



**Applied Perceptions LLC
President
Bruce S. Stone**



Applied Perceptions LLC is a full-service contact center and consulting firm specializing in customer service and sales located in Simi Valley, Calif. Bruce S. Stone, president of Applied Perceptions, has over 25 years of direct market experience. He can be reached at (805) 526-2525, ext. 206, or via e-mail at bstone@apcpc.com.

Electronic Retailer: What advice would you give to marketers in this challenging economic climate?

Bruce Stone: I would suggest that they make the most of every customer contact that they have. From new sales all the way through the customer service process, treat the customers well and focus on saving existing sales, keeping customers coming back and giving them opportunities to buy even more of the products or services they have demonstrated they need or want. In this current economy, many companies are making the mistake of cutting their expenditures on customer service and call-center services. Customers, now more than ever, want to receive value for their money. They want to be confident that they are using their money wisely. They want to be treated as the valued customer that they are. A good call center can help to reinforce the marketer's value proposition!

ER: Is your call center equipped to handle bi-lingual calls? If yes, what steps have you taken to ensure a smooth process?

Stone: AP offers a strong, U.S.-based, bi-lingual (English/Spanish) call-center solution. If you are looking for bi-lingual coverage as you market to the growing U.S. Hispanic market, we can help you work with both English and Spanish-language U.S. markets in one convenient location. Based in Southern California, we have a strong ability to access a large Spanish-speaking population. Our state-of-the-art call center allows us to program and route calls to the agents who can speak the language preferred by your customer. We also understand that handling a different language is not simply translating and treating the customer as you would someone who speaks English as his or her first lan-

guage. Cultural differences may mean that a greater focus on education and relationship building rather than traditional sales will be more effective.

ER: Many call centers have been outsourced to other countries. How would you argue for or against that type of decision?

Stone: If I were marketing directly to consumers in the United States, I would choose a U.S.-based call center. My customers and their satisfaction and overall peace of mind would be paramount. My ability as a marketer to have my main customer contact point in the U.S. would offer me greater peace of mind, as well. I would choose a U.S.-based call center because it offers many advantages in effectively dealing with and selling to your customers.

More effective communications: U.S. customers can talk to people at a U.S.-based call center who use the same expressions and who understand many of the same speech patterns. In some cases, with offshore call centers, there are subtle communication gaps that make it difficult for customers to understand and for call center agents to make valuable customer connections and sales.

Greater control: I would be able to have greater control of my customer contacts with a U.S. call center. The close location allows for easier and more effective agent training and to correct issues that may arise. I prefer to be able to go on-site and in-person to train or check-up on the call center. I could focus on my main core competencies and be able to have customer oversight without having to be on the phone in the middle of the night with someone in a distant land.

Same country oversight: Much concern has been raised about the laws and ability to enforce the laws and consumer protections when your valuable customer data and your customers' private information are distributed around the world. By having a U.S.-based call center, you are operating in and under the same laws and oversights.

There are many good offshore call centers available to U.S. marketers—many at even lower-per-minute charges than U.S. providers. However, lower per-minute charges do not mean that an offshore call center is cheaper. Customer dissatisfaction, time zone challenges, distance and management problems and cultural differences with offshore centers would make me choose a U.S.-based call center such as AP that can provide excellent customer service and sales results. 