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April 2010 • Vol. 28/No. 11
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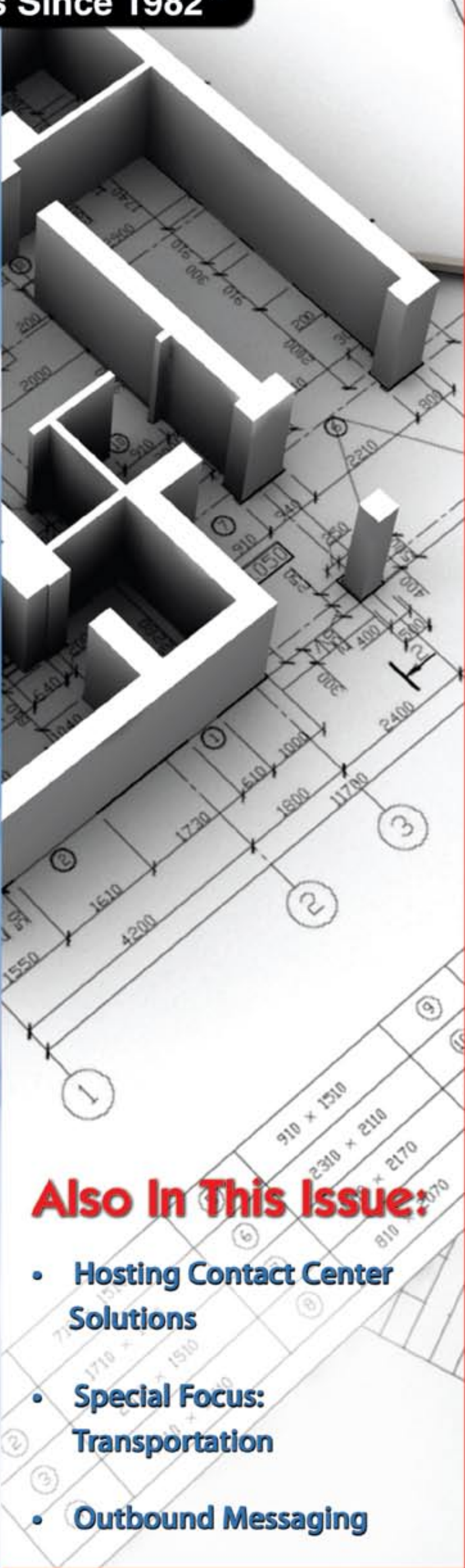

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Rich Tehrani, *CEO, TMC*

First Ever TMC Social Networking Survey

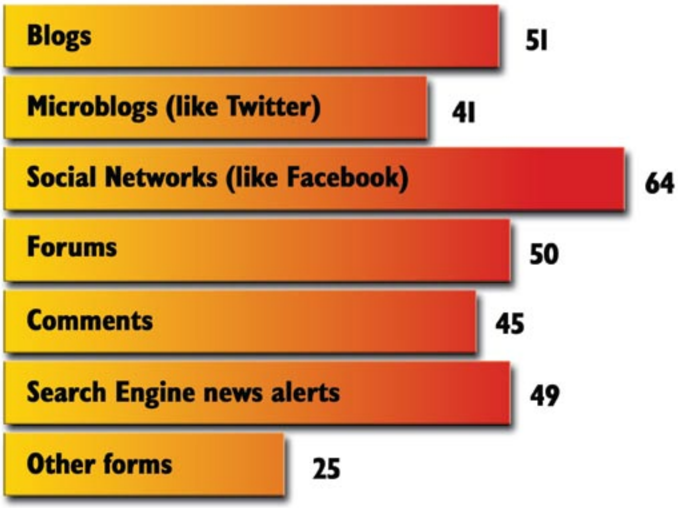
Recently TMC and Avaya performed the first social networking survey of companies with contact centers and the results were illuminating to say the least. Sixty-nine percent of respondents say they monitor some form of social media and alerts but surprisingly only 43 percent monitor search engine news alerts. Thirty-one percent monitor Twitter, which is about 10 points higher than I expected. Companies who are doing a poor job of listening realize they are falling behind and 55 percent say they will begin to monitor in the next 12 months. A delight to consultants is the fact that 17 percent don't know what to do but they realize they must do something.

Most companies I have had contact with do not have integration between services like Twitter and Facebook and their contact center agents. This correlates with the 10 percent of survey respondents who say they have integration between the two. It should be noted that an additional 34 percent of companies have some of their social networking information connected to the contact center through manual methods such as cut and paste or partially automated integration. At the opposite end, 43 percent say social networking information does not connect with the contact center at all.

"If you acknowledge the need to integrate social media into your call center operations but struggle to make it happen, you're not alone," noted Paul Denay, Global Managing Director of Services and Social Marketing for Avaya. "96% of the organizations polled reported that they have not yet fully integrated social media into their call center"

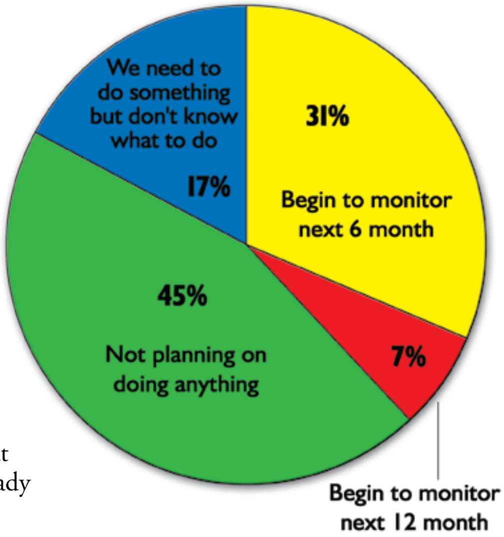
Interestingly, a majority of respondents, 59 percent, said 10 percent or less of their staff are trained in social media. The next highest response was 40-50 percent trained, at 9.4 percent, followed by 30-40 percent trained at 8.2 percent.

Which social media is currently getting handled in your contact center?



"Call centers should resist the urge to establish separate, dedicated teams to handle social media," added Dunay. "Creating a separate team is inefficient, duplicative, and most importantly cost-intensive. They need to find ways to integrate social data into the daily flow of activity that the call center already handles."

What are your social media monitoring plans for future? (if not currently monitoring now)



About a third of respondents all said their contact centers handle blogs, microblogs (Twitter), forums, comments and news alerts. A surprise was Facebook where those answering said 44 percent of their interactions are connected to the contact center.

There is an absolutely tremendous amount of information flowing on the internet regarding all companies and those organizations which figure out how to tap into the incredible grassroots enthusiasm the world has for social media will be at a distinct advantage. Companies who not only monitor the web for discussions which pertain to them but who drive their own discussions could very well gain share in the markets they serve. One company to watch is Skittles as they were early to the social media game and at first found some users posting negative comments about the rainbow colored candy. The company retrenched and launched a Web site which encourages users to upload videos of themselves popping the candies into their mouths. Check it out at shareskittles.com.

The world is changing; social media is becoming mainstream media. Ignore it at your own peril. **CIS**

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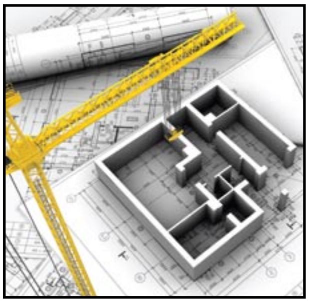

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Erik Linask, *Group Editorial Director, TMC*

Customer Care Should be Automatic

We talk a lot about automation these days, particularly in an inbound capacity, as a means of creating more positive customer relationships, and for good reason. By automating processes, the guesswork, delay, and human error to which manual processes are subject, can be immediately removed from the equation, leading to more productive and satisfying relationships. But, automation, can play a key role is a successful outbound campaign as well, particularly as a means of disseminating information quickly.

Last week, parts of the East Coast – in particular, Fairfield (CT) and Westchester (NY) counties – were hit by a major wind and rain storm resulting in significant flooding, power outages, and downed trees. It also resulted in schools in the area being closed the entire week, as crews worked to remove branches, power lines, and other debris from sidewalks and roads that provided access through town and to schools.

Managing communications to a mass audience is always a challenge but, such situations are often those which define the future of enterprises, because they have an impact on such a large constituency at once. Of course, there are questions: What's the most effective medium? Should you utilize one or multiple forms of communication? What happens when you can't reach someone? Is there a difference between an answering machine and a live response? How important is it that you reach a live person?

Though it's not quite an enterprise call center, school systems, in so many ways, operate in parallel to the business world, with the student bodies and parents as their customer bases – and they certainly operate under tight (and shrinking) budgets. Also, I would suggest that their need to communicate quickly and effectively with their "customers" is at least as critical in order to ensure the safety and well-being of those customers.

For months now, I've heard frequent automated messages from the school system letting informing parents and students of PTO meetings and other functions that might be of interest, and I've wondered how effective the same system would be in an emergency situation. I now had my chance to find out first hand if automation could truly benefit customers.

What I found was that the system cycled through all the numbers on each student's list (i.e., home, multiple cell phones, other alternate numbers) until it reached someone. For five nights, the purpose was to let families know that schools would be closed the following day. While this may have resulted in messages being left on multiple voice mail systems for the same household, it ensured maximum notification success, ensuring

Imagine having to use live agents to place these calls. Not only does it become time consuming and costly, the administrative aspect of tracking which calls were completed, which weren't, which went into voice mail systems, which didn't, and so forth, would be challenging, at best.

Naturally, similar systems can be used by any business looking to deliver important messaging to their customers… insurance firms, medical facilities, retail stores, banks, law firms, service providers, government agencies… nearly any entity, and phone numbers are the one piece of information they all have available. And of course, more complex IVR schemes can be developed to deliver more detailed information to customers as needed.

The point, of course, is that automation technology can be used in both inbound (see my column in the March issue) and outbound campaigns to reduce costs while increasing success rates. And, in this case, the school system was able to communicate critical information by leveraging its communications technology – the same technology that can be used by any business to reach its customer base, regardless of how small or large.

It's worth pointing out, however, that though automation can be make it easier to develop and maintain customer relationships, it is by no means a requirement. Ultimately, regardless of how much or how little technology has been deployed, every business must follow a simple guideline: put your customers first and take the steps to make each one feel important.

