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Social Media is Mainstream Media

Last month I spent some time discussing how social networking will impact your company on search engines. In this issue, it is worth discussing how these technologies are changing marketing, media and sales. A company recently contacted me because they were falling behind... A competitor of theirs had amassed over 100,000 Twitter followers and they had fewer than 100. They surmised correctly that if these 100,000 people who follow the competition are qualified, the balance of power in marketing has just shifted wildly. You see, the 100,000 followers belonged to a person working for a very small company in the market. Traditional marketing – even e-mail – is becoming less effective.

Virtually all forms of customer outreach are declining in value. Radio, TV and print media are losing more and more eyeballs to the Web. Direct mail is being destroyed by e-mail and e-mail is being destroyed by Twitter and Facebook. You see, many people in their twenties and under are not using e-mail or even the Web, they use Facebook as their Internet portal and Facebook and/or Twitter for messaging.

Social media is transforming how we communicate with customers and the later you are to the game, the worse life will be for you. The competition for eyeballs is increasing by the moment and you need to climb on board as soon as possible because it takes time to build a network of followers.

But the question I hear most often is: How do companies grow their Twitter followers and do it quickly?

If this is a situation you find yourself in as well, you have arrived very late to the game and Twitter has made it more difficult as of late to add massive amounts of followers without hard work. In fact, the summer of 2008 seems to be the time they started to impose a 2,000-follower limit on accounts.

This limit depends on factors such as how many people follow you so it isn't a stringent limit per se. Still, this limitation makes it more difficult to grow a large following, but the flipside is it limits the damage spammers can do in this basic social networking service.

I recently started using a software package called Hummingbird, which helps people increase their Twitter followers. In order to use it, you enter in keywords you want to track and then let it "listen." When it finds a tweet with one of the keywords used in your query it auto-follows the person mentioning the term. For example, if your search terms are "Geico, Insurance, Progressive," you will auto-follow anyone using these terms in their tweets.

What I have found is if you allow this program to run overnight in the U.S., you start to follow a lot of international

people. This is likely not the way to use this program unless you are looking for a global Twitter audience. If you try the program, which costs just under \$100, be sure to use esoteric terms first to get comfortable with the followers you attract – you see people you follow will likely follow you back.

I have been spending considerable time cleaning out my own Twitter account because I chose to auto-follow people based on the keywords "Skype" and "video" – bad choices if you are looking for people in the communications and tech spaces.

Perhaps the best way to add related followers on Twitter is a directory such as "Twellow," which allows you to search for people based on interests. You have to follow them one-by-one, unfortunately, but without question, the directory seems to contain the thought leaders in the few industries I checked.

Another important tip is in order to get people to follow you must add insight in your tweets and generally share important information. Humor doesn't hurt either. In addition, you need to seek out others on Twitter and have conversations with them. You don't want to send them direct messages but instead use the "@" sign so your communications are searchable and show up to the persons' followers.

In other words, you could send me "@rtehrani I really liked your last column" and this tweet shows up to my followers and some of my followers may see the tweet and choose to follow you.

The transformation of communications is quite real and contact centers have the potential to be your gateway into social media. In fact you already have very social people working for you as agents and they are likely the same people who are experts in Facebook and Twitter in your company.

I suggest you engage them quickly and find ways to implement their social media knowledge and, in the process, help your company communicate with current and future customers more effectively. Remember, there is absolutely no question that social media has become mainstream media. **CIS**

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Erik Linask, Group Editorial Director, TMC



Customer Relationship Insurance for Insurance Carriers

The basic benefits of IP-based communications are broad and extensible to nearly all industries (cost-savings, operational efficiency, enhanced customer service, etc.). But, each particular vertical market has its own nuances and specific requirements that must be accommodated in order to win the maximum benefit from communications investments.

Therefore – and this is what many communications solutions vendors have begun to understand – it is imperative that products can be adapted to cater to specific markets in order to provide the greatest value for the users.

Take, for instance, your insurance carrier (or, more likely, a former provider). Undoubtedly, most of you have had less than stellar experiences when putting in claims following a fender bender. In my case, it was a pool bender, when a neighbor's tree fell onto my pool during a heavy storm a few years ago.

Naturally, I called my insurance company, spoke to an agent, who asked for my details to look up our coverage, and promptly decided I needed to speak to another agent. That agent also asked me for the same information, and informed me that I would have to speak to yet another agent in a different department, who was not in at the time. I left my number and waited... for two days... at which point, I called back, only to find that the individual I now needed to speak to had been on vacation. That's only the beginning of my saga – recounting the entire ordeal is hardly worth it, since we've already identified a clear opportunity for improving a business process and the customer experience.

Many of the issues and delays policyholders experience when filing claims, or just requesting information, can be resolved through the automation of the claim lifecycle, and with the multichannel environment in which we live, it's important to be able to initiate that automation regardless of the initiating channel.

Consider Interaction Process Automation (IPA), from Interactive Intelligence, an automation software solution that can be customized to the needs of its customers.

For instance, in this case, the initial contact would be logged into a database with a unique case number attached, which would accompany my case from agent to agent, from process to process. The same would hold for a Web-based, e-mail, or IVR inquiry – or any other communication channel. When the first agent transferred me to the second, the information that had already been collected would follow, speeding the process and, importantly, not irritating the customer who previously had to repeat the information.

When the case had to be escalated to a specialist, the data would again follow but, more importantly, rules can be set up to route cases to an alternate agent, since the specialist was unavailable. This not only speeds the process, but eliminates the two days of waiting (not to mention increased agitation) that concluded with the realization that the individual wasn't even available.

In fact, rules can be set up for the entire process, which define each step in a claim or inquiry process, ensuring cases are routed appropriately to available personnel, even integrating with mobile environments, where supervisors can approve or reject claims with a simple key press on their mobile when an alert or message arrives, or routing to accounting staff for payment. Notifications to policyholders can also be automated, informing them of the status of their case throughout the process, including when a claim has been approved and a check cut and mailed.

With IPA, manual claims processing becomes an outdated activity. In fact, with IPA, insurance firms can not only automate claims processes, but also underwriting procedures, policywriting and distribution, and general administration tasks, allowing agencies to be more efficient and productive, ensure compliance with regulations, and ensure customer satisfaction, resulting in a growing business.

In a vertical market that is as competitive as any, especially given the propensity for switching carriers to find lower rates, increasing customer loyalty must be a priority. Automating as many processes as possible is the ideal way to ensure that policies are followed and that customers are serviced as quickly and effectively as possible, by taking human error out of the equation.

To bring you the latest technologies available to the insurance industry, including up-to-date news and customer success stories, TMC has recently launched the Insurance Technology site on TMCnet (insurance-technology.tmcnet.com), which will be the one-stop resource for insurance agencies looking for the best ways to leverage technology to enhance their operations and better manage their customer expectations, driving satisfaction and loyalty – and business success. **CIS**



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Avaya's Route for Next-Gen Customers

There is a new generation of customers that is emerging in the marketplace, one that is empowered and has taken control of interactions, armed with knowledge about companies and their offerings, equipped via social media to make or break firms' reputations. They are demanding that the organizations they interact with deliver to them via a widening array of channels of their choice: voice, Web, chat, e-mail, SMS, social media and video the information, products and services right now.

Avaya (www.avaya.com) is planning to open by third quarter 2010 a new route to help organizations carry this new generation plus by likeminded older customers via the contact centers. It unveiled the highway Jan. 19 with its "Roadmap for Future of Business Communications," which integrates its products with those from the former Nortel Enterprise Solutions. Avaya acquired the division from the bankrupt communications equipment firm at auction in 2009 for \$915 million.

Avaya's new expressway is the Avaya Next Gen Context Center Portfolio for the contact center market, which will rest on the Avaya Aura SIP-based communications platform. The keyword here is "context." The firm says next generation context-based customer service is the ability to streamline information, processes and communications to provide a consistent, high-value end-customer engagement. This will ultimately provide customers with the superior service experience they are demanding.

The key guideposts of the Avaya Next Gen Context Center path include anticipating customer needs with proactive multichannel notification solutions and successfully automating voice and Web self-service interactions via communications enabled business systems. They also include accelerating productivity goals by optimizing agent, expert and self-service interactions across channels for efficient operations.

