



Client

Bird's Eye Wall's Limited

Industry

Retail and Food/Hospitality

Country

United Kingdom

Challenge

Roll out a large front-end call centre account team to proactively manage the Wall's Direct account around the clock. Establish key relationships with vendors to replace the defunct distributor network and drive sales, maintain the integrity of the product and reduce waste.

Solution

Merchants designed and implemented a competitive, outcomes-based CRM solution to enhance Wall's sales profile and distribution strategy. Merchants call centre agents were integrated with the existing Wall's team to form a single team, all committed to delivering a premium service to vendors and drive the business forward. A new call strategy was rolled out that actively pursued sales and took the product to the vendors and the market.

Birds Eye Wall's Limited achieves greater prosperity and market share, in synergy with Merchants

Merchants transforms a traditional sales and distribution model using the combined power of advanced technology and great people

Client Overview

Bird's Eye Wall's, a Unilever company, is the UK market leader in food and ice cream production and sales. By the mid-1990s, Wall's had already been a dominant player in the domestic ice cream market for over 75 years, when a ruling by the Competition Commission placed its traditional sales and distribution model under threat. The ruling disallowed discounted rates to Wall's independent distributor network and regulated a single pricing that would apply to all outlets.

This ruling changed the entire foundation of Wall's business and prompted them to engage in a new business model that embraced advances in technology and sales strategy, while still retaining the best features of the traditional model.

"As a hurricane of change blew through ice cream distribution, the Merchants team stood alongside Wall's to seek out opportunities and help rebuild the business."

Tom Pickersgill, Business Development Centre Director, Birds Eye Wall's Limited

Business Challenge

In the face of these regulatory changes, Wall's took the courageous step of taking over distribution activity itself. This was the start of Wall's Direct. Getting to know its new customers and winning their trust would be key performance indicators and the degree to which Wall's succeeded in these objectives would reflect directly on its bottom line. This made the selection of a CRM front end partner critical to the health and viability of the business. Merchants was selected after a rigorous tender process in which it demonstrated the ideal mix of intelligence, skill, experience and attitude to complement and enhance Wall's operations.

"After consulting a variety of professional call centre operations, Wall's chose the one it truly considered the best – Merchants Limited," says Tom Pickersgill, Business Development Centre Director, Birds Eye Wall's Ltd. "We liked the way Merchants coached and motivated its agents. The call centre agents would work closely with our own staff, so we placed a high priority of 'culture fit'. Like Birds Eye Wall's, Merchants has Investors In People (IIP) accreditation, and that was important to us."



Results

- ▲ Large front end call centre team deployed to proactively manage the account around the clock
- ▲ Bold new business model implemented – customers contacted to request orders, rather than passive order collection
- ▲ Meticulous process planning and matching of Merchants' and Wall's IT systems to guarantee next day delivery of all orders confirmed before 7pm
- ▲ 120-strong dedicated Merchants team made over one million outbound calls by year-end
- ▲ New call centre agents rebuilt the strong ties of loyalty and trust that previously existed with independent distributors, generating immense goodwill and brand loyalty
- ▲ Resources tailored to seasonal demand, maximising profitability and reducing waste
- ▲ Outstanding up-sell and call conversion rates recorded
- ▲ Wall's brands outsold competitors by four to one in 1999

Solution Provided

Merchants researched, designed and implemented a custom CRM solution for Wall's to answer its sales and distribution needs. Core to the solution was the establishment of a large front end call centre, staffed by an integrated 'dream team' of highly trained and motivated Wall's and Merchants agents. A groundbreaking new call centre strategy was rolled out, which involved agents proactively managing distribution and volumes by contacting vendors to establish their needs ahead of time to confirm amounts and delivery times.

How We Delivered

Merchants' primary goal was not only to replace the distribution chain that got Wall's products intact to market, but also develop relationships with its impulse purchase customers and grow market share. The solution was designed after intensive research into the distribution process. All food vendors need to receive the product in good condition. For vendors of impulse ice creams – the kind you buy in a single wrapper to eat on the spot – this means keeping the integrity of the cold chain intact at all times. There can be no weak links in the distribution chain. This was the practical function which Wall's Direct and its call centre agents would now need to fulfill.

Once Merchants understood the logistics and practical requirements of the process, we used this knowledge as a platform from which to launch an enhanced distribution and ordering channel for Wall's and its vendors

The heart of the new distribution model was a major front end call centre. This was staffed by a 120-strong team of combined Wall's and Merchants agents. True to our common values of delivering outstanding training and performance metrics, our merged team provided a great example of how the human factor of call centres makes all the difference in executing on strategy. We implemented CRM as the ideal conduit to centre the sales and distribution strategy around the customers' needs, history, purchase patterns and anticipated future needs.

Agents were briefed and exhaustively trained in their new service strategy, which involved actively contacting vendors to ascertain their order quantities and delivery times, instead of passively answering incoming calls. Merchants masterminded the integration of its own and Wall's IT systems, which allowed agents to guarantee next-day delivery of all orders placed before 7pm.

Value Derived

The CRM system, together with the top quality agents deployed and the new proactive contact strategy, allowed Wall's to re-establish a relationship of trust and loyalty with its vendors.

Call centre agents were able to deliver an outstanding customer service. Performance levels were excellent. The team of 120 agents made over one million outbound calls by the close of the year. The new distribution model also allowed them to adapt according to season and weather, anticipating increased demand during summer and reduced demand during the colder months, and tailor their service accordingly.

One innovation that proved to be immensely successful was the introduction of web-based local weather forecasts. Agents could then use information like a predicted hot spell to motivate increased orders from vendors.

Performance results were extraordinary. The single point of contact telephone number was answered 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Four out of five inbound calls were answered within ten seconds; only one call in 100 was abandoned.

Expert call centre practice like this drives business: a quarter of outbound calls and seven in ten inbound calls converted to sales. The Merchants team used its account management skills to upsell on the orders and increase the bottom-line value of the retailers. Despite the loss of its distributor network, an event which had seemed calamitous only a year before, Wall's outsold its competitors by four to one.

But further challenges were on the way. The following year the Competition Commission ordered Wall's to supply to all independent distributors at a set level of discount, and gave it one year to dismantle the Wall's Direct operation. This meant a significant reduction in the number of agents but Wall's again put in a strong performance, winning a 68% share of the impulse ice-cream sector. In the spirit of partnership, Merchants displayed its flexibility through the changing circumstances. Even after 'Wall's Direct' ended, Merchants still had a key role to play. It successfully tendered to take over the operation of Wall's internal Customer Careline. Though now operating with a head count of 20, the Merchants team continues to contribute to Wall's success. Constructive engagement with the client, proactive account management, and the agility to tailor resources to swiftly changing business conditions – all characterise the outstanding customer management service Merchants provided to Wall's. In the most difficult circumstances imaginable, Wall's was able to assert the value of its leading brands, maintain its market share and position itself for future expansion.