



1903



2003

The Award-Winning Publication of the Reno-Sparks Chamber of Commerce

Northern Nevada's Hidden Industry

by Pat Campbell-Leib

More than 52 separate companies provide employment for 2,500 plus entry-level positions in the Reno/Tahoe area, and remain a largely hidden industry. While government statistics reveal fewer than 800 employees in the area representing just a hand full of companies, the true size and importance of this business community has been difficult, at best, to calculate. The industry is Customer Response Management (CRM), more commonly known as "Call Centers".

Statistics vary widely regarding CRM Centers due to confusion in classifying employees. For example, companies providing financial services might be classified for employment statistics as "financial or banking services" even though the business may include a CRM, or Call Center employing several dozen, and sometimes several hundred CRM representatives. Most CRM professionals view the telephone portion of Customer Response Management to be a "common thread" linking these centers through related image challenges, recruiting and training needs, and wage/benefit/incentive issues.

So, what is a CRM Center? A CRM, or Call Center is the business, or portion of a business devoted exclusively to responding to customers via the telephone. As consumers, when you telephone a utility company, financial institution, insurance company, or order a product advertised, you are likely to eventually speak with a representative in a large room with many other representatives, wearing a headset and sitting in front of a computer ready to provide assistance. Although many, if not most CRM Centers include some level of web related customer service, consumers continue to demand to speak with a living, breathing representative. So, you see, this "hidden industry" touches each of us at some point.

CRM Center's in Northern Nevada include customer service for utilities, financial services, insurance services, medical services, cable companies, and third party centers (those who answer customer service calls for a company other than their own). They include inbound service (incoming sales calls) for catalogs, wholesalers/retailers, and subscriptions, along with reservations centers, survey centers, and answering services. Individual centers employ as few as 10 FTE's (full-time-equivalent) and as many as 600 FTE's. Equipment ranges from the most basic (individuals answering one telephone at a time) to the latest computerized "acd's" (automated call distribution systems). Regardless of the set-up, most companies are required to respond to customers in some manner, and the more efficient, personal, and even understanding the response, the happier the customer. This need for customer service has created a significant number of jobs for northern Nevada residents.

Professional Opportunity

CRM centers sometimes provide opportunity for employees new to the job market to receive training and acquire useable and transferable skills. Yet the most entry-level position requires each CSR to sit and take call after call (often with the minimum required rest breaks) and continue to adapt to each customer while providing a pleasant and satisfactory response to each issue regardless of personal opinion or personality difference. A high level of communication skill is required, with the occasional even higher level of patience and understanding. Other CRM centers require experience, intermediate to advanced computer skills, and a list of industry specific skills. As professionals, CRM Center employees are a valued portion of our talent pool, frequently "growing up" in, and remaining in, call centers. One of my personal friends in this industry began, out of college, as an AT&T entry-level representative, and is currently director of one of our local CRM Centers employing more than 500 people. Call Center skills are transferable and promotable.

Of course compensation tends to be relative to the level of experience, and skill required for each position. A recent voluntary review of 22 companies revealed entry-level wages from \$7.75 per hour to more than \$12.00 per hour, while CRM managers and directors can range from the mid 20's to more than 6 figures. Of the companies, 18 of the 22 provide formal training varying from 3 days to 11 weeks, with a wage differential for training. Additionally, 18 of the 22 companies reviewed offer medical benefits with the average "wait to qualify" being 90 days.

Traditionally, CRM professionals have kept to themselves and many have resisted associations or inter-company organizations. Recently however, Northern Nevada CRM professionals have come together for Knowledge share, Community awareness, and to build a positive Perception in the marketplace. These gatherings revealed a desire in the Reno/Tahoe area to share "best practices" and discuss issues related to the common good. At a recent gathering the group discussed "How to Create a High Performing Team" and included such topics as "Performance Measurements", "Hiring the Right People", "Investing in Training", "Instilling Best Practices", "Instilling the Right Culture" and "Compensation". The 50 professionals who gathered from 26 different companies have become fans of groups encouraging inter-company knowledge share. As this industry comes out of "hiding", our community can benefit from knowledge share on a larger scale.

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