"We're focused on solving the next generation customer care challenge, which requires the delivery of holistic, seamlessly-



connected services for a generation of customers that are expecting to receive care in a variety of different ways," says Jorge Blanco, Avaya vice president, contact center product marketing. "We have also been focused on how we're going to harness all kinds of information both realtime and non-realtime and collapse them onto the customer care process. The plan we have developed is extensible and includes all communications channels."

The Nortel acquisition has added substantially to the engineering talent, tools and the raw materials for the Avaya Next Gen Context Center route, which will help contact centers get where they want to go faster, with fewer bumps and with greater efficiency.

Avaya plans to leverage key elements from the Nortel contact center suite including media handling and workforce applications, plus some of the some of the views and supervisory capabilities such as agent stat views from Nortel's desktop application. Avaya is incorporating the Nortel Agile Communication Environment (ACE), which is an open software platform for building multi-vendor communications-enabled business processes and unified communications applications into the Avaya Aura solution.



“What we’re trying to do with both the Avaya and Nortel products is to make sure that their most innovative features and capabilities are included in the Next Gen Context Center,” says Blanco.

At the same time the Avaya road-map is including onramps for existing Nortel customers so that they can move easily and gradually onto the new thoroughfare. Avaya has a standard product support policy of six years starting with manufacturers and then adding optional extended assistance. Owners of Nortel contact center products such as Symposium Express will have plenty of time to make the turn onto the Next Gen Context Center.

Avaya will be blending contact center call recording, reporting and quality management capabilities of Nortel line with its own call management, recording and QA systems into the next gen portfolio. Companies have built their businesses around the reporting engines that they run, and can ill-afford to have them changed without seamless migration capabilities, explains Blanco.

Similarly, Avaya is meshing Nortel’s IVR and speech recognition solutions via the Avaya Voice Portal. There are hundreds of thousands of such applications that Avaya and legacy Nortel customers have deployed in aggregate on those platforms, which are very scalable, reports Blanco, and which the firm is not looking to disrupt right now.

“We are looking at how those applications can be transitioned to the Next Gen environment over time,” says Blanco. “That’s what our customers expect.” **CIS**

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Jobscope

In his “First Coffee” blog, TMCnet’s David Sims writes:

Jobscope, which sells ERP for order-driven manufacturers, is shipping their new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) module as part of the Jobscope ERP system.

The new CRM module within Jobscope “creates information visibility into all aspects of each customer,” says Hank Sanders, president of Jobscope.

Integrated within Jobscope, the new CRM module offers customer management capabilities “without the need of buying a third party application or any bolt-on software.” Company officials say single screen views with customer tabs “simplify the CRM experience.”

Using the module gives customers activity tracking capabilities for accounts and pros-

pects: “Multiple contacts, bill to and ship to addresses are included on single records,” company officials say, for tracking activity: “Additionally, multiple hold statuses for each account are available including job hold, work order hold and shipping hold. Users also have the ability to link documents to customer records for simplifying access to engineering drawings, pictures, or other account and project documentation.”

Visit David’s blog at <http://blog.tmcnet.com/telecom-crm>

Will Reliability Be a Factor?

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

I see many folks asking if SaaS (software-as-a-service) will be hurt by data center outages. So I figured I would take a shot at it.

Anything over the IP network is going to be slightly less reliable than the TDM network. The TDM network had 100 years to create the 5 nines reliability that customers have come to expect. IP networks have not had that long – 15 years max to design some kind of reliability.

One big difference is that IP networks have more points of failure. Routers and switches on each end. Smart jacks. Cabling. Sure TDM has RJ-11 cabling, but when was the last time that failed? Until it disintegrates it can usually carry some kind of voice signal. It’s data that requires a better connection and more wire integrity. The signal carrying the data is more susceptible to interference, like the way an AM radio signal can knock out a DSLAM.

Luckily for carriers, the consumers have been taught by cellular usage that convenience comes with some trade-offs. So dropped calls, blacked out areas, no coverage, roaming charges, unclear calls and the like have helped to lower customer expectations about services.

That’s a good thing for SaaS – whether it is Hotmail, Google Apps, Salesforce, blogs, or what-have-you. Outages happen. Total redundancy is way too expensive for most companies to actually implement. Let’s remember that the cloud and virtualized apps are still sitting somewhere on a server and hard drive. Many points of failure there, but people have outages on premise based servers too. And on PCs. So there is some understanding.

Visit Peter’s blog at <http://blog.tmcnet.com/on-rads-radar>

SURVEY: MOBILE PHONES MUCH MORE FAVORABLE THAN SOCIAL NETWORKS

In his Communications and Technology Blog, Rich Tehrani writes:

In a tough decade, what could people count on to make their lives better? Communications, yes communications. Fifty percent of people surveyed by Pew viewed the last decade unfavorably and 27 percent viewed it positively.

Here are some of the reasons they may have positive thoughts about the last 10 years:

- 65 percent say the Internet and e-mail have been a change for the better while a full 69 percent of people say mobile devices have been a change for the better;
- Only 29 percent say blogs haven’t been a change for the better – I like to think these are people who haven’t had a chance to visit this site yet; and
- Social networking – all the rage these past years showed a lackluster ranking with only 35 percent saying this new form of communications is a change for the better

After a magnificent bubble in 1998-2000, communications investment was slaughtered like a balanced federal government budget and left for dead. Amazingly companies like Vonage, Skype and a slew of others emerged from the ashes and showed innovation was alive and well.

With the public behind the technology and VCs not far behind, what will the next decade hold in store for communications and tech? I can’t wait to find out.

Visit Rich’s blog at <http://blog.tmcnet.com/blog/rich-tehrani>



Excellent Hosts



Contracting with third-party firms or OEMs to host or provide solutions in the cloud is emerging as a viable lower-cost and more flexible alternative to on-premises, installations for a growing range of contact center applications. The proof though is in the implementation. Here is one such example of an excellent host (and guest):

Extra Space Storage (ESS) is the second largest self storage provider in the United States. It had been using a combination of local on-site staff and a BPO firm to handle its calls. Inbound inquiries to individual facilities were answered by employees when available and by the outsourcer after the fourth ring. It wasn't enough though; the firm needed to improve the customer experience and to track all customer contacts.

So in summer 2008 ESS rethought its contact handling strategy. At the time it operated 670 self-storage properties in 33 states and in Washington, D.C., with a goal to double its footprint by 2013. It decided to build an in-house contact center as well as invest in a CRM to maintain customer account information and provide detailed performance metrics to help it optimize operations.

"We were using an outsourcer because, in our industry, it's imperative that customer calls be answered by a live person," says Extra Space Storage Chief Information Officer Bill Hoban. "Otherwise, callers go to the next self-storage company in the phone book and we lose the sale. But our service had no way of knowing whether the caller had phoned before or was already a customer, outsourcer appointments sent by e-mail sometimes didn't get retrieved before the customer showed up to see a unit."

ESS planned for a new 50-seat center near its Salt Lake City, Utah headquarters. Incoming calls to the local self-storage fa-

cilities would be routed to the center's sales or service queue based on customers' IVR selections. The center would also handle outbound callbacks and campaigns. A new CRM system as well as the company's existing point-of-sale software would be integrated with the contact center software to equip agents with one-screen access to all customer and facility information.

Extra Space Storage investigated premises-based contact center platforms and CRM software. It chose inContact (www.incontact.com) and Salesforce.com (www.salesforce.com) respectively because of the cost and rapid deployment advantages with hosting; inContact's solution is integrated with Salesforce.com's product.

Going to inContact saved ESS tens of thousands of dollars in capital investment and in ongoing building infrastructure, maintenance and replacement costs by eliminate the need to buy and install hardware and software; inContact provides routing, IVR, outbound and workforce management applications. Call handling is provided over a broadband connection from equipment hosted at inContact's own data center.

Taking the hosted route with inContact and Salesforce.com also enabled the firm to meet an eight-week deployment schedule before its outsourced contract expired. Premises-installed contact center and CRM solutions would have missed the date because they entailed much

longer ramp up times, in part because of time-consuming integration chores.

Extra Space Storage opened its inContact-powered contact center in phases beginning in November 2008 and completed deployment to all properties in February 2009. Implementation went quickly and smoothly. By October 2009 growth had expanded the center's responsibilities to 740 local stores.

