

## eHarmony says "I Do" to Customer Care

Forget the Frog. Outstanding service helps the matchmaker's clients find their fairy-tale soul mate—no amphibians necessary.

BY MILA D'ANTONIO

Few people have ever invited a customer service rep to their wedding. It's not a gesture most consumers would even consider. But eHarmony customers don't seem to think of it as being odd—the invitation simply serves as a thank-you to the agents for helping them find their perfect match.

In fact, attending members' weddings is commonplace for the customer care agents of the online dating service. "It happens all the time," says Tony Yoshizawa, customer care supervisor.

How is it possible that customers get to know eHarmony agents enough to extend a wedding invitation at a time when most companies aim to get customers off the phones quickly? The company's culture and practices—from empathy training to customer-focused metrics—are designed to foster relationships. And that culture starts at the top.

CEO Greg Waldorf understands the strategic opportunity a contact center represents, and continuously invests in his as a result.

"People in our space look at a [contact center] as a cost center. It's 'How little can we spend?' For us, it's 'How can we stick with this customer relationship?'" Waldorf says. "Customer care is the closest to the customer. They talk to more customers every day than anyone else in the whole company. If we do a good job of that, those customers are likely to stick with us and recommend us to a friend."

Waldorf says this customer-centric approach is the catalyst that helps bring couples together from eHarmony's 14 million registered users—leading to 90 marriages every day. "I'm proud of the 90 people a day who get married from our site, but customer care is essential to that," he says.

### Building a culture of caring

In 2000 clinical psychologist Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D., founded eHarmony.com with \$3 million in venture capital funding. The company has since grown to \$4.1 million in current sales. Today its staff is devoted to working toward Warren's goal of

eventually reducing the 40 percent divorce rate in the United States to 10 percent.

Some may mock the organization's mission, but inside the company, customer care agents show

real determination in reaching that objective. The company's culture is just the start. Hiring people who demonstrate a caring attitude is what ultimately brings that mission to life.

In fact, according to Scott Ackerman, vice president of customer care at eHarmony, agents don't necessarily need a customer service background. Often that passion for helping people outweighs service experience. "Our culture is based on a product that is helping to make the world a better place by providing long-lasting relationships and reducing the divorce rate," Ackerman says. "It's centered on

that caring attitude. We want employees to come up and down the elevator each day...knowing they made a difference in the world." Waldorf adds, "We don't hire someone unless they can be part of our culture."

eHarmony's search for empathetic employees is evident throughout its biannual recruiting process.

Starting from a pool of 500 applicants drawn from the Los Angeles-area residents, the organization narrows the vast group to 50 or 60 by evaluating resumes. In addition,

eHarmony leverages a referral program where current staff can recommend friends. "We look for people who have been in industries where they have demonstrated a caring attitude as opposed to just handling customer service," Ackerman says. Management then narrows the field to 10, through an all-day interview that consists of a writing exercise, mock phone call, and panel interview.

The final 10 go through a four-week training period in which they are placed on a series of mock phone calls, so eHarmony can screen for the desired caring attitude that the company wants in its agents. During the training, agents take a test every other day, with questions

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ranging from customer sensitivity, to eHarmony policies. Only agents who maintain a passing score are hired.

Denis Pombriant, principal analyst at Beagle Research Group, recently conducted a study on contact centers with high attrition rates and found that organizations with the worst attrition were the ones that conducted the least amount of scrutiny of new candidates. Companies that conducted only three interviews per candidate fared worse than those that conducted seven interviews. "We found that if you want to have low attrition, just slow down," he says, noting that eHarmony is wise to spend so much time selecting and interviewing candidates.

At eHarmony, thoughtful deliberation is just one element of the in-depth hiring process. Executive involvement in hiring agents is standard practice. When Yoshizawa interviewed three years ago, for example, the former CEO and CIO personally interviewed him. Yoshizawa, who had worked at two customer care centers prior to coming to eHarmony, says this high-level involvement is unique in a contact center environment. In fact, eHarmony executives speak to agents on a regular basis. "I think it's unusual where a regular customer care agent feels comfortable approaching senior management," he says. "I always feel as though senior management is supportive of our group."

That support is most evident in Waldorf's involvement in the company's contact center organization. He routinely visits the contact center to speak to the agents. "It's a real benefit to me to talk to those agents," he says. "The typical challenge when you're a CEO is that you feel you're the furthest away from the call center." He also listens in on calls and receives daily email reports with customer care metrics

(current hold times, abandonment rates, first-call resolution, etc.). The reports are funneled to a running dashboard in his office where he can see the statistics in real time.

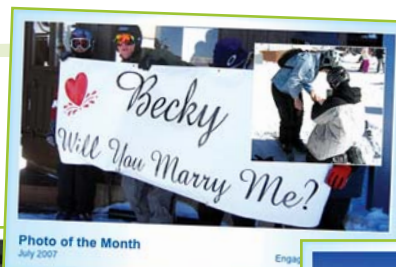
Waldorf believes it's important to work near the people who are the closest to the customer. He also believes that it's crucial for the agents to feel like they're a part of the eHarmony culture. For these reasons the contact center is located at the company's headquarters. "We're touching thousands of lives every day," he says. "My goal is for customer care to be as important a department as any in the company."

