The Smart Contact Center Manager's Guide to Handling Spikes in Call Volume

fonolo

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Stop Call Spikes Forever

When it comes to customer service, there will always be a role for a live conversation with an agent. Perhaps call volume has gone down over the years due to the availability of multi-channel tools and self-service. However, this just means that the transactions that end up with a live agent will a) be more complicated; and b) are more likely to involve an upset customer.

Voice is still one of the major channels customers want to use for support. Some customers may simply prefer to deal with a live agent and skip self-service tools altogether. For example, a study by JD Power found that more than **70% of customers** will visit a branch more than once a month (including millennials) — it's clear that some things, people will just always prefer to do in person.

The biggest problem with the voice channel, as many call center professionals know, is long hold times.

> More than **a third of people surveyed** report waiting on hold as their biggest frustration when seeking support from a company.
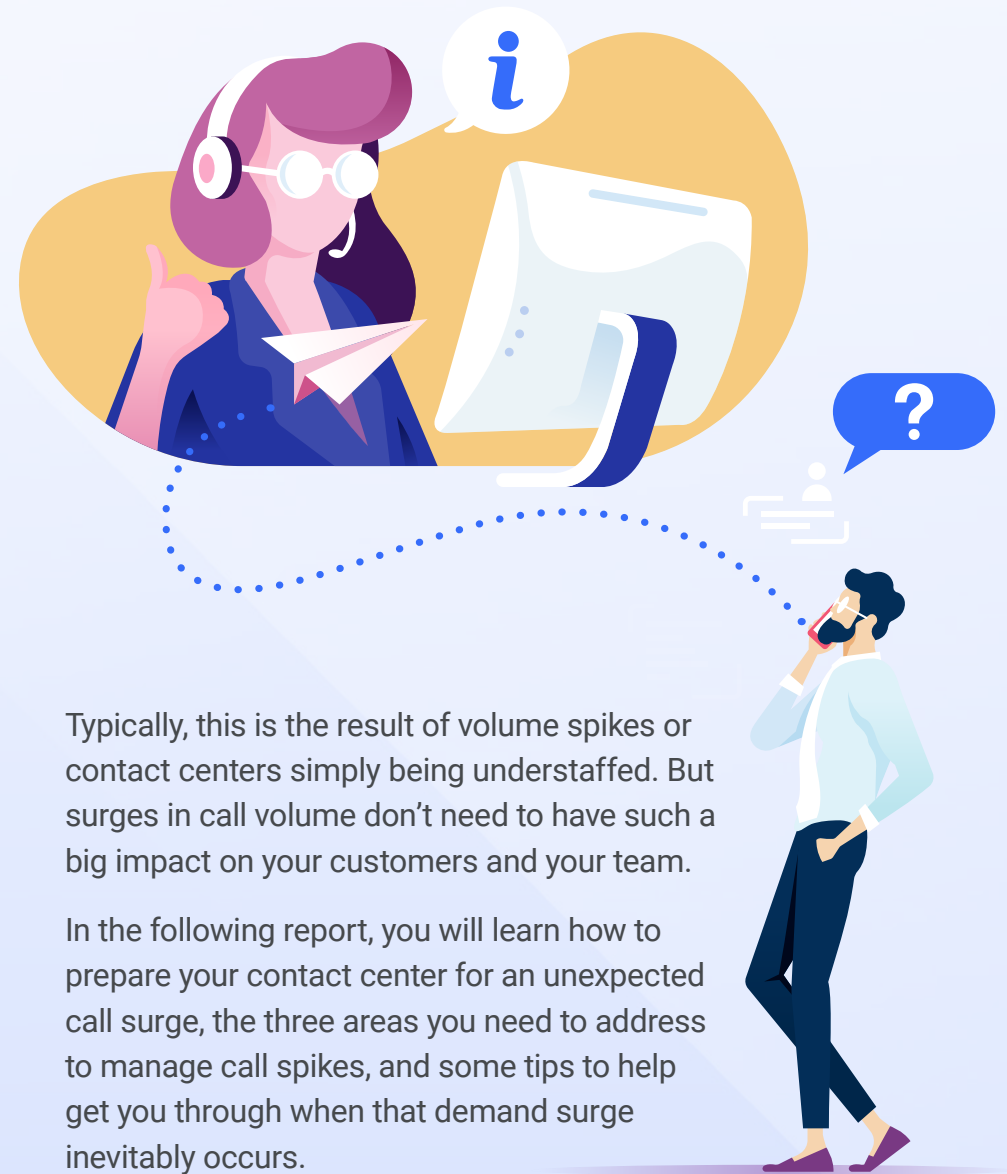
Typically, this is the result of volume spikes or contact centers simply being understaffed. But surges in call volume don't need to have such a big impact on your customers and your team.