The post-setup results have been dramatic. In the first eight months after rollout ESS nearly doubled the percentage of prospect phone calls that resulted in reservations; this is vital as 90 percent of them convert to sales. On-site facility managers no longer have to answer telephone sales inquiries, freeing them to pay attention to maintaining their property and serving existing customers in person.

inContact's hosted solution has future-proofed Extra Space Storage's growth. The storage firm is building out a self-service IVR for simple tasks, such as bill payment, which will manage live agent call volumes. The inContact solution will also enable ESS to add work-at-home-agents as the firm is likely to outgrow its current call center space.

"We don't want to be call switch or CRM experts," Hoban said. "Having someone else manage these systems in the cloud makes business sense from every perspective." **CIS**



Squaring the Training Dilemma

Contact center training in this tight economy is much like essential government services. The needs they address are becoming more complicated; the more thorough and effectively they are provided the more everyone benefits: but few want to foot the bill, citing tight budgets. Instead both services and training have typically been slashed to conserve resources and to avoid raising prices (and taxes) that will annoy the customers, who are also taxpayers.



For contact centers, if not necessarily for governments there may be a dim light on the horizon. Dina Vance, senior vice president at Ulysses Learning, is seeing organizations' purse strings loosen slightly beginning in the last quarter 2009 which has freed up some money for training.

"Training budgets are the first items that get reduced in a downturn and 2009 was a very tough year across the board," says Vance. "Firms are being very careful how to spend their dollars they do have, focusing on areas that get results with cost-efficient tools like e-learning."

Squaring Needs Budgets and Training

Contact center needs are becoming more complex, which requires increasingly sophisticated training. One of the biggest and increasingly common issues that Rosanne D'Ausilio, Ph.D, president, Human Technologies Global, is seeing and treating with training is handling calls from customers who have been through automated self-service and now have to reach live agents. These individuals are upset and frustrated and want out-of-box solutions to their problems now.

"The problem is that agents have often not been trained well on anger diffusion, at helping someone who is frustrated," explains D'Ausilio. "Agents often ask the wrong questions in those moments, they

don't empathize, they get deer in headlights moments. They therefore need training in these areas to turn customers around so they stay with the company."

Maggie Klenke, a founding partner of The Call Center School, reports more demand for sales training than ever before. Contact centers that have focused almost entirely on customer service or technical support are being asked to produce revenue through up-selling, cross-selling and add-ons such as maintenance agreements.

"Many contact centers have not recruited for sales skills and find themselves struggling to get agents to embrace the idea of selling," says Klenke. "So we have added sales training options to our curriculum and will be adding more through this year."

To succeed at sales agents must be well-educated on companies' or in the case of business process outsourcing (BPO) firms their clients' products and services including features, pricing and availability. This training is provided by internal sales managers or by BPO account or client services managers to contact center agents either directly or indirectly via teaching supervisors who then beehive the information to the teams.

Thomas L. Cardella Associates (TLC&A) is a leading BPO firm. The company's client services managers have

been with the firm since the start in 2007; they have at least 10 years' experience at all levels in the contact center industry. All of them have been with the firm since the start.

"To be a successful client services manager you must have passion, a commitment to the clients willing to put in the hours and do what it takes to meet their needs," says TLC&A CEO and founder Tom Cardella. "That passion is imparted via the trainers and supervisors to the agents who then are motivated to excel at serving the clients' customers."

Ulysses Learning's Vance is seeing companies increasingly focus on shortening time to competency to improve productivity. Most new hire training programs take six to eight weeks but firms want to cut this down to four weeks.

"There's been a lot of discussion about how we can reduce the human resources and push more of it to self-directed self-paced learning experience, increasing agents' knowledge so they can start right away with customers," says Vance.

At the same time managers have had to make stronger business case for contact center training. Klenke is seeing more companies asking for demonstrations of training ROI. Managers want to see the attendees demonstrate the skills on the job and an analysis of the benefits that added to the bottom line. These



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analyses require more “before” studies as well as management or projects and other activities that can assess the “after.”

“The simple ‘how did you like the training’ or even the quiz for retention of the key points at the end of class just isn’t enough anymore,” Klenke points out.

Training Solutions

Managers are getting creative on their training methods and solutions. One tool more firms are using is social networking through internal blogs, e-chat and Twitter accounts through which employees can post and share best practices, ask quick questions, get answers from their peers, reports Vance.

Kathryn Jackson, associate, ResponseLearning Corporation, is seeing many organizations beginning to push training to agents during low volume times. This practice has become much more practical and cost effective thanks to e-learning.

In some cases though, organizations are leaving money on the table by not accurately assessing which skills and knowledge specific agents are lacking and only pushing those targeted modules to them.

“My company constantly has to remind organizations not to ‘sheep dip’ (our term for making an employee go through a training session whether they need it or not),” says Jackson.

D’Ausilio recommends that contact centers perform needs assessments to find out where the points of pain are and then focus their training resources on them with the right delivery methods. She is seeing her clients increasingly take an in-person training session that used to last six days to become a one-day event or they have the option of a home study course for staff or train the trainer, which ends up being very cost effective. For the train-the-trainer programs she is requiring her clientele that is using it to put in evaluations for those being trained so that the training is being delivered – and delivered appropriately.

“Training is being provided not as I will do this or that but instead if and that whether traditional classroom, web based e-learning, or one day lunch and learn,” says D’Ausilio. “And to be effective that training must address the most critical needs.”

ResponseLearning’s Jackson believes that company-customized e-learning blended with simulations, with specific examples

Contact Center Products Training

When contact center products and services are installed, users: IT staff, coaches and managers and agents need to be trained on them to realize their full value to the enterprises. That training is provided by the suppliers and/or their reseller partners.

Verint makes a wide range of workforce optimization (WFO) plus security intelligence products. To help customers maximize their Impact 360 Workforce Optimization software investments, Verint Witness Actionable Solutions offers a full program via its Verint Impact Services.

Verint’s dedicated resources and programs are designed to guide the “customer in learning” with ways to best leverage the WFO solutions. Customers have access to both self-paced and instructor-led courses, and also can leverage printed courseware materials, online course materials, and in-person/onsite training.

Verint offers Desktop Learning Libraries, which are comprised of a Web-based collection that enables training right on the customer’s desktop. The Desktop Learning Libraries include interactive training in a wide range of learning tracks. Each track contains several hours of material that

students can master at their own pace, according to job requirements and goals.

The Desktop Learning Libraries include training on soft skills, such as listening and selling. Lessons can be manually assigned to employees using a personalized home page within Impact 360, or – depending on the employee’s configuration – can be assigned based on evaluation scores and/or key performance indicators within an employee’s scorecard. At the end of each course, an assessment shows how well the topic and skills have been mastered. This assessment can be captured leveraging Impact 360 or other compatible learning management systems.

Because supervisors often rise through the ranks and lack formal training on coaching, Verint also offers Impact 360 High-Impact Coaching workshops. Taking place over three days they help supervisors gain the skills to coach their teams effectively. The sessions focus on best practices and skills for coaching staff effectively not only in the contact center, but throughout the enterprise. Supervisors learn to implement consistent coaching across the enterprise using individualized coaching and feedback plans and a customized behavior tracking template.



from their firms, can effectively deliver strong results while cutting costs. Every skill being taught needs a “learn by doing” segment, she explains. Research also indicates that learning is enhanced when the content is situated in the context in which the learning is put to use (i.e. the contact center). Simulations provide this type of contextual training.

The savings from this approach are considerable. One company reports that for every day of training replaced by e-learning and simulation it saves over \$500 (not including any travel costs). She says a firm that trains 30 new agents per year and provides two weeks of new hire training finds that it can replace five days of that with e-learning/simulations it would save \$375,000 a year.

“We can’t afford to deliver hours of training at a time,” says Jackson. “We need modules that succinctly communicate one skill area at a time and take five to 15 minutes to complete. To support this trend, a company must invest in some type of computer based e-learning. Fortunately this technology is extremely affordable these days.”