But, since you've got a communications solution in place, why not make the most of it – and your customer relationships as well. Most times, your customers won't notice the extra steps you take to keep them happy, but when those special situations arise, if you are already practicing the art of communications, they will notice and they will spread the word, helping your business grow. **CIS**

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Customer Care On The Go

Few industries pose as many challenges to enabling high quality customer-retaining interactions as transportation. Few others are subject to daily, weekly and seasonal peaks and slumps, with passengers and organizations traveling and shipping en masse or not at all. Or to as many variables that impact successful delivery: corporate decisions, labor disputes, equipment malfunctions, fuel/energy prices and availability, weather, disasters: man-made and natural and the customers themselves. Yet few businesses have customers that are as demanding.

In the middle of customers and transportation firms are the contact centers. Their agents must, with smiles in their voices and fingertips, meet customers' needs including placating them to keep their loyalty.

Robin Rees, director of customer programs at Varolii and a Boeing and travel industry veteran, points out that change in transportation often come very fast, and unexpectedly. When bad weather hits and flights are delayed or cancelled, it not only impacts travelers in storm areas, but also those who are scheduled on later flights on the same airplane or with the same crew. If the crew doesn't get to its next assignment, the airline has to scramble to find another that's willing, able and certified to fly.

For freight shippers, the problems can be just as bad, says Rees. While packages do not complain about delays, the consumers waiting for them do, especially for time-sensitive delivery dates such as holidays. The problem is compounded when each day's shipments get backed up. The volume increases, but the available vehicles usually do not. A package shipped a few days after a major weather delay may still be late because the shipper is still trying to catch up, a situation which the recipient doesn't always understand.

Also consumers can be hard to reach, which exacerbates problems. An airline traveler notified of a gate change too late isn't going to be happy when they finally get to the new gate just as the airplane has shut its doors. If someone is anxiously awaiting a shipment, they don't want to miss the message telling them when to be at home to sign for it.

Transportation providers have Web sites and information numbers, and airports, stations and terminals have PA systems and message boards. Yet these rely on customers to be in contact, to contact them, be in earshot – often difficult in busy and noisy terminals not built for acoustics – and in sight to deliver key information. The public-facing systems cannot easily have their material personalized – and which may be of confidential nature – to individual customers.

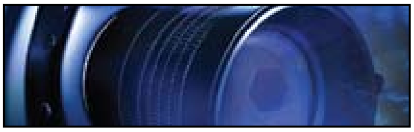
"Companies must contend customer service issues on top of the logistical ones," says Rees. "Consumers are flooding contact centers, demanding to know their own personal status and are often not in the mood to be placated. Minutes count. If companies can communicate quickly to large numbers of their customers, they tend to avoid – or at least lessen – the consumer backlash."

Employing Outbound Notifications

Varolii has devised and refined automated outbound voice and e-mail/SMS customer service and flight team notification solutions. These tools avoid having live agents make outbound calls and contacts and rely on inbound methods that also add to costs deliver vital messages.

For example, Varolii Customer Service & Loyalty communicates across multiple channels to ensure that travelers are contacted immediately when something changes, even if they're already in transit and don't answer their home phones. Varolii automatically calls or text messages the status change, outlines new travel arrangements and then offers to connect the traveler to an agent if the new booking isn't acceptable. If it is, Varolii can then offer to send the new confirmation code via test so the passenger doesn't have to try to write it down while in transit.

Since 2007, Southwest Airlines has been using Varolii's outbound notification system for flight cancellation, and more recently for delay and gate changes, in SMS as well as voice, with personalized messages. The cancellation alerts briefly



explains the accommodations being offered, and provides options to transfer to a service agent, or forward the message to another phone number.

The airline had been broadcasting flight cancellation alerts over airport PA systems, at the reservations desks and on their Web site. The company also had no way of reaching all of their customers in a timely manner using manual outbound dialing. These events usually created a spike in customer service requests as contact center agents scrambled to handle the flood of inbound calls, while airport desk agents struggled to re-schedule passengers on top of managing passenger check-ins for those unaffected by cancellations.

"The more options we have to proactively reach our customers, over their preferred channel of communications, the better we can serve them and rise above their service level expectations," says Fred Taylor, Southwest's senior manager of proactive customer communications.

Managing Costs and Loyalty

Transportation firms in every mode are operating on thin margins in competitive and highly demand-variable markets, forcing them to watch every penny being spent while paying a close eye to customer loyalty.

Grant Shirk, director of industry solutions at Tellme Business Solutions at Microsoft, which provides hosted speech rec solutions, says these challenges can make it difficult for operators to effectively manage their contact centers including self-service systems. They create operational challenges including an often overpowering focus on cost management and automation, unpredictable and spiky traffic, all while trying to maintain a high-level of customer satisfaction for different kinds of customers: casual, business, and high-value frequent fliers.

"While the barriers to entry in the travel industry are high, switching costs from one provider to another in any market are very low for consumers, so there is a premium on attracting and keeping the most valuable travelers," Shirk points out.

Tellme's solution is highly scalable, enabling even the largest transportation operators to handle the biggest call spikes; it handles 10 billion speech requests every year. The hosted model is coupled with pay-as-you-go pricing that enables firms to carefully manage their costs.

The firm has rolled into the platform several technologies that deliver highly personalized experiences. These products include a powerful personalization database that allows applications to store and manage key customization criteria to drive compelling user experiences. They also include segmentation-based call analytics to surface valuable performance insights about how individual segments interact with (and ultimately succeed in their tasks) within them.

Tellme's solutions have enabled one unnamed airline's customers to get to their status information 30 seconds faster, resulting in 60 percent swifter overall task completions. The carrier realized a 26 percent reduction in abandoned calls, and doubled its rate of fully automated tasks.

The Tellme application has boosted customer satisfaction. This is achieved when customers call in they do not have to ask as the systems recognize the callers, their preferences and travel plans and delivers the information that is most relevant to them at the beginning of their calls.

"That airline's unique ability to recognize returning customers and tailors the calling experience to their needs, which leaves callers delighted, differentiates their service from the competition and lowers demand on live agents," says Shirk.

Maintaining QA

Ensuring quality on calls is vital for transportation firms especially when there are many choices available. Southwest Airlines, perhaps not surprisingly, is on the leading edge. The Customer Relations and Rapid Rewards center is where the proverbial "buck stops" at the airline; it manages calls for its frequent flyer program and handles contacts escalated from its customer care/reservations and baggage contact centers.

Jona Berta, customer relations/rapid rewards telephone manager, explains that the center's mission is to serve as an advocate, resource and support for its internal (i.e. staff) and external customers; to provide a channel of communication; and to build and preserve customer loyalty.

To carry out the mission more effectively the Southwest center needed a makeover. That included putting scores to quality and to feel confident about the numbers being accurate and simplifying skills to be evaluated and shortening forms and evaluations. Several of the skills were in the wrong category.

"Supervisors rebelled against the QA form; [they] resorted to listening and coaching to calls manually," says Berta. "It was too difficult to calibrate so we didn't. It was also not in alignment with our yearly performance review form."

Southwest contacted Envision Telephony, which, using industry best practices, combined the number of skills and skill categories, measuring what Berta says only mattered from five categories and 26 skills to three categories and seven skills. The seven combined skills evaluated are: listening skills/communication, empathy/personalization, voice tone and pace, overall knowledge, call control/flexibility, use of systems appropriate to calls, and system documentation.

"Since the program started in August 2007 we've received a ton of positive feedback from our representatives [agents] and supervisors," reports Berta. "It has enabled us to increase first call resolution to 93 percent improved quality program results and a more consistent customer experience. Reps get feedback from all supervisors. Evaluations are being conducted more efficiently and effectively. There is more time for coaching. [And] we are clearly aligned with our yearly performance appraisal." **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

Envision Telephony
www.envisioninc.com

Tellme
www.tellme.com

Varolii
www.varolii.com

SPECIAL FOCUS

Dear Reader,

Is there any of us who hasn't been on or used the likes of Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, TripAdvisor and Twitter? Haven't we all used these social media sites such as to gather what others have said about products and services, to comment on them, to make business contacts and to find out more about potential new hires?

There's a reason why social media is so popular and that is because we are social creatures. We rely on each other for new information, taking what we've gathered from others and integrate that knowledge both facts and assessments into our own experiences, learning and insights, from which we make decisions. And in turn each of us passes this information on to others.

Social media has evolved into the social channel. And TMC is offering insights on the social channel along with those on live agent and automated channels at an exciting new event at ITEXPO West, the Social Customer Summit Oct. 4-6, 2010 at the Los Angeles Convention Center in Los Angeles, Calif. Our goal is to help you learn how to effectively use the social channel, in conjunction with the others to make your organization even more successful…by enabling you to have a more complete view and understanding of your customers to boost retention, sales and results.

Here is a just sample of the topics that will be covered at the Social Customer Summit:

- Why The Social Channel
- Social Channel Applications
- Social Challenges
- Integrating Social With Other Channels
- Enabling At-Home Agents
- Automating Customer Interactions

ITEXPO West 2010 provides the ideal opportunity for social connections via face-to-face networking. You will meet hundreds of other attendees, many of whom are facing the same challenges as yourself, from whom you can learn from and they in turn from you. You will also have personal access to the most innovative exhibitors and their expert teams at any trade show anywhere. They can help you find the best products and services to meet your needs.

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In his "First Coffee" blog, TMCnet's David Sims writes:

3G network operator **Verizon** Wireless has been ranked highest in customer care among wireless phone service providers in J.D. Power and Associates' 2010 Wireless Customer Care Performance Study, Vol. 1.

Based on responses from more than 9,600 wireless subscribers who contacted their wireless service providers by phone, in stores or online last year and were surveyed by J. D. Power and Associates between July and December of 2009, Verizon Wireless "continued to perform as an industry leader with an overall satisfaction score of 753, 14 points above the overall industry average."

Verizon Wireless has recently introduced an after-call survey to provide "fast, direct feedback from more customers," company officials said, "to help the company further improve the customer experience."

The company also continues to roll out its design in new and existing company-owned and -operated Communications Stores, offering shoppers the chance to experience their

Visit David's blog at http://blog.tmcnet.com/telecom-crm

SEO and Google Dollars

In his "On Rad's Radar," Peter Radizeski of RAD-INFO, Inc. writes:

I was at Social Fresh, a conference for marketers to exchange stories about social media. Here are some of my take aways:

The whole numbers game about social media is kind of flawed. You need Listeners, Customer Evangelists, Raving Fans, or at the least a cult-like following. Not 100,000 people that don't pay attention. (You have TV commercials for that!) Listeners can be engaged. Engagement leads to sales and referrals. Referrals are part of that whole word-of-mouth marketing thing. Viral is all about WOM. But there's no formula for viral any more than there is for a best seller.

