

# SPECIAL REPORT: Ten Steps in Evaluating an Outsourced Call Center

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*At a time when the no-see/low-see physician population continues to grow at a double-digit rate, pharma marketers are scrambling to find more efficient ways to deliver messages to target doctors. Of course, some direct marketing tactics show a higher return than others do; according to the 2007 Public Opinion Research survey of pharma brand managers, one of the two most effective direct marketing tactics is teledetailing (the other is teleconferencing). With Pharma's newfound interest in teledetailing, it comes as no surprise that our industry has rediscovered outsourced Call Centers.*

Let's assume you're interested in conducting a teledetailing program using an outsourced Call Center. How do you choose the right vendor partner? What criteria should you use to make your selection? Based on 15 years' experience, I've identified 10 key steps in evaluating Call Centers in order to select the one that best suits your needs.

**1. Ask for 1-3 current or recent client references, and call them.**

Although pharma companies are increasingly hesitant to provide feedback on their vendor experiences, this continues to be the gold standard for screening. With gentle urging, most Call Centers should be able and willing to provide at least one client reference. Questions to ask: Were the Center's team members accessible and responsive? Did they understand your specific need, and design a program to meet that need? Did they deliver what they promised on time and on budget? Did they achieve the results you expected? **Most important: Would you hire them again?**

**2. Validate the company's financial stability.**

The best way to determine a company's financial strength is to review their financial reports. You can start by simply asking the Call Center for their latest income statement and balance sheet. However, since many firms are reluctant to release financial data, it's often necessary to look elsewhere. For publicly traded companies, go to [finance.google.com](http://finance.google.com), and enter the company name in the top-of-page search box; you'll find company news, brief financial statements, upcoming investor events, and direct links to the company's latest SEC filings.

Gathering data on privately held companies is more difficult, but certainly not impossible. The article [Piercing the Veil: How to Gather Information about Privately Held Companies](#), describes more than a dozen valuable resources. As a last resort, use surrogate markers: How long has the company been in business? Is their staff growing? Have they done recent work for high-profile clients?

**3. Check for signs of workforce stability.**

People—call floor representatives and their managers—are the lifeblood of Call Centers. The most important challenges facing a Call Center are hiring top-quality staff, ensuring a good job fit, and helping representatives remain engaged, motivated, and loyal. Call Center representatives perform repetitive tasks and face frequent rejection; therefore, satisfaction and

retention are constant concerns. The best single marker of employee satisfaction is the annual turnover rate, because it reflects a composite of hiring, job fit, and motivation. A well-run Call Center should have an annual turnover rate lower than the national average of 33%. One additional step: review managers' resumes; the management team should have long and successful records of Call Center experience.

**4. Visit the Call Center to observe and talk with the employees.**

If you can't visit in person, at least spend 30 minutes talking on the phone with 2 or 3 call floor representatives. These one-on-one discussions may be your truest measure of a company's operations.

General observation targets:

- Is the facility clean and well kept?
- Does the workflow seem smoothly organized?
- Do the employees appear cheerful and engaged?

Questions to ask:

- How would you describe the company's initial training and project-specific training?
- How does the company encourage innovation and creative problem solving?
- How does the company promote teamwork among employees?
- How does the company reward individual achievements and contributions?
- How does the company measure the success of its call floor reps?

**5. Focus on the call floor representative training programs.**

High-quality training is vital to Call Centers—especially those in the pharmaceutical and life sciences arena. Talk with the head of training; strive to understand his or her philosophy, qualifications, and commitment. Then ask to see examples of each of the 3 main phases of training: (1) initial employee training focused on equipment, skills, etiquette, technique, etc.; (2) project-specific training focused on project goals, the product's features and benefits, competition, etc.; and (3) ongoing skills training.

**6. Examine the systems the Call Center uses to measure quality, consistency, and productivity.**

Call Center senior managers recognize that consistent high performance is built on planning, documentation, and control processes. In high-performance Call Centers, call floor representatives' production and quality scores are documented and reviewed by management on a weekly basis.

**7. Ensure that outbound teledetailing is an integral part of the company's expertise.**

You're hiring an outsourced Call Center because you need to proactively reach doctors that you can't reach with field reps. Unfortunately, the vast majority of Call Centers specialize in *inbound* calls; only 20% conduct primarily outbound calling.

**8. Verify that the staff and systems are capable of handling your project.**

The average outsourced Call Center has just 77 seats, yet conducts multiple projects simultaneously. It is crucial that the Call Center you select can manage its workflow and volume so that your project is successful. It may be wise to consider hiring a large Call Center (100+ seats) to ensure adequate capacity.

**9. Confirm that the call floor representatives are pharma-qualified.**

Reaching and persuading doctors is tough. Be sure your call floor representatives know how to get past gatekeepers to reach doctors, and are fluent in the language of pharma. Check on the availability of specialized personnel; some top-performing pharma Call Centers have several different levels of representatives, including field-qualified reps and full-time teams of pharmacists and nurses. Ask the Call Center for statistics; if you're not convinced, listen to some live calls.

**10. Certify that the Call Center's pricing is based on a shared-risk model.**

One of the primary benefits of working with a Call Center is that, in most cases, payment is based on performance. As you work with a Call Center to develop a project's goals and terms, be sure that the deliverables are clearly spelled out and that performance risk is fairly shared.

It's important to remember that the Call Center you hire becomes the voice of your company; this is a decision that demands careful attention. By following these 10 steps, you can be confident of making a wise and well-considered selection.

Have more questions? Email me directly at [mike.welsch@aristamktg.com](mailto:mike.welsch@aristamktg.com).

NOTE: Looking for a comprehensive review of the call center industry? Here are two. (1) ContactBabel, which provides research, analysis and business recommendations to CRM and contact center solution providers, has published [The US Contact Center Operational Review](#) 2007, the largest and most comprehensive study of all aspects of the US contact center industry. (2) The Global Call Center Project, a collaborative network of over 40 scholars from twenty countries, has published [The Global Call Center Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment](#) 2007, the first large scale international study of call center management and employment practices across all regions of the globe.

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ABOUT ARISTA MARKETING: Arista specializes in physician access beyond face-to-face detailing. We create live conversations with doctors, ranging from 2-minute teledetails to 20-minute web-based video details to 2-hour peer-to-peer teleconferences. Our 150+ communication specialists talk live with 100,000 professionals in an average month, and interact with thousands more through webchat, email, and fax (with low annual turnover of 20% to 25%). Website: [www.aristamktg.com](http://www.aristamktg.com).