E-learning tools are becoming more capable. Ulysses Learning has incorporated The Experience Builder Advanced Version 3.1, from Experience Build-

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Upcoming Training-Related Articles

Contact center channels and environments are diversifying with multichannel communications (e-mail/SMS, chat, social media) and home-based and nearshore and offshore locations. To enable superior customer satisfaction, retention, strong sales and returns and high productivity requires agents to be screened, trained and managed in manners that reflect the unique attributes and challenges of these methods and sites.

Upcoming articles of *Customer Interaction Solutions* will have features that explore these issues. These are: Structuring a Work-at-Home Agent Program (April), Leveraging Multichannel Communications (May) and Onshore vs. Offshore (June).

ers into its CallMentor e-learning solution. It allows contact centers to develop and deploy customized goal-based training simulations more rapidly than ever, at even lower cost.

“Experience Builder Advanced 3.1 enables our clients to combine our exhaustively researched and validated learning content with their knowledge of their organization and specific objectives to create and deploy goal-based simulations for contact center training even faster and more affordable than ever,” says Vance.

Coaching and Managers

One key area that more firms need and are beginning to address is how to get their coaches focused on the right activities: developing their teams through effective and efficient coaching. Recent industry reports show coaching should be 70 percent of a manager’s time however, today most organizations report it around 50 percent, reports Vance.

“We can’t have our contact center managers be everything to everyone and still expect them to spend 70 percent of their time coaching,” says Vance. “We need people-developers because that’s what’s going to make our centers successful.”

Part of the issue lies with senior management adding administrative and other responsibilities onto managers. Yet part of the problem also lies with many managers’ lack of interest in coaching and training. Vance recommends that firms assign the responsibilities to ancillary groups, screen management applicants before promoting them into the roles, and train them on giving consistent constructive, prescriptive feedback.

“Make sure you have managers who have the desire to do the job of coaching, remove the roadblocks in the way of allowing managers to coach and give them the skills to do so,” recommends Vance. “Invest the time now to develop your people and there’s a rippling effect that will lighten your workload three months to six months down the river.”

There is a growing array of manager training programs. The RCCSP Professional Education Alliance, a horizontal industry alliance of over 40 U.S. professional call center, help desk, IT support, telecom and service management training providers, has developed several new and updated training programs targeted at service and cost issues.

The RCCSP Alliance courses cover how to evaluate and employ emerging contact center technologies, maximizing IVR, speech recognition, and self-service technology capabilities and apply powerful contact center engineering techniques to cut wait and increase throughput – with no additional staffing and financial management issues. They also instruct managers on fine-tuning workforce planning, scheduling, and staffing, and designing call center compensation, pay and bonus plans.

“In peer networking sessions, we frequently hear from call center managers who have had their staffing cut to the bone and are left with skeletal teams to carry a workload beyond their capacities,” says RCCSP Alliance CEO Nina Kawalek. “Many feel powerless, weathering an avalanche of calls as best they can. Just surviving the workload is success. They need new, innovated solutions to meet dire circumstances. And, those skills can be found in the industry’s state-of-the-art training and certification programs. The answers really are there.” **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

Human Technologies Global
www.human-technologies.com

RCCSP Alliance
www.the-resource-center.com

ResponseLearning Corporation
www.responselearning.com

The Call Center School
www.thecallcenterschool.com

Thomas L. Cardella Associates
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- **Activa Live (www.activalive.com)** has a new language-localized version of Activa Live Chat. Activa Live Chat's operator console is the reportedly the first and only application of its kind to be available in English and Spanish. The customer-facing portion of the service is now fully localized in 11 languages including English, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Customers can switch the language of their individual live chat deployments with a quick and easy settings change.
- **Altitude Software (www.altitude.com)** has come out with a virtual checkup solution, Altitude Health Monitor. It helps keep contact centers' infrastructure running by providing real time and historical data on system performance over web interfaces and through e-mail and SMS notifications. Altitude Health Monitor's value resides on specific Altitude uCI, Altitude vBox and contact center infrastructure metrics such as database performance, storage occupancy, the number of agents logged, trunk status and configuration changes.
- **EQAOfficeCubicles.com (<http://eqaofficecubicles.com>)** has introduced a new Segment Call Center Cubicle which the company claims is the most indestructible contact center cubicle on the market. The cubicles are constructed with metal and wood laminate; they are scratch-, dirt- and graffiti-resistant. The surfaces are easier to disinfect, which prevents the spread of germs. The cubicles are backed up with a five-year warranty. They are available in a range of colors and textures, can be designed to fit any space: sizes and wall heights are completely configurable for any floor plan and equipped with standards-compliant voice, data and power cabling systems.
- **PhoneFactor (www.phonefactor.com)** now provides readerless biometric verification for its phone-based authentication platform via customers' or employees' (such as home agents') voices. Their voiceprints are verified during **PhoneFactor** authentication calls. Users receive calls when logging in. They answer and speak their passphrases to complete the process. PhoneFactor's voice mapping model uses multiple voiceprint algorithms to ensure that authorized users can be verified regardless of factors such as excess noise or minor voice variations. The authentication call is out-of-band, offering protection from man-in-the-middle attacks and keystroke loggers. The voiceprint solution adds a third factor verification, the others being the calls and passphrases.
- **PRC (www.prcnet.com)** has launched PRC Social Media Solutions to help firms tap into this channel. It is made up of three components: listening, measuring and engaging. The listening component involves monitoring conversations on social networking Web sites. In the measuring phase, PRC uses an analytics tool to track mentions of a client's brand across all social media sites. PRC engages with its clients' customers to address individual service issues, troubleshoot and resolve problems and thank customers for their feedback. PRC Social Media Solutions can be integrated with its inbound/outbound teleservices, e-mail, chat and other service offerings.
- **Toshiba (www.telecom.toshiba.com)** has introduced the Strata Call Manager, its new unified communications solution. The Strata Call Manager's features and capabilities include Presence Viewer, instant messaging/chat, desktop call control from PCs and customized call handling. There is outbound dialing from any application and CRM integration with screen pops.
- **VirtualLogger (www.virtuallogger.com)** has upgraded its recording systems, policies and procedures and has certified to be compliant with Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS 1.2) certification. VirtualLogger passed two separate ASV vulnerability scans from two independent scanning companies, rather than the usual single vendor and engaged a Qualified Security Assessor in completing its SAQ_D. **CS**



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ATA Revs Up Compliance, Legislation Education, Awareness

For contact centers complying with the expanding multitude of federal and state telemarketing and labor regulations can be a headache. So can finding out about, tracking and making one's voice heard on pending legislation and regulations changes that will affect their operations, costs and business.

The American Teleservices Association (ATA) (www.ataconnect.org) has rolled out plans to educate and train its members on compliance and to make them aware on legislation/regulatory issues. It is also seeking their financial support to lobby lawmakers and help elect those that support the teleservices industry.

This year the ATA has expanded its ATA Compliance Education Series to include both regulatory compliance with federal and state laws and legal issues regarding employee relations. They are being held in the following cities in 2010 on these dates:

- Orlando, Fla. - March 16
- Dallas, Texas - March 23
- Philadelphia, Pa. - June 22
- Chicago, Ill. - July 20
- Atlanta, Ga. - Nov. 9
- Phoenix, Ariz. - Dec. 2

Attendees of the seminars, themed "Legally Speaking," will hear from industry compliance experts including Attorney Mitch Roth of Williams Mullen and Attorney Chad Richter of Jackson Lewis. They will address timely issues impacting contact center operations such as: Do Not Call (DNC) and lead generation; managing existing business relationships, updates from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), recent com-

pliance enforcement actions, industry self-regulation, compliance documentation and data privacy. Attendees will also be provided with information and updates on wage and hour enforcement; employee handbook content; unionization; social networking usage; immigration issues; and employee leave.

Corporate sponsors supporting this educational series are title sponsor Contact Center Compliance and supporting sponsors PossibleNow and Neustar. These companies have all demonstrated a long-term commitment, says the ATA, to the association's educational efforts in the area of compliance.

"The topics for our 2010 seminars will build on the successful events we've provided for the past five years to deliver the knowledge and awareness necessary for professionals to properly operate based on best practices supported by the ATA," says Tim Searcy, CEO of the ATA.

The ATA will also be presenting updates on legislation and regulations at the ATA Washington Summit that is taking place April 25 to April 28 in Washington, D.C. David Vladek, director of the bureau of consumer protection, Federal Trade Commission, is expected to give the keynote address. There will be sessions on self-regulation, the law in the contact center, legislating social media, and worldwide regulatory trends plus a 2010 preview on legislative and regulatory issues.