So again we are back to marketing on social platforms like they are a replacement for the newspaper or billboard. Marketing is becoming more and more like a networking event. If you failed at those, you will fail online.

I haven't seen much correlation between sales and social media, except for **Dell** Outlet and travel sites (specifically JetBlue and Marriott). All the telecom case studies of Twitter have to do with customer care. And that is important because as the pie flattens out, and you are fighting in a Red Ocean for customers, customer retention (and the correlating churn number) starts to affect stock price.

So how does social media fit in? One way is SEO. Good old-fashioned search engine optimization. If you put enough good, relevant content out there, people can find you. Social media like Twitter, SlideShare, blogs, LinkedIn are all available in a Google search.

Join. Listen. Engage. Give value. No different than offline.

Visit Peter's blog at http://blog.tmcnet.com/on-rads-radar

THE MICROSOFTIZATION OF GOOGLE

In his "Communications and Technology" Blog, Rich Tehrani writes:

Google has announced a new social networking initiative called Buzz which is supposed to unseat Facebook and Twitter. But you have to wonder, is Google going to ever lose its edge? When you look at Microsoft you see them messing up almost equally across its entire product line and moreover the brain drain from the company is now legendary.

Although it may take time for this to happen to Google it seems apparent that social networking is a place where the company [has been] repeatedly unsuccessful. For the record, I am a huge Google Reader fan and I have shared an immense amount of content on the site... It just seems this is not the place anyone wants to go to be social.

Juan Carlos Perez over at IDG skewered Google for not having Facebook support in Buzz among other reasons. Here is an excerpt: "…I also found the user interface inconvenient for keeping track of what my 20-odd contacts are posting…It's one long page of Buzz conversations, similar to a discussion forum. As comments are added to the conversations, I don't get a notification of any sort. I just have to keep revisiting them to see what's new, scrolling up and down…

"According to Google, people can link up Buzz right now with Picasa, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube and Blogger, while Google chat status messages and Google Reader shared items can also be displayed in Buzz. About 10 other photos appeared several hours later.

"However, it doesn't come close to solving the problem that it was created to address: helping people manage the avalanche of social media information many are inundated with. In fact, Buzz may end up compounding this problem, becoming yet another social media channel that people need to watch and maintain."

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by Brendan Read

Hosting Whys and Hows

Hosted or cloud contact center products, provided either by suppliers or third parties is becoming a mainstream alternative to buying and installing them on-premise. The key reasons for this demand and interest include capital and operating cost savings via reducing building footprint and IT support, greater scalability, continued and simplified access to technologies and improved security. Going hosted – also referred to as software as a service (SaaS) – is a major change, though, for organizations that are accustomed to owning and internally managing their solutions.

We contacted several leading firms and authorities to get their insights on hosted contact center platform and solutions, including demand, service availability, challenges, best practices, and more. Here are excerpts of responses from several industry experts and thought leaders (for their complete responses, visit TMCnet online: tmcnet.com/27900.1).

CosmoCom (www.cosmocom.com)

Steve Kowarsky, Executive Vice President

"During the due diligence process, contact centers need to assess what their needs are for hosted applications and select vendors which will accommodate their current needs as well as anticipate their growth in both capacity and functionality. Support of additional media, or growth into additional geographies, and expansion to larger agent populations should be seamless and not require reinventing the wheel in the provisioning process."

Frost and Sullivan (www.frost.com)

Keith Dawson, Principal Analyst, Information & Communication Technologies

"Most people already have a significant investment in premise equipment, so that's going to give anyone pause. I think from a user point of view, the biggest challenge is in coordinating the approach between contact center operations and IT – which is often very reluctant to approve a hosted (i.e., "external") approach to technology management. I highly recommend getting IT buy-in as early in the process as you can. Also, you want your hosted provider to give you a very specific ROI and TCO calculation."

inContact (www.incontact.com)

Jim Tanner, Senior Vice President, Product and Strategy

"Today, it is possible that the entire technology of a contact center is run in the cloud. We're seeing increasing adoption to this model in all areas of call routing, including ACD, CTI, and IVR. It's interesting to see the growth in agent optimization tools being used in the cloud. Those tools, including WFM, e-learning, proactive hiring, coaching, survey and quality monitoring can be extremely difficult and time consuming to deploy on-premise, and we're seeing a large number of companies showing significant interest in putting those solutions in the cloud."

LiveOps (www.liveops.com)

Paul Lang, Senior Vice President of Marketing and Product Management

"All products that make up a contact center solution are and can be hosted. While they have served well for many years, aging technologies and on-premise sites are reaching their end of life. Many companies are deciding to break away from the constraints of disparate, fragmented technology and high monthly maintenance fees within their existing contact centers. Increasingly, they are demanding flexible solutions that help them react quickly to business changes like spikes in contact volumes." **CIS**

Ensuring Hosted Solution Performance

How do you ensure that your hosted or SaaS solutions perform as well as on-premises-installed applications so that your agents can provide quick, accurate and seamless service to customers? Knoa Software's (www.knoa.com) VCEM Virtual/Cloud Experience Manager (VCEM) could fit the bill. VCEM monitors and manages agent and supervisor experience in using enterprise-scaled products such as CRM, e-learning, routing and workforce and knowledge management.

One of its features is dynamic base-lining by which it tracks metrics such as response times and system and user errors when they vary over time and compares them to typical norms. Another is dynamic benchmarking, which enables system performance analysis prior to and after any change in your internal infrastructure that feeds the hosted applications to the agents. VCEM alerts managers who then alert the hosted providers or IT staff if the issue is with the infrastructure to the problem.

Dynamic benchmarking can also be used to monitor user behavior. Since SaaS vendors introduce new functionality more frequently than on-premise suppliers, Lori Wizdo, vice president of marketing, points out this feature also makes sure that new functionality delivered by the vendor has not changed user adoption/usage in any negative way. For instance the new functionality might require additional user training; the "before and after" tracking of user error patterns will show you that. **CIS**

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION NEWS

- **Bomgar (www.bomgar.com)** has added the B400 Remote Support Appliance to its portfolio. The product, which is specially designed for large IT contact centers, enables support reps to remotely troubleshoot a wide array of issues including software application or hardware configuration problems, smartphone usability issues and back-end switches and router malfunctions. The B400 runs Bomgar's remote desktop control software that permits reps to diagnose and fix matters regardless of operating system, location or language. IT service organizations can deploy Bomgar on up to 6,000 managed remote desktops. It produces a detailed support audit trail of activity, including videos of remote support sessions.

- **Calabrio (www.calabrio.com)** has made available the Calabrio Recording Export (CRX), a software-based transfer utility that allows contact centers to export multiple call recordings in bulk for archiving and speech analytics. Using Calabrio Recording Export, a software-add on to the Calabrio Compliance Recording and Quality Management application, contact centers can identify recorded contacts associated with business trends or problem areas they are looking to analyze either on-demand or at a scheduled intervals.

- **Convergys (www.convergys.com)** has launched version 6.5 of its Intervoice Voice Portal (IVP) and the next generation of its Interaction Composer (IC) development environment to further enhance the suite of intelligent interaction solutions. The IVP 6.5 now includes features platform improvements such as enhanced hearing-impaired support and robust management and alarm capabilities to meet regulatory and client requirements. It also offers Visual IVR support that provides visual presentation of service options, content, and responses on mobile phone screens during voice interactions. The new IC release includes an option to translate legacy Intervoice IQTalk applications and render them using IC diagramming and graphical components. This allows IQTalk applications to leverage VoiceXML and Visual IVR capabilities.

- **Jacada (www.jacada.com)** has come out with two new products the Jacada Advisor and Jacada Insight and has upgraded a third, the Jacada WinFuse.

The Jacada Advisor combines the company's Windows/Web integration and interaction management technology with HTML-compatible "application bubbles," which enable in-line and in-context data feeds. Jacada Advisor features desktop automation capabilities that simplify navigation, cross-application copy/paste functionality and login capabilities and streamlined data entry. It also provides embedded interaction management that delivers rules-based call flow administration with visual interface and reporting capabilities, presented in-context at critical decision points

Jacada Insight takes and combines the data collected by its desktop unification technology with data traditionally found in CTI, PBX, and IVR/ACD systems with business intelligence tools. Jacada Insight provides contact center managers and supervisors with advanced metrics, delivered in real time

Jacada WinFuse 5.5 service enablement and desktop automation solution now supports non-invasive integration with Oracle Forms and the .NET framework, expanding the product's application integration capabilities and reducing the need for extraneous custom coding. The new product retains its capabilities to facilitate the acceptance of service-oriented architectures and participation within the context of an event driven architecture

- **LumenVox (www.lumenvox.com)** has released Speech Tuner version 9.2, which enables speech recognition solution developers to test the applications for errors. The new version is provided with a redesigned interface that helps in increasing accuracy, reducing and tackling errors, and provides suggested settings for improvements. It displays the most common errors in an application, and produces statistics and graphs about them. Speech Tuner 9.2 can perform recognitions on audio, which has not previously passed through the LumenVox Speech Engine, thereby making it easy to run performance tests on a variety of data sources. It also includes a new grammar editor for building and testing grammars, a new transcriber to make performing transcription faster and a faster tester.

- **Noble Systems (www.noblesys.com)** has come out with the Noble TouchStar 6.0 inbound and outbound contact handling solution: the first upgrade of this product since Noble acquired TouchStar's assets and intellectual property in 2009. It offers substantial improvements including a new load-balancing multi-threaded software architecture that leverages Dialogic's NMS carrier class hardware while remaining backwards compatible for customers who do not support it. It also provides advanced automation of daily reporting, system activity logging and data management in a centralized user interface.

- **Oracle (www.oracle.com)** has launched the Oracle Communications Order and Service Management 7.0 aimed at helping communications service providers (CSPs), enables them to get to market faster by unifying the front- and back-office operations required for creating new offers. It also provides them with visibility to detailed order status throughout the entire order lifecycle and to make this information instantly available to contact center agents and customers.

The new Oracle solution can permit CSPs to identify and manage at-risk orders, and those requiring special handling, which helps reduce order fallout. It also permits CSPs to make low-cost, in-flight order changes, by enabling agents to adjust existing orders to reflect new customer requests; updated orders automatically revise order-fulfillment plans completed or in progress. This can help accelerate order completion, reduce manual workarounds, and prevent costly errors and repeated truck-rolls to customer locations.

