



## 5 Ways to Reimagine Customer Service Training to Reap Better Business Results

*By John Kruper, Chief Learning Officer,  
Sykes Enterprises, Incorporated*

Thanks to millennials, the dark ages of “death by PowerPoint” are nearly over. But while the digital generation is the trigger, the current renaissance in training design is solidly based on science and driven by the realities of business.

Most humans learn better by doing — this isn’t a news flash, we know this from decades of scientific research. It makes sense, then, that the costs associated with failed training techniques — ones that employ a passive approach — are becoming too high for companies to ignore. In the case of customer service training, several factors come into play.

As self-service technology helps customers solve more issues on their own, that means live customer service agents are facing increasingly complex problems. That’s **pushed the average cost of live customer service interactions from \$7 in 2009 to nearly \$10 five years later**, according to CEB Gartner research in Harvard Business Review.

The real cost of putting an unprepared agent on the line with frustrated, irate customers, however, comes in the form of lost business. Scorching reviews and embarrassing videos — spread far and wide through social media — pile on the damage. As a result, **businesses are realizing that the customer experience is as important as their products and services.**

Yet training for the frontline of service is often neglected, as the hourly workforce is usually at the bottom in terms of resource allocation. Bersin by Deloitte estimates that **while companies spend more than \$130 billion per year on employee development, leadership development takes the biggest chunk.** This becomes evident when you walk in the training rooms at many call centers. There’s no air, no windows — it’s the last place that gets any love.

At SYKES we’ve found that to deliver outstanding, award-winning customer service, you need to focus attention on the people who provide it. We’ve based our learner-led training model on a highly engaging, interactive experience that not only brings rave reviews from millennials and all workforce generations, but also translates into happy customers. In case after case, we’ve found this science-backed learning approach delivers more value in terms of increasing speed to proficiency, reducing training costs and turnover, and ultimately creating more engagement and connection to customers.

Here are five keys we’ve found valuable when reimagining training to meet today’s customer service challenges:

### 1 **Make the mundane irresistibly memorable.**

Let’s face it: the subject matter that most customer service agents need to learn is hardly Hollywood material. Return policies, APR rates, how to plug in a router ... you can just see eyes glazing over.

That's why we strive to make training come alive by delivering outstanding quality that doesn't break the bank. We specialize in taking information-heavy material and making it interactive, interesting, meaningful and even fun.

This has drawn its fair share of skeptical looks from some clients, but technology has made it possible to create engaging animations, music videos, games, compelling stories and even original songs, all within budget. Compared to watching text-laden slides and listening to a trainer drone on for hours, it's not hard to imagine how a more engaging, impactful approach will result in more learning and, in turn, greater business returns.

This becomes increasingly clear when training millennials. **Putting someone used to constantly consuming music, videos and information on their computer or phone in a classroom and lecturing them for eight hours a day just isn't effective.** They won't put up with it. They vote with their feet – they quit.

As millennials become the majority of your workforce, it's a business imperative to engage them through active learning

## 2 Practice learning by doing, not telling.

Instead of organizing training around the content, flip the classroom and let learners lead the process. That's what learner-led training means, and it's rooted solidly in science. Consider your content and what the agent will actually need to do with that knowledge on the job. Create hands-on exercises, games, role-playing, and other meaningful activities that simulate the actual work environment, engaging students in the learning process by *doing*.

Just as you wouldn't try to lecture your children on how to build a LEGO city, we don't expect new hires to learn simply by being told. We let them own the material and do something with it.

In fact, we inform candidates during the call-center hiring process that our learning model depends on them being actively engaged. We tell them: "If you expect to just show up and listen, memorize and take a test at the end, you probably won't do so well. Our classroom experience isn't like you have to take ownership, be engaged, be motivated, and work with others."

**Encourage new hires to come up with challenging questions, find answers, and test theories with hands-on experience.** By making them accountable for their learning, you can increase engagement, improve performance, and lower attrition.

## 3 Get social.

Include the social dimension as another strong pillar in building your effective learning strategy. Research confirms that as social creatures, humans learn by teaching and working with others.

