
A Practical Guide to Seasonal Staffing Alternatives

It's summer and time to plan for your peak staffing needs for the busy holiday season. While your base staff will carry you throughout the summer, you'll need to begin hiring in September in order to get new staff trained and ready to handle calls for the peak holiday season that begins in October. But unlike other types of call centers, you'll no longer need these staff after the first of the year.

Whether your peak is October – December, February – March, or April – July, catalog call centers and other types of seasonal businesses face a unique challenge in finding qualified staff to handle just a few months of peak call demand. This article is designed to outline five basic options available to address the challenges of seasonal staffing requirements.

Option 1 – Returning Staff

The ideal solution to the seasonal staffing dilemma is to find staff that simply want to work the few months of the year that you need them and then happily leave when the peak is over, returning when you need them again next year. They will likely not need a full training period, but only a refresher and can hit the ground running quickly. Nice solution if you can get them, right?

One mistake that many call centers make is to assume that because your base workforce is made up of full-time staff, your seasonal workers should work a 40-hour week too. To attract more seasonal staff, you will likely need to hire mostly part-time staff in order to fit the requirements of this different labor force. There are many people that may be looking for a little extra income and would appreciate the opportunity to work three or four hours a day, but may not be able to accommodate a full work schedule. Therefore, you may need to change your recruiting and hiring protocol to look for people to fit these kinds of positions, rather than a full-time person.

While there can be some drawbacks to hiring part-time staff, there are many benefits that should also be considered. Some centers point to the increased recruiting and training costs for part-timers. The same amount of effort may be needed to recruit, interview, hire, and train a part-time person as a full-time employee, yet only half the time is available on the phones or their schedules may not accommodate the training hours planned. On the other hand, consider the additional scheduling flexibility it gives the center to be able to arrange and piece together schedules to fit workforce to workload more precisely. And sometimes these staff can actually be better performers given that they're fresh and not on the phones for eight hours a day!

If you're trying to fill positions for the busy holiday season, there may be many people looking for a second job to make some extra money for holiday shopping. There is a big population out there who does not work for many months of the year (such as housewives or students) who may want to work a little as the holidays approach for some additional income.

Many call centers attribute their success at covering seasonal demand to not just hiring part-time staff, but to hire people that fit the ideal part-time profile. Some people will be willing to work part-time during the holiday season as a second job. However, sometimes

there's not enough energy and enthusiasm left after the first job to devote to the call center position. Others may take a part-time position but only as a way to get a foot in the door with the company. These people will never be happy with a part-time position and are certainly not likely to return the following year if they've been laid off after the peak season ends.

The part-time position needs to be well-defined with both expectation of working hours as well as the duration of the job. Those that take the position with full knowledge of schedule definitions as well as length of employment will likely be the ones that return the following year.

To find these ideal part-timers, you'll want to cast a large net and recruit in such a way that you're reaching an optimal audience of candidates. Simple newspaper classified ads will likely not be sufficient. Use your existing workforce for job referrals and reward them for bringing in qualified candidates. Expand the search to billboards and other advertising media to ensure you're getting in front of as many potential candidates as possible with your offer.

Of course, finding potential candidates will be much easier if you have a peak season that just happens to correspond with a ready pool of available workers. It actually works just this way for a number of call centers. For example, one camping supply company has peak demand from May through August, and fills it easily with local college students and teachers off for the summer. These staff enjoy the change of pace from the classroom and happily return year after year to be welcomed back with open arms from the call center just as the calls are beginning to ramp up.

Of course, not all centers have the luxury of having a peak season in the summer when there's a more obvious and ready supply of part-time workers. If you're like many catalogs with a peak season that falls within the October – December timeframe, you'll just have to be a little more creative with where you look for staff. Ask what kinds of businesses may be having an "off-peak" time just as your call workload picks up. Who is slowing down in October just as you're speeding up? How can you target these potential employees?

