

# The Play's The Thing!

## *Theater Training Techniques Teach Telephone Tactics*

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**What role does “voice coaching” – a type of training most often delivered to actors onstage or singers in a recording studio – have in a call center?** At Northern Trust Company, we learned that the “vocal image” presented by our associates could be substantially improved using actor training techniques, leading to more enthused agents and greater customer satisfaction.



Northern Trust (<http://www.northerntrust.com/>), a multi-bank holding company, is a leading provider of global custody, asset administration and investment management services for institutions and individuals. The Investor Services Division serves over 450,000 investors and 45 corporate clients as the processing agent for Corporate Money Market, Retained Asset, Medical Savings, and various insurance-related accounts.

The Investor Services call center handles over 55,000 inbound calls a month through 50 representatives, many of whom also address written correspondence and other administrative processes.

As part of the company’s continuous improvement program, our division conducts ongoing customer satisfaction surveys through an independent third party, as well as through internal systems. Recent results showed that our group kept pace with industry averages for call centers, but we wanted to exceed in the industry, and so develop a strategy to train and further develop our associates to reach world-class status. The three-pronged approach aimed to improve:

- Telephone delivery and articulation
- Quality of internal administrative skills
- Data transfer accuracy to increase one-call resolution rates

We addressed the quality and accuracy issues with internal trainers who had deep knowledge of our unique processes, but we

knew the telephone delivery and articulation would require an outside vendor with the expertise to help us design a program that would target issues specific to Northern Trust.

As our training partner we selected VoiceScape ([www.voicescape.com](http://www.voicescape.com)), a Chicago-based voice and presentation skills training company that specializes in applying professional acting techniques to business communication and presentation situations. Working together with the VoiceScape team, we created a customized class for our call center associates that came to be known as Vocal Image Enhancement Training.

“Your voice tells people so much,” says Vera Gray, a customer service agent who completed the 13-hour training. “The tone of your voice tells the person on the other end of the phone how professional your company is, so it’s important that we are aware of our presentation at all times and that we give our customers the best image.”

### **Actor-Proven Voice Coaching**

While some call centers focus on giving out information, others handle more troubleshooting calls. Our call center at Northern Trust is a combination of the two, so our training needed to help us address various scenarios.

Because of the way our department is staffed, we needed to schedule the training classes so that we would have no more than 10 people off the phones in training at one time. We also wanted to spread the training out over two weeks to maximize retention of the new techniques learned. We implemented the final version of the training in two-hour blocks three times a week for two weeks. The thirteenth hour was dedicated to one-on-one training on live customer calls, with VoiceScape trainers sitting side-by-side with our agents to help them create new call behaviors.

VoiceScape devised training that addressed key call center skills such as clear pronunciation, flexible speaking pace and courteous language. The techniques also addressed the stressors that come from what can often be a full day of high-pressure telephone conversations.



“There’s an enormous amount of vocal fatigue created in using your voice for eight hours straight,” says Kirsten D’Aurelio, CEO of VoiceScape. “We needed to help the associates sound as interested on the one-hundred fiftieth call of the day as they did on the first. There’s also lot of stress involved in conversations about high-stakes financial transactions, so we were able to offer on-the-



they started posting the handouts in their offices so they could keep the information close at hand.”

“When I graduated from the training I noticed a big difference,” says Stephanie. “I wasn’t rushed, I took my time and my words were much clearer than they used to be. When I saw my first scorecards after the training I could see a big difference.”

To best leverage the techniques, our group modified our call monitoring score sheets to reflect the concepts used in the VoiceScape training, such as breathing and vocal pitch. We also continue to record our associates and allow them to hear how they sound to their customers.

“They taped our voices before and after the training, and I can hear the difference. I’m much better now,” says Vera. “I use the techniques every time I talk to someone. You have to go back to it every day.”

spot relaxation techniques that agents can use right at their workstations when things get tense.

But what made VoiceScape training truly unique was the company’s use of the voice and speech exercises commonly used by actors before a performance. For example, Stephanie Mathis, a customer service associate who’s worked at Northern Trust for two years, now starts doing breathing exercises to prepare for the next call as soon as her phone rings.

“I used to run out of breath trying to get a whole line in, and the breathing techniques we learned help me overcome that,” says Stephanie. “I sing with several choirs and groups, and the breathing exercises help me with that, too. They also help calm me down, so I’m less nervous on the phone and even when I’m talking to someone face-to-face.”

Another thespian training technique, a melody exercise, helps encourage the associates to eliminate monotone by exploring their entire vocal ranges, adding more depth and warmth to their telephone conversations. Vera and others use this technique every day, often making our department sound like backstage at an opera house.

“We wanted to make sure that the class was fun for the associates, and we did that by delivering the techniques using the theatrical metaphor,” explains D’Aurelio. “We wanted the people in the call center to see their daily job as a performance – not that they should be in any way false or insincere, but that they should bring their best voices forward in each interaction.”

As head of the VoiceScape training team, D’Aurelio delivered on that sincerity herself. “I know she’s an actress,” says Cheryl Mitchell, operations manager of the call center, “but everything she and her team did for us they felt within their hearts. Kirsten was serious about what she was doing – it wasn’t an act; she really felt what she was saying. That genuineness from Kirsten and her team played a major part in the positive reaction from our staff.”

### Immediate Improvements

The VoiceScape training produced noticeable improvements right away, both on the external surveys and with the internal call monitoring. The external surveys showed a five percent improvement in our already first-class scores.

“We saw immediate results, just in hearing the feedback from the associates and in listening to their conversations,” says Cheryl. “Many of them didn’t realize how much they could improve, and at first didn’t want to devote so much time to the training. Once they started and saw how helpful the theater techniques could be,



“With the different exercises used in their training, the VoiceScape team showed us all how to use them in any situation,” adds Cheryl. “You always have to talk to someone, whether it’s on the phone in the call center, on personal business or even at the grocery store. You have to put these things into practice to help get what you want, and to provide optimum service to the person on the other end. They can’t see you on the phone, so what you say and how you say it is very important.”

Following the training, the insurance operations group recommended that the rest of the company apply the training to other call centers. Our department has made the VoiceScape training a requirement for new associates within the first few months of their start dates, and we’re planning to have refresher courses as soon as we can.

“The call center professionals at Northern Trust put on very sincere performances every time they pick up the phone,” says D’Aurelio. “Just like actors work hard rehearsing and preparing to go onstage, phone representatives can learn to prepare their voices and mindsets each time they pick up the phone.

***“All the world’s a stage, and the people at Northern Trust are definitely stars!”***



For more information about bringing VoiceScape training to your call center staff, visit [www.VoiceScape.com](http://www.VoiceScape.com), or call 773.539.5797.