

21st century Enquiry Answering

a special workshop for



with Tim Buckley Owen

(author of *Successful Enquiry Answering Every Time* – 6th edition 2012)

PROGRAMME

- 10:00 Welcome and introductions
Brainstorm: Before the millennium – what was different about enquiry handling?
- 10:15 When you can't see (or even hear) your enquirer
Presentation: Why enquiry handling is different now
- 10:45 Some things never change
Brainstorm: What's wrong with these questions?
Presentation: Interrogation strategies and questioning techniques
- 11:15 Refreshment Break
- 11:30 21st century enquiry etiquette
Exchange of views: What we can learn from good contact centre practice?
- 12:00 Providing a solution
Presentation: planning how to present your answer – value-add and lock-in – what to do if you can't find an answer
Brainstorm: Can't find the answer – what will you do?
- 12:45 Final discussion and questions
- 13:00 Close

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Before the millennium

What was different about enquiry handling?

	Then	Now	What's changed
Sources of information	Textbooks Journal articles Report literature Newspapers Radio and TV (a few analogue channels) Online services (charged-for, proprietary)	All those plus... Free web pages Free downloadable files (text, image, sound)	Much easier to find things out for free (even if the quality is poor)
Access to information	Libraries Bookshops Desktop computers (if connected to the phone network, and maybe to the internet too) Mobile phone (if you could afford one)	All those plus... Any conventional computer Any tablet computer Most mobile phones E-books	Satisfy your curiosity instantly (even if the knowledge you gain is only superficial)
Ability to add to the body of knowledge	Publish a book Publish a journal article Write to the media	All those (perhaps) plus... Write a blog Contribute to a discussion forum Engage in social networking Create your own website	Publish whatever you want (even if it's not worth reading)
Where you could work	In your office In a library At home (but probably with no online access)	All those plus... Anywhere else where you can connect to a network	Expect the answer now (even if that's not always realistic)

Remember – 21st century enquirers are remote, mobile and think they know it all.

When you can't see (or even hear) your enquirer

Why enquiry handling is different now

Contact centres don't always have a good reputation – but the best of them lead the way in high quality customer service. The services information professionals provide by phone, email, SMS or instant messaging are essentially no different from those supplied by banks, travel firms or IT helpdesks. They're all there to give the customer the solution they need; only the product is different. So what does make remote enquiry handling different?

	Face-to-face	Remote
Opening hours	Customers understand that services open and close at set times.	As far as customers are concerned, an online or contact centre service is never closed.
Response time	Customers are generally happy to wait while you look things up on their behalf.	Customers can't see that you're working hard on their enquiry and expect an instant (or at least a very rapid) response.
Customer loyalty	It's awkward and time-consuming to take your business elsewhere; you have to leave the premises and travel somewhere else.	You can shift to another supplier simply by hanging up and dialling another number or clicking on a different email address.
Service quality	The information you get should be the same wherever you go – but it's less hassle to stay where you are despite the poor service.	The information you get should be the same wherever you go – and it's easy to switch to someone else who gives better service.
Searching time & effort	You can leave an enquirer browsing print materials or using a search engine while you deal with someone else.	You have to do all the searching and select and reject on the enquirer's behalf – and they've probably already done the simple searching themselves.
Cross-selling and up-selling	A personal visitor can browse and discover additional services for themselves.	The onus is on the service provider to draw the customer's attention to additional services.
Non-verbal clues	How we communicate includes <i>what</i> we say (7%), <i>how</i> we say it (38%) and the <i>body language</i> we use (55%).	On the phone, we have only <i>what</i> we say and <i>how</i> we say it (45%), and with email we have only <i>what</i> we say (7%).

Remember – it's very easy for a 21st century enquirer to take their business elsewhere.

Some things never change

Interrogation strategies and questioning techniques

Your enquirer has probably come to you because they've already tried all their usual sources and now they're looking for expert help. But even though they really need your services, they're unlikely to ask the question to which they really want an answer. So it's up to you to steer them from what they asked to what they really want to know.

You can use two questioning strategies...

Funnelling focuses the enquirer in from the general to the particular.

Probing seeks further details when you're not clear what they want.

And six different questioning techniques...

Open questions invite the enquirer to supply further details without you specifying what additional information would be helpful - but they do have the disadvantage of leaving far too many options open.