- **Plantronics (www.plantronics.com)** has enhanced its UC-optimized headset and phone lines to make voice communications easier, more versatile and clearer. The Plantronics Savi headset line includes new binaural and monaural headband versions of the Savi Office. Savi Office enables professionals such as senior support reps to listen to any PC-based audio such as music players, streaming audio and video, Webinars and podcasts, and make calls via desk phones or PCs with a simple press of a button. The Plantronics Blackwire 420 is a foldable headset which is designed for mobile worker which can lay flat next to a laptop for portability. It has in-line controls for volume, answer/end and mute. The Plantronics Calisto wideband USB phone line includes the Plantronics Calisto 540, an optimized for Microsoft Office Communicator deskphone.

- **ResponseTek (www.responsetek.com)**'s ResponseTek: CEM market research, customer feedback and media monitoring solution now enables companies improve sales and service performance by linking customer satisfaction metrics to front-line staff compensation. The winter 2010 release of this product, delivered on-demand, includes dispute management tools to help program managers easily manage and remove bad data.

New role-based scorecards and trend analysis reports have also been added to engage and align the entire organization.

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by Brendan Read

Delivering the Message

Automated outbound messaging – voice, IVR, fax, e-mail and SMS/text messaging are and can be used to handle a wide range of interactions – is becoming a key instrument in every organization's customer interaction tool shed. These tasks include and range from appointment reminders to billing, collections, crew notifications, fraud alerts, airline gate and schedule changes, prescription refill reminders, and in accordance with the law fundraising and telemarketing.

These tools are also becoming more feature-rich. For example, CSG Interactive Messaging's Precision eCare suite offers companies' customers the ease of receiving monthly statements attached to secure e-mails. It offers new technology that enables customers to view and pay their bills directly via interactive features embedded in dynamic .pdf files.

Automated messaging is becoming popular because it provides immediate notification of and subsequent action on issues and offers while avoiding the high costs of outbound and inbound live agent calls while permitting better agent utilization by deploying them to higher-value contacts. DMG Consulting's 2010 Outbound Dialing Market Research Report projects that the outbound voice notification market will grow by 20 percent, 18 percent and 16 percent respectively between 2010 and 2012. In contrast, traditional live agent dialing market will grow by 6 percent, 7 percent and 8 percent respectively over the same period.

The cost savings are substantial. Ann Cannon, vice president of CSG Interactive Messaging, reports that automated messaging will typically save from 50 percent to 95 percent over live agented costs.

"Enterprises are driven toward automated messaging by that cost differential, while leveraging their agented resources to address higher value functions such as premium customer service and later stage collections," says Cannon.

Automated messaging capabilities can be purchased and installed on-premises, usually as part of or integrated with contact routing platforms. Or they can be obtained via hosting either by suppliers or by third-party firms. These message services minimize upfront costs and are highly scalable. They are sometimes offered with other services including inbound IVR and speech recognition and live agent voice, e-mail and chat.

"Much of the market growth is coming from the desire of enterprises to grow and retain current customers while removing costs," says Steve Gass, senior director, West Notifications Group. "Trends that our clients are asking us for are solutions that drive customer loyalty, growth and cost reducing efficiencies."

Regulations Impact

Automated messaging solutions and services have been adjusting to changing environments and needs. Just as outbound live agent telemarketing has been forced, by overuse and abuse to become de facto opt-in, prodded by government regulations that have been formulated in response to consumer complaints, this especially goes for all automated telemarketing means.

For example the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) now and will be prohibiting respectively automated prerecorded voice telemarketing calls to existing consumer customers: unless they have previously agreed to accept them from sellers; they must have recipients' signed written agreements to receive them. Such calls must include an automated, interactive mechanism by which consumers can opt out of such outreach. And while automated calls made on behalf of charities are exempt they must allow consumers to opt-out.

One key driver in these moves is a shift in consumer communications from landline to wireless, abetted by number portability that clouds the distinction, resulting in outbound message calls potentially costing recipients money depending on their plans. Another mover is consumers' wishes for privacy and not to be interrupted by marketing messages especially, such as when they are engaged on their computers or wireless devices with others. Today's milieu is that the consumers are in charge and if firms want their business they need to listen including to how they want to be contacted.

Messaging firms are getting the message. For example, SoundBite Communications' Proactive Preference Management Solution Suite captures and stores consumer opt-in, opt-out and communications preferences. Using the Message Opt-In Solution clients can also request, collect and track customers' communication permissions. The solution proactively requests consumer consent and communications

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http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/dialogic-series preferences and stores the data in one central location, providing organizations with an integrated view of their consumers' preferences.

The Drive to SMS

The move by consumers and businesses to wireless is shifting contacts to SMS/text from voice and e-mail. SMS messages are faster to send, and are read much quicker than e-mail. Not surprisingly increasing numbers of business messages are being sent via SMS rather than by e-mail or automated voice.

Varolii provides hosted outbound multichannel, including SMS notifications solutions. Kael Kelly, senior director of marketing at Varolii, reports that 89 percent of U.S. residents subscribe to a mobile service. According to a CNET story as far back as September 2008, U.S. consumers send and receive almost twice as many text messages than phone calls they make or receive in a month Also, a vast majority of people read SMS within 15 minutes of getting them as opposed to e-mail, which may sit in their inboxes for hours or days.

"We're accustomed to seeing e-mail as less time sensitive, sitting in someone's inbox for awhile unfortunately in many cases gets lost before the recipients had chance to open it, but when we get a text or a voice call including an automated voice message we act on them," says Kelly.

Will this mean that automated voice or e-mail will go away? No more than TV replaced movies says Cannon.

What is happening is segmentation of the media according to the performance parameters and consumer preferences, she points out. The automated messaging industry is long familiar with time-of-day and day-of-week preferences with respect to calling hours, for example. Dynamically switching between interactive voice, SMS, Web and e-mail channels recognizes the differing social and technical environments consumers move through during their daily lives.

"Going forward, automated messaging providers will need to fully manage and utilize all the communication channels and social media sites," says Cannon. "This is to not only to tailor messaging to customer preferences but to also allow businesses to get the most 'bang for their buck' as they build their customer interaction strategies for acquiring, activating, retaining and growing profitable customer relationships."

Integrating Messaging and Live Agents

There is integration between automated outbound voice, e-mail, SMS and inbound IVR/speech rec along with live agent channels that are taking place to enable seamless customer interactions.

SoundBite's Engage multi-channel platform offers just that. Here is one example of the interactions it supports: a credit card company sends outbound voice message to a customer alerting him/her of potential fraudulent card activity. The cardholder can verify the transaction using automated prompts or on the same call connect directly to live specialist to confirm that the transaction is fraudulent.

Similarly, a customer can communicate with an organization via text messaging. Leveraging the SoundBite Engage Platform, SoundBite's Contact Center Text Messaging Solution, enables fully-automated or agent-assisted interactive text messaging.

Here's how it works: a mobile customer can initiate or respond to a text message. The solution views the message and automatically responds with a personalized text message. If the message warrants special attention, then the message will be routed to a contact center agent who can access the entire history and respond accordingly. The entire text conversation can transition seamlessly from agent to automation and vice-versa, depending on the consumer's most recent response.

One key feature of the solution is the SoundBite Dialog Engine. It uses enhanced keyword search functionality to support fully-automated, interactive text messaging conversations that implement custom business logic. The tool enables creating recipient-relevant and personalized messages. The Dialog Engine supports one-way alerts and interactive messages, opt-in and opt-out requests, real-time automated issue resolutions and other self-service options.

Another key functionality of the Contact Center Text Messaging Solution is the SoundBite Agent Text Portal that allows contact center agents to log in and view message history and interact with customers in real-time via a Web user interface. Agents can engage in multiple text conversations simultaneously using predefined or free-form messages. Supervisors can monitor agent activity as well as the overall campaign status.

West is providing its clients with tools that allow them to take control over campaign creation and management through a self-serve user interface, offering their customers the ability to set their communication preferences through a preference management tool. It is also offering new delivery channels such as rich mobile applications.

"The enterprise can take advantage of latest technologies and trends that automate many of the functions an agent or IVR perform today," says Gass. "They are able to communicate with their customers in the best mode possible. Setting up programs for campaigns can be a challenge as enterprises are moving to designing contact strategies which are made up of combinations of inbound and outbound communication channels. Striking the right balance is extremely important to achieving expected or desired results." **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

CSG Interactive Messaging www.csgsystems.com	**Varolii** www.varolii.com
SoundBite Communications www.soundbite.com	**West Notifications Group** www.westnotificationsgroup.com

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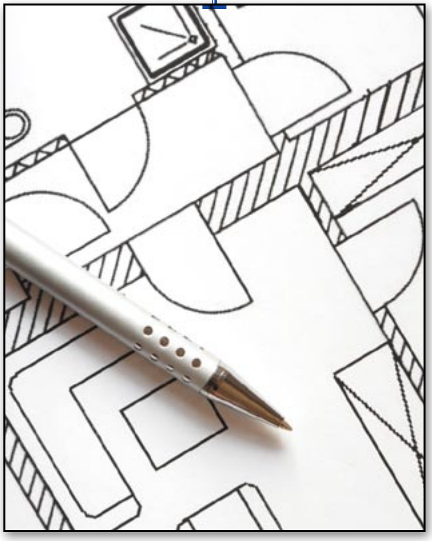
by Brendan Read

Home (Office) Making



You have carefully looked at the arguments for and against having work-at-home agents (WAHAs). You decided that the well-reported benefits: cost savings, lowered attrition, higher productivity, widened labor pools, business continuity and greener environment offset the challenges: security, training, supervision and maintaining connectivity between home agents and your organization.

Now you are looking at how to structure your WAHA program. This article will touch on the key pieces and processes you will need to have in place for it to be a success.

Setting Goals

First, set out the goals and measure them to evaluate WAHA program performance. These can be cost reduction, attrition and improved key performance indicators (KPIs) such as average handle time, first call resolution and sales per hour or day. The objectives will determine program scale and scope.

Telus is one of Canada's largest communications carriers. It has an active and expanding WAHA program. Out of the firm's 5,500- to 6,000-agent (numbers vary from turnover) roster, about 1,000 agents at present and will add 400 by the end of 2010 will be working from home. This will be achieved by moving existing agents from on-premise contact centers to their homes.

The Telus WAHA program goals include higher call quality agent productivity, lowered attrition and reduced facilities costs. It measures agent performance prior to and after they go home. The firm reports that its WAHAs have one-tenth the turnover of on-premises staff. Each agent retained saves it approximately $30,000, including replacement hiring and training cost and the estimated impact to call quality when it loses a trained agent.

