

Providing Contact Center Managers with Good Business Intelligence Information



Bruce Belfiore - CEO

About BenchmarkPortal:

BenchmarkPortal's founders pioneered the first contact center benchmarking study in 1995. Now custodian of the largest database of contact center metrics in the world, BenchmarkPortal is a leader in certification, training, consulting and research for the customer contact industry. Its team of professionals has gained international recognition for expertise and innovation in best practices. BenchmarkPortal's mission is to help management optimize the performance of their center in terms of both cost and quality and thus encourage customer loyalty and build enterprise value. For more information on BenchmarkPortal, call 1-800-214-8929 or visit www.BenchmarkPortal.com.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Mr. Belfiore, what is the concept at BenchmarkPortal?

Mr. Belfiore: The concept at BenchmarkPortal is to provide contact center managers with good business intelligence information on which they can base decisions to improve their performance. To do that, they need to compare their metrics against other centers in their own industry. Our database, started at Purdue University back in the 1990s, has grown to be the largest database in the world of call center metrics. Managers who give us their metrics receive a report, which shows their performance metrics next to the average for the industry, and thereby find out how good their performance is. By doing that, they can determine where they are strong and where they are weak on a competitive basis. They can then utilize that knowledge to investigate their weaknesses, determine what improvement initiatives would be appropriate, and ultimately reduce costs and improve their competitive position in the industry.

CEOCFO: Is there reluctance for companies to provide data? Was that a challenge to overcome initially?

Mr. Belfiore: In most industries, it is not a big challenge to overcome. Keep in mind that people are naturally curious about how they stack up to their competitors. In a couple of industries there is some reluctance to provide data, but keep in mind that this information, although it is very valuable on a managerial level, it is not information that is sensitive in terms of personal information, credit card information, patient information, HIPAA or anything like that. Generally speaking, people are more than willing to share information because they know the information that comes to us will never be revealed to anybody. We have become the trusted intermediary for contact center metrics information in this industry, and people know they can rely on us. They have the value of being able to compare their metrics performance to the industry with the security of knowing that their information will never be revealed.

CEOCFO: How does it work?

Mr. Belfiore: What happens is that people will come to our website and learn about what we do. They will get in touch with us, and they will enter the performance data and metrics from their management reports into a survey on our website. The metrics include average speed of answer, average handle time, average hold time, and numerous other key performance metrics. Those metrics are put into two main categories. One is what we call the efficiency metrics. These are metrics that have an impact on cost. The other metrics are called quality metrics. Those are metrics that have a statistical relationship with customer satisfaction. We put both categories of metrics through individual expert formulas and come out with two indices. One is the cost index and the other is the quality index. These two indices are plotted graphically on a four-quadrant matrix. When they see this performance matrix graphic, managers are able to understand if they are in a strong competitive position or a weak competitive position. They then determine how they can improve their performance. So, to summarize, managers will input the information online, they will get back a report, and the report will show their individual metrics side by side with the average for their industry vertical. They will also get the performance matrix, which is the four-quadrant matrix graphic that I just mentioned to you.

CEOCFO: Are many people surprised at the findings?

Mr. Belfiore: Many people are surprised by the findings. That is good because the important thing is to be able to know where you stand competitively. It is not a good idea as a manager to be in the dark about how you are doing. Once you

know where you stand, you can take appropriate action. That is very empowering for call center managers. We have seen many managers who have benchmarked, who have been surprised or even shocked by their performance, who have then gathered themselves together, analyzed their situation and have taken corrective actions. In the course of usually six to 18 months, they have transformed their center from a very poor performer into a very strong performer. We love to see that. That is exactly the kind of positive, statistics-based management that we think is the essence of good call center management.

CEOCFO: Are you able to help people who are not where they would like to be?

