

# What Contact Centers Can Learn From Public Safety

## Applying lessons from mission-critical emergency services centers to commercial call handling

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### INTRODUCTION

To the harried managers of a modern high-octane commercial contact center, it might seem like nothing could be more urgent than squeezing every bit of efficiency and productivity out of operations. But they would be wrong.

There is an environment in which the stakes are higher, where delivering top-notch “service” is an organizational number one priority. That is in the public safety sector, where callers are people in intense distress and the dispatcher is literally providing them a lifeline. Public safety centers are operational close cousins to commercial contact centers: they both rely on intelligently processing a high volume of inbound contacts at the lowest possible cost that is consistent with the highest available level of service. The standards for service may differ, but the mechanics of how they do it are quite similar.

In some key respects, business centers can leverage the best practices of 911 emergency response centers that handle matters of life-and-death with a consistently high performance level. Like commercial centers, public safety dispatch centers face serious cost-control and budgetary limitations (in this case because they are funded by government agencies). “Doing more with less” is standard operating procedure in the public environment. These centers have learned to maximize the value of essential tools, like call recording, to carefully balance their dual missions of safeguarding lives and caretaking public funds.



This paper describes some of the ways that the two types of call-handling centers resemble each other, and the best practices that have evolved in the public sector that can be applied more broadly in the commercial sphere.

## **OPERATIONAL SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

The clearest divergence between the two types of centers is in fundamental mission – public safety centers are focused squarely on responding to citizen issues that are immediate and often critical. They are a high visibility government function whose performance affects both citizen perceptions and the political climate. Unlike their counterparts in the commercial sphere, public safety centers do not require the types of customer tracking, CRM, billing and transaction processing tools that are necessary for sales or customer support. Safety centers also tend to use fewer of the advanced applications for workforce management and analytics than commercial centers. (There are specialty applications designed to manage the process involved in an emergency services dispatching environment, but those are not relevant to contact center operations.)

Unlike in commercial centers, emergency centers do not generally have to cope with multichannel or cross-channel interactions. The constituent base (i.e., the public) has been trained to use the 911 voice channel for emergencies, and increasingly to use 311 or 211 for non-emergency issues.

Not surprisingly, there are some key differences in the kinds of metrics that matter in each type of center. Measures that are revenue-based are irrelevant to public safety, but are roughly analogous to metrics like time-to-dispatch, which measures how long it takes to finish the information gathering component of a call and turn it into an action item for a response team. Both kinds of centers care deeply about average speed of answer (ASA) and first contact resolution (FCR). They differ on average handle time (AHT) – in public safety, a long call is not necessarily a poorly handled call.

Look past those functional differences and the two types of centers share many important qualities. Both are fundamentally script- or protocol-based operations. They automate and routinize large quantities of similar interactions, codifying the steps to minimize error, time spent and agent training required. To that end they also use much the same kinds of quality control technology, particularly call recording and evaluation tools.

