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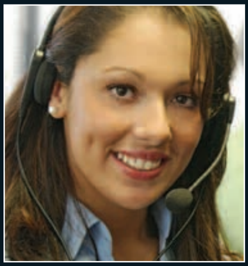

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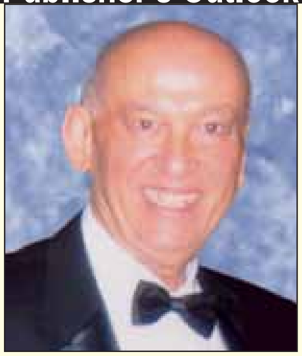

By: Nadji Tehrani,
Founder, Chairman & CEO, Editor-in-Chief,
Technology Marketing Corporation

On Contact Centers, CRM And Teleservices Leadership...

Award Winning Companies Continue To Grow When They Conduct Award Marketing

Contact centers, CRM and technology providers and teleservices companies reach for the ultimate in quality and performance by winning MVP Quality Awards and 2006 Product of the Year Awards.

As the industries' preeminent and pioneering publication since 1982, it has always been the responsibility of this publication to recognize outstanding performances by the valued vendors of technology, solutions and teleservices for the contact center, CRM and the business community.

Customer Inter@ction Solutions® magazine, which began as *Telemarketing*® magazine in June of 1982, laid the foundation for our industry some 25 years ago. Now, the time has come for us to recognize those vendors that have earned TMC's coveted and prestigious MVP Quality Awards as well as the 2006 Product of the Year Awards.

Henry Ford Had The Right Idea

Henry Ford once said that a great design sells the cars but excellent quality brings the customers back. It is too bad that Detroit car makers have actually ignored this phenomenally powerful and wise statement by the inventor of the automobile, while the Japanese, Koreans, Europeans and other car manufacturers have made the most of these wise statements.

A great design sells the cars but excellent quality brings the customers back.

It is unfortunate but indeed true that foreign cars are better designed: they look better and have higher quality! This unfortunate event hurts me very much considering that all of those countries learned from American technology and then improved upon it regularly while Detroit manufacturers had their heads in sand and did nothing to regain market share by improving their cars! There is a great proverb that perhaps sums it all up best when it says, "The grandfather built the company, the children maintained it and the grandchildren destroyed it." How true that is.

Award Winners Differentiate Themselves In A Powerful Way But...

As I have stated in many of these editorials in the last few years, awards without marketing are practically worthless. In many of my past editorials I have also stated that quality and marketing are not part-time jobs. Indeed, I am aware of several companies that are award winners and that they have extremely high quality. By doing practically everything right, including award marketing, these companies are industry leaders and are growing and becoming more profitable each and every year. I think there is a good lesson to be learned from such companies.

Indeed there is no other powerful differentiation tool than winning a coveted award from a prestigious and highly respected publication of the industry. Indeed, we are humble and very proud of the quality of our flagship publication, *Customer Inter@ction Solutions*, which *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL* referred to as "the bible of the industry."

So, the bottom line: award winning companies continue to grow when they maintain quality and when they conduct award marketing.

Quality and marketing are not part-time jobs.

Now The Most Important Question: WHAT MAKES THE AWARD WINNERS MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE SUCCESSFUL?

In my opinion, it is great to congratulate them, which I do sincerely. It is great for them to market themselves and make the most of their awards and differentiate themselves from competition. But, in my opinion, the underlying question is, how do they do it? Because I'm sure every CEO and every savvy manager would like to know how some of these companies are winning awards every single year. For example, InfoCision Management Corp. has won 14 consecutive MVP Quality Awards since the inception of the award. To me, they are a model company and exemplary in every way. Frankly, I have been studying this company for several years and I speak from experience. Not only do they have relentless and demanding quality standards, but they also conduct award marketing better than anyone. When you do both of the above well, there is no way to avoid prosperity.

Awards without marketing are practically worthless.

I have always felt that teleservices (call center outsourcing companies) are the most knowledgeable people in the contact center industry. The reason: they only do inbound, outbound and CRM work for Corporate America and as such, their experience far exceeds that of anyone else, bar none.

For the above reason and for the purpose of this editorial, I have decided to study the philosophies of some of the teleservices companies that have won MVP Quality Awards. My objective was to find out what they do differently and what we can all learn from these companies. In search of the answer to the above questions, I have found the following statements that were made by senior management of these teleservices companies extremely helpful. The underlying philosophies that make them so successful are presented here. And now I would like to share some of them with you.

"We believe that every customer contact must meet or exceed the standard we establish for quality performance. Our motto is, 'We are only as good as our weakest link...so even our weakest link must be strong.' We don't look at group averages as indicators of success. Instead we measure our success by the success of each individual."

"Our motto is to 'treat each customer as if it was your parent, spouse, or child stuck on the side of the road' and 'treat each call as if it is the only call you will take today.' We teach our associates to be excessive about delighting the customer."

"Our standard quality requirements include a 130-point review on each call monitored. Our stringent quality standards ensure our ability to outperform the competition."

"To be truly effective, an outsourcer's quality assurance program must do more than simply ensure that calls are processed correctly. It must be a total commitment to quality that encompasses all aspects of the business, including recruitment and hiring, contact processing, workforce management, performance reporting and administrative support."

"One of the most unique aspects of our company is its entrepreneurial spirit. We promote contact center employment as a career and not as a temporary job. We focus on recruiting from within."

"Our philosophy is simple: Selling is customer service and the only good sale is a quality sale. Outsourced clients are offered the best opportunity to exceed sales projections and achieve the highest quality sales possible, while they solidify relationships with the customers entrusted to us."

"Early on, we concluded that growth alone, including new call centers, expensive technology, numerous workstations and thousands of employees, is not the key to teleservices success and long-term client relationships. Quality is."

"As consumers have become more accustomed to contact centers and more demanding of the service and support they receive, it has become less important to focus on call mechanics and metrics, and more important to focus on customer satisfaction and the overall customer experience."

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Congratulations To This Year's MVP (Marketing Via Phone) Quality Award Winners

I'd like to take this opportunity to extend heartfelt congratulations to all the honorees of the 14th annual MVP (Marketing Via Phone) Quality Awards. This year's winners exemplify the search for excellence. They have demonstrated to the editors of *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* their ability to build a feeling of community within their companies, while providing the best they can give to their clients.

These contact centers exist to get the job done while respecting the wishes and serving the needs of both the business world and the consumer world, providing both the technical and human sides of customer care. I know how difficult it is to win this coveted award, given the amount of competition, both domestic and overseas. We recognize and appreciate your major contributions to the growth and prosperity of our industry.

In my judgment, you are the cream of the crop and it is always a great pleasure to work with you. I thank you for your support.

— Nadji Tehrani

Congratulations To The Winners Of *Customer Inter@ction Solutions'* 2006 Product Of The Year Awards

In this issue and the previous one (January 2007), we highlighted the winners of the 2006 Product of the Year Awards. Each year, *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* magazine recognizes companies that have demonstrated excellence in technological advancement and application refinements, and this year has been no exception. These companies have proven they are committed to quality and excellence in solutions that benefit the customer experience as well as ROI for the companies that use them. We are pleased to honor their hard work and accomplishments and look forward to more innovative solutions from them in the future. I offer my sincerest congratulations to all Product Of The Year recipients.

— Nadji Tehrani

> "Today, our definition of quality has evolved more fully: *quality is an ever-evolving perception carried by the people involved with and impacted by the services delivered by our company*."

> "Our home agent model lends itself to lower costs. In the past, many companies selected offshore companies to reduce costs. Unfortunately, the tradeoff was that many customers lacked a language and cultural affinity with the representatives of these companies."

> "We believe the most solid outsourcing relationships are those in which the client allows us to truly embrace their culture, and in turn, treat us (as an outsourcer) as an extension of their company. We strongly encourage this and recommend active day-to-day involvement in the operation of the program."

As always, I welcome your comments. Please e-mail them to me at ntehrani@tmcnet.com. **CIS**

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION Solutions® magazine has been the voice of the industry since 1982. It is written by industry practitioners for industry practitioners and is regarded worldwide as the "Bible" of the industry. An annual Buyer's Guide is provided as a feature of the December issue.

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February 2007 Volume 25/ Number 9

Contents

32

DEPARTMENTS
1 **Publisher's Outlook**
By Nadji Tehrani, Executive Group Publisher, Technology Marketing Corp.

8 **High Priority!**
By Rich Tehrani, Group Editor-in-Chief, Technology Marketing Corp.

12 **Customer Inter@ction News™**

13 **CallCenterComics.com**
By Ozzie Fonesca

19 **Recommended Vendors List**

35 **The Integrated Marketplace™**

35 **Identification Statement**

35 **Advertising Index**

36 **Last Call**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

CRM
16 **When "Getting Human" Isn't Enough**
Using Testing And Monitoring To Ensure The Quality Of Contact Center Applications
By Michelle Goodall Faulkner, Empirix Inc.

OUTSOURCING TELESERVICES
20 **Fourteenth Annual MVP (Marketing Via Phone) Quality Award Winners**

WORKFORCE OPTIMIZATION
24 **The Elusive Work-Life Balance: Five Steps To Achieving Harmony With Workforce Management**
By Tracey Hawkins, GMT

MANAGEMENT SCOPE
28 **Achieving Successful Sales In The Call Center**
By Susan J. Campbell, TMCnet Contributing Editor

CONTACT CENTER TECHNOLOGY
30 **The 2006 Customer Inter@ction Solutions Product Of The Year Awards, Part Two**
By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

32 **Leveraging Analytic Solutions To Improve Insight, Performance And Customer Experiences**
By David Pennington, Envision

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Computer Systems Do Not Substitute For Leadership In The Call Center

By Susan J. Campbell, TMCnet Contributing Editor

Computers and the technology that they make accessible in the contact center have greatly impacted the level of information, functionality and service that can be delivered to the customer. The computer system can also be used to facilitate training, monitoring and coaching in order to progress the skills of the contact center agent and promote overall efficiency in the center. An interesting element of study is whether or not computer systems are serving as a substitute for leadership in this capacity. And, if this is the case, does the system provide effective leadership or merely a means by which individuals can be micromanaged?
Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/446.1

Study Examines the State Of The North American Contact Industry: Part I

By Susan J. Campbell, TMCnet Contributing Editor

The North American contact center industry is vast, with 56,900 centers in the U.S. and 3,950 in Canada. These centers also provide significant job opportunities for the communities in which they are located. In the U.S., there are 3.07 million agent positions, while Canada is home to 290,500 agents. In the U.S., 34 percent of this staff of over three million is employed by centers that have over 250 agents and are considered large. Interestingly, these large centers only account for 4 percent of all sites in the nation. The mean average size of the contact center is 54 agents in the U.S. and 74 agents in Canada.
Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/447.1

VendorGuru.com Helps Better Customer Interactions In The Call Center

By Stefania Viscusi, TMCnet Assistant Editor

In a bid to help companies further reduce customer frustration and defection, VendorGuru.com has announced the release of a new customizable search database that targets CRM and telephony resources.
Read the full article at http://www.tmcnet.com/448.1

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TMC BEST OF INTERNET TELEPHONY CONFERENCE & EXPO SAN DIEGO, CA 2006

By: Rich Tehrani,
Group Publisher, Group Editor-in-Chief,
Technology Marketing Corporation

Another Hat In The CRM Ring

The world of software is succumbing to a few forces which seem to be operating in stark contrast to one another. In most industries where we see consolidation, it is due to private equity reasons. There are hundreds of billions of dollars being thrown around, and if your company wants to make an acquisition, there may be a waiting list of private equity firms that will want to give you money to make the deal happen.