### Courting the customer

One way in which the company elevates the agents' status is by delivering empathy training, because they find themselves, in many cases, counseling the customers. As a result, Ackerman has abandoned average handle time and instead encourages his reps to stay on the phone as long as possible to meet customers' needs. "We let our agents talk to customers as long as necessary," he says. "We can get more resolution with a customer on the phone. Typically one answered question leads to another, and we spend more time...adjusting the accounts to have the best experience."

Customers' feedback validates the importance of agents spending that time on the phone. Waldorf played a call last year at a board meeting to demonstrate the benefit. It was from a single woman in her 50s who hadn't gone on a date in more than 20 years. She asked the customer care agent how she should respond to a match inquiry, not in a technical sense, but she literally wanted to know what she should say. The agent coached her, telling her to be herself and to talk

## eHarmony finds love...



eHarmony highlights monthly success stories of the couples who have made it to marriage. Here are the months from May to August 2007.

as if they'd met for a cup of coffee. The woman sounded grateful at the end of the call. "We are in an industry that inherently will have a lot of disappointment, so it's an especially tall challenge to make sure people are left with a good impression," Waldorf says.

eHarmony member Wende Kozlow raves about the service she received from eHarmony's customer care department when she was searching for her match. When she first signed up on the site four years ago, she completed the lengthy personality profile and then put it aside because of a change of heart. Two years later she decided to revisit the site, but knew she had changed since filling out the original form. The company's policy is not to allow members to alter their personality profiles, but after explaining to the agent that she felt as though hers no longer accurately represented her, the agent reset it.

In a separate experience, she called customer care to ask to use an alias first name because she wanted to remain anonymous. When the agent could hear the concern in her voice, she allowed Kozlow to change her name. "It's dealing with a different thing," Kozlow says. "It's not like your computer isn't working, it's a sensitive issue and I thought they were quite sensitive to that."

Kozlow found more than caring service at eHarmony; she also found her match—three months after she updated her profile. Now Kozlow recommends the site to friends and family and even people she doesn't know. In fact, she's so enamored with eHarmony that she took time from her Hawaiian honeymoon to speak with *1to1* about her experiences with the company.

While eHarmony firmly believes in the importance of phone time with customers for resolving their problems, the company also provides self-service on its Web site.

Last November eHarmony, with the help of RightNow Technologies, built a knowledge library of nearly 400 answers to common questions that range from "How do I communicate with a match?" to "How do I log into my account?" Customers can search by keyword or topic, or by using a natural language query. Ackerman says the strategy has helped to deflect simple questions from the contact center so agents can spend more time handling delicate calls.

So far, the service has produced a 30 percent reduction in email volume. The company hasn't seen a reduction in phone calls because the decrease in email has allowed the agents to spend more time on the phone with customers. Escalation and routing of emails to agents with special training also helped to decrease the overall email workload. As a result, email response times have

improved from a few days to only four to six hours.

Another way eHarmony empowers its customers is by listening to and acting on their feedback. The company uses RightNow Feedback to survey customers on the interactions they have with eHarmony's staff. eHarmony sends a CSAT survey after every phone call and email that an agent takes. The survey specifically asks, among other questions, if the agent provided the highest possible service for that customer. Agents who receive a 94 percent score or higher on customer satisfaction for each quarter become a part of eHarmony's CSAT Elite group. The company recognizes this group of agents in quarterly rewards ceremonies.



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eHarmony also offers a monthly monetary bonus based on how well agents score in attendance, Yoshizawa says. In addition, the company holds birthday lunches, drawings for prizes, and daily gift incentives for agents who may be struggling with low customer satisfaction scores.

eHarmony also recognizes and motivates its agents through the Inspiration Wall. The company receives feedback from members daily, and spotlights agents who receive positive remarks by posting the letters on the Inspiration Wall. Most of the messages are thank-you notes to agents for understanding their customers' concerns and for providing support and encouragement. "I find myself walking by it for an extra pick-me-up," Yoshizawa says.

### Fairy-tale ending, or new beginning?

The customer-oriented culture that eHarmony has built is a story of enchantments. "I would say eHarmony is more ahead than most companies in understanding the connection between great experiences and continued growth of business," says RightNow's CEO Greg Gianforte. "They offer choice, empower employees, and are proactively listening to clients."

The effects of doing so are apparent internally and externally. Agent turnover rates are below the industry norm, Ackerman says. And customer satisfaction has increased 15 percent.

Such successes don't mean this fairy tale will come to an end. Waldorf plans to evolve what's in place. For example, the company intends to implement voice technology early next year to help increase service efficiency and improve the customer experience. "I think the challenge for eHarmony is to continue to be innovative," he says. "If we're not there, the innovation challenge is to deliver the best services." ■