Closed questions force the enquirer to give you a yes/no answer - but you should use them only when you are certain what the options are.

Forced choice questions force the enquirer to choose between alternatives - but you have to learn to think quickly to come up with two really useful options.

Multiple questions offer the enquirer a range of options to choose from - but you might confuse the enquirer by offering too many options.

Leading questions lead the enquirer in the direction of the answer you want - but they impose your assumptions on the enquirer's request.

Hypothetical questions attempt to glean further information by putting a hypothetical situation to the enquirer - but they risk turning the conversation from fact to fiction, and possibly away from the enquirer's real needs.

Remember: Never take an enquiry at face value, always ask a question back – because you never know where it may lead.

21st century enquiry etiquette

What we can learn from good contact centre practice?

Although the process should still seem as relaxed as possible to the enquirer, you will need to take extra care when taking enquiries remotely. Here are some of the special issues to consider...

Don't read your phone responses from a script	This sounds robotic and also means that the customer's requirements have to match your procedures, instead of you being flexible in meeting the customer's needs. Instead of a script, use a form and choose your own wording.
Speak more slowly and clearly on the phone	Remember that your enquirer needs a little time to adjust to your voice, your accent and what you're saying – and may also be taking notes. So speak at a steady pace; three words a second with a half second gap between sentences is a good guide.
Give special consideration to international callers and those not using their first language	Offer to keep their phone costs down by continuing by email, SMS or Voice Over Internet Protocol. If you think your enquirer is not using their first language, speak a little more steadily than usual, use short, straightforward sentences with few subordinate clauses – and don't shout!
Help laconic or loquacious phone enquirers to help you	If your enquirer's responses are very brief, try using open or multiple choice questions to encourage them to provide the answers you need. If your enquirer talks too much or rambles, try using forced choice or closed questions to help them focus.
Don't snatch up the phone	Allow the phone to ring a couple of times before picking it up; that gives your enquirer time to gather their thoughts.
Always be ready to deal with complaints	Be ready for the possibility that the next phone call may be a complaint. Customers who initially enquired by email frequently complain by phone if they're not satisfied. Satisfied customers tell 9 people about their experience; dissatisfied customers tell 26 – and embellish the story!
Initiate an email dialogue	Don't take an email or SMS enquiry at face value. It might fail to explain what the enquirer wants in sufficient detail, or contain misleading typographical errors. So always initiate a dialogue with the enquirer (by email, phone or SMS) to agree in detail what you will do for them.
Receive by one medium – acknowledge by the other	If you receive an enquiry by phone – send an email or text confirming what you have agreed to do for the enquirer. If your enquiry comes in by email – phone or text them back to confirm that you have received the enquiry and are working on it.

You'll need to be much more meticulous in keeping track of your searching when dealing with remote enquiries than you do when the enquirer is on hand all the time and you can check things with them as you go along. Here are some of the things you'll need to do...

Record enquiries carefully

You can't keep going back to your remote enquirer to check things you forgot to ask –good record keeping is vital when your enquirer is somewhere else.

Use an enquiry record form (whether printed or electronic) that covers all the things you need to ask.

Guarantee your customer's privacy

If you are recording personal details about your enquirer – including what they have asked about – you'll need to be registered for data protection.

Keep accurate search records

You may have to hand a half finished piece of desk research over to a colleague on a change of shift; accurate search records avoid the risk of duplication of effort.

You can't keep checking with a remote enquirer as and when you find things – so you need to keep detailed records of where you searched and what you found, ready for reporting back.

Make sure you have more than one way of contacting the enquirer

Try to ensure that you can get back to the enquirer by phone, email and text message if you need to – even if the enquirer specifies how they would prefer you contact them.

Ask if the enquirer has any special contact requirements (e.g. a time of day or preferred phone number).

Enquirer's deadline

Insist on an actual date and time.

Don't accept 'As soon as possible' or 'It's urgent'.

Be ready to negotiate on what kind of answer is viable if the deadline is tight.

Try to avoid saying 'Can't be done!'

Who took the enquiry

Someone needs to 'own' the enquiry throughout its life, even if it is referred to a colleague or even to another organization.

That someone is you!

Remember – good record keeping is vital when your enquirer is somewhere else.

