

How Monster.com Scares Up a Sales Boost

Monster.com, the career search engine, used MVT to improve its telephone-acquisition sales force. They identified changes that will boost sales performance 25% in the next year.

By Keith Dawson.

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Monster.com is familiar to most job-seekers. It's a company that uses the web to make matches between job-hunters and employers who need to hire. What most job-seekers don't realize is that the company makes its money selling listings to those employers. Think of it as selling classified advertising -- an employer pays for a certain number of listings that can be used within a set period of time.

And of course, it takes a call center-based sales force to prospect through the universe of potential employers to sell those listings.

Recently, the company used an innovative technique to improve their sales performance.

"We were at the time a two call center organization, but we've since added a third," says Monster's John Hyland. He describes Monster's business as "very transactional" -- there are as many as 300,000 active customer relationships at any one time. "Our mantra of sales is volume and activity," he says. "The measurements that we have typically used were very standard: call contacts, time spent on the phone."

What Monster's call center operations were charged with changing was "how we could maximize productivity and gain efficiencies -- there are certain things you can achieve through volume, but what we were looking for was an edge that would make us a little more sophisticated and intelligent about where we spent the time."

At the same time, sales were growing for the company fairly quickly. So to tackle the question they had about how to improve their operations, they looked at an innovative statistical technique called Multi-Variable Testing, or MVT. It's a fairly technical

mathematical method for assessing an entire battery of changes all at once, using statistical sampling. Developed by a company called QualPro, it helps you analyze the consequences of making many changes at once to a situation.

In MVT, you identify the factors that you'd consider altering. These can be simple changes: the wording of a greeting; the particular mix of products in an upsell offer; the addition of specific training to reps, and so on. MVT analysis then creates a matrix of "recipes" that let you test all the considered changes in combination with the other changes. You run the "recipes" on a series of limited target agent groups, and voila, you can see definitively which changes help, which hurt, and which have no effect.

Monster had had some experience using MVT to analyze its ecommerce operations, which Hyland says is a more traditional environment for it.

In the largely outbound environment that Monster operates, there are many variables that could be manipulated to improve performance. They include the volume of calls, the various metrics used to measure success, the average order size, and what activities reps spend their time on. "You have three or four stages of the sales process where you really want to have the sales force spend their time," Hyland says. "The less prospecting, the less quoting, the less administrative paperwork, the better off they are."

"We had some ideas of things that we thought were drags on getting the reps to spend time on the high value areas," he says. For example, they assumed that there were aspects of the prospecting and qualification process that were bottlenecks. Another area where they saw a chance to make up some ground was in the quoting and closing process.

So they came up with that "menu" of possible changes to procedures and practices. One area they considered had to do with yearlong job postings. Reps were selling a year-long commitment, yet customers often believed that they had to use that inventory immediately. Would sales go up if reps stressed to customers that they had up to a year to use the postings they purchased?

As it turned out, the MVT process found that their thinking was precisely opposite to the desired results. "As we got the team focused on underscoring that the postings were good for a whole year, it got customers thinking in a different manner that delayed the transaction. They thought of it as more of a long term process," Hyland says. "It made things worse."

Monster ballparked a list of about 80 possible changes, largely generated by the reps themselves. The list was whittled down to a menu of 56 variables that were to be measured and tested.

The MVT process "has to do with being able to measure the impact of things in a short term period, and how they play off against each other," Hyland says.

All told, the things that worked, and were implementable, gave the organization a measurable sales boost. And the timing was critical: Monster wanted to establish a set of baseline best practices before a series of expansions with a third major sales center and the launch of several international product offerings.

"There wasn't a person involved who wasn't surprised by something we found," Hyland says. "Everybody goes in with preconceived notions -- we all went through something that we thought would make a big difference that didn't. It reveals the unbiased nature of statistics."