In the following report, you will learn how to prepare your contact center for an unexpected call surge, the three areas you need to address to manage call spikes, and some tips to help get you through when that demand surge inevitably occurs.

SECTION 1

Preparing for Spikes in Call Volume

Contact center managers are, at their core, problem-solvers.

One of the most challenging problems they often face is dealing with unpredictable spikes in call volume. Sometimes the causes of call spikes are understood, even anticipated.

Yet, in many cases, these periods of peak call volume come as a real shock to everyone in the contact center. They shouldn't.

For example, a marketing event promoting a product sale would be an easy predictor for an influx in calls, whereas an unexpected power outage or a sudden bout of the flu in your contact center isn't something that can be readily planned for...or is it?

> A spike in call volume is the guaranteed outcome of a number of events — there's no excuse not to be prepared.

The most unlikely events should still be planned for — even events as unlikely as a sweeping pandemic that puts half the planet in quarantine. Because no matter the nature of your business, a spike in call volume is pretty much a guaranteed outcome of a number of events — there's no excuse not to be prepared for them.

HOW TO PREPARE YOUR CONTACT CENTER FOR THE 'UNEXPECTED' CALL SPIKE

Use data to forecast potential issues

Prepare your team with a crisis action plan

Invest in the right technology

Use data to forecast potential issues

Your data will be key to preparing for a surge in calls. Take some time to analyze data from your contact center. Look at the previous two years and label the spikes as planned or unplanned. Note any patterns that are present within both the planned and unplanned periods.

For instance, many organizations tend to have spikes on Mondays after being closed on Sunday. Most contact centers would take this data and use it for workforce optimization – in other words, staffing up for times when they know spikes will occur.

The important thing to note with tracking is that it is an ongoing process. Changes in the marketplace or within your own organizations may dictate alterations in the trends – this is something you will have to feel out as it happens.

Prepare your team with a crisis action plan

What happens when call volume gets out of control in your contact center? What strategies do you have in place to ensure that the customer experience doesn't suffer?

Sit down with your team-leads, management, your data, and any other stakeholders you may have to determine your crisis action plan. This should include emergency opening hours, templated responses for certain issues, pre-determined 'crisis partners' and even pre-recorded emergency handling IVRs. You should find some more inspiration for your plan in the chapters below.

When the inevitable crisis occurs, your plan will help ease the uncertainty, reduce some of the stress, and absolve you from any blame for poor planning.

