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OPTIMIZING VoIP for Contact Centers

Ben Navon, president and ceo
Optimized Business

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The Importance of Quality Interactions

There was a time, before the advent of the Internet, when upsetting a single customer was believed to be the equivalent of losing ten customers, because the typical person with a poor experience would share their experience with others. But, as social media has evolved, the ramifications of a single poor experience can be far greater, as customers have shown, when they are upset, they don't hesitate to use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a host of other services to flame the company and transaction in question. Yet, in such an environment there are companies continuing to shop for customer service agencies and BPO shops based on price alone. There are many stories of companies getting burned because they think about short-term profit and not the long-term damage poor quality can cause an organization.

To learn more, I reached out to Chris Coles, President & CEO of HyperQuality, which focuses on helping its customers provide optimal quality experience over the phone, email and chat. The company also analyzes accents and cultural issues with agents in India and other countries. Our interaction provides solid information on how important providing quality interactions is to customers.

How has contact center quality changed these past few years?

CC: The focus has expanded from agent performance to gaining customer insight from the calls to drive both a targeted coaching process for agent performance and business process improvements. New technologies, such as speech analytics, allow a larger percentage of interactions to be analyzed, and those calls that are most valuable to be evaluated by a person are flagged. This expanded insight increases the contact center's importance and delivers stronger ROI to the business.

How has the move to international contact center agents affected quality?

CC: International centers have brought both benefits and new challenges. Leveraging new talent pools for hiring has enabled broader customer service phone support. However, these centers have, at times, experienced language and understanding challenges.

How strong is the correlation between customer interaction quality and sales/customer retention?

CC: The quality of interaction, as determined by the customer (and not simply metrics of the company), is generally quite important in the customer's consideration of repeat purchases. Assuming the purchase is not simply about lowest price, the customer experience is the most important factor after "expectation met or exceeded" in the context of the product or service.

What is the biggest mistake you have seen customers make?

CC: The biggest mistake customers often make in a call to a contact center is failing to document the details of their interactions. A customer should always note the agent's name or number, the time of the call, the number and the substance of the conversation for future reference. This is powerful information if further calls are needed on the same issue, as it empowers customers to alert the new agents that this is a repeat call on the same issue.

What has been the biggest surprise you have found in the contact center space?

CC: The frequent lack of connection between contact center metrics and the customer experience, as defined by customer satisfaction. In order to make the contact center valuable, it is crucial to have processes and technology in place to ensure that customer interaction results match up with customer satisfaction scores, or tell businesses why they are different. Additionally, some companies have a stated customer service strategy, but aren't willing to make the investment to provide service consistent with that strategy. This is often evident to the customer base.

How should companies measure ROI on their contact center spend?

CC: ROI comes from several benefits, depending on the processes handled within the contact center. For sale centers, it is from sales conversion rates and customer base expansion. For collections centers, it comes from reduced debt write-offs and increased past due collections. For customer service centers, it is based on customer retention, cross-selling and reduced sales returns.

How can management be best prepared to provide the best possible service in their organizations going forward?

CC: Develop a complete quality ecosystem around business processes that includes using the customer insight gained in their contact center interactions to drive process improvements as well as better agent performance. **CIS**

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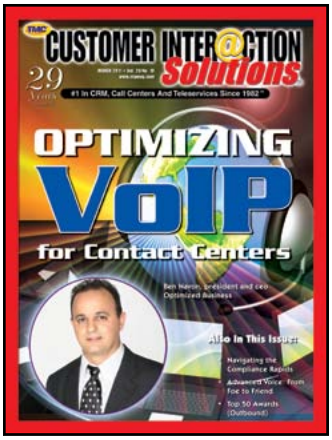
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Erik Linask, *Group Editorial Director, TMC*

SMBs are Call Centers Too

There are two approaches to the small and mid-sized business (SMB) market – treat it as a unique market or as a downsized enterprise. It's a dilemma that many telephony vendors have struggled with over the years and, while some have succeeded, many have failed to make a significant impact on the market.

The call center market mirrors this scenario. In fact, the SMB is perhaps even more at a disadvantage when it comes to call center technology than with other communications solutions, because many vendors overlook them entirely, ignoring the thoughts of TMC Founder and Chairman Nadji Tehrani: Every company is a call center, no matter how small.

I had a chance to talk to a call center technology vendor founded on this very principle. In fact, my conversation with Jim Southwell, general manager at Infratel, started off by discussing the need for SMBs to have access to their own set of call center technologies that offer cost effective alternatives to enterprise products without sacrificing feature richness or sacrificing the latest market trends.