Mr. Belfiore: Yes. We started with the benchmarking only, and people would thank us for showing them where they performed miserably, but they wanted to know what they should do about it. We have developed other areas of our practice to address their needs. This includes training, where we developed something called the College of Call Center Excellence, which was originally developed for AT&T. This is a curriculum to help call center managers, supervisors and agents to increase their performance and to learn more about how to do a great job. That is something we offer around the world with great success. We also have introduced assessments. We do assessments that are based on the benchmarking and include site visits to our clients. We help them identify where their problems are and help them to see how they can improve. We have also developed a research side because we have so much data that we like focusing our leading edge research based on that data. There are some other initiatives we have going, but I will stop there for right now.

“We can give managers the information they need to be more competitive, to actually make their customers more satisfied and to prove to their senior managers that they are adding enterprise value. These are very useful elements; we always keep in mind the people component, processes and technology, because we have intimate knowledge of all three. We have seen time and again that when those three elements are optimized and working well in unison, then great things can happen and managers careers are also turbo charged as well. I was out with a client last night that was just made vice president of a very large health insurance operation. She credited her success to having used our methodology in a structured and consistent way. People who care about their company, their people and their careers are paying attention to BenchmarkPortal.”- Bruce Belfiore

CEOCFO: Just because you can statistically figure out where a company is, that does not necessarily mean you can tell them how to improve. How have you developed the skills needed to go beyond the original concept or providing the information and helping a company take steps?

Mr. Belfiore: We have recruited a very experienced group of call center experts, who we call Senior Consultants, who bring together the intimate knowledge of our metrics-based methodology with a great knowledge of practical best practices in the call center environment. By bringing together our metrics-based method of diagnosis, with expert knowledge of best practices and what is happening in the industry, we are able to provide call center managers not only with an indication of where they are strong and weak, but also with a road map forward of how to get stronger and how to actually improve. There is a great deal of cross-pollination that goes on with regard to best practices. We keep up on the latest literature, we contribute to the latest literature, and our experts are continually on site with call centers. They are always seeing new things. We have kind of a unique situation in that our senior consulting group meets every week. We talk about situations that we have seen with clients, always respecting totally the individual information for an individual client. We want to bring forth best practices using call center benchmarking as the first step.

CEOCFO: What might be some of the common areas where people fall short in their call centers. What might be something a little more outside the box that you would be able to identify and help a company change?

Mr. Belfiore: An area where there are frequently problems is in the human resources area. That goes all the way from proper recruiting to proper training and transition, (which is often times called “nesting” between the training and being fully in service), and also in terms of motivating and communicating with agents or reps after that. We have also seen that there is a big impact from supervisors who are the coaches for these reps. In turn, we have seen issues that senior managers have in terms of setting the right tone and in making sure that they have the right incentives in place to motivate their team. I went to dinner last night with a client who came to one of my courses about four years ago. She took copious notes and asked me to come to her center, as she had a terrible morale situation. She and her team were able to turn things around by doing the right stuff - - from a 28 percent top box customer representative satisfaction rate to 67 percent customer rep satisfaction in the course of less than a year -- just by focusing on doing the right things. We see many opportunities in the HR area. Technology is another area where there are many new things happening in our sector. There are opportunities for specific call centers to better leverage technology to make themselves more efficient and more effective.

CEOCCFO: *Are there many companies in your space?*

Mr. Belfiore: We do not have any competitors with the same breadth that we have. Our distinguishing characteristic is our unique database, which has taken a long time and a great deal of resources to build. It is not only big, but it is also very clean. We actually ask more questions than we need for specific metrics on our survey so that we can do cross checks. If we see something that does not cross check properly, then we go back to the submitter and ask for clarification. Also, the curriculum we have for the College of Call Center Excellence benefits from our original research, as well as the best practices consulting we have done. Our assessments also benefit from that because with the benchmarking, it is sort of like going to the doctor. If the doctor has your x-rays, blood sample etc. before you walk in the door, then that doctor will know a lot about you already and will know where to probe in terms of problems and issues. That is the way we operate as well. Benchmarking gives us the great advantage of being able to know a lot about you through your metrics before we walk into your center. This compresses the time needed to move from discovery mode to problem solving mode. We are able to really devote our time and efforts to converting or leveraging our best practices knowledge to get good results for you.