CRISIS ACTION PLAN ESSENTIALS

- ☐ Emergency opening hours
- ☐ Plan for various crisis responses
- ☐ Emergency response scripts
- ☐ Predetermined IVR/tech changes
- ☐ Crisis partners
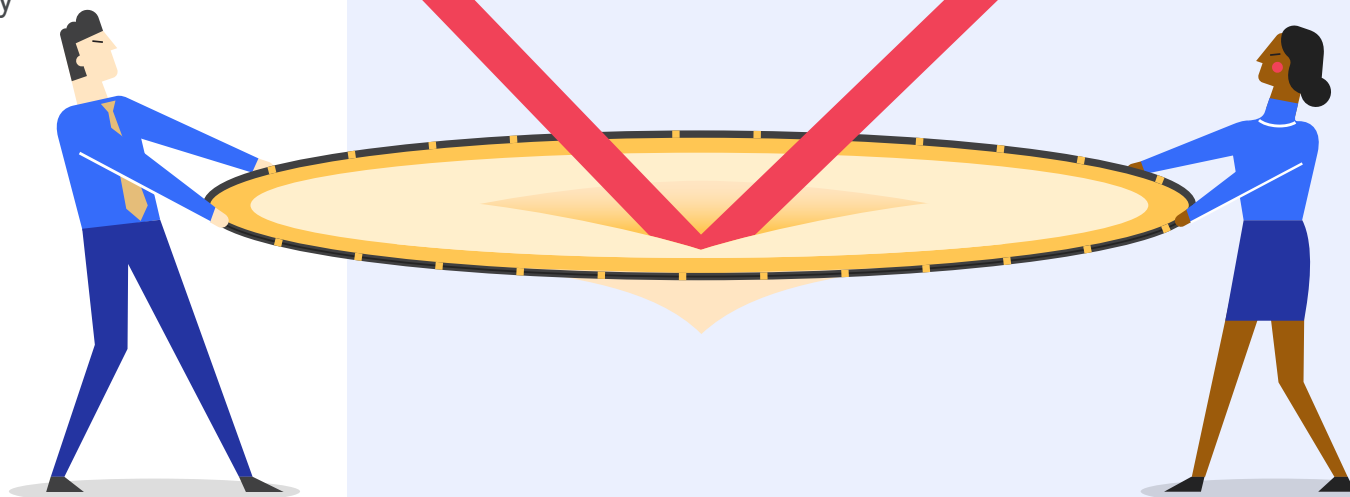
Invest in the right technology

The right technology is essential for managing the contact center — so there can be no excuses when it comes to investing in it. That said, contact center technology is no small investment, so it's important to spend some time testing it to make sure it can handle everything it needs to.

Unfortunately, many companies assume that because something works during normal times, it'll work under pressure. But — as the folks at **Credit Union of Colorado** will tell you — it's only under pressure that the cracks really start to show.

Perform stress-tests on the technology you have to make sure it can handle an unexpected volume without failure. And don't be scared to invest in technology that will ensure the job gets done when you really need it — during a crisis.

> **Don't be scared to invest in technology that ensures the job gets done when you need it most — during a crisis.**

SECTION 2

Managing Call Spikes with People

Of course, there's only so much that planning can do. In the immortal words of Sun Tzu, "According as circumstances are favorable, one should modify one's plans."

Or in more familiar terms, "When s*** hits the fan, your plans go down the toilet." Yes, your crisis plan should help with this, but emergencies have an annoying habit of not sticking to plans.

When a crisis occurs, and the numbers are flashing red, what do you do to manage your callers, and your team, without mutiny and public outrage?

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS

Call in extra agents

Keep agent morale high

Open for longer hours

Outsource overflow

Call in extra agents

One of the quickest and easiest ways to handle call spikes in a crisis is to call in the cavalry.

Most of your employees — especially your sales team — are probably very capable of handling a customer call with minimal training — so get them in to help in the short-term.

If you're worried about call quality, you can always set them up as a 'Real IVR' to give customers some human contact while they're rerouted to the correct person; this is also a great opportunity to take some work away from your agents who can handle more complicated inquiries.

Keep agent morale high

Your survival during a tsunami of customer calls depends largely on your agents. Keep them happy in whatever way you can. And that doesn't just have to be a financial reward.

Here are some ways you can keep your agent morale high throughout the onslaught of customer calls:

• Buying food — pizza/snacks/drinks/lunch/popcorn

• Bonus vacation days (for after the crisis)

• Hire a meditation teacher, breathwork course, or meditation app

• Schedule short, very regular (think 5 mins every 25 mins) to allow agents to quickly recharge during long, intense shifts

Open longer hours

This might seem like a simple and obvious fix for staff shortages in your contact center, but it's a powerful one to employ in a crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, some call centers stretched their day into a full 18 hours, split into 6-hour shifts to mitigate the impact on agents.