In addition, the appeal of being a public company has faded for the moment and, as a result, some of the money in the industry has been spent on taking public companies private. One example is the purchase of Aspect by Concerto, creating Aspect Software.

One strong force is that of consolidation which, ironically, in the CRM space is being driven more by Oracle than by private equity companies. Larry Ellison has done what few have been able to do and that is acquire successfully time and time again. In fact, the choices in the enterprise software market are dwindling, leaving many organizations with a few choices such as Oracle and SAP. Recently, a rumor has been circulating that Oracle will soon make a bid for SAP, as well.

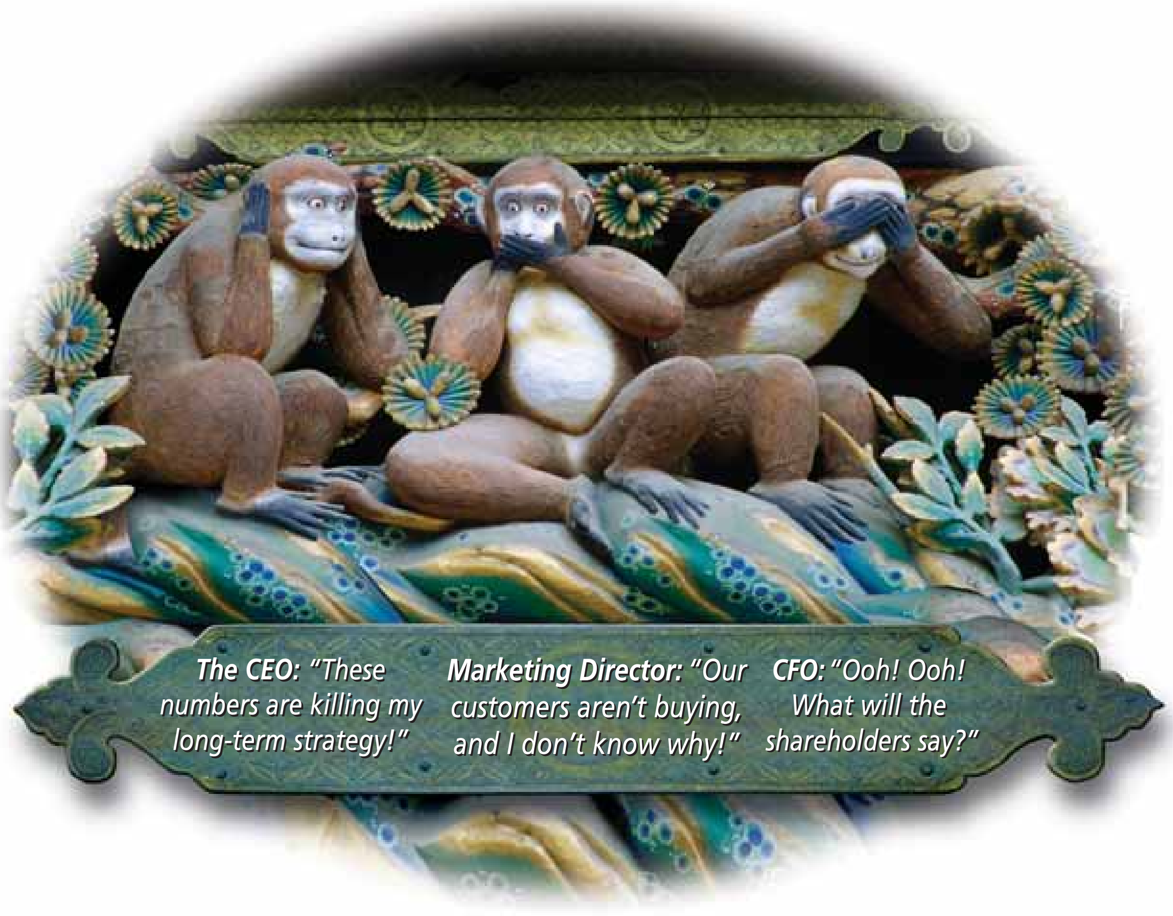
For those of you who paid attention in school, you remember that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In this case, the opposite of consolidation is a move to open-source software. While the open source market hasn't grown very quickly in the CRM space, the size of the threat does continue to grow.

Of course, Oracle (quote - news - alert) has recently gotten into the open source business as well, which is a good hedge for them as they will soon be able to help companies regardless of their needs. But for those organizations looking for choice in the software market, I bring them some hope in the form of a company many readers may never have heard of: IFS (news - alert) (http://www.ifsworld.com/us). The company's software solutions are optimized for enterprise resource planning (ERP); enterprise asset management (EAM); and maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO). IFS also has a focus on CRM and, as such, I thought it would be interesting to readers to share a recent interview with IFS' Jorge DeFreitas, product manager of CRM for the company.

RT: Tell me about IFS.

JD: IFS develops and markets IFS Applications, a suite of enterprise applications used by 500,000 users at more than 2,000 companies worldwide. Our global headquarters are in Sweden, but we have 79 offices in 54 countries — with our North American headquarters in Schaumburg, Illinois.

IFS focuses on the needs of middle market companies; that is, companies with about $100 million to about $2 billion in revenue. We further target companies in some specific manufacturing and asset-intensive industries, including utilities and telecom, process industries, service and facility management, aerospace and defense, industrial manufacturing, high-tech and medical devices and


The CEO: "These numbers are killing my long-term strategy!"
Marketing Director: "Our customers aren't buying, and I don't know why!"
CFO: "Ooh! Ooh! What will the shareholders say?"

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automotive. In short, IFS thrives in complex environments and in businesses that must adapt to rapid change.

RT: How do your software offerings differ from the larger players in the market?

JD: First of all, we are an independent software vendor, and after years of merger mania, we are one of the few ISVs left in the enterprise application space! From a product differentiation standpoint, IFS pioneered and is still the leader in mid-market applications built on a service-oriented component architecture (SOCA). This method of building applications gives end users unprecedented flexibility and allows our customers to implement a small segment of functionality or a comprehensive suite. This means customers can realize a return on their investment more rapidly. Our modular product structure allows customers to phase implementation, addressing their business needs in priority order and avoiding the "big bang" implementation. Oracle and SAP are still trying to catch up with us on this score.

RT: How do your products integrate with customer CRM needs?

JD: Our customers are looking for an enterprise application that allows efficient support for the customer and product lifecycle. This means that while we have an application module designed to manage customer contact information, our application suite is flexible enough to allow you to view virtually any data — from sales contact information to production to aftermarket service to revenue history — by customer.

IFS CRM enables full customer lifecycle and covers the three main CRM-related processes: marketing, sales and service. IFS CRM falls under the category "Enterprise Application Suite Vendor" as opposed to, e.g., Salesforce.com — best of breed. Our view of CRM involves very deep and dynamic connections to back-office functions. This is what allows us to give our customers such a penetrating view into their customers' activities and business patterns.

RT: What is the future of enterprise software as it relates to CRM and ERP?

JD: These two disciplines need to become more and more intertwined. Most people and probably most CRM application vendors take a very narrow view of the discipline, and this necessarily limits the effectiveness of customer interactions. Obviously, CRM is often used as a term in the context of a single application, though it is more complicated than this. Technology can be a tool to facilitate the CRM strategy and process. For the most part, CRM represents software and online tools that face outward in three areas: marketing, customer service and sales. But the more data — better data — you can pour into those outward-facing applications, the more powerful your CRM tool will be.

In the real world, CRM ranges from niche tools (for example, tools that perform simple things like personalizing corporate Web sites for certain customers) to a large-scale application that captures myriad interactions with all customers, analyzes them with sophisticated reporting tools, and connects to other major functions such as supply chain management and ERP.

For instance, consider the situation faced by a company that sells and services complex industrial machinery. As the company's call center takes service and repair request calls from their customers, it helps if they can access information on which other customers had purchased similar or identical equipment, and whether any of those customers had reported similar problems. Better yet, it would be beneficial if the call center could access the maintenance records for that equipment to determine how those problems were solved. Or, if in the course of repairing a customer's piece of equipment, modifications or alterations were made, that information may also be important to a service crew, as they may need to bring different equipment with them on the customer call.

RT: What is your take on hosted versus in-house software?

JD: It is important for IFS to be able to offer customers both options when desired; thus, the versatility and agility in our product offering. We have delivered IFS Applications in a SAAS environment, but it is not something we see much of a call for. Narrow product offerings like Salesforce.com may be more popular in this configuration. But it seems like middle market companies like the ones we serve want to be more hands-on with their enterprise application. To a certain extent, an in-house implementation may cause a company's management team to take the type of ownership that can lead them to maximize the possibility of their enterprise application.

RT: What can we expect from IFS over the next five years? Can you look out farther than that?

JD: IFS' CRM strategy is to continue enhancing our solution, both feature- and technology-wise, based on market and customer requirements/needs. We will make sure we continue to have a very competitive, out-of-the-box and fully ERP-integrated in-house CRM solution.

To a certain extent, our CRM solution will become more and more powerful, along with the rest of our application suite — as the very back-office functions that make up a quality ERP solution. One of our main challenges will be to raise awareness of the fact that CRM is mainly ERP information organized by customer. It takes a true twenty-first century enterprise application — which un-silos information from throughout a company — to deliver on this promise. And this is the point we need to make more clearly in the market.

RT: Thank you for your time, Jorge.