Home Connections

Program planning and setup requires paying careful attention to voice/data connections. One of the most critical choices is PSTN versus VoIP for voice. VoIP is less expensive; the downside is that quality, while greatly improved as broadband providers have upgraded their networks to offer it to homes, is often not quite that of PSTN. There are still on occasion issues such as jitter and latency affecting conversations and in some cases leading to dropouts.

Telus does not use VoIP for its WAHAs; it had tested the technology out recently and found the quality still poor. On the other hand, Convergys, a large teleservices firm which has an extensive AHA program, permits VoIP but prospective agents must pass an online quality test before the firm will approve them using it.

Another issue is bandwidth, and what to specify to home agents. It will depend on how much information you are pushing and pulling through the pipes. Telus has found that 3 Mb down and 1 Mb up is usually sufficient for desktops. Convergys requires a minimum 1.5 Mb down and 512kp up.

There needs to be failover at the server end. The Canadian carrier has a triple redundant virtual private network (VPN) server solution so that if one drops out the WAHAs can connect into either of the two remaining units.

There is debate over computer ownership. Employer-owned is preferable over agent-owned because it provides greater security by having complete control on what is on it, but is more expensive. A third option has emerged which is the locked-down desktop, pioneered by West, where employers take remote control over agent-owned machines while the agents are working. Agents cannot access their personal files, print or save to storage.

Telus is exploring a fourth choice: thin-client appliances. They are less expensive, more secure as no data resides on or can be downloaded from them and use less energy and space. The firm is presently testing thin-client devices with on-premise agents and is considering piloting them for WAHAs as early as the third quarter of 2010.

A critical component for home agents is IT support. They are on their own, so to speak, though with help desk support no more than a phone call or a mouse click away. Michael DeSalles, strategic analyst, Frost and Sullivan, recommends that companies set up their support policies and suppliers ahead of time. This would include communication procedures with help desk personnel, acceptable downtime and backup plans. Ian Cruickshank, Telus manager, workforce management, suggests having troubleshooting guides available so that WAHAs can fix simple problems backed by dedicated IT support teams.

Ensuring Security

Security and data privacy is a key concern of senior management and of teleservices' firms clients with WAHAs because the information is being handled in private residences outside of corporate control. One of the biggest challenges is limiting the risk of viruses and malware spreading from home machines. For that reason WAHA-using companies typically prohibit or advise against using Wi-Fi routers because criminals can gain access to home computers through them. They often require dedicated broadband connections to PCs; no other devices are allowed to run off them.

DeSalles recommends what many providers are requiring of home agents today; authentication via multiple password layers and biometric voice login for access to networks and applications.

Security can also be enhanced for the most critical cases such as financial and healthcare data by locked-down desktops mentioned above. Yet it also adds to costs, he points out.

In addition and as enhancement to some of these methods Telus uses authentication factor 2 (i.e. two passwords or logins for security.) It also uses a hardware firewall NAT device (router) deployed at WAHAs homes that provides more basic firewall protection for PC connected to the Internet plus a software-based firewall and virus protection software on every PC.

Telus masks agents' screens for credit card, social insurance and other critical information. It also requires WAHAs to have secure offices: those with a quiet environment free of noise or distractions and a lockable door in their homes. It checks prospective home offices before allowing agents to work from home including seeing if their monitors can be read by others.

Ergonomics

Enabling ergonomics in home offices to ensure comfort and productivity and to avoid injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis is just as important as it is on-premise offices. This includes requiring agents select spaces with no glare on screens, indirect lighting, buying adjustable chairs and workstations and equipping or asking them to buy high-quality headsets.

Headsets are as critical in homes as they are on-premises but for different reasons. While there is no din of other voices in home offices as there are on-premises there are unavoidable and unpredictable sharp sounds like truck back firings or sirens. There are also occasions when WAHAs may need to step away from their desks, such as to sign for a courier delivery or instruct a contractor where to make repairs.

Neil Hooper, senior manager, contact center marketing, Plantronics points to the Savi Office line which enhances WAHA environments, by letting users connect to multiple communication applications and devices – corded desk phones, softphones and PC-audio with a single headset. Noise-canceling microphone, wideband PC audio and integrated DECT 6.0 technologies provides clear communication while letting WAHAs roam up to 350 feet from their desk without compromising on clarity.

Assessing WAHAs

The opportunity to work from home is very popular with existing employees and jobseekers alike, observers report, yet not everyone is suitable for it. That requires creating unique WAHA hiring and assessment programs.

DeSalles recommends building hiring profiles based on customer service experience such as in related fields such as hospitality and retail. While generally more mature than their on-premises counterparts, WAHAs are expected to be self-starters and good problem-solvers. The profiles should also include having IT troubleshooting skills.

There are differences in what to look for in WAHAs than for on-premise agents. While there are overlaps in basic competencies and skills, Dawn Lambert, FurstPerson senior manager, selection and assessment, says her firm has found four – autonomy and initiative and perseverance and time management – that stand out as much more important for AHAs than for on-premises agents. These assessments must be applied to agents being hired directly to work from home and for those moving from on-premises to home offices.

WAHA recruitment and assessment including for voice competency can be carried out virtually, without ever having to see the applicants.

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FurstPerson's Hire@Home solution includes a contact center simulation set in a home office environment with Web-based training and a remote trainer as part of the assessment. It also includes computer diagnostic tools that can evaluate the job candidate's technical environment. It can also assess them for problem-solving abilities and basic IT set-up that may indicate their IT troubleshooting skills.

Alpine Access, a pure-play WAHA teleservices firm uses 100 percent virtual screening for its applicants. They must confirm that they meet its computer, Internet, phone, headsets and home office requirements. They then take a specialized course via the firm's Alpine Access University that assesses their capability and commitment, utilizing videos and interactive exercises, followed by a skills exam that employs simulations to prove that they can do the work. Once prospective WAHAs pass these Alpine Access then sets up phone interviews from which it decides whether to make job offers based on the applicants' skill sets matching available positions.

Screening for applicants who have the skills and if preferred experience for your WAHA-located positions increases the likelihood of them performing well. It also reduces initial training and ramp-up times.

Telus carefully interviews WAHA candidates by front-line managers using pre-prepared Interview kits. They look for behaviors that are consistent with agents that are self-starters, self-motivated and able to work in physically isolated environments. They also seek those who can utilize alternate/ non-face-to-face means of communication like LiveMeeting, e-mail, chat, phone, text message, and have good basic PC skills. It informs agents what is expected of them.

Scheduling, Training, Managing and Communications

WAHAs, because they do not have to commute give more versatility to scheduling by enabling and filling split-shifts, shorter part-time shifts and greater availability to handle sudden and unexpected spikes. Assigning them is no different than that for on-premise agents; the tools and methods are the same.

"The task of forecasting and scheduling at-home agents can sound unwieldy," says Bill Durr, principal global solutions consultant, Verint Witness Actionable Solutions. "However, with browser-based functionality right at the desktop, agents and supervisors have the ability to manage shift preferences and view published schedules, conduct rule-based partial day shift swaps and submit wait lists requests. They can also view the status of time-off requests down to 15-minute intervals and conduct performance-enabled shift bidding."

The challenges come with the training and coaching. Even where agents come into the office initially and periodically (see later this article) there will be many instances where the learning and supervising occurs remotely.

The answers lie in e-learning for initial and ongoing training that can backed by, where instructor or supervisor intervention is required chat sessions or Web conferencing where agents can be given and walked through lessons and simulations. Workforce optimization tools can schedule sessions based on agent and/or instructor or supervisor availability. IMs, calls and e-mails can be used for follow up.

"Many contact centers utilizing WAHAs need to be more creative with the different methods they use for communication to encourage ongoing dialogue and accountability," says Dina Vance, senior vice president at Ulysses Learning. "The key is to create accountability around the touch points to ensure they add value to the overall performance. The profile of the home based agent is proving to be people with strong work ethics and a desire to do a good job."

Sitel, which has some 400 WAHAs which it calls HomeShore agents and plans to add 200 more has enhanced its e-learning functionality by using inContact's hosted RightTime technology. It allows Sitel to ensure delivery of continuous based training and communications are delivered to their agents' desktops in real time.

Another key and related issue with WAHAs is their lack of connectivity with supervisors and colleagues and vice-versa. Ulysses' Vance recommends putting in communications means such as internal social networking to enable group collaboration and problem solving.

Convergys recently modified its desktop proprietary messaging tool to incorporate SMS, which enables it to quickly notify agents even if they are not on-line via their wireless devices, thereby giving the virtual equivalent of seeking someone out in the break room or hallway. The tool also has one-button screen share and chat capability, enabling instant support from a supervisor, as well as personal number concealment are two other key functions of the tool.

Desktop messaging systems, important for at-premises agents as they deliver individual, team and group statistics and announcements become critical for WAHAs because they are out of office, enabling key information to be supplied to them and to make them feel involved.

Inova Solutions' Desktop Presenter™ application is preconfigured; WAHAs can install the solutions out of the box. Desktop Presenter connects to Inova's LightLink™ middleware when the WAHAs first login, displaying critical KPIs and messages on the agents' desktops. Desktop Presenter also offers added security by offering authentication by Microsoft Windows usernames in addition to IP addresses. Utilizing usernames minimizes the risks of others gaining access to confidential information, such as family members getting on WAHAs' computers.

One tool to consider is video. Laura Shay, director of product marketing, Polycom, points out that video captures non-verbal communications, which enables clearer understandings and fewer follow-up questions, resulting in shorter calls.

DeSalles isn't so sure though if video adds value. Where would video be better than doing online coaching with an application he asks?

"For example let's say you have a salesperson who doesn't know how to close," he says. "Do you want a Webcam conference with them or have a telephone conference to show them the proper way to do via an avatar or online video or something you can score or measure?"

Dr. Turgut Aykin, president of ac(2) Solutions, says contact center managers should look at what other organizations have done successfully for training and connectivity. He points to IBM's Global Services, where he had once worked, has used teleworkers since the 1990s. IBM worked around these issues with online training, webinars and courses. It required X amount of training per year; employees must demonstrate proof. IBM also had weekly conference calls involving the entire unit; teams within them also had conference call huddles.

"The best strategy is to pilot to sort some of these agents at home and to look into other organizations as to how they sorted out these issues," recommends Aykin.

Satellite or Constellation?

Once you know what materials and methods there are to structure a WAHA program you have the choice of two designs: satellite i.e. having agents within two to three hours driving time of existing contact centers or branch offices; or constellation i.e. WAHAs not having to reside in travelling distance. The selection will affect costs, agent assessment and training, technology, security, management and social connectivity.