If your contact center operates on a standard 9-5 schedule, even opening for an extra hour each end of the day is adding 25% more operating time — that can take a big load off your team.

You may also find that you can divert callers to this later time, alleviating even more pressure from the phone lines and flattening the curve.

You're going to really need to sell the story to your team to get them on board, and you may even have to hire some temporary workers — there are a lot of students without classes or exams right now — and run them through an intensive course so they can handle simple queries.

Outsource overflow

Not every business can afford to hire even temporary staff during a crisis. But that doesn't mean you can't get some professional help handling the flood of customer calls.

There are a great many BPO companies that will be happy to alleviate some of the pressure from your team — for a price!

Start by pre-negotiating an overflow contract with your chosen 'crisis partner', so that when you get slammed by 5,000 angry customers on a Monday morning, you'll have the support ready and waiting for you.

SECTION 3

# Managing Call Spikes with Data

Find out the cause and fix it

This one might seem obvious but the reasons for call surges are not always as clear-cut as you might think.

The easiest way to do this from the start is to listen to what your customers are saying. What are they calling about? What issues keep cropping up?

If they're all calling about similar things, what can you do to fix that and prevent these calls coming in the first place? In these situations, taking a proactive approach and reaching out to your customers can save your call center a lot of unnecessary stress and expense.

One common mistake that can cause call surges is bad messaging. If you provide customers with a number, they will call it. If you tell them not to call the number, they will also probably call it.

Look at where your messaging could be improved to reduce unnecessary customer calls. A badly designed webpage that fails to answer questions effectively can quickly be re-written, drastically reducing calls.
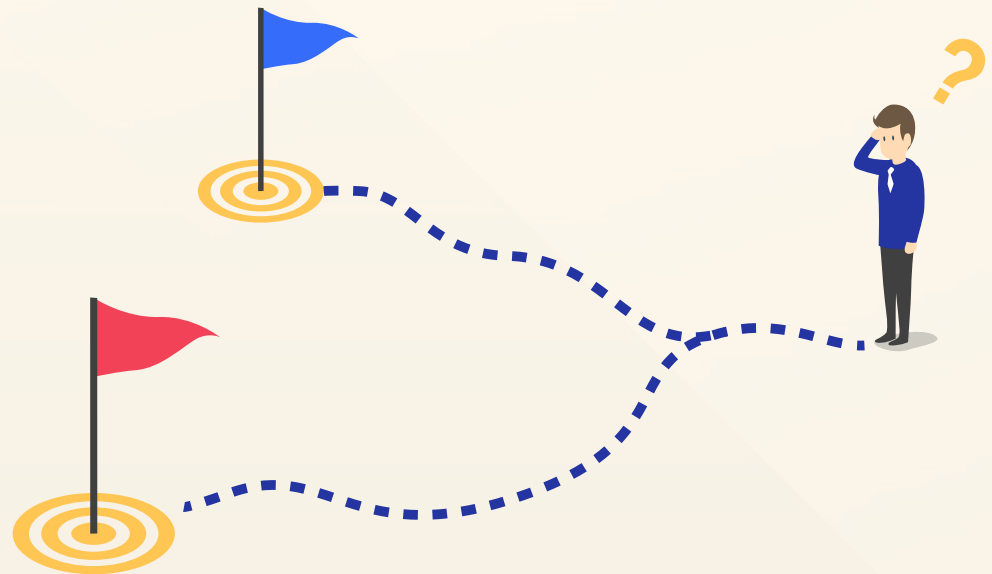
Improve your self-service options

As we mentioned above, sometimes poor self-service options or explainer pages are the reason behind call spikes.

If you've published information that's supposed to be easing pressure from customer support and you're still experiencing high call volume — reassess that page.

You may even find that you can implement a basic chatbot to help with simple inquiries. Remember, your customers don't want to have to call as much as you don't want them to. Provide them with easy to understand ways of fixing their issues and they won't contact you.

