

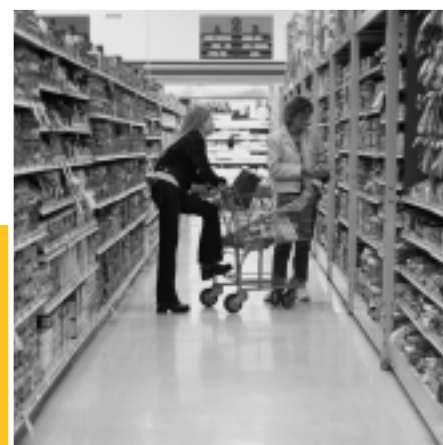
Bringing consumers closer

Careline provides consumer care for more than 40 brands and 3,000 products created by fmcg (fast moving consumer goods) giant, Unilever – and has created a unique two-way interface between this world-leading business and its consumers across the UK and Ireland. Along the way, it has boosted consumer satisfaction ahead of the company’s competitors and reduced the cost of operating the service by 15%.

Most fmcg businesses view their consumer care line as simply the first line of defence against consumer complaints. Not so Unilever. The company recognised early its potential to foster a direct, two-way exchange between the business and its consumers – an exchange that simply couldn’t be achieved by any other means.

“Consumers develop strong relationships with our brands, but, because the retailer stands between us and them, it’s hard for us to understand how that relationship is formed; how it can be nurtured and, ultimately, how it can be strengthened to our advantage,” says Unilever’s Consumerlink Manager, Phil Hood. “We’ve always believed that the consumer care line could bridge that gap. Careline has helped us realise that belief.”

Unilever appointed Careline in 2007 and, since then, has seen its service performance improve dramatically. In independent market tests, conducted three times a year, Unilever now consistently outperforms its competitors for overall call quality and consumer experience. “We’d outsourced the care line before, but had difficulty finding a supplier that shared our vision for the service and our determination to extend the art of the possible. We recognised quickly that Careline not only understood the vision, but had creative ideas about how we could make it real.”



In independent market tests Unilever’s consumer care line consistently outperforms its competitors

	June 2007	June 2009	
Overall quality	2.93	3.15	Unilever
	2.85	2.99	closest competitor
Consumer experience	2.96	3.57	Unilever
	2.96	3.24	closest competitor

1 = poor 2 = average 3 = good 4 = excellent

Callers are satisfied with the service provided by Unilever’s care line is beyond doubt. In immediate post-call feedback an average 82% agree that their query has been resolved, 97% that their experience was positive and 81% that they’d be likely to make a repeat purchase. Unilever, however, demands much more than that...

Insights for a 'multi-local' business

Unilever has a strategy to act less as a 'multinational' business, and more as a 'multi-local' one; combining a close understanding of local consumers with its leverage as a global player to outmanoeuvre indigenous competitors.

The consumer care line is a vital component of this strategy. "We've now reached the point where only 35% of the contacts the care line receives are complaints. The vast majority are requests for information – either about the brand or about company policy and ethics – or they're responses to campaigns and promotions," explains Phil. "We need to learn from each and every one of those interactions to understand consumer motivation. Analysed properly they'll tell us what consumers think of our products – and about changes we make to them – and about the way we conduct our business."

To make sure this information is captured, Careline works directly with Unilever's brand and marketing teams. "Rarely a day passes without one or other of Unilever's teams visiting our operation," says Careline's Account Director, Megan Neale. "They come for two reasons, first, to tell us about new developments in their ranges, so that our knowledge base can be kept up to date, and secondly, to hear what we have to tell them about how consumers are responding to their products and promotions."

Sometimes the information gathered is as simple as how consumers have reacted to a change in packaging, the introduction of a new product or a variation in an existing one. But the care line can also alert Unilever to difficulties consumers may be having locating products in retail outlets, which may prompt discussions about product placement with the company's retail partners. The feedback also allows Unilever to keep abreast of consumer concerns regarding ethical or health issues. "It helps us keep a weather eye on our consumers' broader concerns and – in turn – to make sure our focus on health and ethics is well communicated," says Phil. "For example, in 2008 Careline noted a marked increase in the number of consumers concerned about the use of palm oil in our products. We were able to reassure those consumers that we have an active programme to ensure that, by 2015, all our palm oil will come from sustainable sources."

Insights from the care line have also helped both Careline and Unilever streamline business processes and cut out cost. For example, Careline noted that simple requests for new detergent dosing devices accounted for 20% of all inbound telephone calls. Those calls were logged – like all of the more complex consumer requests – by a mechanism that required the capture of 17 different data fields. Careline reduced the data fields to six, producing the same output for the fulfilment house, but reducing the length of the call by 50%. This has been part of an ongoing process streamlining programme initiated by Careline to save cost without compromising service.

Efficiency without compromise

The vital role the care line provides as the bellweather of consumer opinion means Unilever is been prepared to invest time, effort and resources to build and maintain it. But, like any responsible business, it has an eye towards cost.

