

Background

Medical information call centers are often the first point of contact for a pharmaceutical company's internal and external customers. In this capacity, call center specialists serve the needs of the pharmaceutical company's employees and are liaisons between the company and healthcare providers and patients.

Call center specialists' responsibilities may include receiving medical information requests, adverse event reports, product quality complaints, mixed inquiries (some combination of the aforementioned inquiry types), or other inquiries from their customers. They must then respond to and document these inquiries in a timely manner or transfer the customer to the appropriate department.

When evaluating the performance of a medical information call center, customer satisfaction is a commonly assessed metric. It may involve measuring the amount of time the caller is on hold, specialist availability, and the turn around time of phone calls.¹

If resolution of certain call types involves time consuming steps, such as free-typing information or asking lengthy follow-up questions, specialists' valuable time may be consumed. This can result in inefficiently handled inquiries and compromised customer satisfaction.

Objective

Identify which inquiry type requires the most time and determine why.

Methodology

Survey Design

A 31 question, internet-based survey created through SurveyMonkey was emailed to representatives in various pharmaceutical companies. Seventeen questions were multiple choice, eight questions were multiple choice with short answer, and six questions were open ended. Questions focused on call center hours, personnel, inquiry volume, and documentation processes. Answers to survey questions were received anonymously.

Evaluation of Survey Respondents

- 142 industry representatives were contacted; 19 (13.4%) completed survey
 - Not all survey respondents answered every question

Results

Call Center Background Information

Fig. 1 Ranking of Processing Time Required Based on Method by which Inquiry was Received

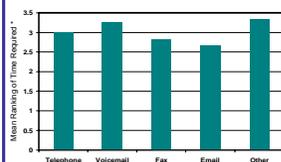
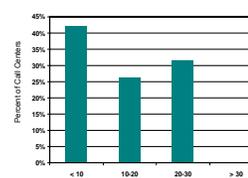


Fig. 2 Protocol for Handling Calls Once Received by Pharmaceutical Company



Fig. 3 Number of Call Center Specialists Available to Receive Inquiries



• Based on rankings, inquiries conveyed via "Other" methods (postal correspondence or transmission from a sales representative) required the most processing time.

• Most inquiries were transmitted to a single call center.

• 42.1% of respondents said that their companies utilized both an in-house and outsourced call center.

• Respondents stated that their call centers supported a mean of 30.7 products.

• The majority of call center specialists were pharmacists or nurses.

• Specialists often received greater than ten days of training.

Inquiry Processing

Inquiry Types Received by Call Center and Inquiry Processing Systems

- Inquiry types most often received by call centers included medical information requests, adverse event reports, product quality complaints, and mixed inquiries.
 - Of these, medical information requests and mixed inquiries were the inquiry types that were most commonly received within the previous month.
- Call centers also handled inquiries related to business, field support, public affairs, consumer marketing, clinical trial information, lab test results, non-medical issues, sales representative and medical science liaison information, promotional materials, credits and refunds for medications, consumer products, and patient assistance.
- Most survey respondents utilized the Siebel or IRMS database system to document inquiries.
 - The majority (71.4%) stated that their database performance time was moderately fast and that they were somewhat happy (42.9%) with their system.

Fig. 4 Ranking of Time Required to Process each Inquiry Type

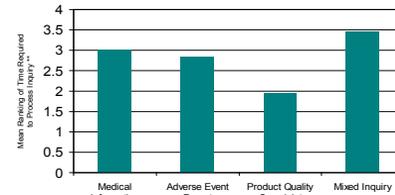


Fig. 5 Ranking of Time Required to Ask and Document Follow-Up Questions

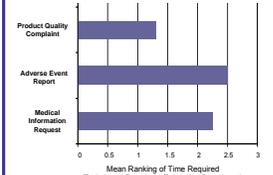


Fig. 6 Ranking of Most versus Least Drop-Down Menus and Check-Boxes

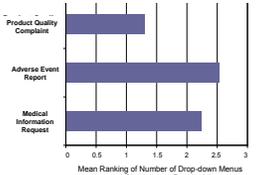
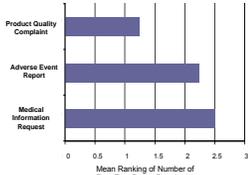


Fig. 7 Ranking of Most versus Least Free-Text Boxes



• More time was required to ask follow-up questions and record information for adverse event reports.

• Documenting adverse event reports largely required the specialist to record information via drop-down menus or check-boxes.

• Text-boxes, which required typing out information, were most often utilized when documenting medical information requests.

** Respondents were asked to rank: 1= least time required and 4= most time required.
 † Respondents were asked to rank: 1= least time required and 3= most time required.
 ‡ Respondents were asked to rank: 1= least and 3= most drop-down menus/check boxes and free text boxes.

Discussion

- According to survey respondents, most calls were transmitted to one call center rather than being triaged and transferred to separate call centers. Call centers supported an average of 30.7 products, and staffed up to 30 specialists.
- Mixed inquiries, medical information requests, product quality complaints, and adverse event reports were among the inquiry types received by call centers. Of these, medical information requests and mixed inquiries represented the largest volume of inquiries per month.
- Inquiries were often documented via the Siebel or IRMS database system.
- Based on rankings, mixed inquiries required the longest processing time. For the purpose of this study, mixed inquiries were defined as a combination of medical information requests, adverse event reports, and/or product quality complaints. Further investigation of these specific inquiries helped identify which inquiry type resulted in a longer processing time:
 - According to rankings, medical information requests took longest to process. A significant amount of processing time was also required for adverse event reports. However, rankings showed that the least processing time was associated with product quality complaints.
 - Documenting medical information requests required the specialist to free-type information, which may require more time than entering information via drop down menus or check-boxes. Additionally, the time associated with asking follow-up questions could result in a more lengthy documentation process.
 - For adverse event documentation, specialists may need to ask the reporter follow-up questions, which require considerable time and may result in a lengthy documentation process.

Limitations

- Survey questions were not validated.
- Due to the small sample size, substantial conclusions cannot be drawn from the data, nor can they be generalized across all pharmaceutical companies.
- Survey respondents' familiarity with call center processes was not evaluated.
- Multiple respondents from one company may have completed the survey, thus duplicating the data.
- The results presented may be the opinions of survey respondents and may not be representative of actual metrics and time spent on inquiry documentation.
- Some survey respondents did not complete all survey questions.
- Assumptions were made while conducting the study and interpreting the data.

Conclusions

- Based on the rankings of respondents, mixed inquiries required the longest time to process.
 - Specifically, rankings indicated that documenting medical information requests required a significant amount of specialists' time. This may be due to the time associated with free-typing information.
 - A significant amount of time was also required to process adverse event reports, according to the rankings of respondents. In this case, the time required to ask and document follow-up questions may have resulted in a longer processing time.
 - Rankings showed that the least time was associated with the documentation of product quality complaints.

References

1. Evolving Medical Information Call Centers through Performance Measurement and Process Improvement. Durham, NC: Cutting Edge Information; 2009:10-25.