Michele Rowan is president, Customer Contact Strategies, an at-home agent consultancy. The satellite model maintains a large span of control with little change to business process, except technology. Organizations can begin to move agents home with a single focus of getting technology right. Social connectivity – between agents, supervisors and colleagues is continued – WAHAs remain fully engaged in on-premise centers' activities with frequent on site visits, as often as the company deems necessary.

The satellite model requires frequent on-site visits that can impact agent retention, she point outs. It also adds readying and commuting time that WAHAs would rather do without, "and they will tell us that," says Rowan. Satellite also places limitations on leveraging many of the cost-saving and performance-maximizing of virtualizing hardware and software to a single server covering the entire enterprise or to a vendor-or-third-party provided hosted environments. These methods do away with costly and duplicate computer rooms, servers, licenses and IT staff.

The constellation model, when combined with closing on-premises centers offers the most cost savings. It also unleashes geographical restrictions on hiring, providing unlimited talent pools at their disposal. Business continuity is also superior; a snow storm in the northern plains is no longer an issue when agents can be brought on line in the South.

Constellation deployments has limitations including individual state (and in Canada provincial) labor law, workers' compensation and general liability regulations that can vary greatly, and can be tedious to manage. Also, group gatherings and face-to-face meetings, even if only desired a few times per year, can be challenging with wide agent deployment.

"The ideal approach is to start with a satellite model and get really good at operating in a mixed environment," advises Rowan. "Build out virtual technology in tandem with fine turning operating performance. And when ready, expand into the constellation model a few select markets that meet your business objectives."

Telus currently uses the satellite model; WAHAs live within 100 miles by road of its eight contact centers located in Burnaby and Prince George, B.C., Edmonton and Calgary, Alta., Barrie and Toronto, Ont. and Montreal and Rimouski, Que.

WAHAs travel to the nearest contact center two days a month so that they can reconnect with team managers and peers face to face and for continued training. If their connectivity or PCs fails they are able to come back to the nearest contact center and continue working while the issue is being resolved.

Telus has been looking at moving to the constellation model to tap larger labor pools. It is developing its e-learning capabilities to convert agent training into a completely virtual learning curriculum. It has also audio/Web conferencing and is piloting webcams with select agents.

"The major obstacle has been training," explains Telus' Cruickshank. "Once we have that virtual training capability then potentially we'll be able to hire from anywhere."

Putting It Together

Regardless of what model you pick or migrate to you need to create a formal written policy that outlines what is expected from the agents and your company.

DeSalles says these policies must cover a wide range of items including home office environments such as voice/data connectivity, noise levels, lighting, ergonomics and basic home security. They should set out hours to be worked and availability and require agents to report absences, illnesses and tardiness. They should also stipulate the KPIs agents are expected to meet. To ensure compliance agents should be required to sign off on them so that they and you know that they have read and understood them.

Telus' Cruickshank points out that multiple departments: HR, health and safety, IT, insurance, labor relations and legal need to weigh in on the program and policy setup. His firm has created one that that is backed up with home office pre- and post-launch assessments for individual candidates by specially-trained managers, followed by twice-yearly periodic inspections.

"Setting up an at-home agent program is complex; it requires a lot of thinking and consideration," explains Cruickshank. "We've been able to do both very well by making sure that we have structured the program in a way that finds the best agents." **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

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www.ac2solutions.com

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www.alpineaccess.com

Convergys
www.convergys.com

Customer Contact Strategies
www.customercontactstrategies.com

FurstPerson
www.furstperson.com

inContact
www.incontact.com

Inova Solutions
www.inovasolutions.com

Plantronics
www.plantronics.com

Polycom
www.polycom.com

Sitel
www.sitel.com

Telus
www.telustalksbusiness.com

Ulysses Learning
www.ulysseslearning.com

Verint
www.verint.com

Employing Creative Ways to Enhance Recruitment and Retention

In the call center industry – or any industry really – recruiting and retaining top talent is critical to success. People are the heart of our business, so attracting the right candidates can make all the difference. Holding on to top performers is equally important, enabling a company to avoid knowledge loss and attrition costs that can hinder growth.

By Steve Brubaker, Chief of Staff
InfoCision Management Corporation

So how do you bring the best candidates your way? And how do you keep top talent on board? To enhance your efforts on both fronts, you need to implement what I like to call a Continuum for Recruiting and Retention. This continuum focuses on four ongoing and overlapping goals:

Raise awareness to become an "employer of choice"

Think of a company where everyone wants to work – a company like Google. How can your company achieve the Google allure? Well, it starts with making a concentrated effort to be an "employer of choice." An "employer of choice" is a place where people are lining up and kicking down the door for a position. You may already consider your company to be an "employer of choice," but do your employees and potential employees?

To become an "employer of choice," you have to raise awareness. You have to get your name out there and tell your company story. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn. Let the community know about your unique work environment, and your employees and their notable achievements (at and outside work). Apply for awards recognizing great employers. When you win, let the media know; let potential employees know. Find ways to make your company stand out from the pack. Spotlight aspects of your company that are different or better: amenities, salary, opportunities for advancement, and the like.

Integrate effective human resources policies and procedures

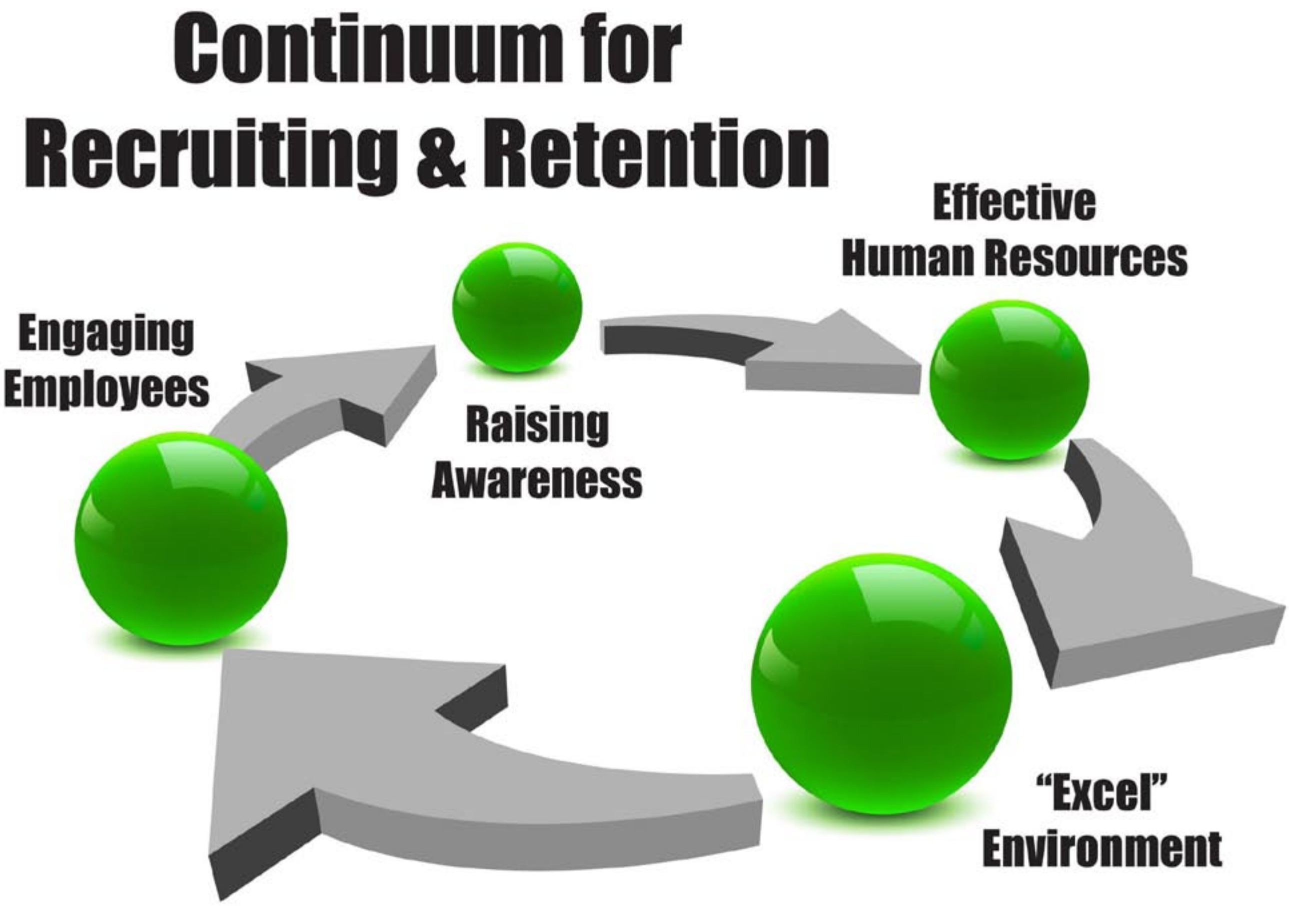
On the human resources side, it all starts with best practices. Develop a diversity policy, and promote diversity in hiring. Encourage HR staff members to earn Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) certification. Also, employ best practices for your industry and your region. Every region has its own pressing issues. Make sure you address them.

Be specific with your recruiting messages. Let potential employees know exactly what you are looking for. At InfoCision, we seek out communicators who are mature with work experience. So, in our recruitment materials, we make it clear we're looking for people who want careers and not just jobs. It's also important to select the best channels (newspaper, television, Intranet, job fairs) to reach your ideal candidate. Finally, don't be afraid to turn people away if they are not a good fit for your company. Hiring a candidate simply to fill a seat will only hurt your organization in the long run.

Create an environment where employees can excel

"Employers of choice" provide employees opportunities to learn, grow and develop. You have to give employees the tools to succeed. That means job training and company orientation. Teach them your values and mission. Let them know your goals and business. Offer training to: help employees excel in their current roles; advance to new or expanded roles; learn best practices; and adapt to new technologies. These opportunities help you better single out individuals looking to grow.

Another aspect of creating an environment where employees excel involves making life easier for your employees. A key question we ask when looking at benefits and amenities: could we offer the service on-site? At InfoCision, we offer on-site fitness centers, doctors' clinics with attending physician, child care early learning facilities, and food service options. These conveniences eliminate many everyday


Continuum for Recruiting & Retention
Effective Human Resources
Engaging Employees
Raising Awareness
"Excel" Environment

stresses for our employees (running to the doctor, finding time for the gym), helping them to be more focused and productive at work. Employees value these benefits, and they are a draw to job candidates.

Engage employees – help them achieve self-actualizing goals

There is a very easy way to find out what your employees want and need: ask them. With surveys, you can discover whether employees are happy with their benefits, training, work environment, etc. And, where improvement is needed, they can provide recommendations. You also can solicit feedback through open forums with senior management, suggestion boxes, performance and peer reviews, and award programs.