In fact, Infratel has taken to heart an idea that some vendors have, to their detriment, overlooked: The SMB market is unique and is difficult to serve simply by downsizing a large enterprise product. In fact, that very fundamental is what prompted a group of former Genesys employees to launch Infratel back in 1999, understanding that, while SMBs need many of the same capabilities as large enterprises, they have neither the budgets nor the personnel to manage and maintain the same systems.

Enter Infratel with its software-based call center that runs on a standard Windows server, eliminating the need for additional infrastructure while providing all the functionality most SMBs require. In addition, while it integrates easily with existing PBXs, for those that require it, Infratel includes an integrated IP PBX, further simplifying the communications infrastructure. Southwell says about a third of its customers leverage Infradapt's PBX.

Taking it a step further (and line with one of the hottest trends in technology), Southwell noted that Infratel is also working with Parallels and its Automation product to deliver a full turnkey cloud-based call center for the SMB, further driving down costs and management requirements.

"The cloud is exciting and it's going to be a factor," he says. "It's a good alternative for SMBs so they don't have to bear the burden of infrastructure."

We are still in the very early adopter stage – "brave and pioneering," Southwell calls them. But, he is also confident they are headed in the right direction and, in the next two to three years, cloud will have become standard practice.

Birger Steen, Parallels CEO, agrees the cloud model is appealing to SMBs, but suggests the market is further along, already emerging as a mainstream strategy as a driving force behind the growth of the cloud industry.

"Why should you buy infrastructure, if you can have someone else do it?" Southwell asks.

When it comes to saving on calling costs, nothing beats free. Just look at the growth of Skype over the years – as of Q4 2010, it boasted 663 million user accounts (more than Facebook).

While SMBs are always seeking new ways to reduce costs, their customers are likely just as keen on reducing recurring costs. To that end, Infratel has initiated the certification process for its platform with Skype, which will allow its customers to leverage Skype as another inbound trunk.

Southwell firmly believes the SMB market recognizes the value of connecting via Skype, thanks to its ease of use in addition to the cost savings. Still, he doesn't necessarily see it as a major game changer, though says it is worth doing, considering the minimal cost and effort involved. Initially, he may be right. But, as LTE networks continue to be built out and as VoIP over 4G becomes prevalent, he may find the integration of Skype calling a competitive advantage.

And as for social media, Infratel has its sights set on being able to route social media request as routine work items, with a longer term vision of routing via sentiment. He agrees, though, that social media integration is still a work in progress, as most businesses are not yet sure of exactly what role social media interaction should play.

What he does believe is that it is only a matter of time before SMBs – along with the rest of the business world – will have figured it out and will be looking for technologies that will make social media just another contact.

"It's not unlike chat and multichannel – how long did it take for those to be adopted by call centers?" he notes. "We're in that space where it's still unfolding and, in the next 24 months, we're going to see something meaningful come of it."

Much of what Infratel is doing isn't necessarily unique – it is seeking for the best ways to solve the problems its customers face in their daily business operations. What it is doing, though, is looking at if from the perspective of a customer base that doesn't always get the targeted attention it deserves.

By designing its call center solution specifically for the SMB – and with its fingers on the pulse of that market – Infratel will be able to deliver innovation, incorporating the latest trends and demands, with the simplicity and price point that is within the means of even the smallest businesses, which need to provide at least the same levels of customer service as their larger competitors – if not higher, just to remain competitive. **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

Optimizing VoIP For Contact Centers

The rapidly approaching future for voice calls into and out of contact centers is VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). It promises and delivers lower costs, greater flexibility and simple single-pipe integration with data and voice, and hosts versatile unified communications systems. VoIP supports customer-satisfying and more audible higher quality voice compared with circuit-switched PSTN/TDM services.

VoIP is delivered to customers' premises through SIP trunks over the Internet on broadband or on traditional data T1 circuits, which are significantly less expensive than voice lines or voice T1s. There are a wide range of VoIP providers, with new SIP trunking providers emerging into the marketplace, along with the current major PSTN/TDM carriers.

Ben Navon is president and ceo of Optimized Business (www.OptimizedBusiness.com), which provides voice, data and VoIP services to enterprises of all sizes including their contact centers. Ben forged his firm in 2003 out of the need in the market for a free service to assist business owners with telephony services and products.

Ben has over 20 years of extensive experience in the contact center and telecommunications industry. Ben's background includes successfully designing and building contact centers and driving multiple call/contact centers to extreme success by using many telephony and cutting edge techniques. His involvement in all areas including data and voice circuits, CRM design and development, new VoIP technologies and using other techniques to improve conversion ratios has created multimillion dollar operations.