CEOCCFO: *How do you match a high level of customer service with efficiency, so that a company does really get the best result?*

Mr. Belfiore: That is the major management challenge. We have the two indices I mentioned before (cost and quality) that reflect our philosophy about a balanced scorecard. Balancing financial and quality objectives is important, whether you are in the private sector, the government sector or the non-profit sector. We work with call centers in all three areas. The challenge is to be able to have that balanced score card of information and then try to optimize in all areas. There are tradeoffs; there is no doubt about it. There are things that you have to balance, but when you use our methodology, you think about it in a more structured and a more managerially useful way. You are trying to optimize your operation, keeping in mind what your company's mission is and what its strategic objectives are, and then you can work on the right metrics to improve your position according to your mission and strategic objectives.

CEOCCFO: *What is your geographic range today?*

Mr. Belfiore: Our geographic range is actually global. We have most of our business in North America but we are expanding throughout the world. I was in contact with the UK, Netherlands, Italy, Dubai, China, Australia, Singapore and South America -- all within the last couple of months.

CEOCCFO: *Is it the same everywhere? Would there be different ways of approaching the subject in different geographies? At the end of the day, is a call center a call center?*

Mr. Belfiore: Keep in mind, you are talking to somebody who is a dual national; I have both Italian and American nationality and I have spent a great deal of my professional life abroad. BenchmarkPortal is very sensitive to cultural differences and to perceptions in different countries. We have that as a starting point. However, we think that our methodology, when it is put into local context, is universal. That is to say, bringing the most value to the customer and the most efficiency for the enterprise are good things to do wherever you are.

CEOCCFO: *How is business these days?*

Mr. Belfiore: Business is good!

CEOCCFO: *What might be different a year or two from now?*

Mr. Belfiore: From our point of view, automated benchmarking is something that we are introducing. We have a patent on it, so we are not too worried about talking about that. Right now, there is a lot of effort that is involved in benchmarking, going through all your management reports and making sure that you are submitting things according to our definitions for the various metrics. It takes enough time, so people tend to do it only once, maybe twice a year. It is more of a report card than an ongoing management tool. We are in beta stages now of introducing automated benchmarking. This is going to mean that managers, instead of chewing their fingernails and being concerned about how they are going to benchmark at the end of the year, will be able to monitor the numbers on a monthly basis year round. That is one thing. I think the other thing that is going to happen in our sector is that technology is progressing in such leaps and bounds that it is going to be even more important in the monitoring of quality and in the training of people than before.

CEOCCFO: *Put it all together for our readers. Why pay attention to BenchmarkPortal?*

Mr. Belfiore: We can give managers the information they need to be more competitive, to actually make their customers more satisfied and to prove to their senior managers that they are adding enterprise value. These are very useful elements; we always keep in mind the people component, processes and technology, because we have intimate knowledge of all three. We have seen time and again that when those three elements are optimized and working well in unison, then great things can happen and managers careers are also turbo charged as well. I was out with a client last night that was just made vice president of a very large health insurance operation. She credited her success to having used our methodology in a structured and consistent way. People who care about their company, their people and their careers are paying attention to BenchmarkPortal.

BIO: Bruce Belfiore is Senior Research Executive and CEO of BenchmarkPortal, custodian of the world's largest database of contact center metrics. He hosts the monthly on-line radio show "CallTalk," which focuses on topics of interest to contact center managers, and he is chancellor of The College of Call Center Excellence, which provides courses for call center professionals. He has consulted for many Fortune 1000 companies, helping them to improve the strategic value, efficiency and effectiveness of their customer contact operations. He is the author of the book Benchmarking At Its Best for Contact Centers and holds bachelor's, MBA and JD degrees from Harvard University.



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