

COLLECTIONS and vulnerability

Jodie Bedoya of eMatrix Training in the lead up to her session at the 2022 Pickles IMA Conference looks at collection & vulnerability strategies to achieve better outcomes for your customers, your staff and your organisation.

Why is managing customer vulnerability such a challenge for organisations?

Today, customer service alone can be challenging, whereas managing customer engagement in a collections/credit environment is becoming even more difficult for organisations.

Collections team are given the 'customer first' values/ethos of the organisation, yet often there is no clarity of what this means for a collections team when dealing with conversations involving debt, credit defaults, repossession of goods, disconnection of services, complaints and litigation. Layer this up with vulnerability, self-harm calls, family violence, to name a few and a collector's role is becoming more and more complex - they now wear many hats.

In working with organisations to develop strategies and training soft skills for managing collections, customer hardship and vulnerability, eMatrix encounters common trends which cause blockages to this occurring. Our top 6 are as follows:

1. Regulatory requirements and compliance override human conversations

There is so much pressure on operations from the regulatory and compliance teams, often with policies, processes and scripts layered up on frontline staff, often without collaboration with operations and written by people who have never picked up a phone to a customer. Often these processes are nonsensical and convoluted, with things wedged into conversations to tick the compliance box. This stops operators from truly listening to customers, as they are flicking between delegation matrices, intranet guides and knowledge database rules, processes and scripts.

2. Poor KPI's

You get what you measure. Layering AHT (Average Handling Time) KPI's onto staff is counterintuitive for managing customer vulnerability.



Jodie Bedoya

never
underestimate
the difference
you can make in
somebody's life

Vulnerable customers don't come at you in a straight line. Their lives are difficult, complex, chaotic and often they cannot articulate what is happening to them. Working through this takes time and isn't always sorted on one call.

3. Quality frameworks that don't support the teams

Quality programs should ideally be designed as a tool to assist in coaching, not catching people out. Constantly staff fear being 'marked down' by a faceless person in the organisation, and then dreading the one-on-one that follows where they are asked what they could do better next time.





4. Over-servicing

Quality frameworks can overcomplicate what kind of conversation we need to have with a customer. Often operators fear not meeting expectations, so cram in a lot of words, talk fast and feel the need to over-serve; providing too much information, waffling, overtalking, cross selling, upselling, asking customers to complete surveys and sign up to reward programs, when all the customer called for was a simple answer to their question. When someone is vulnerable, their ability to take in information is limited, and they can often only handle one piece of information at a time - usually the key piece of information they needed to sort their issue out but it is so often lost in the litany of language.

5. Vulnerable customers aren't always nice

Just because someone is experiencing hardship or vulnerability, doesn't mean they will be rational or polite. Stressed, scared, anxious - this may mean they swear or yell and an operator's go-to, more often than not, is "if you continue the language, I will terminate the call" followed by 'customer is abusive' all over the notes. Training staff in how to manage these calls, is critical, as

when this occurs, the organisation has failed to support the customer - in fact, it has alienated them.

6. Compassion fatigue

A team can become disengaged when compassion fatigue kicks in - where they have heard it all before, where they become sceptical, being helpful to the customers they like, and reacting to those they don't. And the toxic behaviours begin - like a vortex of negativity, staff start to share their stories. They hang up from a customer, turn to their colleague and bad-mouth; one-upmanship begins to occur "think your customer was bad, should have heard the guy I just spoke to..."...and so judgement begins. This then feeds on itself, as sitting next to someone who complains or whinges, changes the chemical structure of YOUR brain. You then become fatigued and absenteeism increases, as does presenteeism - here, but not here!

So, what works?

Do what operationally makes sense, work in close collaboration with compliance teams, but don't be passive in your relationship with them. Respectfully challenge and work out where the wriggle room is. Consider what is driving your organisation's customer interactions -

is it KPI's, checklists and rules? And consider how you can support your team's move to more human interactions.

Training cannot be a one-off. It needs to be meaningful, embedded into business as usual and sustainable. And if you only have minimal training spend, invest it in your Team Leaders.

Conclusion

Sometimes the topic of vulnerability can seem overwhelming and it is easy to think "well really, what can I do? I'm just one person/one organisation, this is a bigger issue". Having listened to thousands of customer calls, we know you should never underestimate the difference you can make in somebody's life.

It is important for all of us working in credit to remember this. We are not expected to be counsellors or experts, but it is about doing what we can within our individual roles and doing it to the best of our ability. With the right support from Leaders and a dedicated approach to training, we can all move beyond awareness to real and improved outcomes for everyone. ■

Jodie Bedoya, is Director of eMatrix Training, Collections & Vulnerability Training Specialists and will be presenting at the 2022 Pickles IMA Conference in Melbourne. Jodie can be contacted at jodieb@ematrixtraining.com.au or on 0438 391 500.