Don't overlook the possibility of finding your additional part-time staff right in your own building. Some centers look to employees in other departments to fill part-timer staffing needs. There may be several employees looking to make some extra money for the holidays and are already familiar with the company's products, procedures, etc. The cost for these employees might be a little higher since their wages would be at an overtime rate, but the benefits of their base knowledge and skills can be well worth the extra expense.

Option 2 – Shared Staff Arrangements

Some centers with a busy seasonal holiday pattern look to local businesses that may slow down in the fall. Some recruit workers directly with great success from businesses that have a summer peak. You can choose to try to reach these potential staff with wide and well-timed advertising, or you can elect to go directly to the source and work with those businesses directly.

For example, one Illinois-based call center with a holiday peak season from October to January works with the local Home Depot and Lowe’s building supply stores to find a base of staff. With shoppers having reduced building supply and gardening center needs in the fall and winter, not as many staff are needed in their stores. The call center works with these companies to advertise open positions from October through January for those staff that wish to stay employed, but might be laid off temporarily or cut back to part-time hours in these retail stores. Some staff choose the call center option, knowing their store position will be saved and waiting upon their February return. The call center benefits by having a ready supply of candidates with great customer service training, and the stores benefit by having a way to ensure employment for all its workers during the slower months.

Another call center has a partnership with a neighboring call center in the same city that happens to have peak calling times at different times of year. Each guarantees employment for six months of the year, but during the off-peak time, there is the option to go to the other call center. Both centers benefit by having staff bringing experience and skills to the job from the other company, as well as existing expertise in that call center position.

Making arrangements like this work require creativity and some “outside the box” planning, processes, and compensation arrangements. You’ll want to ask what types of businesses or call centers have an opposite peak time than your business. Pursue these businesses to see if you can forge a staffing arrangement that benefits you both.

Option 3 – Local Staffing Agencies

One of the most common ways that catalog call centers address the need for seasonal staffing is to work through a local staffing agency to find temporary full-time or part-time staff. This scenario, sometimes referred to as “in-sourcing”, involves the use of a staffing agency to recruit, screen, and hire temporary workers. These staff are typically treated as employees of the temporary agency, but in some instances the call center may actually hire the employee.

In most cases, the training and supervision of the staff is handled by call center personnel, but in some instances, the agency actually expands their role into training and supervision of their temporary staff. The contract staffing agency may perform the recruiting, hiring, and training activities at their site, or when there is a large staffing demand, may have dedicated agency staff actually reside at the call center site.

The call center typically pays more for a contract staffing person, since the staffing rate includes an “overhead” charge for the staffing agency, but the added cost comes with many benefits including staffing expertise, flexibility of dictating schedule demands, and a trial working arrangement.

Despite the slightly higher wage rates, many call centers choose to staff through local employment agencies since they have a core competency of recruiting and hiring staff, so they may perhaps do a better job of it than the internal call center management team might do, especially in frantic times. These agencies are familiar with labor pools in various communities and most have links to various state or community vocational

training programs. They are experts at helping the call center define job requirements, and then finding suitable candidates, doing careful screening to ensure a good match for the job.

Another benefit of agency staffing is the flexibility of procuring exactly the number and type of staff required. The call center can simply inform the contract staffing agency of how many of each type of position it needs to fill and for how long, and the agency can fill the vacancies. This flexibility is particularly useful for catalog companies with short-term campaigns where staff will not be needed for a long period of time.

Many contract agencies have a contract with the call center where the center can hire temporary staff to be permanent company employees. This arrangement lets the call center “try before buy” in terms of adding permanent staff to the payroll. Likewise, if there is a problem with any contract employee, the call center simply has to inform the agency and does not have to go through disciplinary and severance procedures that are likely required with company employees. There are also benefits to the workers who have an opportunity to try out the job tasks and the employer before making the commitment to take a permanent position.

One of the advantages of contract staffing is also one of the major disadvantages. Since the agents work for the staffing agency and not the company, the call center has less control over them than if they were company employees. And since most of the positions are temporary, the staff may decide to leave if they find other more permanent positions elsewhere, making staff turnover a bigger problem than with regular employees.