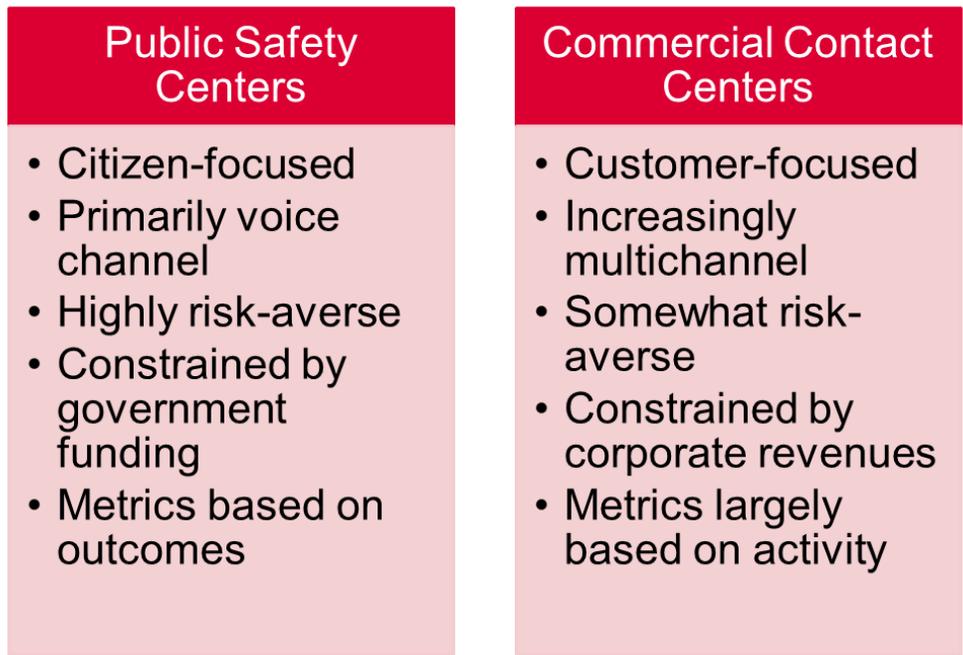
Much of the rest of the traditional call handling telephony infrastructure technology is common to both domains, as is the fact that both are, at heart, reliant on the ability to train and retain a select set of human skills. Public safety centers face turnover issues; they deal with dispatcher hiring pipelines; their dispatchers require training in call handling techniques, articulation and empathy as

much as any contact center agent. And managers have to record, store, monitor and evaluate calls for quality and compliance purposes.

Perhaps most important is that both types of centers are constraint-based operations: they are subject to cost-control from their funding authorities. As a result they have to make choices in what kinds of technologies to deploy. They both have to measure and communicate “success” criteria to those authorities. And they have to rationalize the business case for staff funding and training. Budgetary constraints often take the form of a conservative, risk-averse approach to operations.

As illustrated in Figure 1, these parallels present commercial contact centers with a rare opportunity: to see how their operations appear when stripped of some of the more esoteric interaction elements and reduced to their essentials: answer critical calls with bulletproof responsiveness in a constrained environment.

**Figure 1: Comparative qualities of commercial and public safety centers**



Source: Ovum

## LEVERAGING BEST PRACTICES OF PUBLIC SAFETY CENTERS

### Record and store everything, all the time

What sets public safety centers apart is how heavily they rely on call recording for compliance purposes. In the commercial sphere, they resemble financial services centers that are obligated to record every customer transaction in case of later dispute. Many emergency services centers capture all calls and store them. In many cases they are used in court cases as valuable pieces of evidence establishing the time and context of incidents.

Many centers in both domains face the question of whether to record all calls, or just a portion. If they opt to capture just a segment of the calls, they then have to decide what criteria to use for selection, or whether to gather them randomly. In the past, when most recorders were analog, tape-based systems, most centers chose to capture just a small segment, often in the 10% range. These recordings would not be kept for very long as storage was also expensive.

Now, with the conversion to digital complete, both kinds of contact centers have an easier time capturing the totality of interactions. On the public safety side, that means gathering citizen calls, plus radio traffic between the dispatch center and personnel in the field. For contact centers, that means capturing the data on agent screens.

In many contact centers, quality reviews are an afterthought and a managerial chore. In public safety, they are a critical factor in staying accountable to the public and to governmental authorities. Commercial centers that want to focus on the customer experience, and that want to leverage the “voice of the customer” in their operations, can look to the public realm for validation of the idea that total interaction capture provides valuable insight.

When you record 100% of the call base, you naturally create an audit trail that assigns responsibility for each segment of the interaction to a particular person, workstation, application and manager. With selective recording it is possible to miss critical moments of truth that lead to extraordinarily good or bad interactions. When you do locate those moments, it may be weeks or months after the fact, only when enough evidence has amassed to show up in a random evaluation selection.

In the hands of a public safety evaluator, recordings of tough calls allow documentary evidence to be produced long after an incident occurs. For businesses, it allows for a more nuanced analysis of trends in a customer base or agent pool. Rich analytics can allow a contact center to switch gears quickly in the face of changing business conditions in the customer base. It can detect flaws in marketing campaigns or discontent with particular processes or products. Total recording allows



you to see those issues before they mushroom into major problems, and to respond with better training or adjustments to the agent pool.