Attendees will also have a chance to be heard at the Capitol Hill Legislators Reception. There will be a Knowing How to Lobby Breakfast and legislative visits by appointment only.

To support the ATA's efforts the 2010 ATA Washington Summit will have a fundraiser with live entertainment for the ATA Political Action Committee (ATA-PAC). ATA-PAC's mission is to educate, motivate and mobilize contact center and teleservices employees on political and legislative matters. ATA-PAC contributes to candidates with a pro-business philosophy, who are sensitive to the interests of industry, who have constituent relationships and with legislative committee assignments and leadership positions.

Observers say the ATA Washington Summit's agenda and ATA-PAC fundraiser is especially timely in the run-up to this fall's elections where the outcomes of key congressional and senate raises could shift and shape the federal agenda on business issues. In his State of the Union address, U.S. President Barack Obama appeared to have signaled that he is no longer "playing nice" with the Republican "opposition" and said he intends to make a de facto full-court press on matters such as healthcare reform.

Contact centers employ some 5.2 million Americans, or 4 percent of the workforce, says the ATA-PAC. With unemployment rates edging on and in too many communities over 10 percent, maintaining and growing contact center employment is critical. The underlying message is this: Don't unfairly restrict the teleservices industry so that it can continue to employ Americans.

"The ATA Washington Summit is the contact center industry's only conference that offers complete insight into both operations and legislative issues that have a real impact on decision-making and outcomes throughout your business," says the association. **CIS**



Untying the Mobile Tether

With more robust smartphones and the expansion of high-capacity wireless networks, CRM applications can operate more effectively wherever they're used – from the road, railroad, lobbies and waiting areas to cafes and “hot desks.” “Road warriors” have less need to return to home base to update their systems, which saves on fuel, costs and emissions. Yet are the technologies and practices at the point where mobile workers can untie the tether, to be free to operate entirely and cost-effectively in the virtual space?

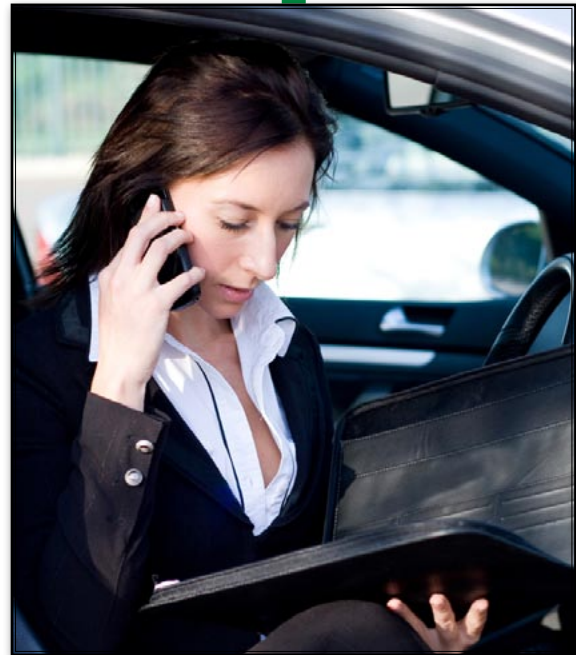
To assess where CRM is at with the mobile workforce, *Customer Interaction Solutions* approached several leading firms. We posed them key questions on:

- * Top trends, issues, challenges and drivers;
- * Impacts of rapid expansion of 3G and now the advent of 4G/LTE; and
- * Real-time access to CRM applications on mobile devices as readily as if one is on a fixed point access.

Aruba Networks (www.arubanetworks.com)
Mike Tennefoss, Head of Strategic Marketing

In order to be most efficient and productive in this environment, mobile workers need access to the same networked CRM resources and applications while roaming as they do at their desks. The challenge is how to securely deliver this access so that workers have the same good user experience, security is maintained without compromise from end-to-end and the IT department is not burdened with multiple, non-complementary systems to manage and maintain.

The advent of high-speed 802.11n Wi-Fi and 3G/4G cellular networks, coupled with new inexpensive remote access technology, has provided new vehicles with which to economically extend the corporate network to mobile workers. The dividing line between work that must be done in the office, at home, and on the road has been blurred – workers can largely be just as effective working from any of these locations. However, while the technology to make mobile workers productive has made huge strides, workplace dynamics and the stigma associated with not being physically present in an office remain open, thorny issues.



Untethered real-time access is not only possible but highly desirable. However, it will only work well when an operations management solution is in place to ensure that the network and devices are running well. The key to real-time data access is the high availability of both the devices and the network. A network management solution that encompasses mobile devices – as well as wireless and wired networks – is essential to quickly identifying fault conditions, pinpointing root causes of errors, notifying affected parties and remediating the issues. This element of CRM implementation is often overlooked and yet it is critical to optimal system operation and user satisfaction.

Avidian Technologies (www.avidian.com)
Tim Nguyen, Chief Information Officer

We believe the top trends are faster access to CRM data and easy to use CRM mobile applications. Users understand that screen real estate is smaller and they aren't looking for the entire CRM application to be recreated on their handheld devices. What mobile workers are looking for is fast access to this data without having to find a hotspot or waiting for a mobile Web browser to finish painting the page. Solutions to these problems are to deliver CRM data directly to devices via Web services or Web applications using a data plan or Wi-Fi hotspot.

We believe the next major mobile requirement will be CRM data. Users want to know the history of the client, orders placed, past conversations and other valuable data before visiting the client. They want access to all this without having to open their laptop or netbook. The winner of the device wars will need to understand this new requirement and make it super easy for users to get at this relevant data. In the end, CRM companies will need to develop mobile applications that



support all the major devices: Blackberry, Windows Mobile, iPhone and Android.

With 3G, many mobile apps and Web pages are rendered at “acceptable” speeds or throughput. With the introduction of 4G, we’ll see the data packet size increase, speed increase and many other technical improvements. This is going to result in a much higher quality and faster user experience. 4G will enable CRM developers to create applications that deliver more relevant client data to mobile users wherever and whenever they request it. However, the keys to receiving these technologies are that you will need a newer mobile device, 4G carrier support in your area and signal strength.

Access to real-time data versus stale data is very important. On a case-by-case basis, both can be acceptable given certain criteria. How important is the data? How often does it change? How difficult is it to sync and get new data? How often is syncing done? Mobile CRM applications are not normally designed to replace their desktop/laptop application cousins. They are designed to be a supporting application for quick information. Once I get back to the office or hotel room, then I will use my laptop to enter in the full details of the client visit using a full keyboard. It would be great to be able to sync the offline mobile data to the corporate CRM in order to give me a head start.

Maximizer Software (www.maximizer.com)

Vivek Thomas, President

Regarding trends with a mobile workforce’s engagement with a CRM system [there is a realization of] major benefits include the ability to increase productivity as well as establish a better work-life balance. For example, a salesperson can fit in more daily visits to customers or prospects by optimizing his or her time on the road – logging customer updates as he or she goes through the day rather than taking one to two hours at the end of the day.

Another trend is that executives who are part of a mobilized workforce have the ability to strategically manage by exception by responding to issues requiring immediate attention, from any location. The challenges that appear are primarily related to corporate mobility policies and deployment, such as issues with networks or data plans, rather than regarding functionality or specific user-problems.

The rapid expansion of mobile networks has made Internet-enabled applications on mobile devices a reality – ranging from Facebook-type social networking apps to robust enterprise-enabled apps. Local device processing power and storage is no longer a limitation as processing can be moved to the server side. With newer, faster mobile networks, we can now design applications that leverage the storage and processing requirements on the server, resulting in a lighter footprint on the device and bringing uniformity to the data accessed/viewed by the user.

A key challenge is the consistency and availability of these networks, as the quality of a connection may not always be as good as adver-

tised. Additionally, 3G and 4G are not available in all parts of the world. Another potential problem is the abuse of these networks, especially with streaming audio and video applications, which can quickly degrade the quality of service in a mobile network.

We believe that with fast wireless 3G, 4G/LTE and Wi-Fi mobile networks available, we are ready for the next generation of real-time access mobile applications. Mobile users can run their new business applications, like Maximizer Mobile CRM, while completely relying on communication with their enterprise server through the Internet over an encrypted channel.

