Introduction

During the past decades, the rhetoric of listening and responding to the voice of the customer has been buzzing in academic and practitioner marketing circles. Despite the buzz, the dominant model in marketing theory and practice has been mass broadcast, i.e. one to the many. However, recently it is becoming rapidly clear that the interactive marketing paradigm, i.e. one-to-one, is finally taking shape. It now has become possible to literally listen and respond to the voice of the customer in real time. As a result of the aforementioned paradigm shift, call centers are rapidly emerging as central hubs for customer access and key sources of customer-specific information in many companies. These centers range from small to massive operations, employing thousands of telephone service representatives.

Several forces have converged to make call centers an important strategic force for business and an appropriate arena for business and consumer research. First, the birth of the (0800) toll-free number made access to companies cheap and easy for consumers. Subsequent advances in telecommunications technology have enabled businesses to handle volumes of calls that until now were impossible to deal with at a cost that made sense. Second, increased competition made it important for businesses to satisfy the customer better than the competition. The consumer was able to buy the same product or service in the mail, from a catalog, from TV, from a store, and now from the Internet. How was one business to differentiate itself from the competition? The call center emerged as the means by which a business could distance itself from the competition. The call center provided 24-hour-a-day contact, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and the means for a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Finally, the 1990s have emerged as the era of customer service. The Search for Excellence by Tom Peters and Robert Waterston (1988) fuelled a new perspective in the business world. Customer service was not simply spoken by consultants and academics but in executive boardrooms.

Advancing technology will allow an integrated and comprehensive range of customer contact points (from telephone, to e-mail, to Internet) which will allow companies to ascend to new heights in customer service and satisfaction. Call centers present several research challenges. While attention from practitioners has been booming, virtually none of the aforementioned issues have been addressed in the academic literature. The purpose of this special issue is to generate discussion of and cutting-edge research about a rich variety of issues related to call center management.

The papers that follow in this special issue present the first concentrated and truly international look at call centers as an arena for research. The growth of call centers as a means of creating loyal and satisfied customers has far outpaced any research that has been done to understand the nature and scope of call centers. In their paper "Operational determinants of caller satisfaction in the call center", Feinberg, Kim, Hokama, Keen and De Ruyter take the first look at how some of the operational variables of a call center are related to caller satisfaction.
Of the 300+ attributes that can be measured, tracked, and used for strategic decisions, Feinberg et al. show that only two variables seem to be important. Thus, the question remains what are the attributes of call that do matter. An attempt to answer this question is the focus of the second paper in this special issue. In a scale development paper titled "Customer expectation dimensions of voice-to-voice service encounters: a scale-development study", Burgers, De Ruiter, Keen and Streukens examine what the key customer expectation dimensions are with regard to call center representative behavior. Burgers et al. report four key dimensions: adaptiveness, assurance, empathy, and authority.

Extending the theme of customer satisfaction with call centers, Bennington, Cummane and Conn compare customer satisfaction with respect to call center services with more traditional office-based services in their paper "Customer satisfaction and call centers: an Australian study". They find that the traditional office-based services receive slightly higher satisfaction levels. Whereas customer satisfaction is often regarded as a measure of call center effectiveness, call center agents are often monitored on the basis of efficiency (e.g. "the number of calls per hour"). Frequently, the competing objectives of effectiveness and efficiency lead to difficult trade-off decisions and compromises. This issue is addressed by Wallace, Eagleson and Walderssee in their paper "The sacrificial HR strategy in call centers". The authors demonstrate by means of case analysis how it is possible to achieve high levels of both efficiency and effectiveness at the same time. Finally, call centers are a setting in which services marketing theory is supplemented by theory in the realm of operations research. This is clearly the case in the paper by Betts, Meadows and Walley entitled "Call centre capacity management". Their paper examines how call centers manage forecasting, capacity and scheduling tasks.

So far, we have discussed the status quo and the developments that shaped it. Furthermore, as we indicated, the research papers in this volume allow for an in-depth analysis of important status quo facets. What is lacking, however, is a visionary perspective, one that outlines the shape of things to come. In an invited essay, Dr Jon Anton, a leading call center consultant, takes us to the future. The past was mail and telephone. The future is the Internet, as part of a seamless integrated set of access points. The issue will be how can we make it easiest for customers to contact us so that we can add value to their purchase of products and services and how can we provide this value before they contact us. The future will be won by companies who build fences around their customers by enveloping them with value added contacts that make it unlikely and difficult for them to defect to other companies and for other companies to steal them. The call center is the start of that battle and the more we understand about this battleground now the more we will be able to predict and develop the future. We hope that this special issue entices the research community to embrace call centers and the future of customer access management and development as an arena of research, theoretical, and strategic thinking.

Ko de Ruyter and Richard Feinberg