Safety Starts with Care … Customer Care

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The first indication a company has a safety problem with a product often comes through the customer care department. Call center staff process complaints from consumers about product quality, performance, usability, and, of course, safety. Calls citing safety problems require special attention … and escalation to the product safety committee.

Customers injured by products are often emotional and may exaggerate the severity of an incident. For that reason, it's important for call center agents to be empathetic, but also inquisitive in an attempt to capture as much accurate and complete information as possible. Knowing the right questions to ask and recording the answers accurately is helpful for informing a future investigation by engineers.

Training call center staff to drill down on safety issues is a critical—but frequently overlooked—part of the safety process. The training must be developed with the help of the engineers who are able to anticipate consequences of failures that might be expected and lawyers who can assist with the right way to ask questions and document responses. Using their knowledge, companies can equip their call-center agents with drop-down forms to use when communicating with customers, helping ensure that the right information is collected.

Say, for example, a consumer calls a company and claims that the company's product caught fire. Did the product actually catch fire or did it *almost* catch fire? Were there visible flames or was it just smoke or did the product get very hot? Were the flames contained in the product itself, or did they escape the product? Was anyone or anything burned? If someone was burned, did they seek professional medical treatment for the burn or did they self-treat? If professional medical treatment was sought, was the treatment in a clinic or a hospital emergency room? Were they admitted to the hospital? Was there a diagnosis citing of the severity of the injury … first-, second-, or third-degree burn, for

example? Can they provide any documentation or a photo or video evidence of problem? And, should the agent ask for the customer to return the product for further examination by the companies' engineers?

More sophisticated call centers use advanced or big data analytics to help sort and escalate safety issues. Use of "smoke" words extracted from a lexicon of safety issues is common. Less common is analysis of phrases that can differentiate between expressions such as "a cut above in quality" and "a cut above my eye." Though it's not 100 percent accurate, some companies also supplement call center records with speech-to-text technology that can help pick out the "smoke signals."

Now comes the hard part – evaluating the calls and product returns to determine if there is truly a product safety issue. Forensic engineers can try to replicate the problem by following the exact operating conditions cited by the consumer, and preferably on the exact product returned by the consumer. If the product is not easily returned, engineers can inspect the product in the consumer's home, which would allow them to collect even more information for their investigation.

Key Takeaways:
- Training call center agents is critical to ensure accurate and complete recording of consumer safety complaints.
- Advanced analytics can help sort and escalate safety issues from call center records.
- Post-sale failure analysis can be strongly influenced by customer care records.

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