Ideally, mobile devices should be able to automatically switch from the cellular network to Wi-Fi when in close proximity to the local Wi-Fi access point. Some network providers are already looking at providing such services to complement to their data plan bundles.

Salesforce.com (www.salesforce.com)

Atul Suklikar, Vice President, Product Management

At the highest level, the rapid growth in the smartphone market is reflected in an increase in adoption of CRM solutions on these devices. We are seeing more cases of mobile workers who are using their smartphones as their primary, and often only interface to Salesforce CRM – leaving their laptops behind when they are on the move. Another trend is the increase in the number of organizations that support access from multiple devices. In many cases, these additional devices are procured by individuals rather than corporate employers.

Because the hurdles of intermittent connectivity were addressed by salesforce.com early in the products’ lifecycle through data caching on the device, it’s safe to say that the networks have had relatively minimal impact on our ability to deliver a high quality mobile CRM application.

In a perfect world, a mobile application could be run entirely using a mobile connection. In today’s world, though, mobile CRM still needs to be accessible offline for a couple of reasons. The first is responsiveness. When you need information, you want it right there, stored on your mobile device and instantly accessible. The second is offline access. Users should be able to work offline whether a connection is available or not, such as on an airplane. In fact, we believe a user shouldn’t even know or care whether a wireless connection is available or not – their experience should be seamless.

Continuing advancements in network speed and capacity are definitely opening up new horizons for our mobile CRM application. For example, by integrating Web-based content with our local device client app, salesforce.com has been able to make dynamic Web content viewable in the context of a locally stored mobile application. This enables us to deliver the best of both worlds without compromising the core requirements such as instant accessibility and relevant data.



At some point, wireless technology will indeed pass a threshold and caching will no longer be required. Until that day comes, we believe that our model of mobile client plus Visualforce pages offers the best of both worlds.

It really depends on the quality of the application you want to deliver. Receiving and uploading fresh data once a day is quite limiting and arguably negates some of the chief benefits of having real-time mobile access.

SugarCRM (www.sugarcrm.com)

Martin Schneider, Director of Product Marketing

The greatest issues impacting mobile CRM capabilities are device proliferation, the reluctance of companies to add the additional expense of mobile applications, and the inability for older CRM systems to be leveraged via mobile browsers.

Device proliferation is a simple, yet hard to overcome issue. Sales may use Blackberries, while marketing uses iPhones, or Microsoft-powered devices. Deploying the same CRM system across these devices can be troublesome, or impossible.

Some mobile application platform vendors such as Rhomobile and Appcelerator are working hard to create singular platforms that support the same application logic across Android, Blackberry, iPhone and Microsoft smart phones. This will make deploying resident apps a lot easier for businesses – and easier for the CRM vendors to support a single application that is deployed across many different platforms. The CRM provider can work with Rhomobile or Appcelerator (or both) and simply create a single version of the application – which was certainly not the case. This speeds up development time, and lowers maintenance issues.

While these platforms are still nascent, the prevailing wisdom seems to be vendor-provided HTML smart clients. This enables the mobile device browsers to support the application in a fast and user-friendly manner (it is not simply a “shrunk-down” browser). This obviates the “Blackberry or iPhone” issue, as smart clients are device and browser agnostic. The downside is that users lose access to the application and live data when they lose Internet connectivity (for example, in airplanes), but the upside is there are no data synchronization issues because when you are connected, you are connected directly to the server.

As the hardware providers work to make their devices easier to use, adoption of mobile CRM apps will surge. This is certainly the next phase of mobile application development, and it is an exciting time.

Broadband ubiquity (or at least as close as we have come to it) has aided the mobile rollout. Mobile CRM has moved from a “nice to have” into a “yes, we’re going mobile” scenario for many businesses. These faster and more reliable networks make

it as easy to access CRM data over a browser-based client as it is to access your e-mail.

Of course, the issue becomes present when the network fails, or is not performing at optimal levels. But as the networks battle to provide better service to consumers – the mobile CRM user wins.

Sadly, we are still in “trade-off” mode: where users must decide on using a smart browser client and having live access to real-time data, or using a cached database/synch approach. Both have their benefits, however, it is up to the user and use case to decide which approach is best.

The smarter CRM vendors provide both options. SugarCRM, for example provides its “offline client” directly and resident applications for the Blackberry and other devices through partners. Its smart-client mobile version is bundled free with the Professional and Enterprise editions, and requires no additional cost or deployment to get running – simply point to the app on your device browser and you’re up and running. **CIS**

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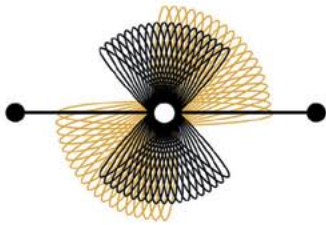


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Speech Rec: Temporary Slowdown, Faster Adoption Ahead

Advanced speech recognition, otherwise known as speech rec, is one of the most effective tools organizations are increasingly using to reduce customer interaction costs while improving quality service and with it customer retention and revenues. These solutions' without-wait, human-resembling dialogues have proven to keep more calls in automated voice systems, increase responsiveness to outbound notifications and shorten live agent calls compared with DTMF, a.k.a TouchTone IVR in most cases.



While speech rec deployment has slowed down with the recession there is a clear road ahead for more of them to be adopted. Yet hurdles remain before their applications become widespread.

Joe Outlaw, principal analyst, Frost and Sullivan reports that a majority of larger firms want to build automated customer contact applications with speech rather than with DTMF. They have recognized enough of the advantages, tested them out and now are waiting for the economy to strengthen more before greenlighting the projects.

Smaller businesses and contact centers have in contrast been much slower to deploy speech rec because they perceive the technology as still too complex and expensive, he points out. Application techniques and pre-programmed/configurable products have to get better before these organizations sign the dotted lines. There also needs to be more speech application developers who are willing to work on smaller projects.

"The fundamental business drivers for speech applications are still there," says Outlaw. "As the economy recovers they will drive decisions to resume speech application projects: at least for larger firms."

The speech rec technologies are improving, becoming less expensive and their implementation times are shrinking. Yet there is still often a gap between buyers' expectations and the realities of what the applications can deliver.

"We are time and again surprised when even companies that have deployed speech recognition ask us if the technology has improved to a point where they can simulate human-like conversational interaction with a speech system to completely replace the contact center agent," explains Fakhri Karray, CEO and co-founder, Vestec. "Firms are typically thinking of StarTrek and we have to point out that that kind of interaction is still far into the future."

Costs, Deployments and Budgets

Where the rubber meets the road is that potential speech rec buyers/clients have tight budgets and stringent timeframes for investments to show ROI. Yet the technology is not a quick or inexpensive fix. The applications can cost tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars and can take up to 18 months to deploy.

"Clients continue to drive requirements for an accelerated time to market for speech applications," reports Dave Pelland, director, design collaborative, relationship technology management, [Convergys](#). "They're pressuring vendors to drive down the cost and time to market for application development and deployment to gain ROI quickly. They continue to view the cost of speech as too high for perceived value, requiring vendors to demonstrate strong ROIs. In many cases, projects are split up into multiple deployments to get some ROI benefits as quickly as possible. Leveraging performance guarantees and assurance of ROI are [also] key to deploying speech solutions."

Speech rec customers are picking easier, quicker-to-realize ROI speech applications. Michael Perry, product management director, contact center technologies, Avaya, reports that more firms are using speech to shorten calls, reach the right agents and in outbound notifications, all of which cost less and show positive results in less than 12 months. Another growing application for speech recognition he is seeing are as biometric identifiers on customers' accounts.

Speech-recognition vendors are also making their offerings more attractive through new partnerships. For example, Avaya now offers Loquendo's ASR speech engine in addition to IBM and Nuance products for its customizable Avaya Voice Platform.

"[Loquendo](#) offers a lower pricepoint for their core speech engine, which is available in many languages, and is popular



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with companies, consultants and integrators internationally,” explains Perry. “Loquendo therefore gives our customers more choice in speech technologies.”

