

BellSouth Uses Scientific Testing to Increase Call Center Sales

BY DARIEL CURREN, FREELANCE WRITER

It's how you say it that matters. That's what BellSouth's Consumer Services Division learned as a result of its scientific evaluation of 23 different telemarketing scripts. By implementing simple script changes identified through testing, the division stands to increase sales revenue at its call centers by over 25%, generating millions of dollars in additional sales.

The testing – which began in two south Florida centers and is now being rolled out in nine states – pinpointed three script factors that led to higher sales. An unexpected, but welcome, benefit was the improvement in employee morale that occurred when employees recognized their ideas were largely responsible for the revenue increase.

To develop the best possible scripts, the company used a technique called Multivariable Testing™ (MVT), developed by QualPro, a process improvement firm based in Knoxville, TN. The MVT process solicited ideas from call representatives, simultaneously tested these ideas using a statistics-based method and quickly sorted out which ideas had a positive impact, negative impact or no impact at all.

The first round of experiments was conducted in top performing call centers in Miami and Fort Lauderdale. “We figured if we could make the best better, we'd really be on to something,” said Carmen Marin, manager of Consumer Service.

A team of two supervisors and two representatives from each center was formed to brainstorm ways to improve scripts. With input from the Orlando facility, the group came up with more than 100 different ideas to test. After discarding those not “practical, feasible or cost-effective,” 23 ideas remained for use in the study.

“Things are changing so rapidly in the telecommunications

industry that anything taking too long to implement will be obsolete,” Marin noted. “That's the beauty of this process: it generates results rapidly with very little capital investment.”

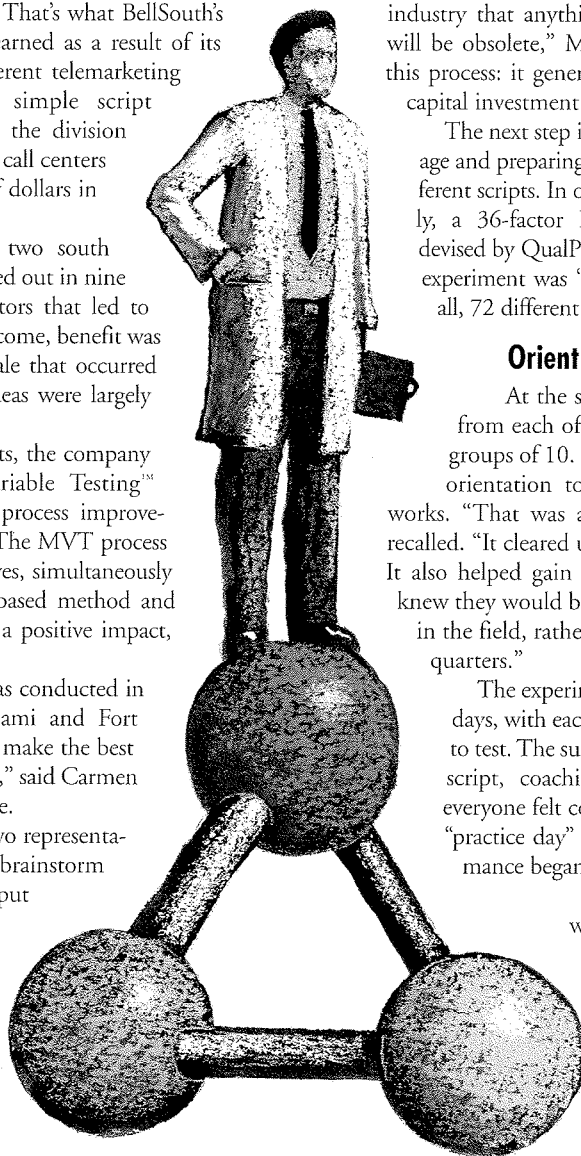
The next step involved developing a training package and preparing notecards with the “recipes” or different scripts. In order to test the 23 factors statistically, a 36-factor Plackett-Burman experiment was devised by QualPro. To assure accuracy of results, the experiment was “reflected,” or run backwards, so in all, 72 different recipes were created.

Orientation Helped Gain Buy-In

At the start of the second month, 40 reps from each of the two centers were divided into groups of 10. Each group was given a 30-minute orientation to explain how the MVT process works. “That was a very important session,” Marin recalled. “It cleared up a lot of concerns and questions. It also helped gain ‘buy-in’ from the reps since they knew they would be testing ideas that came from reps in the field, rather than from management or headquarters.”

