Editorial

The importance of marketing and communications skills in the financial services sector

It might strike some as surprising to think that communication and marketing skills are valued higher than numeracy skills by the financial services sector but the evolution of the delivery of financial services and products over recent years has meant that — for many positions within the sector — communication does indeed take precedence over numeracy.

One of the main reasons for this is that while significant advances in technology have removed much of the requirement for recruits to the financial services sector to be able to display mental mathematical skills to a high level of competency, these same technological advances have heightened the need for recruits not only to be computer literate to a standard that enables them to process financial data proficiently and efficiently, but also to utilise an increasingly sophisticated range of information and telecommunications technologies to maximum effect.

Given that the financial services sector in Scotland has grown by almost 60 per cent since 1995, compared to 28 per cent for the UK as a whole, there are presently opportunities aplenty for candidates with the requisite marketing and communications skills. According to Scottish Financial Enterprise, employment by banks, insurance companies and fund managers amounts to almost 100,000 workers, representing a 22 per cent increase in jobs in the financial services sector over the past decade.

Indeed, in Scotland today, one job in ten is in financial services. Yet, regardless of the status of the particular vacancy a financial services company is seeking to fill, it will invariably only ever give consideration to the recruitment and retention of those candidates able to demonstrate a variety of communications skills together with dedication and a willingness to learn a range of new marketing skills.

The financial services sector has of course undergone a period of considerable structural change over recent years, with a string of major mergers and acquisitions leading to the formation of new brands and a considerable marketing challenge simultaneously to build upon existing customer loyalty and inherent brand values while attracting new customers.

Once regarded as something of a slumbering giant, a combination of the impact of government deregulation together with significant technological advances, mean that today's financial sector is characterised by a fierce competitiveness and populated by major blue-chip organisations that rely on the highest possible standards of marketing to be able to maintain, let alone expand upon, hard-won market share. The importance to such organisations of a well-managed customer services resource cannot be overestimated.

All major financial organisations utilise all aspects of the marketing mix, adopting

both above and below the line techniques to convey their various messages, but the shift in recent years towards the provision of services delivered via call centres, has meant that there is no technique more important than that of telemarketing.

The most expensive and memorable advertising campaigns, invariably encompassing television, print, radio, online, direct marketing and outdoor exposure, amount to nothing should any enquiries made by prospective new customers prompted by such campaigns be met with a less than optimum standard of service. Nevertheless, a proportion of customer service candidates can struggle to match the exceptionally high standards of excellence required by such a demanding sector, which is why significant investment in the customer service resource is paramount.

While the customer service function of many financial services organisations does not presently stipulate any particular qualifications from candidates, basic computer literacy is now considered vital. This is because many of the customer service positions within the financial services sector are concerned primarily with call handling, whether handling a range of enquiries flowing into an organisation with regard to a particular financial product or service, or whether initiating a series of calls with a view to raising the level of awareness among potential and existing clients about the range of financial products and services available.

Customer service personnel represent the face of the brand and organisational personality that the business wants to project to its customers. As the direct interface with customers, no one is better placed than the telemarketer to ascertain levels of customer satisfaction and areas of service in need of improvement. Such knowledge is vital to the business and is the foundation upon which many of its strategic decisions will be based.

Increasingly discerning customers mean that sophisticated models of customer relationship management are required if customers' heightened expectations are to be met. This is possible only where provision for adequate training programmes are installed.

The nature of today's financial services sector is such that the customer services department is often the largest in terms of employee numbers by a considerable margin — many such departments measure employee numbers in hundreds — though competition among candidates for positions is high so that those with tangible communications skills find themselves at a distinct advantage. Unfortunately, recent evidence has emerged to suggest that several financial services companies in Edinburgh — the chief location of the sector's main operators in Scotland — are conscious of a lack of such skills from within the pool of candidates coming forward for customer service vacancies.

It was in order to address this area of concern that some of the major operators in Edinburgh's financial sector — including Standard Life, RBS and HSBC — formed and funded an organisation with the specific objective of providing pre-interviewing skills for such candidates so that when they arrived for interview, they were able to display competencies in such areas as: customer services; team working; problem solving; call handling and IT skills.

Consequently, a number of training companies have been appointed to establish and deliver a range of training programmes to address these and related issues. One such training programme was aimed primarily at lone parents, New Deal and other mainstream funded eligible candidates. In all cases the candidates were unemployed and claiming benefits. The delivery by Rewards Scotland of such skills to these candidates has resulted in

many individuals progressing to secure full-time, permanent jobs within the financial services sector.

This initiative, just one of several, has succeeded in raising the calibre of candidates arriving for interview at financial service companies, largely through raising their communications skills to a sufficient standard. This is providing convincing evidence that there are jobs for anyone without academic qualifications

within the most challenging of commercial environments, provided that candidates first take active steps to equip themselves adequately with the requisite skills and are able to demonstrate an enthusiasm for work.

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