Cut back on unnecessary tasks or processes

One way to reduce pressure on your agents is to reduce after-call work. Anything that isn't absolutely necessary should either be dropped, postponed, or moved to another department. You should also look at automating as much after-call work as possible. Doing this can free up a surprising amount of time for your team; time they can use to handle more calls.

There are probably some aspects of your agents' after-call work that isn't vital to the running of the business, that can be put on hold or postponed until the call volume subsides. Look into your data to see where you can make big reductions in total Average Handle Time by cutting some After Call Work or information gathering tasks.

You could also use AI technology — or other temporary support agents — to do this, collecting basic information or handling after-call work so that more qualified agents are freed up to help customers.

SECTION 4

Managing Call Spikes with Technology

Use your IVR to divert and prioritize calls

Any contact center manager worth their salt has probably already tweaked their IVR to mitigate an incoming wave of calls. This may mean playing pre-recorded answers to the most common questions while callers are waiting on hold, or simply asking them to call back at a later time if their inquiry isn't about a specific urgent issue.

> **The most important thing to do is to give your callers a choice.**

You can also use your IVR to divert calls to other channels. Social media, a live chat on your website, or an email address are all good options. The most important thing to do is to offer your callers an option. Not all of them will take it but every little helps alleviate some of the pressure on your agents.

Use call-back software to defer calls

When a call center experiences peaks in call volume, hold times inevitably go up and abandon rates become an issue. This is the reality for call centers, and it can have a significant impact on the bottom line.

Call-backs help "smooth-out" spikes in call volume by deferring calls (in a customer-friendly manner) to a time when there's additional agent availability. In a sense, call-backs let you do a better job matching the demand for agent time with the supply in agent time. This results in more efficient use of resources.

Offering options to callers also does something amazing for the customer experience: It empowers callers to choose how they want to resolve their issues.

> Respect your customers enough to let them choose how they want to resolve an issue.

If they're stuck on hold and choose a call-back option instead of waiting on the line, you've allowed them to choose how they want to spend their time.

How to use Scheduled Conversations to smooth call spikes

It's important at this point to make the distinction between regular (or "ASAP") call-backs and scheduled call-backs.

Traditionally with call-backs, the customer's place in line is held and they are called when their turn arrives. Another name for this is "virtual queuing" or "virtual hold" because the caller is waiting in the queue via a virtual placeholder.

This approach yields the advantages of decreased abandonment, shorter handle times, and lower telco costs, but it does not get us the traffic-reshaping advantage we want.

That's because just replacing queue time with virtual queue time does not remove the burden on the call center. To do that, you need scheduled call-backs, whereby customers are offered carefully selected time slots in the future for their call-back.
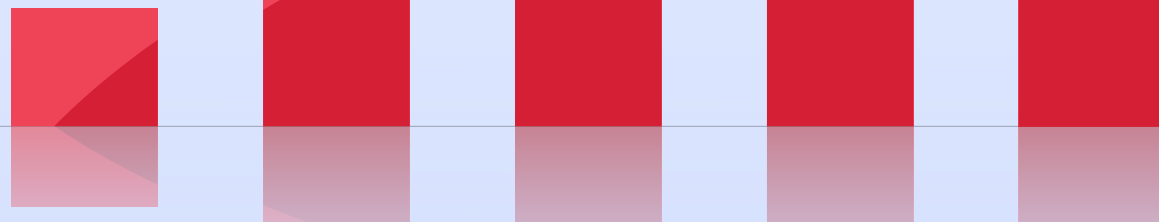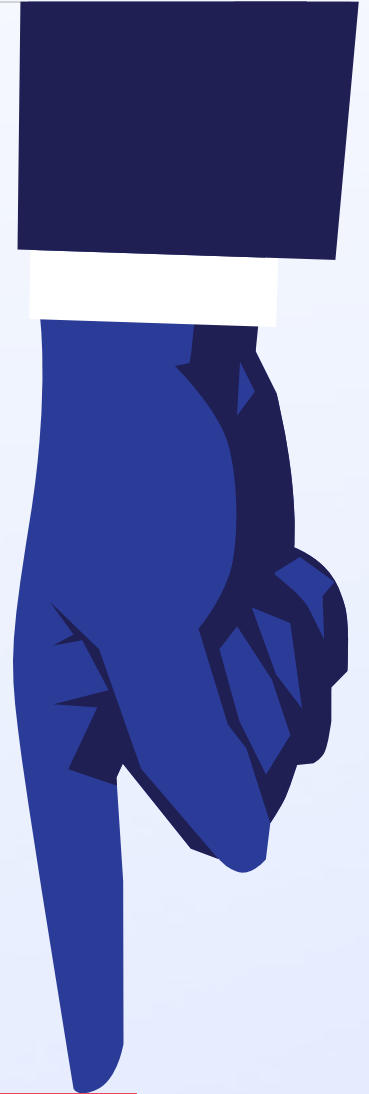
Scheduling a call-back