In the future, the CRM wars may be won by the company that demonstrates not the largest or most "brand name" offerings, but the most flexibility to customer needs, not only in terms of the manner of delivery (premise-based, SaaS or a mix of both), but in terms of functionality, scalability, pricing and ease of integration and administration. **CIS**

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

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Customer Inter@ction NEWS

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

Telrex Announces CallRex Release 3.5

Telrex, (news - alert) developer of VoIP call recording and monitoring software for businesses using IP-PBXs or hosted VoIP services, recently announced the release of CallRex Professional 3.5 featuring an advanced distributed services software architecture. According to the company, CallRex 3.5 was created to deliver greater scalability, high reliability and additional security, plus new features for multi-site deployments including enhanced multisite call recording and monitoring, advanced file transfers, flexible storage and streamlined archiving. CallRex was the first VoIP call recording solution verified to record encrypted VoIP calls for Cisco CallManager 5.0, and CallRex version 3.5 now provides additional security to ensure that call recording files cannot be secretly altered. The CallRex 3.5 distributed-services software architecture features separate services for status, control, recording and conversion of VoIP phone calls. CallRex 3.5 services operate independently and are deployed on industry-standard Windows servers in single- or multi-server configurations. Together, the CallRex 3.5 services enable the recording, monitoring, retrieval, playback and utilization of call recordings from any location. The design provides high reliability and enables virtually unlimited scalability across multiple servers and multiple office locations.

http://www.telrex.com

FrontRange Announces GoldMine Plus Accounting 4.0

Responding to customer requests for tighter integration between front- and back-office data, **FrontRange Solutions** (news - alert) has announced the general release of GoldMine Plus Accounting 4.0. This add-on to the organization's CRM solution allows users to draw information from Inuit Inc.'s QuickBooks and see it alongside the standard GoldMine data in order to gain a unified view of all transactions that relate to a given customer account. Updates can also be sent from GoldMine back to QuickBooks with ease. According to the company, GoldMine Plus Accounting 4.0 solves a plethora of issues that result from organizations using separate systems to access customer, sales, accounting and operational data. For example, it helps eliminate duplicate data entry, which not only improves productivity but also reduces the chances of human error or data discrepancies between the front and back offices. It also helps eliminate the need to undertake expensive and time-consuming data integration projects or purchase additional, complex business integration systems to achieve the same results.

http://www.frontrange.com

InfoCision Challenges Telemarketing Competitors

InfoCision Management Corporation (news - alert) has openly invited all firms that could benefit from telemarketing programs to take what the company refers to as "a split test," which would pit InfoCision against any other teleservices firm. If InfoCision's program is not more effective and more productive than the opponent's, there will be no charge for their services, according to the company. InfoCision is confident that no other firm will able to match the results it can achieve. InfoCision states that, to date, it has never lost a split test. The challenge comes in conjunction with the release of the Ohio-based telemarketing firm's new and comprehensive Web site, which provides the details of the split test offer and presents case studies that detail how InfoCision's programs have worked for current clients. To take advantage of the split test, contact InfoCision at 866-341-1411.

http://www.infocision.com

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Magazine

Call Center Experts Launch Site Selection Group

King R. White, former principal of **Trammell Crow Company**, has spun-off its **Call Center Site Selection Group** to form Dallas-based Site Selection Group, a global location strategies company. **Site Selection Group, LLC** (news - alert) is a full-service location advisory firm that delivers comprehensive global site selection services for office and industrial projects, such as call centers, business processing functions, headquarters, R&D, distribution centers and manufacturing operations. Site Selection Groups services include strategic planning, site-selection consulting, economic incentive services, brokerage services, portfolio administration, construction management and economic development services for a wide variety of audiences. To provide optimal solutions for customers around the world, Site Selection Group is building a comprehensive, global site selection database. Additionally, the organization is entering into formal alliances, partnerships and/or partial ownership with real estate and site-selection firms across the world to deliver seamless, full-service solutions to any geographic region.

http://www.siteselectiongroup.com

Nuance Launches IP-Based Voice Dialer For Employee-to-Employee Communications

Nuance Communications, Inc. (news - alert) has introduced its SpeechAttendant Internal Dialer, a turnkey, IP-based speech-enabled auto-attendant solution for employee-to-employee communications. Following rising corporate investment in VoIP and IP telephony, and the resulting demand for IP-based communication tools, Nuance has designed the new SpeechAttendant Internal Dialer to help organizations derive additional value and productivity from their IP infrastructures. With support for IP standards such as session initiation protocol (SIP), Nuance's auto-attendant solution can eliminate the need for custom IP-based deployments. The solution is compatible out of the box with IP-based infrastructures from vendors such as Avaya, Cisco, Genesys and more, enabling customers to immediately benefit from employee productivity improvements. Designed specifically for intra-company communications, the SpeechAttendant Internal Dialer enables employees to reach any person, department or location across the organization by simply dialing one number and saying a name. Organizations maintain a single inbound phone number powered by automated, speech-driven call routing to increase employee productivity and decrease telecommunications costs. The solution also allows employees to forward calls to their current location (such as a cell phone, home or remote office) for added convenience and efficiency.

http://www.nuance.com

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

LiveOps Develops Secure Exchange

LiveOps, (news - alert) a provider of distributed contact center solutions, has announced the immediate availability of Secure Exchange, a patent-pending system that allows callers to provide and receive sensitive personal information while restricting the call center agent from hearing or accessing those data. The system protects callers from exposing their credit card numbers or personal data that could leave them at risk for identity theft or other fraud. Contracting with over 9,000 home agents, LiveOps is the largest distributed contact center in the U.S. According to the company, Secure Exchange is the first call center technology that meets data privacy regulations impacting a variety of industries such as financial services and healthcare. Sensitive caller information, such as credit card and social security numbers, financial information or medical history, is captured within a secure environment: The agent cannot hear or see any of the input, but can track the caller's progress in real time in case the caller needs assistance. In addition, Secure Exchange assures that captured data are encrypted whenever they are stored or transferred. As a result, sensitive customer information can never be accessed by agents or any non-approved personnel. Secure Exchange will be an integrated feature within the LiveOps platform, which can be easily configured anywhere within the call flow. It has bi-directional potential, so callers can both input or collect sensitive information within the secure environment. Secure Exchange has been fully implemented and is available immediately to LiveOps customers.

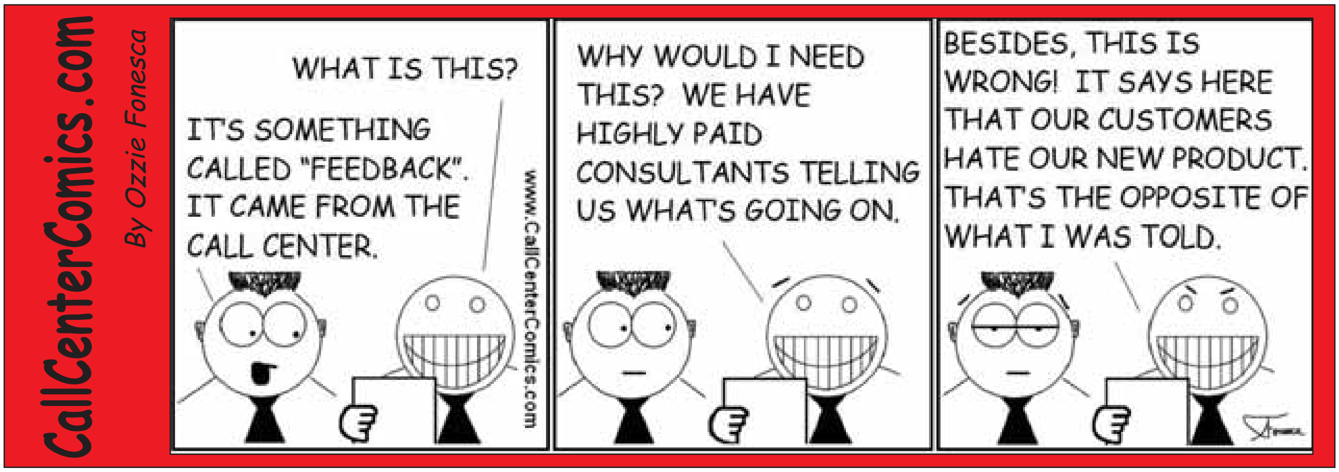
http://www.liveops.com

Interactive Intelligence Announces New Workforce Management Software

Interactive Intelligence Inc. (news - alert) has made generally available its new contact center workforce management software module, Interaction Optimizer. The company designed Interaction Optimizer to offer affordable forecasting, scheduling and real-time adherence capabilities to contact centers of all sizes. By more effectively matching a workforce to its workload, these capabilities can help contact centers lower costs, increase agent productivity, improve customer service and ensure regulatory compliance. Interaction Optimizer will be offered as an optional, pre-integrated component of the Interactive Intelligence contact center automation software suite, Customer Interaction Center (CIC). As a pre-integrated component of the company's software suite, Interaction Optimizer makes use of CIC's automatic call distribution data, which includes multichannel routing, thus giving customers an easy-to-use and accurate method for planning schedules and making changes on-the-fly. Interaction Optimizer's demand forecasting feature includes the ability to create schedule simulations based on virtually unlimited scenarios, such as variances due to seasonal effects and promotional campaigns. This flexibility is intended to help contact centers effectively identify staffing shortages and overages for maximum operational efficiency. Interaction Optimizer's real-time adherence functionality offers instant notification of compliance with scheduled activities — no lag time between notification and event.
http://www.inin.com/products/optimizer/optimizer.asp

Data Collection Resources Releases CEMS Version 6.0

Data Collection Resources, (news - alert) a provider of quality monitoring, call center recording and e-learning management solutions for call centers in North America, has announced the general availability of CEMS Release 6.0. CEMS 6.0 offers new features designed to strengthen performance and data management. New features include the evaluator performance dashboard, coaching activities management, real-time agent desktop global view and two new data management tools, an archive wizard and an auto delete function. DCR offers mid-market solutions that provide customers with affordable, flexible and reliable alternatives to enhance and improve the customer's experience without the high cost of owning a legacy quality monitoring and call center recording system. CEMS is DCR's core offering for organizations requiring a complete quality monitoring and call center recording solution that is collectively more affordable and budget friendly. CEMS can be cost-effectively configured and implemented for total recording, random recording, record-on-demand, customized agent evaluation, real-time monitors for agent screens, synchronized audio video, e-learning management and management analysis and reporting.
http://www.monitoringmadeeasy.com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Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Sales Progress Launches New Sales Coaching Software

Sales Progress LLC (news - alert) has announced the availability of its updated Sales Progress Coaching System. The software was designed to provide resources for sales/customer service staff to advance their knowledge, enable managers to improve employee performance and also allow the director to oversee that their managers are "coaching" their staff effectively. The system comes with two primary functions. First, the system teaches a specific coaching methodology that comes with software to help monitor employee development. One feature is a scoring application in which a manager can create custom scoring tools that help define both graphically and statistically where an employee needs additional coaching. If the manager does not know what to do, he or she is provided a helpful tool called The Coach's Corner where that manager can search over 250 coaching activities to address specific employee challenges. Second, there are learning tools for staff such as pod casts, over 25 Web-based courses and quick audio help files for various topics (getting past gatekeepers, closing ideas, etc.). In addition, managers and staff members are provided "Help Tickets" where they can ask for help online within the system and Sales Progress will provide custom feedback in the form of coaching or sales advice.
http://www.salesprogress.com

Persay And YeSpeech Build Centralized, Cross-Channel Speaker Verification System

Persay Ltd., (news - alert) a provider of biometric speaker verification technology, has announced that it will participate in an extensive project with Korean-based **YeSpeech** (formerly **YesTechnology**) to provide a multichannel, centralized speaker verification system. The system proposed will be exposed as a Web service for authenticating phone, Internet and mobile users performing risky transactions by introducing independent double/triple layered authentication processes employing biometric speaker verification technology. The solution will enable financial services, government agencies, healthcare organizations, home networking and distant learning application providers to securely authenticate users and protect themselves from financial fraud, identity theft and privacy breaches. The centralized, multichannel voice authentication system will include the following four modes: Web user authentication using callback mechanism (out of band); Web user authentication using a local microphone (in band); mobile user authentication using data channel (WIPI/BREW based); and mobile\landline user authentication using standard voice (telephony) channel. The solution proposed is based on Persay's VocalPassword and on a VoiceXML platform and will include easy-to-use tools and interfaces, enabling enterprises to use biometric speaker verification as a second authentication factor across all communication channels.
http://www.persay.com

