
PRESS RELEASE

Banks: ABI, call centers handled 53 million incoming calls regarding transactions, services and customer care

Nearly 50% more calls than in 2007. The average call waiting time is 40 seconds and over 85% of customers are provided with a definite answer during the same call. Two in three call centers provide assistance in more than one language to meet foreign customers' needs. These are the results of the fifth annual survey of call centers conducted by ABI Lab and ABI's Marketing and Customer Satisfaction Department.

Italians increasingly use telephone and mobile phone banking rather than traditional banking. It has become easier, quicker and more convenient for Italians to communicate with their banks, make a bank transfer, top up their mobile phones, trade in securities, request car insurance or loan quotes; this is also thanks to bank call centers. In 2008, call centers received over 53 million incoming calls, 47% more than in 2007 (in which 34 million calls were handled). Nearly half of them were from mobile phones (46%): to make the service easier to use and more cost effective, 80% of banks offer a *toll free number* that customers can call from their *mobile* phones. These are the results of the fifth annual *Bank Call Center Report* conducted by ABI Lab and ABI's Marketing and Customer Satisfaction Department on a sample of 25 call centers working for 84 banks, representing 75% of the Italian banking sector in terms of total assets and number of employees.

Transactions and services

In 2008, each bank call center has provided, on average, 27 different services, ranging from simple services, such as requests for information on customer current account statements and transactions, to more complex services, such as using F24 forms to pay tax or selling and buying shares. Specifically, of the 53 million customers who called bank toll free numbers, 17.5 million decided to speak to call center operators (+38% with respect to 2007), while 35.5 million customer requests were resolved thanks to an automated answering service (+53%). Moreover, in addition to calls from customers, bank call centers also handled approximately 7.2 million calls from banks requesting information on customer satisfaction, in order to provide better products and services to their customers, inform them of new opportunities and provide them with information and practical tips for better using phone banking (+50%).

"Anti-crisis" call centers

5 million calls, i.e. 10% of incoming calls, were made to request information on the recent developments in the regulatory framework and new opportunities offered by banks to help customers protect themselves from the ongoing financial crisis. Specifically, callers requested information on mortgages, the agreement between ABI and the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the 4% threshold, loan refinancing and substitution, the liquidity crisis, Lehman bonds, as well as MiFID, and so on.

To deliver a better service to customers and enable operators to better meet customer needs, banks have organized additional training courses and lifelong learning programs for call center operators with respect to different issues. Moreover, it will be easier for customers to make an

appointment with their bank, so as to analyze their specific situation and better understand the different options. Lastly, banks improved their customer service, as other bank employees, who are more qualified and can better assist customers on specific issues, will also be available.

Call centers provide explanations, information, accurate operational guidelines for using products and benefiting from special offers as well as tips for better using banking services: in 2008, the phone banking channel has played a key role in enhancing clarity, transparency and flexibility and has enabled banks to stay close to their customers; call center operators have worked together with traditional branch network staff, visited bank websites and used new tools, such as sending text messages, to communicate with customers in real time and provide a bespoke service.

Customer care and foreign languages

To meet foreign customers' needs, 91% of bank call centers provide assistance in more than one language, as 36% of call center operators speak a foreign language and are able to assist and provide information and services to foreign customers. Specifically, according to the data collected by the Task Force, each *phone branch* delivers services in 2.6 foreign languages, on average: English, French, German and Spanish, but also Romanian, Arab and Russian. Although English remains Italian call centers' second "official language" (100%) also in 2008, - together with French (70%), Spanish (50%) and German (40%) - the number of call centers providing services in Arab (15%) and Romanian (10%) remains unchanged with respect to 2007. Moreover, the figures reveal that, for the first time, there are call center operators who *speak* and are able to deliver services in Russian (5%).

Response times and professionalism

One of the advantages of phone banking is that it delivers an easy, convenient and quick service. The results of ABI's report show that the average waiting time is 42 seconds, but 70% of callers are provided with a response in 20 seconds. Taking into account that calls may also regard more complex products and more complicated requests, it takes 3.5 minutes, on average, to provide a service or the requested information to customers. Thanks to operators' efficiency and to the procedures implemented by banks, moreover, 85% of customers are provided with a definite answer during the same call. Actually, operator training is essential to call centers' success and the number of operators has increased by 14% in 2008. Before answering the phone, employees attend a 152 hour training course to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. Moreover, operators receive 71 hours' training and attend refresher courses on specific issues on an annual basis.

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