Asking a caller to select a time slot at the time of their original call does add a small burden to the process. But fortunately, customers still regard this option favorably because they perceive that the call center is catering to their needs. It's really a win-win situation.

If the interaction begins on the phone, the time slot selection can be done through an IVR-style menu.

If the interaction begins on the web or mobile app, then the timeslot selection process can be even simpler, as shown in the figure to the right, taken from a Fonolo Visual IVR deployment:

Your Website

Have Us Call You ⌄

201-555-0123

5:00 to 6:00 PM (EST) ⌄

Request Call-Back
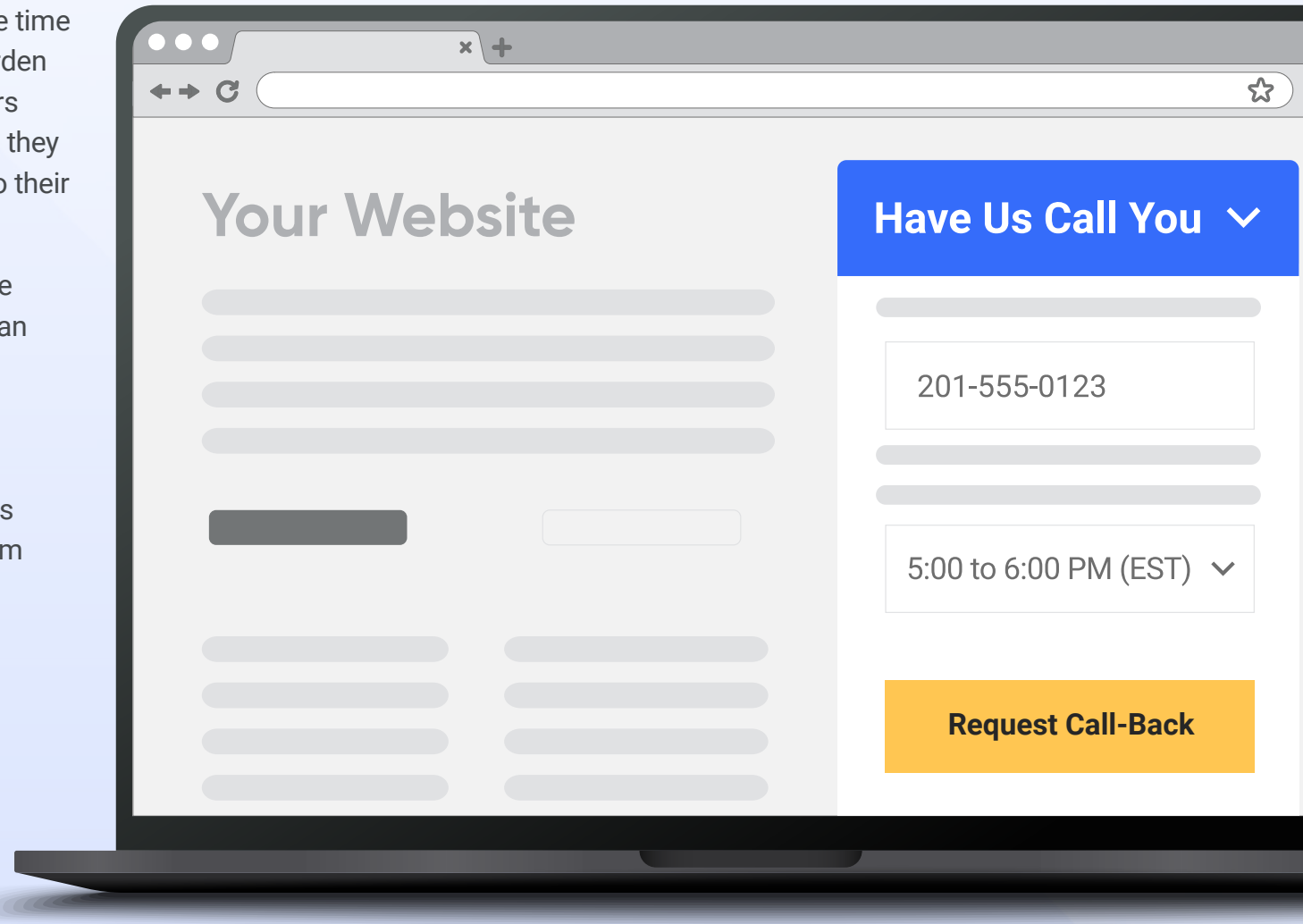
Flattening the curve with Voice Call-Backs