The experiment had a staggered start over four days, with each group randomly choosing recipes to test. The supervisor talked the reps through the script, coaching and role-playing them until everyone felt comfortable. Reps were then given a “practice day” before the tracking of sales performance began.

The experiment ran for 10 days, with two reps working on each recipe. Four supervisors worked full-time to monitor the calls and to encourage the reps to stick closely to the scripts they were testing. If observations showed a rep didn't use the recipe at least 80% of the time,



that rep's data for the day was discarded.

"We also stressed the importance of not sharing information about the individual scripts being tested, either inside or outside the group, because we didn't want the results to be skewed. It was uncanny how everyone thought the script being tested at any particular moment was the best," she said.

A daily conference call between the teams at the two locations afforded an opportunity to discuss concerns and questions about compliance. "This sharing was very helpful in keeping the process moving smoothly," Marin said.

Tests Revealed Surprises

At the end of five weeks, data resulting from 720 days was analyzed. What the data showed surprised many on the team: 18 of the factors tested made no difference in sales revenue; two hurt and three helped. Interestingly, the study revealed that giving the price of one of the company's most mature products at the beginning of the sales call was much more successful than waiting until after the service was explained.

By focusing on the three factors that helped, reps were able to increase average sales revenue from \$137 to \$163 per hour. The two call centers then trained all 350 representatives on how to use the new scripts based on the scientific evidence about which ideas worked and which did not. After several months of practice with the new scripts, the reps are now up to \$185 per hour – an increase of 33% – and are climbing steadily toward the predicted goal of \$191 per hour.

In addition to the dramatic increase in sales revenue, the project produced an unexpected bonus. "Our employees loved being part of the process and knowing they contributed directly to it. That sense

of empowerment really boosted employee morale," Marin said.

Refining Experiments Used

Although the company was very excited about the results from south Florida and was eager to implement the changes in all its call centers, refining experiments were first conducted at several different facilities. "This also turned out to be a critical step," Marin recalled. "First, we knew part of the success of the Miami and Fort Lauderdale experiments was that the sales reps took such pride in the fact that their ideas had been tested and had worked. By taking the same approach with other call centers, we avoided the 'not invented here' syndrome that can spell doom for a program.

"That is especially important in an organization like ours, which encompasses a broad geography and over 2,000 sales representatives. What works in south Florida might not work in north Florida, let alone Kentucky or Louisiana. The refining experiments at individual call centers allowed us to take the guesswork out of it."

As a result, the three successful scripts were tested in Georgia, North Carolina, Louisiana and two cities in north Florida. The refining experiments did, in fact, show some subtle changes were necessary for certain call centers. At one, for example, it was discovered sales representatives were accustomed to discussing the good value of a particular product. With the new scripts, representatives were forced to eliminate the discussion of value, and sales revenue declined. When a conference call with 30 people in four states uncovered the reason for the dip, the script for that location was revised to highlight the good value and, as a result, sales skyrocketed.

Implementation Proved Challenging

Full-scale implementation, however, proved challenging. "The most difficult thing is getting compliance," Marin acknowledged, "but we've learned a lot on that front. Even though representatives were involved in the process or knew that peers generated the ideas, the tendency was to slip back into the old ways of saying things.

"Our experience shows that the best way to ensure compliance is to explain the MVT approach, provide hands-on script training and then to go through an intensive month-long observation period where compliance reports are sent directly to senior management," she explained. "This direct reporting cuts out the filtering and fudging and helps zero in on people who are having difficulty using the scripts and may require more training."

"Although our initial testing and implementation took several months because we were new at it, our goal is for new centers to telescope the time frame. We think we can do the screening tests in two weeks, the refining test in two weeks and the deployment in two weeks. It's fast and furious, but we're convinced it will work."

BellSouth will soon have the chance to put the accelerated process to the test. The success of MVT methods in the Consumer Services Division has prompted the company to start using the test method for its service centers, collection centers and repair centers. ©

To request complimentary copies of direct marketing case histories utilizing MVT techniques, please contact Ken Holland at 1-800-500-1722, or send your request on company letterhead to Ken Holland at QualPro, P. O. Box 51984, Knoxville, TN, 37950-1984.