**You want to provide learning experiences that are highly collaborative and peer-driven.** Give students opportunities to tutor and teach others. Engage them in role-playing where one plays the customer, the other the agent. Have them trade roles, observe, and debrief each other.

Gamification is another way to engage social instincts – through competition and motivation. While not new concepts, incorporating mobile phones and other technology into training for a generation of learners who grew up using these tools can be very effective.

## 4 Create collaborative learning spaces.

Rethink the very idea of the classroom itself to maximize collaboration and connectivity.

We're transforming our physical classrooms with a more learner-centered design. Organized like an arts studio, our classrooms have pods of tables so students are facing each other rather than staring at the front of the room. The facilitator is walking around, so the front essentially dissolves away. There's a decidedly different vibe in these classrooms – they're kinetic and even a little noisy because people are talking and laughing. We liken the difference between this and the traditional corporate training room to the contrast between a Montessori classroom and a college auditorium.

Today's world of virtual workers and global business also calls for customer experience training that goes beyond the brick-and-mortar classroom. We've created the "connected classroom" that can combine students sitting in a physical classroom with others working from their production desktops or from home. In this scenario, the trainers can be anywhere.

The flexibility introduced the connected classroom can be a valuable advantage in meeting training challenges that would be impossible with limited physical space. In one instance, the connected classroom made it possible to bring **175 new agents up to speed in just 126 days, facilitating 15 classes concurrently, while only actually occupying two physical training rooms.** Using a blend of active learning and e-learning, we were able to bring together seasoned trainers and coaches from other lines of business around the world to virtually assist in ramping up the new hire classes.

Besides meeting the rollout deadline, the new site became the highest performing in customer satisfaction (CSAT) and Net Promoter Scores (NPS) compared to nine other sites that were more established.

## 5 Follow data, not fads.

Our business is data-driven — attrition and retention, up-sell results, engagement, speed to proficiency, overall performance — the call-center environment is highly measurable.

While you may have the latest multimedia software, it's important to stay focused on your business results and the underlying science of learning. Keep testing and iterating to encourage what works and change what doesn't.

In one instance, we observed the impact of revamping a leading retail bank's "new hire" training program. Change-factors included a flipped curriculum focused on learners, and active-learning training and certification for all facilitators. **Our learning architects also simplified the training by zeroing in on the top 20 percent of call drivers, with a goal to enhance knowledge retention and critical thinking.** Their premise was that 80 percent of the outcomes come from 20 percent of the content and curriculum. In addition, the program accelerated the process of getting agents on calls to give them more hands-on experience.

The results were outstanding, with agents hitting proficiency targets within just 45 to 60 days, compared to over 90 days with the previous training. Agents also reported they felt 40 percent more prepared when on the production floor.

Fortunately for us, the learning never stops. We make metrics a core piece of everything we do. Not just to prove our ROI, but to learn and improve. We can always continue to make it better, refine it, tweak it.

Being human comes with some unique characteristics that give us an edge over self-service technology bots — empathy, problem solving and critical thinking skills. It's imperative that those qualities are always considered when designing a training program.



**John Kruper**  
Chief Learning Officer

John Kruper serves as SYKES' Chief Learning Officer, leading the training and development for over 50,000 employees worldwide. Harnessing the opportunity to apply emerging technologies to education, Mr. Kruper has helped train thousands of employees all over the world, leading to greater efficiency and efficacy in all kinds of businesses.

## ABOUT SYKES

Sykes Enterprises, Incorporated is a leading provider of multichannel demand generation and customer engagement services for Global 2000 companies and their end customers. SYKES' differentiated full lifecycle solutions and services — digital marketing, sales expertise, customer service, technical support and more through multichannel delivery platforms — effectively engage customers at every touchpoint of the customer journey. Our complete service offering helps clients acquire, retain and increase the lifetime value of their customer relationships through cost-effective solutions that enhance the customer service experience, promote stronger brand loyalty, and foster high levels of performance and profitability.