Providing a solution

Planning how to present your answer – value-add and lock-in – what to do if you can't find an answer

When you report back to the enquirer, you face exactly the same challenges as you did when you first took the enquiry. You and the enquirer have none of the visual clues that you take for granted when dealing face-to-face, so you must think carefully about how you will deliver your answer...

Use the most appropriate medium	Even though you received an enquiry by phone, you may have so much to provide in reply that email may be the better response medium.
Plan your return phone call first	Remember – your enquirer can't see you. So what you choose to say on the phone and how you say it is vital.
Help the enquirer to understand your answer quickly	<p>Tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you've told them.</p> <p>Give them the most important information first – then add supporting detail until they tell you they have enough.</p> <p>Supply the best and refer to the rest.</p> <p>Cite all sources you have used.</p> <p>Perhaps write a brief abstract summarising the answer or reviewing the sources.</p> <p>Always observe copyright and licensing requirements.</p>
Text confirmation of phone responses	<p>If you can answer an enquiry with a brief phone call, consider sending the answer as a text message as well for confirmation.</p> <p>But make sure the message is not so brief as to be open to misinterpretation.</p> <p>Bear in mind that network congestion can delay the arrival of text messages, or that the enquirer may not be able to get a signal at all.</p>
Consider sending written answers as PDFs	This means you can be reasonably sure that your answer will look the way you intended when it arrives, and carry strong branding for your service.
Check before emailing attachments	<p>Make sure your enquirer is willing to receive attached files before you send them.</p> <p>Tell them in advance what the file size is.</p> <p>Consider emailing them a web link instead.</p>
Phone to make sure the enquirer has received your email	Just because you've requested an automatic read receipt, that doesn't necessarily mean that your email has reached the enquirer it was intended for – so phone the enquirer directly and check.
If you need to send printed documents...	If you need to send items by post, use the correct posting method depending on whether the items are valuable or urgent. Ask the enquirer to let you know when the package arrives – and check yourself if you don't hear back.

Use cross-selling and up-selling to lock customers in

Try to complete the enquiry a little before the deadline – so there's time to deal with any follow-up questions.
Thereafter, try to keep customers loyal – perhaps by offering...

- an updating service as a follow-up to an enquiry
- a regular current awareness service on the enquiry topic
- an automatic feed
- a discount on an upgrade from a pay-as-you-go to a subscription contract.

But don't risk spoiling a good customer relationship with too hard a sell.

If you **can't find** a satisfactory answer in the time available...

Prepare your enquirer for disappointment

so that you can both be thinking of acceptable alternatives.

Offer a compromise answer

less relevant, less up-to-date.

Look for outside help

from other libraries, information organizations, specialist organisations – ask yourself who really needs to know the information you are looking for.

Ask authors or editors

of nearly relevant books, articles, periodicals or literature cited in bibliographies.

Ask an online discussion group

– but do verify any responses you receive.

Buy the information in

from a commercial online service or an independent information professional.

Remember – a 21st century enquirer may not be able to see you. So how you deliver your answer is vital – especially if you can't find one.

21st century enquiry answering

The key messages

1. 21st century enquirers are remote, mobile and think they know it all.
2. It's very easy for them to take their business elsewhere.
3. So never take an enquiry at face value – always ask a question back.
4. Good record keeping is vital when your enquirer is somewhere else.
5. Your enquirer can't see you – so what you say and how you say it are vital too.

Tim Buckley Owen

Tim is an independent information skills trainer and writer on the information industry, with 40 years' experience in the information profession in the United Kingdom. His career has encompassed information management, writing, editing, training, government policy advice and corporate media & marketing.

He began his information career handling enquiries at two major London libraries: Westminster Central Reference Library and then the City Business Library. Subsequently he became principal information officer at the London Research Centre (later part of the Greater London Authority), where he was responsible for current awareness and database services as well as a charged-for enquiry service.

He currently runs courses for training providers and private clients on enquiry handling, abstracting and summarising (from printed documents and the web), information packaging and presentation, and basic information management skills.

The sixth edition of Tim's classic textbook, *Successful Enquiry Answering Every Time* will be published by Facet Publishing very soon. He also writes regularly for FreePint's *VIP* magazine and LiveWire blog.

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