TARGUS*info* Announces Enhanced Call Detail

TARGUS*info*, (news - alert) a provider of caller name services, recently announced Enhanced Call Detail services for the telecommunications market. Available now, Enhanced Call Detail can increase the valuable call information telco providers can offer their subscribers, thereby increasing subscriber growth, reducing churn and curbing customer support costs. While most providers offer only barebones data about the name of an inbound caller, providers who use TARGUS*info*'s Enhanced Call Detail services can offer subscribers on-demand information about their calls, including full name of the caller and full address as well as business/consumer and landline/wireless status. Without TARGUS*info*'s Enhanced Call Detail service, providers can offer little more than a truncated name on a bill. In addition, TARGUSinfo users can now deliver improved caller information on the fly to any device, including PCs, cell phones and TVs. Whether by itself or in value-added applications, Enhanced Call Detail eliminates subscribers' frustration with unrecognizable calls and simplifies allocation of long-distance charges within a business.

http://www.targusinfo.com

CosmoCom Launches Version 5 Of CosmoCall Universe

CosmoCom, (news - alert) a provider of Unified Customer Communications, recently announced Version 5, its major upgrade to CosmoCom's CosmoCall Universe (CCU), the company's IP-based contact center software platform. CosmoCom has dubbed the new version the Unified Customer Communications (UCC) release, because the platform has been enhanced to support key elements of UCC. Among the significant enhancements in CCU 5 are a completely redesigned e-mail and voice mail environment, rich call transfer capabilities, a customizable rich security model, new reporting features and further enhancements to its video call center and video self-service capabilities. CCU was designed to leverage emerging IP-based convergence to unify customer communications across all channels, including voice, video, e-mail and Web sessions, across all locations and across all knowledge workers in the enterprise. CosmoCall Universe 5 expands on its innovative roots, introducing a number of new tools that simplify contact center operations and provide significant enhancements to messaging infrastructure, call flow, reporting and security.
http://www.cosmocom.com

Telecom CRM, e-Commerce And Analytics Market To Reach $1.3 Billion In 2010

A new study from telecom market research and consulting firm **Dittberner Associates** predicts resurgent growth in the market for CRM and related customer assurance software. The report, entitled "Telecom Customer Assurance & Analytics," sizes the telecom industry market for such software at $997 million in 2005 and forecasts healthy growth to $1.3 billion in 2010. While the CRM market has certainly declined since its dotcom heyday, the Dittberner report cites the complexity of pricing, promoting and personalizing next-generation telecom services as the main driver for telcos to pay greater attention to CRM-related issues. While the report sees CRM on the climb again, it cautions that the character of the CRM market has fundamentally changed. Most telecoms already own the desktop tools they need to efficiently capture and integrate customer behavioral and demographic data. Where Dittberner sees future growth is in the analysis of these data. In effect, telecoms have merely "scratched the surface of knowledge" that can be leveraged from their daily interaction with customers, operations, services, networks and salespeople. As a result, the report points to the opportunity — not for analytics software alone — but for a combination of analytics software, industry consulting and analytics experts who know how to build customized analytic apps.
http://www.technology-research.com/ca.html

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Willow CSN Changes Name To Arise Incorporated

Home agent provider **Willow CSN** has announced that it has changed its name to **Arise Incorporated**. (news - alert) The renamed company will continue to offer virtual business services to companies in the consumer goods, retail, travel and financial services sectors with “a renewed focus on inspiring trust and creating results for both clients and Arise Certified Professionals,” according to the company. Arise states that it remains committed to providing thousands of home-based businesses with the freedom to answer calls, e-mail and provide interactive chat services. Arise offers certification courses needed to become an Arise Certified Professional in customer services, sales and technical support. Virtual Services Corporations employ Arise Certified Professionals, who have the freedom to choose how often they work and for which companies. All Virtual Services Corporations invest in the required equipment and certification, and receive compensation based on performance and results to ensure that only the most dedicated and motivated Arise Certified Professionals serve Arise clients.

http://www.arise.com

Toshiba Launches New IP Desk Telephone

Toshiba America Information Systems Inc. Telecommunication Systems Division has announced its new Toshiba IPT2010-SDC IP Desk Telephone, which includes an Analog CO line interface for local dialing, including emergency calls. It is compatible with Toshiba’s Strata CIX family of IP business communication systems for small to medium-sized enterprises, national accounts and government users. Toshiba’s new Strata IPT2010-SDC delivers all the features and functionality of Toshiba’s digital telephones in an IP format, including: 10 programmable feature buttons that enable users to customize the telephone’s use to meet their own unique needs; a two-line by 24-character LCD for at-a-glance information; full-duplex speakerphone; analog CO line interface for local dialing and emergency calls; handset/headset choice, off-hook dialing, hands-free use and ring tones (different for IP and analog lines); power provided via Power over Ethernet (PoE) or local AC adapter; compatibility with Toshiba’s entire family of Strata CIX IP business telephone systems, including CIX670, CIX200, CIX100, CIX40; and compatibility with Toshiba’s older Strata CTX systems that support IP interface units.

http://www.toshiba.com

Inter-Tel Announces Release Of Unified Communicator v4.0

Inter-Tel, Incorporated, (news - alert) a provider of voice and data communications solutions for businesses, has announced the general release of its Unified Communicator version 4.0 software, a robust presence management and collaboration tool that enables users to project their status and availability to associates and prioritize how and where they receive incoming calls. In addition, Unified Communicator v4.0 combines these features with Web collaboration and conferencing into a single converged solution. One of the latest enhancements of the application is the integration of Inter-Tel Web Conferencing v4.5 into Unified Communicator v4.0, delivering tightly woven presence management, conferencing and collaboration functions into a single interface. With the addition of the optional Inter-Tel Remote Support v4.5 add-on, users can conduct remote support sessions through this same interface as well. Unified Communicator v4.0 offers users the ability to prioritize and route calls to specified colleagues or locations, project their status to associates, share documents and conduct Web conferences. Like previous versions, Unified Communicator v4.0 enables users to access features and functions through speech recognition technology and a variety of devices, such as desktop endpoints, PCs, PDAs and cell phones. Along with its expanded collaboration functionality, Unified Communicator v4.0 offers a new, user-friendly Web client interface, simplified call routing and a streamlined installation process. It provides voice mail capabilities, which deliver voice mail notification to all associated devices on a user’s account. Unified Communicator v4.0 also supports the latest release of the Inter-Tel Model 8602 IP soft phone.

http://www.inter-tel.com

ASC Releases Enhanced VoIPRecording Solution For Windows

ASC, (news - alert) a provider of communications recording and quality monitoring solutions for contact centers, financial institutions and public safety and government organizations, recently announced the release of an enhanced version of EVO*ip* for Windows, a VoIP recording solution. The product captures telephone calls from the network and enables storage, playback and archiving of the entire interaction. It is entirely software-based and designed for maximum flexibility, scalability and ease of integration and installation. The new features now provide the same functionality as the company’s Linux product including recording of encrypted calls, keyword spotting (searching for spoken words), multilingual applications and adjustable modes for individual, bulk or selective recording on each IP phone. The solution works with SIP — a standard VoIP protocol common to all major IP vendors — to preserve call-index data, such as incoming phone numbers, without the need for CTI. EVO*ip* for Windows is designed with an innovative layered architecture for passive and active VoIP recording. EVO*ip*, as a passive VoIP solution, works by “sniffing” for audio packets in the network. It is built upon the common underlying protocols of VoIP communications and thus operates in a vendor-independent manner in any environment. ASC also offers certified, integrated, vendor-specific solutions for major IP vendors including Avaya, Cisco, Mitel and Siemens. EVO*ip* active, on the other hand, works as an integral part of the call flow within an IP switch. It is ideal for companies with multiple locations as only one recording facility will capture communications throughout the network. It also works well for selective recording, often used in quality monitoring situations.

http://www.asctelecom.com

M2M Holdings Inc. Acquires KNOVA Software Inc.

M2M Holdings Inc., (news - alert) the privately held holding company jointly owned by **Battery Ventures VI L.P.** and **Thoma Cressey Equity Partners**, recently announced it has signed a definitive agreement to acquire **KNOVA Software Inc.**, a provider of intelligent customer experience applications, in an all-cash transaction valued at $5.00 per share, or approximately $47 million. The parties anticipate closing the transaction in the first calendar quarter of 2007. The closing is subject to approval by holders of a majority of KNOVA Software’s outstanding common stock and other customary regulatory and documentation closing conditions. As with each of its past acquisitions, M2M Holdings plans to apply its integration model to the acquisition of KNOVA Software. This model ensures that each acquired product line maintains its brand identity and is enhanced, maintained, supported and sold by dedicated sales, product management, development, customer support and professional services teams.

http://www.made2manage.com

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

When "Getting Human" Isn't Enough

Using Testing And Monitoring To Ensure The Quality Of Contact Center Applications

For most organizations, self-service applications — including IVR, CTI and CRM technologies — have become critical elements of the contact center. And it's no surprise that the business benefits of using self-service applications instead of live agents for the majority of customer contacts have been well documented.

For consumers, too, the concept of self-service can have significant appeal. Often, transactions can be completed more efficiently, more conveniently and more privately when a live agent isn't involved. In fact, when they work correctly, IVR systems and other call center applications can increase customer satisfaction and improve agent productivity.

The problem for businesses and the consumers they serve is the difference between concept and reality when self-service applications don't work as users expect. This disconnect frequently leads customers to "zero out" to a live agent — at first in frustration and eventually by reflex after the customer has experienced inefficiency with self-service systems one too many times.

Today, consumers who are frustrated by issues like long wait times, repeated requests for the same information, being routed to the wrong person or department, and dropped calls have found a real advocate in Paul English and his "Get Human" consumer movement (http://www.gethuman.com), which offers tools and techniques that help customers bypass IVR systems and other contact center applications to speak to a live human agent instead of an inefficient self-service system.

Form Versus Function

Clearly, organizations can realize the benefits and efficiencies of self-service applications only if their customers use them, and the best way to ensure that contact center systems are used is to make sure they work as they're supposed to. Customers must get what they need, when they need it.

A strong self-service application begins with an excellent design, but even the best designed application should not be executed until it has been thoroughly tested. A well designed, thoroughly tested self-service application will deliver significant benefits to an organization and its customers.

Testing, Testing, Testing

Regardless of the type of product a company sells or the kind of service it provides, the quality of a customer's experience begins with their first interaction with the contact center. As demonstrated by the success of the Get Human movement, the impact of that interaction extends well beyond the contact itself. Poorly designed self-service systems clearly top most consumers' "pet peeve" lists.

Often, companies that have invested millions of dollars installing advanced self-service systems may be willing (in a misguided effort to "save" time and money) to assume automatically that an application will run smoothly after deployment. Yet these same organizations would never consider launching a new product or service without putting it through its paces first with months of thorough testing. Why should the launch of a new customer-facing contact center application be treated any differently?