Providing employees fresh, consistent incentives to achieve goals is another great way to increase productivity, create value and improve retention. Use performance contests to inspire and motivate employees to work smarter and be more proactive. Challenges and competitions keep employees engaged in their roles, and offer clear, attainable goals. They also help keep work fun, and spirits and energy high. Ultimately, a great work environment will be your field of dreams: if you build it, top talent will come – and stick around. **CIS**

Steve Brubaker is chief of staff at InfoCision Management Corporation. Reach him at steve.brubaker@infocision.com. In business for over 27 years, InfoCision is the second-largest privately held teleservices company and a leading provider of customer care services, commercial sales and marketing for a variety of Fortune 100 companies and small businesses. Along with call center solutions, InfoCision offers business intelligence, digital printing, direct mail solutions and fulfillment services. For more information, visit www.infocision.com.

by Brendan Read

Does Size Really Matter?

Small contact centers – those with less than 75 seats – can be and are often indeed beautiful. They can provide exceptional customer service and sales thanks to their size in which agents and supervisors know each other. They are often owned and managed by companies that care about their customers and infuse that positive and team-building attitude throughout the center.

One such example is Lindner Hotels AG, a family-owned, medium-sized hotel group based in Dusseldorf, Germany that operates 34 four- and five-star hotels and resorts. Lindner is experiencing strong growth: in the last five years alone, the number of hotels has more than doubled, while the total number of rooms has risen to almost 4,000. The firm is known for innovative hotel concepts and an impressive array of wellness facilities.

Lindner Hotels relies on a 34-agent contact center whose primary brief is to instantly identify previous guests when they call, regardless of which of the hotels they stayed in so that the agents can provide high-level personalized interactions. To enable this, the hotelier has built up a data warehouse of 900,000 guest profiles. The center also runs a central reservations hotline and acts as a virtual reception point for 12 hotels; agents answer with the appropriate hotel name. The center currently handles some 164,000 calls, plus it processes faxes and e-mails, and makes around 255,000 reservations per year.

To provide quality assurance (QA), Lindner has been collecting and classifying statistics on availability, response and processing time, call length and agent effectiveness. External partners carried out regular training sessions, mystery calls and mystery shopping exercises. However, this set of method did not allow the hotelier to determine how many inquiries were converted into reservations. The mystery calls provided no data about how effectively the reservation software was being used or whether the processes offered the best possible support for booking procedures. The agents became wise to the calls, which diminished their effectiveness.

After consulting with others in the hotel industry, Lindner opted for the Impact 360 Quality Monitoring software from Verint Witness Actionable Solutions (www.verint.com). The clincher was that Impact 360 records both calls and agents' screen activities.

Lindner appointed Fiebig + Team, a Verint partner, to implement the solution as part of an overall contact center system modernization. It conducted planning workshops, infrastructure and workflow analysis, phase concept development, new hardware and software implementation, CTI and Impact 360 software integration and agent training. The work took place in late 2008.

Lindner wanted from Impact 360 information to help it find out how effectively the reservation software is being used, and whether its processes offer the best possible support for day-to-day operations. During deployment, the firm defined new call guidelines, which led to new evaluation sheets and training sessions. It also established recording rules, including random recording of calls, analysis of individual agents' performance, and event-triggered recording.

The QA data collected from Impact 360 is analyzed by Impact 360 to systematically develop its agents' skills according to specific needs. Supervisors can quickly help agents improve their performance. The firm also uses Impact 360 Quality Monitoring for new-hire training; the recruits can listen to calls and follow the various process stages on screen, which helps them to understand the software applications more quickly while reducing training time.

The new Verint Impact 360 solution helped Lindner improve processes, increased reservation system effectiveness and boosted productivity and sales. Results garnered in 2009 were impressive compared with prior to installing the product. Average call length dropped by 20 percent, and trainers improved call quality; scores increased to 82 percent from 78 percent. Calls handled by per day increased by as many as 140; reservation volumes have grown by an average of 50 bookings per day. Inquiry-to-booking conversion rates rose by 15 percent, while the up-sell rate has doubled. Accordingly, annual sales have increased significantly.

"It's unusual for hotel chain our size to operate a contact center with quality monitoring systems, but the investment with Impact 360 has paid off for us," says Gunnar von Hagen, head of operations and central project management, Lindner Hotels AG. **CIS**

by Brendan Read

'Customer Interaction Solutions' Magazine's 25th Annual Top 50 Inbound Teleservices Agency Rankings

For a quarter century, the Customer Interaction Solutions "Top 50" Teleservices Agency Outbound Rankings rankings, based on extensive detail gleaned from an exhaustive application process, have been the benchmark for choosing high-capacity teleservices agencies. Last month, we unveiled this year's "Top 50" Outbound Rankings and now, we bring you our Inbound and Interactive rankings.

Ranking Criteria

Customer Interaction Solutions has always relied on measurable, third-party-verifiable data to determine our rankings of the "Top 50" agencies. More specifically, we rank agencies based on the number of minutes each was billed by each of its phone companies for telephone service for 12 months, from November 2008 through October 2009. We have found this to be an accurate and reliable reflection of the amount of teleservices each agency provides and, therefore, provides a true reflection of its size.

Qualification

Qualifying teleservices agencies submitted responses to a detailed questionnaire, indicating the nature of their operations and listing their volume of billable minutes for the 12-month period. Verification, in the form of the signature of each agency's president/CEO was required, in addition to submitting a letter of verification from each telephone service providers used, certifying the number of minutes for which the providers billed the agencies during the evaluation period. As always, we extend our gratitude to all the carriers for their thorough and expeditious provision of these data.

Exceptions

Agencies that did not supply the required third-party verification were disqualified, with three exceptions: 1) a client of the service agency was billed directly for its telephone service and would not provide a letter of verification for anonymity reasons; 2) part of the billable minutes were with a foreign telecommunications carrier that could not provide the data by the deadline; 3) legitimate business situations prevented an agency from obtaining verification from certain of its carriers or a certain carrier. For these situations, we allowed companies to certify a portion of the missing minutes with a letter of explanation and signed verification of billable minutes pertaining to the explanation from the president/CEO of the agency, indicating these agencies with an asterisk (*) in the listings.

Understanding the Listings

The Inbound listings have beed divided into three categories, ranked by size, beginning with the largest. Category A lists U.S. teleservices businesses; Category B consists of international teleservices businesses, including international components of U.S.-based agencies. Agencies that are ranked in both Category A and B are indicated with a dagger (†).

Category C ranks the interactive services (i.e., no live operators) of these teleservices agencies. This category continues to reflect the demand for automated self-help services. Companies that are ranked in the Domestic and/or International lists, and also in the Interactive category, are marked with a double dagger (‡).

And, because we have already ranked the Outbound services provided by these firms in the March issue, we also include Category D, the Overall Global Ranking, which aggregates global outbound, inbound, and interactive minutes to provide a view of the size of these businesses on global level.

As always, we provide these rankings with the hope that they will benefit you as you look to fulfill your teleservices outsourcing requirements. Please be sure to let your teleservices providers know you found them through the *Customer Interaction Solutions* "Top 50" Rankings.

Category A – U.S. Domestic

1. Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah) † ‡
www.teleperformance.com

2. Sitel Operating Corporation (Nashville, Tenn.) * † ‡
www.sitel.com

3. PRC Global Contact Management (Plantation, Fla.) ‡
www.prcnet.com

4. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) * ‡
www.liveops.com

5. GC Services Limited Partnership (Houston, Texas) * ‡
www.gcserv.com

6. Accent Marketing Services (Jeffersonville, Ind.) † ‡
www.accentonline.com

7. Cross Country Automotive Services (Medford, Mass.) † ‡
www.crosscountry-auto.com

8. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.)
www.dialamerica.com

9. The Connection (Burnsville, Minn.) * ‡
www.the-connection.com

10. VXI Global Solutions (Los Angeles, Calif.) * † ‡
www.vxi.com

11. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) * † ‡
www.telerx.com

12. TCIM Services, Inc. (Wilmington, Del.) *
www.tcim.com

13. American Customer Care, Inc. (Bristol, Conn.)
www.americancustomercare.com

14. Synergy' Solutions, Inc. (Scottsdale, Ariz.) ‡
www.synergysolutionsinc.com

15. The Results Companies (Dania Beach, Calif.) * †
www.theresultscompanies.com

16. AnswerNet (Willow Grove, Pa.) *
www.answernetnetwork.com

17. Charlton (Madison, Wis.)
www.tcgcorp.net

18. Affinitas Corporation (Omaha, Neb.)
www.affinitas.net

19. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * † ‡
www.influentinc.com

20. Hamilton Contact Center Services (Aurora, Neb.)
www.hamiltontm.com

21. Ameridial (North Canton, Ohio)
www.oksameridial.com

22. Ansafone Contact Centers (Santa Ana, Calif.)
www.ansafone.com

23. TMS Health (Boca Raton, Fla.) ‡
www.tmshealth.com

24. Americall Group, Inc. (Naperville, Ill.), a TelePerformance Company
www.americallgroup.com

25. Thomas L. Cardella & Associates (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) *
www.tlcassociates.com

26. InService America (Forest, Va.)
www.inserviceamerica.com

27. XO Interactive (Beaverton, Ore.) ‡
www.xo.com

28. Global Contact Services LLC (Salisbury, N.C.)
www.gcsagents.com

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29. Teleservices Direct (Indianapolis, Ind.)
www.teleservicesdirect.com

30. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Pa.)
www.121directresponse.com

31. O'Currance, Inc. (Draper, Utah) *
www.ocurrance.com

CATEGORY B — INTERNATIONAL

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France) ‡
www.teleperformance.com

2. Sitel Operating Corporation (Nashville, Tenn.) * † ‡
www.sitel.com

3. Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah) † ‡
www.teleperformance.com

4. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * † ‡
www.influentinc.com

5. Telvista Inc. (Dallas, Texas) * ‡
www.telvista.com

6. The Results Companies (Dania Beach, Calif.) * †
www.theresultscompanies.com

7. VXI Global Solutions (Los Angeles, Calif.) * † ‡
www.vxi.com

8. Skybridge Marketing Group (Greenfield, Minn.)
www.skybridgemg.com

9. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, SK) ‡
www.24-7intouch.com