"Once again Careline's approach mirrored our own," says Phil. "They looked at our business pragmatically and identified immediate actions that would help us reduce cost, without compromising the effectiveness of the care line, either as a provider of consumer support or a source of business intelligence. Over the first two years of the contract they're reduced the cost per contact by 15% - and we believe more savings are to come."

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Unilever's Consumerlink Manager

Careline's first step was to create a single agent team able to handle all six of Unilever's product ranges:

- Ice cream
- Specialist Foods
- Laundry (Home Care)
- Teas and Savoury
- Personal Care
- Fats

"We had previously maintained an agent team dedicated to each," explained Phil. "And it was hard for us to imagine that any single team could manage to maintain the breadth of knowledge needed to support the 3,000 plus products they contained! Careline, however, has made it happen."

The progression has been achieved gradually, with agents being carefully trained in each area in turn and their teams steadily amalgamated. By the end of the first year of the contract the number of teams had been reduced from six to two – foods and non-foods. Early in 2009, these two were folded into a single agent body.

"This has dramatically improved our flexibility and scheduling performance," says Megan. "And helps us smooth the variable peaks that inevitably occur in Unilever's business." Unsurprisingly call's about ice cream peak in summer, while soup takes centre stage in the winter months. "Add to that a non-stop schedule of product specific promotions and you can see that day-to-day scheduling could become an expensive nightmare without a flexible, multi-skilled team!"

The move to a single agent team has been made possible by two Careline initiatives. First, the creation of an extensive knowledge base, constantly updated by a dedicated knowledge base manager. Second, the creation of a graduate school programme to grow the agent team's knowledge.

"The complexity of the knowledge base is breath taking," says Phil. "And Careline's achievement in keeping it up to date is no less so. It means that agent knowledge is reinforced by a reliable information source and queries are resolved faster and more efficiently." Quite simply, the more complete Careline's knowledge is, the fewer queries have to be referred back to Unilever for an answer, that means consumers get an immediate response and Unilever's internal resource isn't diverted.

The graduate school is an ongoing agent training and performance management programme that allows agents to gradually build their knowledge. "When new agents join the team they have a basic two week training period. Then they're introduced to the phone lines to answer calls on a specific product set," explains Megan. "They then begin a twelve week 'in-work' training programme, which allows them to progressively add the remaining five product sets to their range. On an ongoing basis their performance is assessed for accuracy, knowledge, empathy, and attendance, and motivated by a series of bonus payments." The programme has the added benefit of encouraging agent loyalty. A very low attrition rate – less than 10% - means that skills and knowledge, once achieved, are maintained in the agent group.

Building the brand

The ability to add product sets progressively to an agent's portfolio is enabled by Caller Line Identification (CLI). Each brand has a specific on-pack phone number, which means Careline can control the calls directed to agents still in training. CLI also means that every call can be answered with a brand specific greeting.

"Creating brand resonance is a considerable step forward for us which, we believe, will bring us increasing differentiation from our competitors," says Phil. "Our brand managers have worked closely with the agent teams to help them assimilate the

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personalities and characteristics of our key brands. And there's a spirit of creativity and agent empowerment within Careline has helped them bring those characteristics alive in telephone conversations, emails and white mail."

As well as handling multiple products, Careline's agents also handle multiple channels, again, improving the flexibility and efficiency of the agent team.

"And their skills have been expanded further still," explains Megan. "Around 2% of calls to the care line are about the impact of home care products or the cooking performance of food. If a consumer believes that a detergent has damaged an item of clothing, for example, that item has to be returned for examination and testing. In the past, those tests were undertaken by Unilever. Today they're carried out by specially trained Careline agents - including a qualified nutritionist - in a specialist test laundry and kitchen that has been built here in the contact centre. That means the consumer gets a faster response and that Unilever's specialist staff are not tied up with relatively straightforward issue resolutions."

Phil concurs, "It was clear to us from the start that the more tasks and processes Careline was able to lift from our shoulders the better the partnership would be for our business efficiency and focus. Careline's 'can do – will do' approach has meant we've been able to push the edges of that particular envelope further than we ever imagined."

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Results summary

- 15% reduction in cost per contact
- Independently monitored call quality and consumer experience ahead of competition
- 97% consumer approval of consumer experience
- 81% say they'll stay loyal to the brand
- 82% say their query has been resolved

Key numbers

- 4,000 calls, 2,500 emails and over 400 white mail items per week
- 41 FTE – including agents, team managers and supervisors, quality teams, knowledge base manager, nutritionist, trainer
- Dedicated call centre manager and operational manager

Unilever – a market leader

Unilever is the world's leading manufacturer of food, home care and personal care products:

- Its products are used 160 million times a day in 150 countries
- 273 manufacturing sites
- 174,000 employees
- €40.5 billion turnover
- 13 of its brands have annual sales greater than €billion

Find out what engaging with Careline could do for your customer relationships and your business results.

Contact us at:
Tel: 0845 194 9295
Email: sales@careline-services.co.uk

Visit our website at
www.careline-services.co.uk

Or write to us at:
Careline Services Limited
250 Gunnersbury Avenue
London W4 5QB
United Kingdom