Digium, which created and owns the Asterisk open source telephony software, and Aumtech have partnered to provide users with Aumtech’s Media Resource Control Protocol Connector utility for the Microsoft Office Communications Server 2007 Speech Server. It features server-based licenses that support 48-plus ports and unlimited grammars and over a dozen languages.

“Our Asterisk customers have long recognized the value of speech recognition applications; however, most have delayed implementing these technologies due to the high entry costs,” says Bill Miller, Digium’s vice president of product management. “Aumtech’s solution is the lowest-cost at higher capacities for world-class speech technology and may prove to be the ‘tipping point,’ finally bringing speech to the masses.”

One option companies are considering to lower costs is buying packaged applications such as Nuance’s SpeechPak Application Kits, reports Frost and Sullivan’s Outlaw. These tools can save 10 percent to 15 percent or more off pure custom installations.

There is increased customer demand for hosted applications. Outlaw says with hosting organizations do not have to outlay capital for, manage or run the applications. The agreements also create built-in incentives for success as the hosts are often paid by completed-call-minutes.

“Consequently the hosts have the incentive to tune the applications – for improved operation and increased usage,” says Outlaw.

Jeff Foley, senior manager of marketing for Nuance’s enterprise division is seeing more of his firms’ customers shift to hosted environments from on-premise to realize speech rec benefits with minimal involvement with hardware and software upgrades, system designing and fine-tuning.

“A lot of companies don’t want to deal with those details and are willing to pay someone like Nuance to take ownership of the system and provide continuous improvement,” says Foley.

Hosting is making speech rec more practical for applications such as outbound notifications. Speech offers value-add, explains Grant Shirk, director of industry solutions at Tellme Business Solutions at Microsoft Corp., because it enables more compelling, efficient campaigns, for early-stage collections, alerts, or customer care scenarios.

“Because the scope of outbound applications is much smaller than inbound –they are usually focused on completing a very specific task – on-premise speech deployments were often cost-prohibitive,” explains Shirk. “However, with the advent of on-demand speech as a service, more companies now have access to the technology in an affordable way.”

Refining but not Revolutionizing Technology

Speech rec technologies and deployments continue to be refined rather experience breakthrough developments. The net results are steadily increasing completion rates, shrinking costs and shortened install times.

Avaya is adding new functionality to Dialog Designer that enables developers to quickly build contact center workflow and routing strategies using the same tools they use to build VoiceXML self service applications. Developers working on Avaya contact centers only need to know one tooling environment, explains Perry. They can create rich user experiences by tightly integrating self service and agent assisted transactions quickly and easily.

Avaya’s self-service platform will be leveraging several core technologies from the Nortel acquisition. The enhanced solution will be incorporated into Avaya’s new contact center platform, Next Gen Context Center, expected to be gradually rolled out this year.

“The new portfolio allows us to incorporate some of the advanced media processing and tooling capabilities from Nortel that will allow us to better integrate with a wider variety of contact center environments,” says Perry.

Frost and Sullivan’s Outlaw sees greater application development tool availability and improvement; as they become better the more speech applications tend to get built. There are more industry standards such as Voice XML which enhances and makes it easier and more desirable for companies to build speech applications. Analytics tools are also being used to discover opportunities to improve existing speech apps and build business cases for new ones.

He also sees steady recognition rates and language domains improvements. He points to VoltDelta’s CrystalWave, which takes outputs from multiple recognizers running against the same conversations, applies context analysis and uses that to boost recognition rates over what they would get out of any individual recognizer.

A recent white paper by VoltDelta adds that the recognition results can be immediately refined through a speech process known as robust parsing. This technique works to verify results that appear consistent with the data set or discounting those that fall out of logical parameters.

Outlaw also points to Nu Echo’s NuGram Platform, which helps developers author, tune and manage speech grammars. Nu Echo’s NuGram has also been integrated with Voxeo’s VoiceObjects Service Creation Environment. This allows developers to easily create either static or dynamic grammars that can be used with VoiceObjects technology to efficiently build multichannel self-service applications.



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Vestec's Karry reports that artificial intelligence-based algorithms are significantly improving recognition quality for both native and non-native speakers, which in turn is increasing customer satisfaction with speech applications. Advanced noise-cancellation techniques are also helping improve recognition quality in noisy mobile and VoIP environments. At the same time, there has been a dramatic decrease in prices of speech recognition software. High quality, standards-based speech recognition engines can now be licensed at less than \$100 per channel, "a figure that makes speech recognition truly affordable for the first time to the vast majority of smaller business and enterprise markets," says Karry.

In the next year, Tellme customers can expect to receive enhanced capabilities for speech-enabled outbound, new performance optimization tools to help them improve task completion rates, continued core engine improvements, and the launch of cloud-based routing and queuing services to optimize contact center resource utilization. It plans to debut technology that will open up its speech platform to more channels, enabling speech interfaces for mobile, online and other devices.

There continues to be a slow shift to natural language as its processing improves from directed dialogue, which currently dominates speech rec applications. Natural language-based applications are becoming more conversational and therefore able to keep users in the automated systems longer, making them to become more desirable for companies to implement. Yet they are still more expensive and time-consuming to deploy than directed dialogue and are still a ways yet from making talking to machines as "natural" as conversing with people.

"Having a computer with enough built-in alternatives to what might come out of someone's mouth if you 'how can I help you today' it is going to take a lot longer before we have enough grammar and vocabulary to come back with a rational answer," says Outlaw.

Making speech applications in directed dialog and natural language more accurate, reliable and feasible is the rise of distributed computing resources such as Microsoft's Azure, reports Tellme's Shirk. Harnessing this computing power, he says, "promises more accurate recognition, greater automation per task, and higher user satisfaction."

Nuance's Foley thinks the ideal applications are those that give customers choices via directed dialogue, which is more straightforward and less complex than natural language but have natural language capabilities underneath. This way if a customer goes out of grammar the application can understand what they say and bring them back to the conversation.

Nuance is improving its applications to better understand the human response, i.e. individuals saying something that the systems are not designed to expect. It is exploring ways to

design the system and taking advantage of enabling technology advancements such with filters, contextual analysis, fuzzy matching and parsing information.

"The challenge is how can make our technology better at listening to what end-customers are saying and matching them to the possible options they have," says Foley. "In many cases we can understand exactly what customers are saying, we can transcribe it to go back to what they've said, but how do you map that to a choice on the speech rec menu?"

Customer Acceptance

Equally if not more importantly than the application development work in enabling speech rec is greater consumer and business familiarity and acceptance. One of the literally big drivers is the growth of mobile communications including as alternative to having residential landlines. Speech solutions eliminate handheld operations, which are becoming prohibited behind the wheels of vehicles in a growing list of jurisdictions. A study by Forrester for Nuance found that a growing segment of mobile consumers prefer self-service wherever possible especially speech service.

"If you look at the way cellphone, smartphone and even landline phones both corded and cordless are designed today it is very inconvenient to shift back and forth between the microphones and receivers and the keypads," Foley points out. "Speech rec bridges that for automated applications."

Enabling customer acceptance are more consumer-oriented speech applications. They are increasing awareness how speech systems work and how they can be used to interact with companies. Foley cites Ford's Nuance-developed SYNC and Nuance's Dragon iPhone app as examples.

"Consumer familiarity with speech is a big win on contact center side, because it makes consumers more willing to use it if presented with it when calling," says Foley. "And consumers are beginning to appreciate companies who put good speech systems in place because it gives them a more positive experience as compared to waiting on hold for five minutes and then talking to an agent who can't help them beyond the script they have." CIS

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

Avaya
www.avaya.com

Aumtech
www.aumtech.com

Convergys
www.convergys.com

Nuance
www.nuance.com

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

For a quarter century now, *Customer Interaction Solutions* brings you its "Top 50" Teleservices Agency Ranking. As has become customary, in this issue, we are presenting the Outbound rankings, with the Inbound rankings to come in the April issue. Since its inception in 1986, our "Top 50" ranking, based on extensive detail gleaned from the exhaustive application process detailing minutes usage in the applicants' various call center locations, has been the benchmark for choosing high-capacity teleservices agencies.



Ranking Criteria

Because the primary factor in our rankings is agency size, based on annual call volume, *Customer Interaction Solutions* has always relied on measurable, third-party-verifiable data to determine our rankings of the "Top 50" agencies. More specifically, we ranked these 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.