Simply put, many contact center performance issues can be avoided — well before customers are affected — with thorough testing and ongoing monitoring both pre- and post-deployment.

By Michelle Goodall Faulkner
Empirix Inc.

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Proactive Testing, Tuning And Monitoring From The Customer's Perspective

All organizations should perform three types of testing before rolling out critical self-service applications such as IVRs, CTI solutions and CRM: usability testing, automated functional testing and load testing. By taking a comprehensive approach to testing, organizations can verify a new or upgraded application's performance under real-world conditions before it is deployed — pinpointing problems *before* the customer does.

The first is usability testing. Performed by real users, usability testing can help companies ensure that the design of their self-service application is logical and easy to navigate — making the application so convenient and efficient to use that customers will opt for it willingly.

Usability testing can help keep applications simple, with a limited number of menus, for example, and can help ensure that the technologies used in the application make sense. It isn't logical, for instance, to use speech recognition technology when account numbers are long; callers should be able to enter their account numbers using touch-tone instead.

Finally, usability testing can ensure that self-service applications have a logical flow; a caller should never be prompted to enter an account number and then be asked if they would like to open an account, for example.

The second type of testing is automated functional testing. Automated functional testing evaluates the entire customer experience for a *single* user — from the network carrier through the PBX/ACD into the IVR (define - news - alert) and to the agent desktop — by driving simulated calls that emulate real caller and agent behavior. These simulated calls dial into the system under test, enter or speak account and/or PIN numbers, listen to ensure that the right prompt responses are being played, and measure system and network response times throughout each test.

With functional testing, companies can quickly identify and isolate problems, such as when response times exceed pre-established thresholds, as well as ensure that customers won't experience dropped calls, be given the wrong prompt or be delayed by slow database lookups.

Like automated functional testing, automated load testing drives calls that emulate real caller and agent behavior into the IVR or other self-service application, but automated load testing simulates hundreds or thousands of calls into a system simultaneously to make sure the application works as designed for *many* callers. This type of testing provides companies with advanced warning of the types and level of call traffic that would overload or bring down a system, including performance bottlenecks and call-handling errors.

Testing And The Get Human Standard

The Get Human Web site (http://www.gethuman.com) describes 10 key standards that exemplify Paul English's vision of how customer service phone systems and support should work. Many of these standards can be addressed when organizations ensure that their self-service applications are well designed and easy for their customers to use.

There are a number of standards, however, that can be directly influenced by thorough pre- and post-deployment testing and monitoring.

For example, standard three says, "Callers should never be asked to repeat any information (name, full account number, description of issue, etc.) provided to a human or an automated system during a call." This common and frustrating problem typically occurs when software, which transfers information entered by the caller from the automated system to an agent's desktop, doesn't work properly. This transfer of information is a key functional element of the IVR, and the problem could be eliminated with pre-deployment functional testing and ongoing monitoring of the application to ensure the system works as designed.

Standard five recommends that, "Speech applications should provide touch-tone (DTMF) fall-back." In reali-

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

ty, if speech applications are well designed and thoroughly tested, they will work effectively, making a fall-back unnecessary. With functional and load testing, companies can evaluate the performance of speech applications, including application availability, speech recognition rates and transaction length. They can also test voice quality, even as caller and user load grows.

Standard eight says, “Do not disconnect for user errors, including when there are no perceived key presses (as the caller might be on a rotary phone); instead, queue for a human operator and/or offer the choice for call-back.” Dropped calls are another frustrating problem that can be limited, or eliminated, by testing. Calls are most commonly dropped when call traffic overloads and then brings down the system — an issue that can be prevented through pre-deployment load testing.

The Answer: A Comprehensive Approach

It is clear that to ensure the quality of the customer experience and to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction, companies must always strive to meet the requirements of their customers. This necessitates a comprehensive approach to the design and deployment of customer-facing applications in the contact center. In some cases, for example, meeting customer needs may mean making it more convenient for callers to “get human” when they need to. In all cases, however, “getting human” just isn’t enough. Meeting customer needs should always mean ensuring the quality and performance of the automated systems and self-service applications on which customers rely, and having the confidence that applications and systems will work as an organization and its customers expect. For this, thorough testing and on-going monitoring are an absolute must. **CIS**

Michelle Faulkner has been at (news - alert) Empirix (http://www.empirix.com) for four years and has been the director of marketing communications since 2006. She is a 14-year veteran of marketing and corporate communications for high-tech companies, on both the client and agency sides. Empirix is a provider of testing and monitoring solutions to ensure customers realize the promise of their technology investments. The company offers expertise that spans the evolution of advanced technologies across multiple markets — from testing in R&D labs through monitoring the end-user experience.

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Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

2007 Recommended Vendor List

The TMC Seal Of Approval

The following Recommended Vendors have distinguished themselves by winning one or more of TMC's coveted awards, earning them the TMC Seal of Approval.

CRM/Contact Center Software/Hardware

Amcat

Co-Nexus, Inc.

etalk

IEX Corporation

Interactive Intelligence

Oracle

Left Bank Solutions

NICE Systems

Nortel Networks

Sennheiser Electronic Corp.

SER Solutions Inc.

Spectrum Corporation

Symon

Stratasoft, Inc.

Teleformix

Strategic Communication Systems

Verint Systems

Witness Systems

Teleservices Outsourcing

West Corporation

InfoCision Management Corporation

Advanced Data-Comm, Inc.

For information about how to get on the Recommended Vendor list, see http:/www.tmcnet.com/mediakit/cis04/soa.htm

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Fourteenth Annual MVP (Marketing Via Phone) Quality Award Winners

By Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

This is the fourteenth year *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* has brought you the winners of its MVP (Marketing Via Phone) Quality Awards. In the ensuing years since we introduced the awards in 1993, we have been impressed by the growing sophistication of the quality measures that have been introduced to the contact center by the leading-edge companies that apply for our MVP Quality Award. Over the years, we have seen new technologies adopted and the standards for a quality interaction refined and improved. Each of the following companies has demonstrated, through its MVP Quality Awards application, a true commitment to high ethical standards, stringent policies and challenging goals. Each of the award recipients is involved in a quality process that stretches from its human resource development to its implementation of technology to improve quality to taking a leadership role in promoting a positive public image of teleservices, and more. The following brief extracts from the extensive award-winning applications will give you a glimpse into what the companies provided as their standards for quality.

On a 16-point essay, entrants described a specific teleservices program and its results, and explained their overall policies and procedures, including human resources, technologies, customer services, ergonomics and public image that are used to establish, sustain and measure the program's quality. Judging the applicants was an arduous task, and the scores were not given lightly. Judging involved assigning a numerical point value from 1 to 10 for each of the 16 evaluation points. The average essay length was 17 pages...enough to give an editor a pronounced squint afterwards.

Through the winners' essays, we learned that there are countless individuals within these organizations whose combined efforts and teamwork have contributed to elevating their companies' marketing via phone practices to the forefront of the industry. We've shared some of the most compelling items on the winners' application essays with readers. To all of the winners, congratulations.

— *Tracey Schelmetic*

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AWARD

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

GOLD AWARD WINNERS

APAC Customer Services Inc.

(b-to-b inbound)
Deerfield, IL
http://www.apaccustomerservices.com

What do you do for customers that gives them the impression of quality and high ethical standards?

(news - alert) "Complete background checks are performed on each representative/staff member prior to placement. We maintain a workplace with no paper to secure personal customer data. Representatives and team leaders are required to shred all paper at the end of the day and team leaders frequently walk through the floor and perform a sweep to retrieve and discard any stray paper. Desktops are required to protect customer data by automatically switching to a screen saver with two minutes of inactivity."

ClientLogic

(b-to-b integrated)
Nashville, TN
http://www.clientlogic.com

What do you do for customers that gives them the impression of quality and high ethical standards?

(news - alert) "ClientLogic's Fraud Examination Unit (FEU), headed by a former FBI agent, ensures that ClientLogic's clients and their customers are protected from criminal activity. The FEU is responsible for identifying and eliminating vulnerabilities in the pre-sales, e-commerce and post-sales processes, as well as customer service processes, to shield customers from fraud. The FEU also serves as the liaison with the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, other law enforcement organizations, fraud examiners from other companies and professional security and anti-fraud organizations. By using this Anti-Fraud Network, the FEU maintains a high level of preparedness against new and creative frauds."

Cross Country Automotive Services

(b-to-c integrated)
Medford, MA
http://www.crosscountry-auto.com

(news - alert) How do you measure customer satisfaction?

"One hundred percent of all customers who contact Cross Country Automotive Services for service are requested to provide real-time feedback by completing a survey via the Web or through IVR automation. In addition, we mail customer satisfaction surveys to approximately five percent of our completed calls daily. These surveys have 12 questions related to various aspects of the service we provide. Customers are asked to rate the speed of answer, courtesy, knowledge/ability and overall service of the customer service representative. Customers are also asked to rate the professionalism, courtesy, ability, timeliness and overall performance of the service provider we have dispatched. We receive approximately 22,000 completed customer satisfaction surveys every month."

GC Services Limited Partnership

(b-to-b and b-to-c integrated)
Houston, TX
http://www.gcserv.com

What are your monitoring practices?

(news - alert) "Without courtesy, there can be no customer care. Accordingly, the first responsibility of our Quality First coaches and unit managers is to ensure that all representatives provide unflagging courtesy on every single contact. Regardless of how well a representative is able to assist a customer from a technical standpoint, he or she has not met customer and business expectations if our coaches observe even minor breaches in courteous demeanor."

InfoCision Management Corp.

(b-to-c inbound)
Akron, OH
http://www.infocision.com

Provide quantifiable results of a specific program. Explain how results were tabulated and how the quality of the program was gauged.

"The client (news - alert) estimated the value of each upsell to be $129. With the previous upsell rate of 1.6 percent, 1,000 calls would generate $2,064 in revenue for the client. With the increase [we effected] to 4.6 percent for the upsell rate, we were able to earn $5,934 in revenue for the client on the same 1,000 calls. At our current rate, we will receive 700,000 calls this year and upsell 32,200 customers, which will generate $4,153,800 for the client."

SILVER AWARD WINNERS

Alta Resources

(b-to-c inbound)
Neenah, WI
http://www.altaresources.com

What do you do to demonstrate your commitment to staff quality, i.e., training, motivation techniques, etc.?

(news - alert)"As an outsourced service provider, we have the opportunity to partner with some of the most recognized and trusted brand names in the world. As a result, we have been able to take best practices from these organizations and incorporate them into our own culture."

ePerformax Contact Centers

(b-to-c inbound)
Cordova, TN
http://www.eperformax.com

Explain how quality has evolved in your contact center, how it is sustained and how it is measured.

(news - alert)"Our performance maximization model provides the foundation for constant evolution and continuous improvement in our company. In order to engage our management team in the use of the model and the continuous improvement of processes, we provide a comprehensive management training track to all front-line supervisors and above. Reps are also offered the opportunity to voluntarily attend the management training in preparation for promotion opportunities."