## **Streamlined agent desktops enable productivity**

It bears restating that the public safety centers are constraint-based environments. Taxpayer-funded, they cannot afford to chase the latest technologies and innovations unless they are rock solid, proven, and cost-effective. This is an attribute they share with their corporate cousins, but exhibit more starkly.

Safety centers also use a wide variety of applications that are purpose-built for them: mapping systems to locate callers, for example. Another is interfaces to radio and dispatch systems. These coexist with screen pops and scripting apps that are similar to what contact centers use. The totality of the dispatcher's workday environment is every bit as complex as that of a commercial contact center agent.

With the stakes in each interaction so high, managers of public safety centers have learned to streamline dispatcher desktops to minimize distraction and confusion. In these centers, speed and clarity are the most important elements for a dispatcher. They need to quickly grasp the fundamentals of a situation, and then translate that into an appropriate sequence of actions.

What a commercial center can learn from this environment is the value of simplicity. Sometimes adding widgets or informational gadgets to an agent's view is not an added value, it is a distraction. More information at the moment of the interaction – and more applications that deliver and process that information – can hinder productivity and introduce error. Managers have to be very careful to evaluate any new software for ease of use and complexity of the user interface.

It is also valuable to look at the training regimen as an opportunity to drill agents on the importance of following good company processes. In public safety, training and evaluation are very closely linked. (In many cases, because of unionization, they are also more formally organized, as well.)

The most important metric in these centers is time-to-dispatch, or how long it takes from the moment the call comes in to when the appropriate service is sent out. In contact centers, this is closely related to AHT, with the key difference that for a particular call, too long an AHT may cost a company some cents; in public safety centers it may cost a life.

Hence the importance of clarity and speed. Public safety centers have overcome the dispatch desktop problem by being conservative, and by making ongoing training and evaluation the centerpiece of their operational strategy. In effect, they are doing what commercial call centers do, but they are better leveraging the things that are actually under their control, through quality monitoring and recording tools.



## **Adapt to the new by sharing internally**

The public safety sector in the US is on the cusp of transforming its core technology base to newer, more multichannel tools. NG-911 is a federal initiative to encourage those centers to adopt technology that allows the public to interact with emergency services through new media like the web, smartphones, and Voice over IP.

But the resource constraints endemic to the sector force public agencies to shift from a siloed view of emergency preparation and management to a more holistic approach characterized by information sharing, collaboration, and strategic planning beginning at the procurement stage.

To adapt, some agencies are starting to shift more resources into training dispatchers, as new equipment, processes and software shake up past operational methods. There is an increasing use of more sophisticated knowledge management systems to coordinate the documentation of processes and allow for more sharing of information and best practices.

This mirrors the experience of commercial centers, which are facing an explosion of new contact channels and customer demands. Businesses are often finding themselves handcuffed by data silos that hamper delivery of effective service, and that prevent stakeholders from different departments from understanding how their activities all connect. Marketing departments, contact centers and IT may all share the same overall goals, but they are not always paddling in the same direction.