Qualification

Qualifying teleservices agencies in this year's "Top 50" were required to submit responses to a detailed questionnaire, indicating the nature of their operations and listing the number 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.

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. You will find an asterisk (*) next to the name of all agencies that supplied a portion of their verification from their president/CEO.

Reading the Rankings

The ranking of Outbound "Top 50" agencies is a numerical ranking, with 1 indicating the largest, through 31 (the smallest, in the case of Domestic Outbound rankings). While we strive to compile as comprehensive listing as possible, several factors, including consolidation in the teleservices industry, resulting in only 31 agencies meeting minimum requirements for billable minutes for this year's rankings.

Category A comprises U.S. teleservices agencies; Category B consists of international teleservices agencies, along with international components of U.S.-based agencies (e.g., ranking the international billable minutes of those agencies). U.S. domestic agencies that are also ranked in the International category are marked with a dagger (†) in their domestic ranking.

Category A – U.S. Domestic

1. **Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah) †**
www.teleperformance.com
2. **GC Services Limited Partnership (Houston, Texas) ***
www.gcserv.com
3. **LiveOps (Santa Clara, Calif.)***
www.liveops.com
4. **Americall Group, Inc. (Naperville, Ill.),
a Teleperformance Company †**
www.americallgroup.com
5. **Global Contact Services LLC (Salisbury, N.C.) †**
www.gcsagents.com
6. **DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.)**
www.dialamerica.com
7. **PCCW (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, OH) * †**
www.influentinc.com



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5465368894331258794523215
9923024648948555464852552
145632710047599841202546
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March 9, 2010 • 2:00pm ET/11:00am PT

Part 1: The Year of HD

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<http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/dialogic-series>

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Q & A with the Expert: Faxing in a VoIP Environment

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March 11, 2010 • 2:00pm ET/11:00am PT

Managing Convergence: Five Keys to Bullet-Proofing Your Converging Voice and Data Network

Sponsored by:

TONE SOFTWARE CORPORATION

<http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/tone-software2>

March 16, 2010 • 2:00pm ET/11:00am PT

Internal Monitoring Isn't Enough... Treat Yourself Like a Customer – Remote Availability & Performance Monitoring from IQ Services

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iqservices
Proactive Testing for Confident Customer Interactions

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March 30, 2010 • 2:00pm ET/11:00am PT

Metrics that Wow! How Coremetrics Became the Customer Service Model of Success

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PARATURE

<http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/parature4>

April 13, 2010 • 2:00pm ET/11:00am PT

Learn how to Drive Revenue, Increase Profit Margins, Reduce Costs, and Build Your Subscriber Base

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IVR Technologies
The Voice of the Next Generation Network

<http://www.tmcnet.com/webinar/ivr-technologies>

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54621578542466244



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

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

10. Teleservices Direct (Indianapolis, Ind.) †
www.teleservicesdirect.com

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

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

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

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

15. Charlton (Madison, Wisc.)
www.tcgcorp.net

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

17. Ameridial, Inc. (North Canton, Ohio)
www.oksameridial.com

18. O'Curran, Inc. (Draper, Vt.)*
www.ocurran.com

19. The Results Companies (Dania Beach, Fla.) * †
www.theresultscompanies.com

20. AnswerNet (Willow Grove, Penn.) *
www.answer.netnetwork.com

21. American Customer Care, Inc. (Bristol, Conn.)
www.americancustomer.care.com

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

23. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Penn.)
www.121directresponse.com

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

25. Greene, an RMG Direct Company (Lincolnshire, Ill.)
www.rmgdirectinc.com

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

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

28. AnsaFone Contact Centers (Santa Ana, Calif.)
www.ansafone.com

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

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

31. Telerx (Horsham, Penn.) *
www.telerx.com

Category B — INTERNATIONAL

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

2. Teleperformance USA (Salt Lake City, Utah) a
TelePerformance Company
www.teleperformance.com

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

4. PCCW (Hong Kong) & Influent (Dublin, OH) *
www.influentinc.com

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

6. Listen Up Espanol (Portland, Maine)
www.listenupespanol.com

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

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

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

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

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

12. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, SK)
www.24-7intouch.com

13. The Results Companies (Dania Beach, Fla.)*
www.theresultscompanies.com

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

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

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<http://call-center-software.tmcnet.com>

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The Warnings of Haiti

The almost incomprehensible destruction, loss of life and immense suffering from the earthquake that struck Haiti in January serves as a warning for companies in their site selection decisions. If they want their contact centers to survive disasters then they must be prepared because the chances are increasingly excellent that they're on their own, wherever they are located.

Haiti is and will not likely to be an offshore contact center hub as its European language is French; North African countries have taken that role. Yet India and the Philippines and other developing countries that are drawing this business in English and Spanish are vulnerable to and poorly prepared for similar and other deadly calamities. Many of these nations share the same ills: no or badly-enforced building codes, corrupt officials and poor infrastructure coupled with political instability and terrorism amidst economic extremes that makes these societies fragile.

It is that disaster planning and response ranks way below subsidizing bonus-happy bankers who had tipped the economy into the downturn and bailing out shortsighted auto manufacturers in funding priorities.

Then again one can make the same points about developed countries. Witness Hurricane Katrina. Is there that much difference between what happened in New Orleans and in Port-au-Prince? Bad planning in the face of predicted disasters, inadequate infrastructure, a pathetic-bordering-on-the-inept government response amidst unbelievable human loss... Except that in wealthy nations like the U.S. there is no excuse. It is that disaster planning and response ranks way below subsidizing bonus-happy bankers who had tipped the economy into the downturn and bailing out shortsighted auto manufacturers in funding priorities.

The disaster prognosis is getting worse. Global warming brought on by a refusal by firms and individuals to pay for the environmental damage they incur can be blamed for the weird winter weather with effects such as heavy rains resulting in flooding and mudslides on the West Coast. As sea levels climb from polar ice melting, roads, rail and communications networks and communities will start to disappear. Homes and businesses situated in flood plains are just waiting to be destroyed and so are the lives of those in them. The same goes for those in danger areas like

the slopes of Mount Rainier in Washington State that face the sprawling Seattle-Tacoma area: on top of past deadly mudflows from this iconic dormant volcano.

So where will the money come from when the next disasters hit? Consider California's situation. The state government is broke and no one wants to pay more taxes or take services cuts. So when the next 8.0-magnitude or worse hits the Bay Area or the L.A. basin, who will pay for the cops, the medics, the firefighting gear, the shelter and food, and to reconstruct what was lost?

To survive the next event, firms need to thoroughly assess their functions and locations. That includes loss of employees and business and restoration expenses. When these costs plus operating and facilities and technology investments are added the ROI may be there to buy or contract for speech recognition and improved web self-service to reduce staff either directly or indirectly through outsourcers. Look at the typically heavily scripted calls being offshored. Is there that much benefit in having live agents as opposed to computers handling them?

Companies must take a second look at where their facilities are situated to see if they can be evacuated quickly. Office parks are more vulnerable than traditional downtowns where there is only one way out whereas the latter are on grid systems with multiple escape paths.

Or better yet, don't build at all. There is no logical reason why contact center employees have to be in employer-provided buildings. Having them work from home minimizes disaster losses while providing business continuity, improving productivity, cutting costs and boosting profits.

Lastly, firms should take a leadership role and ride elected officials' backsides to prevent and minimize and respond to disasters. They should state they are prepared to pay more in taxes, but only if the money goes to the right places, such as stiffening infrastructure, fixing the problems that led or made the events worse and emergency planning, action and recovery. Individual lives, economies and communities wherever they are depend on it. **CIS**

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Happier Customers

A green rectangular sign with a white border and the text "Shorter Handle Times" in white, mounted on an orange post. The background of the signpost area shows a stylized landscape with rolling green hills and several blue houses with smiling faces.

Shorter Handle Times

A green rectangular sign with a white border and the text "Fewer Service Calls" in white, mounted on an orange post. The background of the signpost area shows a stylized landscape with rolling green hills and several blue houses with smiling faces.

Fewer Service Calls

A stylized illustration of a person in an orange suit holding a large, open map. The map is white with green lines and features the LogiCALL SMART Path logo and the word "MAP" in large letters. The background of the map area shows a stylized landscape with rolling green hills and several blue houses with smiling faces.

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