Hamilton Contact Center Services

(b-to-b integrated)
Aurora, NE
http://www.hamiltontm.com

Specifically state your policies on quality and your company's philosophy/motto on quality.

(news - alert)"Essentially, we have built our culture around Point 8 of management guru W. Edward Demming's famed 14-point management philosophy — Drive out fear and build trust so everyone can do a better job. By focusing on what caused a breakdown in the system instead of focusing on the individual who incurred

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

the mistake, employees are able to work better after a mistake and without any fear of recrimination.”

NOVO1

(b-to-b outbound)
Laurel, MD
http://www.novo1.com

Explain how quality has evolved in your contact center, how it is sustained and how it is measured.

(news - alert)“Early on, we concluded that growth alone, including new call centers, expensive technology, numerous workstations and thousands of employees, is not the key to teleservices success and long-term client relationships. Quality is...At each stage of [our growth], we carefully evaluated the level of quality provided to each client before moving on to the next stage. With each 20 percent incremental increase in growth, we set as our goal no less than a five percent increase in quality and a 30 percent increase in results (e.g., increased sales/leads).”

Synergy Solutions, Inc.

(b-to-c integrated)
Phoenix, AZ
http://www.synergysolutionsinc.com

Specifically state your policies on quality and your company's philosophy/motto on quality.

(news - alert) “Synergy is committed to long-term partnerships and to that effect we only charge our clients for the log time of the up-front CSR. We do not charge for the verification time as we realize that this investment in the extra verification step will ensure stronger customer retention for our clients which in turn increases the value we provide and the strength of our partnership.”

Teleperformance

(b-to-c integrated)
Paris, France
http://www.teleperformance.com

What is special or unique about your staff that contributes to quality?

(news - alert) “One of the most unique aspects of Teleperformance is its entrepreneurial spirit. Teleperformance promotes contact center employment as a career and not as a temporary job. We focus on recruiting from within in order to maintain our in-depth operational know-how. This unwritten and proven policy brings: minimized staff attrition among our managers (supervisors, account managers, support functions, etc.); staff loyalty with strong expertise succession; and information sharing and social interactions.”

Working Solutions

(b-to-c inbound)
Plano, TX
http://www.workingsol.com

What elements make it easy to do business with your firm?

(news - alert) “We have Business Continuity Planning and Support, where we make call center systems and infrastructures readily available in the event of a disaster. This service helps companies maintain their business operations when unexpected events like power outages or natural disasters occur. In a brick-and-mortar environment, such events can wipe out a contact center for days. This potentially costs clients hundreds of thousands in lost sales. However, the dispersed, home-based nature of our agents, coupled with our technical redundancies, enables us to handle such events with ease. Our business continuity solution can even be implemented within a 24-hour period, to minimize the loss of calls and revenues.”

BRONZE AWARD WINNERS

2006 MVP Quality
CUSTOMER INTER@CTION Solutions
AWARD
BRONZE

Ambergris Solutions

(b-to-c inbound)
Pasig City, Philippines
http://www.ambergrissolutions.com

What elements make it easy to do business with your firm?

(news - alert) “Ambergris, through its parent TELUS International, a wholly owned subsidiary of TELUS Corp., has vast amounts of resources from an IT and telecom background to support a total provisioning of technology to a joint sharing of technology perspective. Ambergris is focused on implementing processes that work for each of our clients. Our Business Process Improvement team champions process improvement projects across the organization. Their efforts are focused on metric management, enhancing key metrics such as customer satisfaction and first call resolution scores, as well as capturing best practices within a program and cascading the information to other programs.”

Intelenet Global Services

(b-to-b and b-to-c integrated)
Plano, TX
http://www.intelenetglobal.com

What do you do to demonstrate your commitment to staff quality, i.e, training, motivational techniques, etc.?

Intelenet Global Services utilizes the “train the trainer” approach to handle domain- and process-related training specific to our client accounts. The client training team trains Intelenet Global Services trainers on the business domain of the client and also on those processes that are to be offshored. These trainers then train the offshore delivery team comprising of agents and other support personnel to be deployed for the particular account. This ensures correct information is being transferred offshore to ensure high quality.”

Telvista Inc.

(b-to-b and b-to-c integrated)
Dallas, TX
www.telvista.com

Explain how quality has evolved in your contact center, how it is sustained and how it is measured.

(news - alert) “As consumers have become more accustomed to contact centers and more demanding of the service and support they receive, it has become less important to focus on call mechanics and metrics, and more important to focus on customer satisfaction and the overall customer experience.”

The Connection

(b-to-c integrated)
Burnsville, MD
http://www.the-connection.com

Include specific information on the types of technologies you use to enhance quality.

(news - alert) “Clients access our Web Quality Plus (WQP) system through a secure link to monitor and print custom reports detailing specific areas of feedback. WQP is unique in that it provides a “need help” button, which submits a client’s question directly to the Quality Assurance Manager via e-mail. Each question or concern is addressed by the next business day. The user friendliness of the WQP system is unique to the call center industry and sets The Connection apart from its competitors.” CIS

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

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The Elusive Work-Life Balance:

Five Steps To Achieving Harmony With Workforce Management

The familiar terms "flexible working" and "work-life balance" hold different meanings for different people. For an employer, flexibility often means a way to ensure staff availability at the right times to meet customer demand. To the employee, flexibility usually means freedom to pursue outside interests, whether leisurely pursuits or family commitments, and to schedule work around these activities.

As a result, there is a daily battle of managing the conflicts between staff preferences and business needs. This is particularly relevant for the contact center industry, as working mothers are the largest employee group and nearly seven out of 10 agents prefer to work flexible hours.

Fortunately, tensions between both perspectives can be reconciled within the same organization. In this article, we will explain how flexibility and work-life balance — for both employee and employer — can be achieved in five steps with workforce management (WFM).

Why Work-Life Balance And Flexible Working?

Besides the obvious benefit of sanity or less stress in an increasingly hectic world, there are pragmatic, bottom-line impacts from achieving a work-life balance and flexible operation, as follows.

Save on recruitment costs. Just as it is more expensive to win over new customers than to retain existing ones, it is good business to retain the people you have invested time, money and training in. Recruitment is expensive, and research shows that staff turnover is significantly lower in those organizations that have four or more work-life balance initiatives or flexible working practices.

Reduce absenteeism. In a recent survey, a public sector organization established that more than 50 percent of its staff members admitted to using sick leave as a means of managing family commitments, resulting in an overall attendance rate of 87 percent. When improved flexible working options were introduced, attendance rose to over 96 percent.

Motivate staff. Employees who can designate the times they would like to work, their less-preferred times, times when they are not available and so on are likely to be more productive, have higher attendance rates and are less likely to seek a new job. Lack of work-life balance is one of the top 10 reasons stated by employees for resigning their position.

Improve customer service. More productive, happier employees also mean better customer service. Having the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time improves operational efficiency and performance, reducing the number of calls abandoned, increasing revenue and sales, reducing the time spent managing customer complaints and so on.

By Tracey Hawkins
GMT

Finding The Right Balance With WFM

The typical manager must account for many considerations in developing flexible working options while ensuring that the contact center meets its goals. These considerations include:

- How many agents do I need, at what time and with which skills?
- What are the preferred working hours of each agent?
- How do I balance personnel who want flexibility against those who do not?
- What other constraints do I have to consider, e.g., breaks, training, meetings, working time directive, contractual hours, etc.?
- How do I manage special events or new campaigns and have the ability to identify and respond to unforeseen events?
- How is my contact center performing (service levels may differ for different work types)?
- How do I understand the impact of changes in advance?
- How do I ensure that supervisors and team leaders have time to do other things outside of schedule management?

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

FREE Webinar

February 28, 2007 • 1:00pm Eastern Time

Home-Based Agents:
A New Reality for Every Call Center

intervoice

Presenter

Vice President,
Product Marketing
Intervoice

Presenter

Jack Heacock
Senior Vice President
Telework Coalition

Moderator

Tracey E. Schelmetic
Editorial Director,
Customer Inter@ction
Solutions Magazine

If you're wrestling with how best to support home agents, then you can't afford to miss our webcast on home-based agents in the contact center. This informative session will provide you with valuable insights about how you can roll out home agents to optimize the quality and efficiency of your company's contact centers.

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- How trends are helping drive a radically different business model
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- How do I keep staff informed of what they are working on and when?

Many contact centers try to manage these processes manually, which is incredibly time-intensive and unproductive since it removes agents from their primary purpose of serving customers and managers from their core function of managing the business.

A sophisticated WFM solution can be a cost-effective way to balance all of these pressures, enabling organizations to deliver flexible working options while improving performance and reducing costs.

Five Key Steps To Work-Life Balance

Step 1 – Identify The Options

There are a broad range of flexible working options:

Term-time working. When someone on a permanent contract can take unpaid leave during school holidays.

Part-time working. Employees work a reduced number of hours, usually with working times agreed in advance.

Flex-time. Gives employees a choice about when they work.

Job-share schemes. Two people share the duties of a post that would normally be done by one person. Both work part-time and share the salary, holidays and any other benefits.

Compressed working hours. Allows staff to work their contracted hours over a shorter number of days, for example, a four-day week.

Shift swapping. Employees rearrange shifts among themselves to suit their needs, as long as the business needs are met.

Telecommuting. Employees do their jobs from home, often using a telephone and computer to stay in touch.

Staggered hours. Employees have different start, finish and break times that cover longer working days.

Step 2 – Understand Demand

Inflexible working practices contribute to poor performance within many contact centers. For example, a standard rotating shift pattern in one organization offering 24/7/365 service delivered only a 47 percent workload fit, with significant overstaffing over the weekend period when call volumes dropped and significant overtime pay to fill understaffing during weekdays.

It is essential for today's contact centers to have a sound understanding of demand volumes across all touch points in the organization; the impact of seasonality and trending; and the impact of shrinkage factors on their ability to meet service levels and to easily apply a myriad business rules, both legislative and corporate-mandated.

For many contact centers, this is a manual, time-intensive and error-prone process that relies on spreadsheets and Erlang C calculations. A robust WFM solution, however, can employ statistical forecasting to predict touch point (phone, Web, e-mail and faxes) volume. Forecasting calculations are automatic and take into consideration seasonality, long-term growth trends and the effect of additional factors such as advertising campaigns on call traffic.

A good WFM solution should also understand the impact of shrinkage — including sickness, training, meetings and many other work/availability exceptions — and automatically factor these into the schedule. It should also understand the skills of individual agents and their proficiency level within each skill area, providing truly optimized schedules to ensure there are the right people with the right skills in the right place at the right time.

Case studies reveal a 60 to 80 percent reduction in the number of hours spent by supervisors producing and managing schedules, which translates to hundreds of dollars or more in savings per year from more efficient schedule management in addition to productivity and revenue gains from higher employee satisfaction and customer service.

Step 3 – Manage Flexibility Preferences

Working pattern changes are not always productive if designed hastily or improperly. Some can require months of consultation, appeasement and change in management and staff. Introducing flexible working options ideally should not add to the complexity of the resource planning function or managing staff; rather, it should make life easier.