For our call-back strategy, let's start with something simple. We'll turn to an example company, creatively named "ExampleCo." Here are some of its basic contact center features:

- 28 agents

- 500,000 calls per year

- AHT is 5 minutes

- Target service level is 80/20
(i.e. 80% of calls should be answered in 20 minutes)

If call traffic were perfectly smooth, there would be 250 calls coming in per hour and agents would be able to provide timely service.

But, as you can see in the graphs below, they struggle to manage a daily influx of calls around lunchtime:

CALLS

Lunch time peak exceeds average by 35%

AVERAGE CALL VOLUME

ASA

Callers at noon might have to wait up to **560** seconds!

Callers at 3pm have no wait time at all.

SERVICE LEVEL

Goal fails between 10:30am and 1 pm

Flattening the curve with Voice Call-Backs

We're going to demonstrate how we can solve this issue and meet their service level throughout the day using call-backs.

Callers between 10:00 AM and 1:00 PM will hear an offer for a call-back, with suggested time slots between 2:00 PM and 4:30 PM.

We'll assume a 20% take-up rate and distribute those deferred calls evenly into the afternoon slots. Already, you can see that there are several powerful variables that you can control to reshape the call traffic to your needs:

1. **When the call-backs are offered**

2. **What time slots are proposed to callers**

3. **What the Take-up Rate is**
   (i.e. the percentage of callers who will opt for a call-back. This can be controlled by changing when and how often the offer message is played to callers who are in-queue)

When shopping for a call-back solution, make sure you have easy control of these variables! Below you can see the impressive impact of call-backs on service level and ASA.

CALLS

With scheduled call-backs in place the call volume is smoother

ASA

ASA never goes above 17 seconds

SERVICE LEVEL

Service level never goes below 80%

The ROI of call-backs vs. outsourcing

How many additional agents would it take to get a similar improvement? That's really the question we need to answer in determining ROI.

Through some trial and error, we find that 32 agents (four more than before) are needed to meet the demand. With that staffing level, the service level just barely dips below our 80/20 target at noon, as we can see in the charts below.
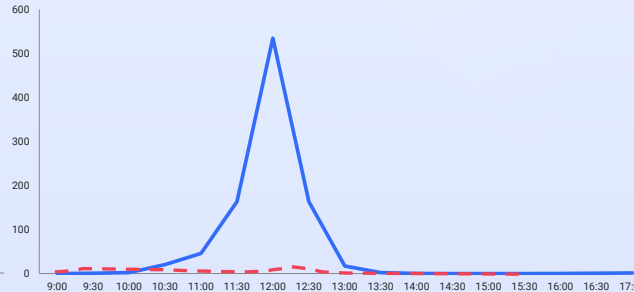
In both of these cases, you've successfully managed your call volume spike, and have definitely improved the caller's experience.