Option 4 – Non-Traditional Staffing Agencies

Another contract staffing possibility is to evaluate the use of staffing agencies that may not be in your local area, but can supply staff on an as-needed basis. Many large outsourcers today have an “at home” network of agents in a wide geographic area. These agents are independent contractors with the agency serving as a broker for their services. These agents are trained in the area of customer service and handle a wide variety of sales and service calls. They can generally be trained quickly and can be available for whatever length of service your company requires.

Option 5 – Call Center Outsourcers

A final option is to contract with another company to handle some or all of your call demand. The main reason that businesses outsource call center functions is to avoid the resource drain and costs associated with initial set-up and ongoing operation of a function that is typically not the core competency of the business. Developing and running a call center is expensive and many companies find they can accomplish the call handling operation more cost-effectively by outsourcing it than trying to do it in-house.

Outsourcing does not need to be an all or nothing solution. A business such as a catalog can still maintain call-handling operations, but simply choose to send overflow calls or

seasonal demand calls to an outsourcing partner as a supplement to an internal call center operation.

There are many benefits to be considered in using an outsourcer to handle inbound or outbound calling. In some cases, routing calls to an outsourcer can actually be cost-effective compared to in-house operations. Inbound calls arrive in peaks and valleys and traditional call centers are therefore by nature inefficient. During periods of low call volumes, agents may be idle and equipment is not utilized. In an outsourced call center, multiple clients' calls tend to smooth out the peaks and valleys meaning a greater utilization of equipment and staffing resources. And given the large size of most outsourcing operations, there are typically more staff and phone lines available to handle even the biggest of spikes in call volume due to marketing or advertising campaigns. An in-house center may have difficulty dealing with unanticipated increases in volume due to insufficient telecommunications capacity or labor resources. In this case, outsourcers can also be used for just the additional load that the call center cannot handle during peak times.

Internal call centers tend to focus most of their training on specific products and services, with not as much emphasis on general call-handling skills or knowledge of call center operations. Outsourcers spend much more time training agents to be generalists on the front-end so they are prepared to adapt quickly to a particular customer's needs. Training may be more comprehensive in nature, actually resulting in better overall quality of the call handling process.

Due to the nature of most service level agreements, rigorous call monitoring is typically done to ensure the customer's calls are being handled in a professional, quality manner. The most sophisticated equipment is typically in place and supervisors and quality specialists are highly trained in monitoring and coaching techniques. Daily performance assessment is part of the agreement with most clients and is therefore done more often and more thoroughly than in an in-house center where supervisors may not have the time to devote sufficient time and attention to it, particularly during the busy season.

Since there are so many different outsourcer options in the call center industry today, it is very competitive among outsourcing companies. This high level of competition typically results in high levels of performance if the outsourcer is to survive in the business. Outsourcers can be held to higher levels of performance than perhaps internal call centers, since the customer can simply take away business if performance standards are not met. Internal call centers may take longer to respond to customer demands and there is typically not as much of a significant consequence if performance levels are not met for some period of time.

Despite growing customer expectations, many companies cannot afford to operate their call center seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. The small numbers of calls that arrive in non-peak hours make it prohibitively expensive to operate at certain hours. Therefore, availability to customers during those times is limited to self-service options

for many call centers. An outsourcer can provide this service for a company at a much lower cost per call and help the business maintain round-the-clock availability.

Getting the “just right” number of staff in place to answer the calls is one of the biggest challenges for a call center – no matter what the time of year. Adding a peak, short-term demand makes this task all the more challenging. The key to successful seasonal staffing is a good forecast to accurately predict incoming call center demand for the coming period. You’ll then want to weigh all the above options carefully to ensure you fill those seats in the most effective way possible to take maximum advantage of those seasonal catalog orders.

About the Author....

Penny Reynolds is a Founding Partner of **The Call Center School**, a company dedicated to the education and development of call center professionals. Penny teaches classes on a wide variety of call center topics and is the author of several call center management books, including *Call Center Staffing – The Complete, Practical Guide to Workforce Management*. Contact her at penny.reynolds@thecallcenterschool.com or call 615-812-8410.