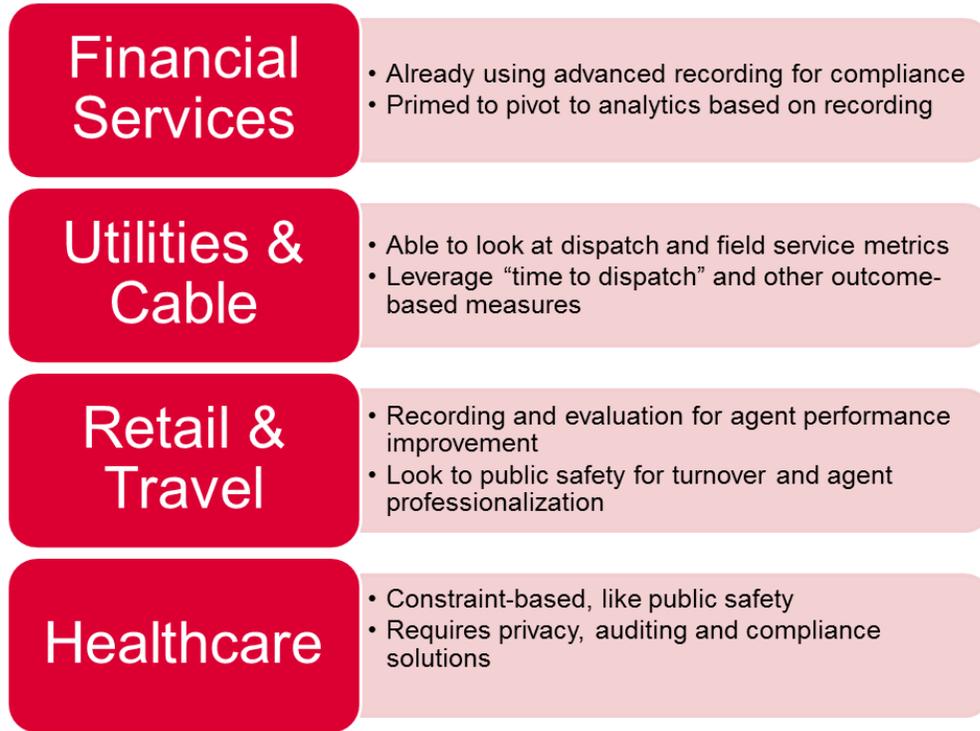
The key to constraint-based operations – to “doing more with less” – is to integrate applications across departments so you can share data and collaborate more effectively.

## **COMMERCIAL USES OF PUBLIC SAFETY BEST PRACTICES**

Figure 2 illustrates some of the industries that can most directly benefit from aligning their contact centers with public safety best practices.

Financial services centers have the longest history using common technologies of recording and monitoring, chiefly for legal compliance purposes. They have also turned that legacy of recording use into effective quality control and training programs. Financial services centers are among the most likely to be recording at or near 100% of calls, and to be storing records that reach into other channels (mainly emails and texts).

**Figure 2: Industry segments in relation to public safety centers**



Source: Ovum



Financial services are the least resource-constrained of commercial centers. They have a bit more freedom to adopt new technologies like analytics and data mining.

There is also a close kinship between emerging health care centers and those in public safety. Many are subject to compliance and privacy regulations that force them to keep close track of data as it moves through their systems, and to keep an auditable record of voice transactions. As one of the slower-growing segments of the commercial contact center business, health care has an opportunity to put in place good quality control processes early on, and to ensure that their technologies are open, interoperable, scalable and fit for long-term use.

Utilities and cable companies should look at how public safety centers emphasize time-to-dispatch instead of AHT as a way to increase productivity and, potentially, customer satisfaction. By making the outcome of the interaction as important as the duration of the call, companies that reach customers face to face can have a more positive impact and understand better what factors make customers happy.

Retail and travel industry centers should look to the public sector for its emphasis on using recording for quality control and better evaluations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that public safety centers have a lower turnover rate than commercial centers, in part due to the more intensive training of dispatcher, and to the “professionalization” of the staff. In-depth evaluation of recordings for training and ongoing quality improvement allow agents to feel invested in the work that they do, which presumably leads to higher employee engagement and lower turnover.

## **CONCLUSION**

Commercial contact center managers should look to their colleagues handling calls in the public sector for ideas in how to cope with resource constraints in a high-criticality environment. Public safety has embraced recording and used it to lever better performance from its staff. They have made the most of the tools at their disposal to focus on maximizing agent performance during each interaction. And they have created meaningful metrics that express the value of their operations to lay outsiders. In effect, they have successfully learned to do more with less, a mantra that many commercial centers are still grappling with.



## APPENDIX

### Author

Keith Dawson, Principal Analyst, Customer Interaction & Experience

[keith.dawson@ovum.com](mailto:keith.dawson@ovum.com)

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