

Taking tele-sales to a new level

With the number of call centre workers set to rise, an advanced telephone skills course is pioneering the move to improve professional qualifications, writes **Andrew Cave**

The students wore gowns and mortar boards, received their qualifications at an official presentation and partied on strongly afterwards in the customary fashion. But the 10 graduates who picked up their certificates in Cheltenham were no usual students.

Instead of carrying out a three-year degree course, they had toiled for just five months. They didn't have a campus or student bar to hang out in and neither did they have to join a queue for jobs at the end.

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The members of this class of 2008 were all building centre, call centre and branch employees who studied one day a month in formal, work-based training, reinforcing this with regular measurement and assessment in their daily jobs.

They became Britain's first graduates in advanced telephone skills, courtesy of a level-five diploma in sales through Dorset-based training consultancy Direct Sales Accreditation (DSA).

DSA is run by Simon Bell, who has 20 years experience in sales and training and says he has developed

a course that focuses on “enjoyable, manageable and sustainable selling” that stems from developing a rapport and relationship with customers.

The course has been approved by the Newcastle-based NCFE, Britain's seventh largest national awarding body as a level five award – just one level down from an honours degree and equivalent to diploma or foundation degree – and the graduation ceremony earlier this month marked the end of the first pilot scheme by Chelsea Building Society.

Mark Higgins, the building society's head of people development at Chelsea, said the training had an “astounding” and “outstanding” effect on the best salespeople of the society, which is now working on incorporating it into its formal sales training and using its principles in staff induction course.

The course combines 30 hours of tutorial with 350 hours of desk-based, practical learning. Each module includes a day of formalised training, with the remainder of the training taking place at-work, logged and monitored by a process that takes up to 15 minutes at the end of each day and requires people on the course to record their day's call experiences.

Mr Higgins did not disclose the actual increase in sales performances achieved by the course's graduates but said they were encouraging enough for the society to want to roll out the scheme across its 300-strong workforce, call centre of 120 staff and 33 branches. Only one of the original 11 people on the course did not complete it, he said.



Graduates from the pilot course said it had taught them a new approach. Chris Howell, a telephone mortgage sales agent at Chelsea's call centre in Cheltenham, said: “What the course has taught us is that what we do is one way of doing things, but we can do it a lot better, a lot more easily and gain a lot more success from it.”

One thing in particular that he said he has learned is how to compliment people over the phone. “People appreciate it,” he said. “It's easy and you get great results from it.”

Neil Gurney, a mortgage sales manager at Chelsea, added: “Before I came on the course, I thought I was very successful on the telephone in presenting information

Talking heads:
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and selling to our customers, but there was something missing.

“Having taken the course, what I've found is that what I haven't been doing so much of is asking our customers what their thoughts and feelings are in relation to the facts that I am presenting.

“Now I really engage with them, getting the feedback so that I can best meet the needs of the customer.”

Chris Hancox, another telephone mortgage sales agent at the society, added: “I think it's been a fantastic course. It brings customers into the forefront of what we do. It teaches us that it's about talking to customers, getting to know them and building a lasting relationship as opposed to

just making a quick sale.”

Gethin Evans, training manager at Chelsea Building Society, says: “This training is profound. It takes what is superficially at least a very straightforward concept of making telephone calls and engaging customers in conversation – what could be simpler? But in fact there's an awful lot more to it than meets the eye.

“From my perspective, the depth of academic study that we've covered has been unbelievable. I had no idea there would be so much information that enriches a telephone conversation. Our customers are responding and the impact that it's having on them is probably as profound as it is on the individuals.”

With 586,000 people working in UK call centres – a number that's expected to rise to 677,000 by 2012 – Mr Bell said there is a need for professional qualifications – something encouraged by the Leitch Review of Britain's skills base, which urged the adoption of high levels of workforce qualifications by 2020.

“This is the first step that telephone sales has made towards meeting the requirements of the Leitch Report,” he said.

“We have actually measured the performance in numbers, and we are actually recording and measuring behavioural and financial improvements. This combination is what will deliver further outstanding rewards to Chelsea and our other clients.”