A good WFM solution eliminates the need to design an alternative shift pattern. By optimizing schedules based on employee preferences, those employees who do not want to change their work schedules can remain as they are; those who want to have more flexibility can do so; and part-time staff can be utilized to better support the business. In addition, as posts become vacant through natural attrition, the solution should be able to identify the type of agent required, i.e., part-time or full-time, with the right skill set and availability. This tailors the recruitment strategy to meet the needs of the business and to reduce costs.

In the same way that a structured pattern of work will suit some employees and not others, the same is true of flexible working options. An advanced WFM solution will allow for several layers of availability as well as seamless management of staff, shift patterns and rotations within the solution.

Further, the solution should have the flexibility to incorporate all of the necessary business rules, ensuring that the schedules produced adhere to the parameters in place. These rules include, for instance, assigning breaks with the capacity to automatically understand when a different break set rule applies; e.g., if a shift is extended, the employee is entitled to more or longer breaks. Other business rules may include terms under local best-practice guidelines.

Step 4 – Making The Case For Change

There is compelling research that shows the various business benefits of introducing work-life balance initiatives. The majority of employers report that introduction of work-life balance measures had a positive impact on:

- Employee relations: 71 percent
- Employee commitment and motivation: 69 percent
- Staff turnover: 54 percent
- Improved productivity, absenteeism and recruitment: 50 percent

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Case study examples have shown to yield the following results, as an example, within 12 months of implementing a WFM solution:

	Pre-WFM	**Post-WFM**
Calls Answered	90.5 percent	99.3 percent
Grade of Service	74 percent	93.4 percent
Abandoned Calls	11 percent (27,000 per month)	0.7 percent (1,735 per month)
Attendance	89 percent	96 percent
Staff Turnover	16 percent	1.6 percent
Overtime Spending	$190k	$34.2k

Step 5 – Delivering Work-Life Balance

The key to delivering a new way of working is a good change management strategy. The critical tasks that must be accomplished are as follows:

- Establish the time and appropriate resources required to effect the change in working practices. This may include personnel managers to establish new policies, planning training sessions and providing literature for staff.
- Spend time ensuring that key players such as departmental managers, supervisors, team-leaders and staff association representatives understand the business benefits to the organization and employees. The benefits should be a sound mix of organizational efficiencies and qualitative benefits.
- Involve employees from an early stage, highlighting the flexible working options available to them.
- Start small: better results are obtained if the project is taken in small steps. Pilot new ways of working in a small area, either a department or team of people, and get feedback from staff and modify plans, if required, before rolling the program out to the entire organization.
- Make effective use of supporting technologies, of which workforce management tools are one, freeing up employee and supervisor time to do more of their job roles.

Don't be alarmed if you recognize some or all of the conflicting demands outlined in this article; you are not alone. But technology exists today to help. An advanced workforce management solution, together with your organization's commitment to work-life balance for employees, can harmonize your operational requirements with employee preference as well as the human factor considerations that influence safety and employee performance — creating a perfect balance where there was once a perfect storm. **CIS**

Tracey Hawkins is Business Development Manager for GMT (http://www.gmt.com). GMT's (news - alert) workforce and cash optimization solutions were designed to create competitive advantage by enabling companies to improve customer service and sales, while decreasing their variable expenses.

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[1] The Second Work-Life Balance Survey: Results from the Employers Survey (Employment Relations Research Series No.22), National Centre for Social Research (November 2003). See http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/emar/wlbsemployers_results.pdf

[2] Ibid.

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Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Achieving Successful Sales In The Call Center

As call centers have experienced increased pressures from managers to reduce costs and regulations have forced them to constrict calling activities, the demand for revamping processes has grown. As a result, many centers have focused on sales to deliver better customer experiences and help drive organizational revenues to offset the cost of the center.

Best Practices' Global Benchmarking Council (GBC) conducts focus group meetings once a year on customer service and call centers. A recent roundtable discussion focused on making sales happen in the call center. Key areas of discussion for this group included the most critical areas of service to sales, the view from the customer service representative's (CSR) perspective, how to manage change, accountability for CSRs and how to recognize issues.

Areas that were identified as being most critical in service to sales environments included technology, errors, upselling, introducing change and presenting inadequate information to the customer.

Roundtable participants agreed that technology plays a key role in the call center. Specifically, the needs of the customer must be correctly matched to the proper technology to drive optimal call center success. Providing only IVR as a self-service channel will frustrate customers that prefer to do all their business online.

Another critical area is that of proper call routing. When a customer is placed on the line with an individual who is not capable of providing the correct information or assistance, both the customer and the agent can become frustrated, degrading the experience for the customer, even if the issue is eventually resolved.

CSRs also expressed that certain elements of their jobs were critical areas, including upselling a service warranty in order to drive profits, lack of adequate information available to the customer on a product that impacts the customer's willingness to buy the product and changing the size of the center.

The CSRs involved in the focus group articulated their feelings that convincing agents that enhancing the size of the center is the best thing to do for the company is another critical area of consideration in a service to sales environment. If change is not managed properly, employees will resist that change, denying the organization the benefits that it was originally hoping to enjoy.

Generating sales for any organization can be a challenge. When it is to happen in a call center that has traditionally focused on service, the challenges can seem insurmountable. This does not have to be reality, however. Call centers can generate significant sales and profits, but it does not come easily or immediately.

By Susan J. Campbell
TMCnet Contributing Editor

Equipping Agents For Sales Roles Can Ensure Transition Success

As more traditional call centers have moved from service-oriented to sales-oriented operations, management focus has shifted from primarily customer service to also driving sales. To gain a better understanding of the challenges that call centers face in such an environment, Best Practices, LLC conducted a Global Benchmarking Council (GBC) Meeting that included a roundtable discussion on making sales happen in the call center.

While we previously reviewed critical areas of service to sales that were identified by this panel, it is also important to understand the process from the customer service representative's (CSR) perspective as well as how to properly manage change in the call center.

Many representatives in the call center that has moved from a service-to-sales environment are not sales professionals and are therefore learning how to conduct the duties of their new positions in completely different ways.

To ease this transformation, experienced CSRs suggest that the individual ask permission of the customer before beginning the conversation to put

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

everyone at ease; the agent should take the time to ask the important questions to determine the customer's needs; learn what the customer has to gain from purchasing the product or service; and find out why the customer said "no."

These experienced CSRs also have advice for the call center manager who is managing this change. First, the manager must be able to convince the agent of the product or service so that they can win the customer. Second, it is important to recognize that incentive plans never satisfy 100 percent of the population and alternative methods of motivation should be considered. Finally, supervisors have to reinforce the new objective of the company and let the agent know that "they are either on the bus, or they are not."

In order to promote complete success in the service-to-sales call center, representatives must understand that they are representing the company. When an issue or problem arises with a customer, that customer wants someone to apologize and then relay how the problem will be fixed. Every CSR has a certain level of empowerment, and when he or she speaks the customer's language, it will reach further in the effort to retain that customer.

When CSRs are provided the necessary tools to perform their jobs effectively, they will be more equipped to plant the seeds or features of a product or service that the customer will likely have an interest in purchasing, thus driving sales revenues for the organization.

Making the transition from a service-to-sales call center can be challenging, but it can also be rewarding when it is handled properly. When call center managers pay close attention to what their CSRs need in order to be successful in their new positions, they also promote success for the call center overall. **CIS**

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The 2006 *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* Product Of The Year Awards, Part Two

Each year, *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* magazine bestows its Product of the Year awards on companies that have demonstrated excellence in technological advancement and application refinements. Listed here are products and services that we've judged to have gone the extra mile to help improve both the customer experience and the ROI for the companies that use them. It is these companies' contributions that lead the way in making the contact center technology industry the dynamic field that it is today.

Here, we present Part Two of the winner's list. Part One appeared in the January 2007 issue of *Customer Inter@ction Solutions* magazine. Please visit http://www.tmcnet.com/425.1 for more information about the winning solutions and the companies that provide them.

Congratulations to the winners.

— Tracey E. Schelmetic, Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

Altitude Software
Altitude Fast Script Builder
http://www.altitude.com

Amcat
Amcat Data and Reporting Tool (DART)
http://www.amcat.com

AMTEL
Telecom Information Management System (TIMS)
http://www.amtelnet.com

Antenna Software
Antenna A3 SmartCopy
http://www.antennasoftware.com

Aperio CI
Visual Bill Manager (VBM)
http://www.aperioci.com

Aspect Software
Aspect Customer Self Service 7.2
http://www.aspect.com

Astute Solutions
ePowerCenter Direct
http://www.astutesolutions.com

Avaya
Avaya Interaction Center 7.1
http://www.avaya.com

CallMiner
Virtual Server Room
http://www.callminer.com

Cisco Systems, Inc.
Cisco Unified Customer Voice Portal v4.0
http://www.cisco.com

Citrix Online
Citrix GoToAssist Integration Services
http://www.citrix.com

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

GN Netcom, Inc.
GN Netcom 9350
http://www.gnnetcom.com

Informiam
Informiam Call Analyzer
http://www.informiam.com

Interactive Intelligence
Customer Interaction Center (CIC)
http://www.inin.com

Inter-Tel, Inc.
Inter-Tel Contact Center Suite 4.0
http://www.inter-tel.com

Jacada
Jacada WorkSpace
http://www.jacada.com

Kana
KANA IQ 9.1
http://www.kana.com

KNOVA Software
KNOVA 7
http://www.knova.com

LivePerson, Inc.
Timpani Voice
http://www.liveperson.com

LiveVox, Inc.
LiveVox Voice Portal
http://www.livevox.com

Neocase Software
Neocase 10
http://www.neocasesoftware.com

Netelligent Corporation
Interact
http://www.netelligent.com

NextNine
NextNine Service Automation Ecosystem Edition
http://www.nextnine.com

Numara Software
Numara FootPrints Hosting Service
http://www.numarasoftware.com

Onyx Software
Onyx CRM 6.0
http://www.onyx.com

OPC Marketing Inc.
SpitFire HYBRID
http://www.opc-marketing.com

Performix
Performix
http://www.performixtechnologies.com

Richardson
Richardson SkillGauge: Telephone Selling
http://www.richardson.com

Sage Software
SageCRM v5.8
http://www.sage.com

Sage Software
Sage SalesLogix v7
http://www.sage.com

Sento
CXP (Customer Experience Platform)
http://www.sento.com

ShoreTel Inc.
ShoreTel Contact Center
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Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

Leveraging Analytic Solutions To Improve Insight, Performance And Customer Experiences

Customers today are empowered. They demand more from the companies with which they engage. Companies are faced with the increasing complexity of customer interactions, managing the growing repositories of data stored across their organization, and the need to provide consistent, legendary customer experiences again and again. By leveraging analytic solutions, companies can improve insight, performance and customer experiences from the contact center to the enterprise.

Historically, decision makers have relied upon data stored in silos, which offers limited employee access to important customer intelligence. Basic and unconnected analytic systems have essentially existed in isolation. Analytic solutions move beyond silo-based systems to provide a cohesive view of customer experience across the organization from contact center agents to executive decision makers. These solutions make it easier for decision makers to access, analyze and share customer information and intelligence from data collected across the contact center to improve customer care, operational efficiency and profitability.