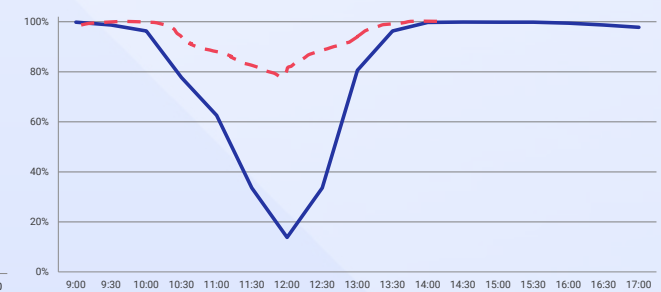You have also evened out the call volume for your staff and allowed them to be better utilized.

CALLS

ASA
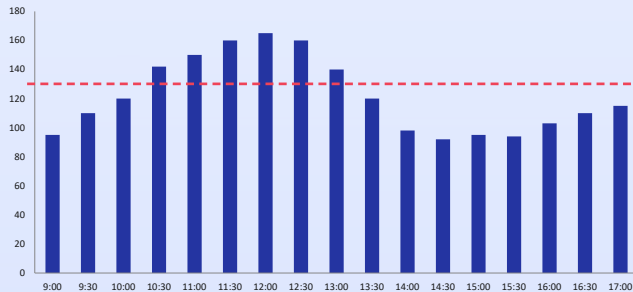
SERVICE LEVEL

With **32 agents** instead of 28, ASA stays below 21 seconds.

Service level almost above target. 77% at the worst time slot.

ROI through cost differential

Let's assume the comprehensive costs of a full-time agent at this call center is $50k. Our four new agents would then cost $200k per year. We're going to ignore for now training and onboarding costs.

How does this compare with the cost of call-backs?

In the scenario above, 180 calls were deferred between 10:00 AM and 1:00 PM. Let's assume that call-backs are not offered at other times during the day and that this day is representative of the year. That means 45,000 call-backs per year.

If the cost is less than $4 per call-back, the total cost is less than hiring agents.

> **At $1 per call-back, the cost differential is $200k minus $45k, which is $155,000, or a 77% savings!**

But beyond the "hard" ROI of improved efficiency in the call center, one should not discount the value of the increased customer satisfaction that results when you remove the aggravation of hold time.

Call-backs are an insurance policy for your call center.

And if you need a reminder of how much callers dislike waiting on hold, just take a moment to scan the tweets at **onholdwith.com**.

These sections will serve to support your goals of better managing surges in call volume; improving agent and customer experiences, and having all the right information at your fingertips.

Call-backs are an insurance policy for your contact center — one that pays out all the time: You add another convenience for your customers that they'll appreciate, even during lulls. And when call volume spikes, you can rest easy knowing that you can rise to the challenge and handle the traffic.

How to Choose a Call-Back Solution

Whether you get a built-in or third-party solution like Fonolo, here are some questions you should ask before making a selection:

What's the pricing model?

TIP
Premise-based solutions require up-front capital, while cloud-based solutions typically don't charge for professional services.

How does the price scale with call volume?

TIP
SaaS solutions allow flexibility and scalability. If you purchase a premise-based solution and then find that your projections are off, it can be difficult to adjust.

What happens when there are already more calls queued up than can be handled before end-of-day?

TIP
Handling these kinds of sticky situations is really critical. Ensure you've thought about every possible outcome.

How hard is it to add web & mobile functionality?

TIP
You should be able to accomplish this without involving IT or calling in a consultant.

How easy is it to adjust parameters like the wording or timing of the call-back offer message?

TIP
Ask if you have access to a management interface so that changes can easily be made.

How thorough is the reporting and can it be integrated with your existing reporting tools?

TIP
Think about your KPIs and what success metrics are important to you.