10. Voxdata (Montreal, QC) *
www.voxdata.com

11. Cross Country Automotive Services (Medford, Mass.) † ‡
www.crosscountry-auto.com

12. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) * † ‡
www.telerx.com

13. Accent Marketing Services (Jeffersonville, Ind.) † ‡
www.accentonline.com

CATEGORY C — INTERACTIVE INBOUND

1. XO Interactive (Beaverton, Ore.)
www.xo.com

2. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, Ohio) *
www.influentinc.com

3. Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah)
www.teleperformance.com

4. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France)
www.teleperformance.com

5. GC Services Limited Partnership (Houston, Texas) *
www.gcserv.com

6. Cross Country Automotive Services (Medford, Mass.)
www.crosscountry-auto.com

7. TMS Health (Boca Raton, Fla.)
www.tmshealth.com

8. Sitel Operating Corporation (Nashville, Tenn.) *
www.sitel.com

9. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) *
www.liveops.com

10. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) *
www.telerx.com

11. Synergy Solutions, Inc. (Scottsdale, Ariz.)
www.synergysolutionsinc.com

12. Accent Marketing Services (Jeffersonville, Ind.)
www.accentonline.com

13. PRC Global Contact Management Solutions (Plantation, Fla.)
www.prcnet.com

14. The Connection (Burnsville, Minn.) *
www.the-connection.com

15. VXI Global Solutions (Los Angeles, Calif.) *
www.vxi.com

16. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, SK)
www.24-7intouch.com

17. Telvista, Inc. (Dallas, Texas)
www.telvista.com

CATEGORY D — GLOBAL AGGREGATE RANKING

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France)

2. Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah)

3. Sitel Operating Corporation (Nashville, Tenn.) *

4. XO Interactive (Beaverton, Ore.)

5. GC Services Limited Partnership (Houston, Texas) *

6. LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.) *

7. PRC Global Contact Management Solutions (Plantation, Fla.)

8. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, Ohio) *

9. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.)

10. Cross Country Automotive Services (Medford, Mass.)

11. Accent Marketing Services (Jeffersonville, Ind.)

12. Americall Group, Inc. (Naperville, Ill.), a TelePerformance Company

13. VXI Global Solutions (Los Angeles, Calif.) *

14. Global Contact Services LLC (Salisbury, N.C.)

15. Telvista, Inc. (Dallas, Texas) *

16. The Results Companies (Dania Beach, Fla.) *

17. TCIM Services, Inc. (Wilmington, Del.) *

18. The Connection (Burnsville, Minn.) *

19. Telerx (Horsham, Pa.) *

20. Synergy Solutions, Inc. (Scottsdale, Ariz.)

21. TMS Health (Boca Raton, Fla.)

22. Charlton (Madison, Wis.)

23. American Customer Care, Inc. (Bristol, Conn.)

24. AnswerNet (Willow Grove, Pa.) *

25. Teleservices Direct (Indianapolis, Ind.)

26. Thomas L. Cardella & Associates (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) *

27. Ameridial (North Canton, Ohio)

28. Hamilton Contact Center Services (Aurora, Neb.)

29. Affinitas Corporation (Omaha, Neb.)

30. Skybridge Marketing Group (Greenfield, Minn.)

31. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, SK)

32. O'Currance, Inc. (Draper, Utah) *

33. Voxdata (Toronto, ON)

34. ListenUp Espanol (Portland, Maine)

35. Ansafone Contact Centers (Santa Ana, Calif.)

36. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Pa.)

37. InService America (Forest, Va.)

38. Greene, an RMG Direct Company (Lincolnshire, IL)

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IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT

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Brendan B. Read, *Senior Contributing Editor*

Not Serving Obnoxious Customers

At the risk of disloyalty to my "home and native land" (Canada), to cite the words of our now-familiar-to-the world national anthem: I tolerate Tim Hortons coffee. I'll drink it if I'm on the road, need a jolt and there isn't anything else reasonably available.

My wife, who recently became a Canadian citizen, thinks the same way. She told me "now I must be a Canadian; my taste buds have died."

While I may have misgivings about Tim Hortons offerings, I have tremendous respect for the staff who deliver them. They rush to meet sometimes simple, occasionally complicated orders, taking it (verbally) on the chin for their colleagues if the coffee is not quite right or a sandwich is goofed up, and always with a smile on their face. They are worth far more than what they are paid.

> Contact centers and parent firms should set up 'three strikes and you're out' policies for offenders regardless of channel; information about offenders would be shared.

So when I read a CBC story published Feb. 8 'Tim Hortons bans complaining customer' about a New Brunswick man being barred from a local outlet because of the lousy coffee I initially sympathized. Then I read a followup CBC article published the next day 'Tim Hortons defends customer ban' about the same customer being aggressive...well I only wish that people receive what is rightfully theirs, and which appears to be the case.

Contact center agents would probably agree with and applaud the coffee/donut chain. For they arguably receive even worse treatment from miscreants because they hide behind the phones, chat inputs and e-mails and texts, cowards who would dare not spew their vile behavior including language – which sadly too often is infested with racist and sexist slurs – face-to-face. Dealing with these miserable individuals is one of the biggest annoyances of contact center work: up there with terrible supervisors.

Obnoxious behavior directed to contact center staff risks becoming worse because customers are becoming more empowered, that they know best and are demanding, an attitude that is sharpened when they are using mobile devices, on expensive per-minute-based plans and feel they can't/don't have to wait. More importantly, because the auto-attendant systems and Web sites have directed customers to voice and web self-service tools when they zero-out or dial to reach agents they are often frustrated and impatient because they could not obtain what they needed via these solutions.

Businesses where employees interact with customers face-to-face make it clear to the clientele that these enterprises have the right to refuse service and, as the Canadian coffee giant demonstrated, will make this stick. They can and do bring multiple people to bear on the perps along with building security and if need be the police, both of which supply the added punishment of public embarrassment.

My wife used to work for one of Canada's largest contact centers. When her and her colleagues got rude callers they bounced them to their supervisors who then made notes in the customers' files. Yet somehow such measures don't have the same effect as telling them the contact centers will end the transactions or, in extreme cases, cancel the accounts.

Contact centers need a similar approach like that taken by retail/storefront firms like Tim Hortons. They have one potent edge compared with them in that the calls/contacts are recorded, providing proof of transgressions that they can retrieve for further action.

Contact centers and parent firms should set up "three strikes and you're out" policies for offenders regardless of channel; information about offenders would be shared. They should institute triggers of two objectionable calls: the first one automated outbound notifications and if the incidents happen again the second being live calls to the dear persons to see "what are their problems?" If the customers are out of line the third time they can give the offending parties an opportunity to write formal written apologies. If these are not received in X amount of time firm can then notify the wronging parties that they are terminating their accounts.

The most valuable assets companies have are their staff. Protecting them when they have been wronged will encourage them to provide even better service to those excellent customers for whom they find it a pleasure to serve. **CIS**

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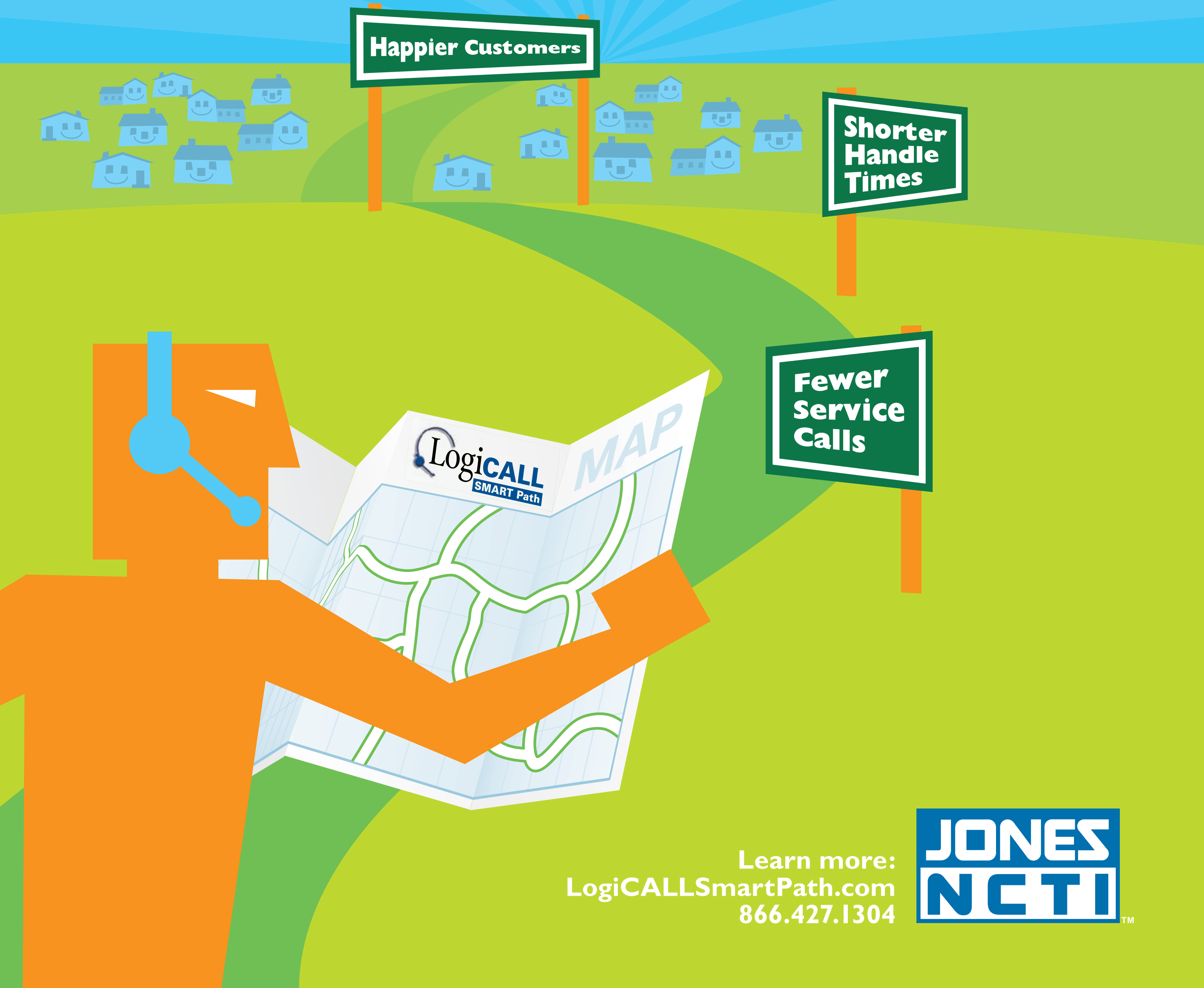
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