Analytic solutions help decision makers "tune in" to the voice of their customers to better understand and predict their purchase needs or service demands, both today and in the future. Visionary companies are leveraging these solutions to proactively improve their business and performance management strategies to deliver legendary customer experiences that satisfy customers and fuel business growth.

Analytics Defined

Traditionally, contact centers have measured performance using key performance indicators from quality scores to workforce management performance-based statistics. While these provide a snapshot of what's happening at a given moment, they don't offer the predictive power of analytic solutions. Analytic solutions enrich traditional metric-driven data by predicting why or why not a customer purchased and what that customer is likely to purchase in the future. Analytic solutions offer a way for decision makers to access, analyze and share intelligence across the enterprise to improve performance rapidly. Analytic solutions deliver insight based on analysis of large volumes of data, potentially uncovering customer expectations that may not have been visible using less formal approaches or simpler methods.

By David Pennington
Envision

Analytics Integrates The Voice Of The Customer Into The Enterprise

Today, companies are moving away from silo-based decision making where each department or group makes decisions based on its own metrics to a holistic view of customers' experiences as they interact with the organization. Analytic solutions can help companies improve the consistency of information shared across the organization, improving the quality of decision making. Easy and fast access to the voice of the customer makes it easy to understand business problems from the customers' perspective, facilitating change that has a direct impact on customer experiences. With customer feedback provided on a continual basis, companies can optimize their performance by understanding how their marketing and sales campaigns are performing against their objectives, drive product innovation by integrating customer feedback into development and planning processes and find new ways to reengineer business processes to reduce costs and continually satisfy customers.

Analytics Improves Customer Satisfaction With Better Intelligence

Visionary companies are adopting analytic technology to gain a unified view of what customers expect. The same companies can use analytics to measure how they are delivering on those expectations and measure and

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

integrate customer feedback into processes to delight customers again and again. These companies are tuning in to “the voice of their customers” by listening to those customers describe their experiences with the company and taking action to improve the company’s performance. Analytics solutions are providing the information required for effective decision making, improving business performance from increasing customer satisfaction and revenue growth to resolving customer issues faster. Responsive companies can leverage analytics solutions across their enterprises to take advantage of market and customer intelligence faster than their competition. Analytics solutions can provide the insight required to make changes that improve agent effectiveness and contact center and enterprise performance.

Analytics Improve Agent-Customer Interactions

Analytics solutions can be leveraged to measure agent performance — both soft and hard skills. Web-based solutions categorize information according to a company’s unique business needs. How effective are agent interactions with customers? Do agents have the right information to cross-sell and upsell customers to increase revenue? Are agents resolving customer issues on the first call? Categorization of these interactions, coupled with analysis, empowers decision makers with the information necessary to understand and provide better evaluations, identify agent skill gaps and create targeted desktop training to improve performance. Web-based views of these interactions and accompanying data make it easy to recognize repetitive customer service issues that may be occurring within the center. Decision makers can quickly drill down into specific customer calls to listen to customers describe their experiences in their own words. With greater insight, decision makers can take action to re-engineer business processes or develop, coach or train agents to become more effective, thereby increasing revenue and customer satisfaction.

Analytics Drive Operational Efficiency And Effectiveness

Analytics solutions can combine data from multiple data sources to provide better customer visibility and understanding of contact center performance. Analytics allow decision makers to perform root cause analysis to understand why customer preferences are changing or why customers are canceling service, or to identify specific reasons customers are continuing to buy products and services repeatedly. With analytic solutions, managers can gain greater understanding of why customers are calling and predict why they are likely to call in the future. Better insight supports more accurate and reliable forecasts and schedules, improving customer experiences and satisfaction. Analytics provide the foundation for better planning by allowing decision makers to predict and prioritize what’s most important to customers within the context of corporate objectives, budgets and resources.

Analytics Drive Enterprise Growth And Increase Revenue

Analytic solutions connect the contact center with the enterprise by providing valuable information about a company’s most valuable asset — its customers. Analytics support rapid, accelerated growth by providing the information required to understand changing market and customer needs. Raw data can be easily converted into insight that drives organizational effectiveness and efficiency, delivering greater profits. Better understanding drives customer satisfaction that can increase short- and long-term revenue and cash flow and support long-term profitable customer relationships.

Analytics Enhance Performance Management

Competitive companies are leveraging the power of analytics solutions to better understand their customer experiences within their performance management programs. These solutions allow decision makers to continually optimize their performance management programs by understanding and communicating patterns, trends and relationships in customer interactions. Successful companies understand the value of tightly integrated analytics- and performance-based solutions that help call center and business executives continue to evolve and optimize performance objectives based on corporate goals and customers’ experiences and expectations.

It’s a customer revolution, and companies are responding by investing in analytic solutions to tune in to the voice of the customers with the ultimate objective of improving customer experiences, operational efficiency and overall profitability. **CIS**

David Pennington oversees product direction and design for Envision (news - alert) (http://www.envisioninc.com). He manages the development and delivery of innovative, first-to-market software solutions. During a distinguished career in software management, Pennington established a reputation for excellence developing and marketing solutions that provide the highest levels of business value for customers. Pennington is an advocate for advancing the value of coaching agents and its impact on improving the quality of customer interactions throughout the contact center industry.

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

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Advertiser/ Web Address	Page Number
Amcat *http://www.amcat.com*	5
Cacti *http://www.cacticom.com*	29
Call Center 2.0 *http://www.callcenter20.com*	34
Intervoice Webinar *http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar*	25
Dirigo Telecommunications *http://www.dirigosoft.com*	7
InfoCision Management Corp. *http://www.infocision.com*	cover 2
Oracle *http://www.oracle.com*	cover 4

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Plantronics Inc. *http://www.plantronics.com*	cover 3
Samsung *http://www.samsung.com*	3
Stratasoft *http://www.stratasoft.com*	27
Strategic Communication Systems *http://www.strategicinc.com*	18
Teleformix *http://www.teleformix.com*	11
Verint Systems *http://www.verint.com*	23
Witness Systems *http://www.witness.com*	9

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

By Tracey E. Schelmetic
Editorial Director, Customer Inter@ction Solutions

Clicks-And-Mortars:

Doubly Dismal Customer Service

Though the estimates vary, most sources have called this online holiday shopping season somewhere in the range of $25 billion, and most agree that the growth rate over last year was about 25 percent. Market research firm (news - alert) comScore Networks (http://www.comscore.com) discovered that Wednesday, December 13th was likely the biggest online shopping day of the year, with sales reaching $670 million. This was an improvement over last year's top day by over $100 million.

According the annual "Top 40 Online Retail Satisfaction Index" from market research company ForeSee Results (news - alert) (http://www.foreseeresults. com), click-and-mortar retailers (companies with both stores and a strong online presence) demonstrated the most improvement online this holiday season, though these click-and-mortar companies still lagged behind 100 percent Internet retailers like Amazon.

It's safe to say that online shopping is in, and not just for the holidays. More and more people are becoming comfortable with it, having gotten over issues of security (probably falsely, as security issues appear to be on the rise), shipping, returns and not being able to see and touch merchandise in advance.

After spending a few hours in retail stores, it's not hard to see why shoppers are increasingly willing to get over almost any obstacle, up to and including the box arriving in the mail with an assortment of angry, poisonous and live invertebrates contained within.

Why am I in such a snit? I went to several stores during my lunch hour today. After a mild winter thus far, it's finally gotten cold in New England. I decided I could use a few new sweaters or fleece tops. Because I hate malls, I usually choose standalone department stores — the kind known for reasonable prices and decent quality.

There were few sweaters to be had, though, since it's January and, according to some incomprehensible rule of retail, that means it's time for spring clothes.

Who really does their spring shopping in the winter? Are there still people out there who buy their clothes one season in advance? Holly Golightly from "Breakfast at Tiffany's"? Maybe. But the rest of us who don't find Versace and Armani boutiques to be reasonable sources for a simple knit sweater? Give me a break. What I think is that it's a ploy to get us to resort to shopping the store's clearance racks, which are always loaded with the proper types of clothing for the season. Stores put out their regularly priced merchandise one season ahead, knowing few people will pay full price for it, and as a result, manage to get shoppers to strip their clearance racks, which though discounted, are still priced high enough to make the store a profit. You feel like you're getting an enormous bargain, even though you're paying $19.99 for a sweater that cost the store $4. Everybody wins (except the poor working sod in Bangladesh who made the sweater for $.02 in pay).

After having found a few items on sale, I brought them to the cash register. My cashier, whose expression was so bland for a moment I wasn't sure she was actually conscious, swiped the items over the scanner. One rang up at full price. "That's on sale," I said. Though her eyes technically pointed in my direction, she did not actually focus on me. "How much is it?" she asked, in a monotone voice.

"I don't know," I said testily. My robo-cashier picked up the phone and sent a page into the atmosphere. "Price check for women's clothing." I'm not sure who we were waiting to respond. God? In any case, nothing happened. "Shall I go back and check?" I asked. She nodded, then bent over at the waist and put her forehead down on the counter next to her cash register. I wondered if she had powered down to save energy.

When I returned with the sale price sign in hand, she had not moved. I wasn't sure what to do. Press control-alt-delete to reboot her? She finally straightened and entered the sale price I pointed out on the sign into the cash register. I paid, wondering if I'd never left to check but just written "$1.99" on a piece of paper from my purse and showed it to her, she would have nodded unenthusiastically and entered that price into the cash register.

It makes me wonder if higher-end department stores that pride themselves on customer service (Nordstrom, for example) have seen physical retail sales take a dive in favor of Web-based purchases. Maybe it's a chicken-and-egg situation. The more people shop online, the less stores can justify offering employment to real, thinking humans in their brick-and-mortar stores. And as a result, the more robo-service we get, the more likely we are to risk the security of our credit cards, shipping costs and potential returns to save ourselves from the barely sentient customer service in stores.

But what happens when both the online experience and the brick-and-mortar customer experience are dismal? Talk about chicken-and-egg scenarios...it'll be almost impossible to tell which went rotten first.

E-commerce company (news - alert) Allurent (http://www.allurent.com) recently released its second annual "Holiday Shopping: Online Customer Experience Survey," which the company designed and implemented to better understand consumer online shopping behavior. The most interesting points?

- Year-over-year, there's been nearly a 50 percent increase in consumers who report that a frustrating online experience would make them less likely to shop at that retailer's physical store;
- Eighty-two percent of consumers surveyed revealed that a frustrating shopping experience makes them less likely to return to a retailers' Web site; and
- Fifty-nine percent reported that when they have a frustrating shopping experience online, it negatively impacts their overall opinion of the retailer/brand. In 2005, this number was 55 percent.

Click-and-mortar retailers of the world, it's time to pick one channel (at least) to excel in. If you staff your physical stores with disinterested DMV rejects, you may be affecting sales on your Web site. If your Web site is a nightmarish black hole of frustrated customer service expectations, you may be keeping people out of your stores.

Anyone know if there's anything good on the clearance racks at Nordstrom? **CIS**

The author may be contacted at tschelmetic@tmcnet.com.

Go To Table of Contents | Go To Ad Index

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