Customer Interaction Solutions recently interviewed Ben to get his insights on "Optimizing" VoIP for contact centers, including a look at the new offerings that his firms are rolling out.

CIS: What changes are you seeing that are encouraging contact centers to use VoIP?

BN: There are three key factors: affordability, reliability and innovative technology.

There is a growing competition in the industry that is leading to lower prices for VoIP services, SIP trunking and data circuits, as more telephony customers, including contact centers, realize and are exploring the advantages of VoIP. Another of the big benefits besides costs savings is the ability to easily modify call flow between contact centers, skill groups and queues and even home-based agents. While PSTN requires a professional to make changes to call flows, and in most cases these changes cost money and take time to modify, with VoIP business owners and supervisors are able to instantly make changes in most cases without the need for any specialty training.

With the right providers, VoIP is far easier and simpler to install and integrate into operations than PSTN. In VoIP you just sign up, authenticate, make sure that your data connection is in place and you are up and running your VoIP service. In a matter of hours, if not less, you can have voice lines live, rather than having to wait for a T1 to be installed, which can take a month. In today's marketplace, it's all about fast, affordable and convenient solutions.

As this is a newer technology in the industry it has taken some time for companies to learn to trust VoIP. The early-on problems of jitter and latency with VoIP are a thing of the past, as long as customers maintain the required data connections. I look forward to seeing more business owners switching to VoIP, now that the industry is realizing that it is a very reliable service.

On the innovating technology side, there is now the advent of hosted IP-PBXs that enable the smaller contact centers and businesses to go to VoIP. Hosted IP-PBXs allow firms to obtain the features and functionality such as skill-based routing without installing and rip-and-replacing the switches themselves.

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Before hosted IP-PBXs came along smaller firms were afraid to buy IP-based switching solutions, as these were too expensive and very labor-intensive to get installed and programmed. Now thanks to the hosted products, VoIP is practical and affordable for any size company, and businesses can even buy minutes without having to buy any features. Overall they spend less money on buying equipment and programming; it's a very turnkey solution.

CIS: With what appears to be growing demand for VoIP, will the capacity be there to handle it to avoid reliability and quality issues?

BN: Absolutely. The big carriers have increased the bandwidth available for VoIP on the trunks from the central offices to the premises. They are more often providing T-3/DS3 to businesses, which provide excellent data bandwidth for high volumes of VoIP use and VoIP users. So ultimately, data providers are increasing the bandwidth to the premises, while maintaining priority to voice packets (SIP).

The biggest advantage is the cost efficiency and flexibility of VoIP. In the current economy, contact centers and businesses are looking to cut costs on their services. VoIP provides them with the ability to have more home-based agents, thus carrying less overhead costs.

I have several big contact center customers with seven to 10 T1s that have switched over to my firm. They were paying thousands of dollars each month in MRCs alone whereas with VoIP minutes the more you buy, the cheaper the minutes are. So basically the more you use the cheaper the rates.

CIS: Is there a future for toll-free numbers with the newfound popularity of VoIP that eliminates long distance charges for consumers?

BN: While there is a cost for toll-free numbers, it continues to be a great benefit to companies from the marketing standpoint. Toll-free numbers create a global appearance and size that shows and creates confidence in consumers. VoIP can deliver toll-free calls at less cost too. The SMS800 has recently released the 855 toll-free prefix, so I don't anticipate toll-free numbers running low or becoming so expensive that firms will do without them anytime soon.

CIS: What are the benefits of using VoIP for outbound calling?

BN: VoIP is a safe haven for outbound calling. Basically, the fact that you no longer need to order more T1s for more phone lines alleviates the need to sign a 36-month contract on those new phone lines and that's a huge plus. With our business VoIP at VoIPDialing.com, which is a subsidiary of Optimized Business, we let you use only those lines that you need and as many as you need. You can change the number of SIP lines that you need, instantly based upon the number of calls being dialed and billing is directly in line with usage.

CIS: With VoIP expanding, improving and the increasing demand for it, what affect will this have on the wireless, cellular phone and PDA industries?

BN: Together with the VoIP development, many softphone applications are emerging. These applications are being customized for cell phones usage. This will allow consumers to use their cellular phone's data connection for VoIP calls/use of VoIP lines. Many apps and gadgets will be launched in the next year, using VoIP connectivity to deliver value to end users. Overall, VoIP will allow an easy and simplified link between computers and data for voice calls, speech recognition and speech to text and vice versa.

CIS: What new VoIP services are you offering now and planning to offer in the future?

BN: We have been rolling out VoIPDialing.com, which is our package of VoIP services nationwide. It offers low costs, 99.99 percent reliability and uptime and there are no term or usage commitments, which makes it very flexible and a great solution.

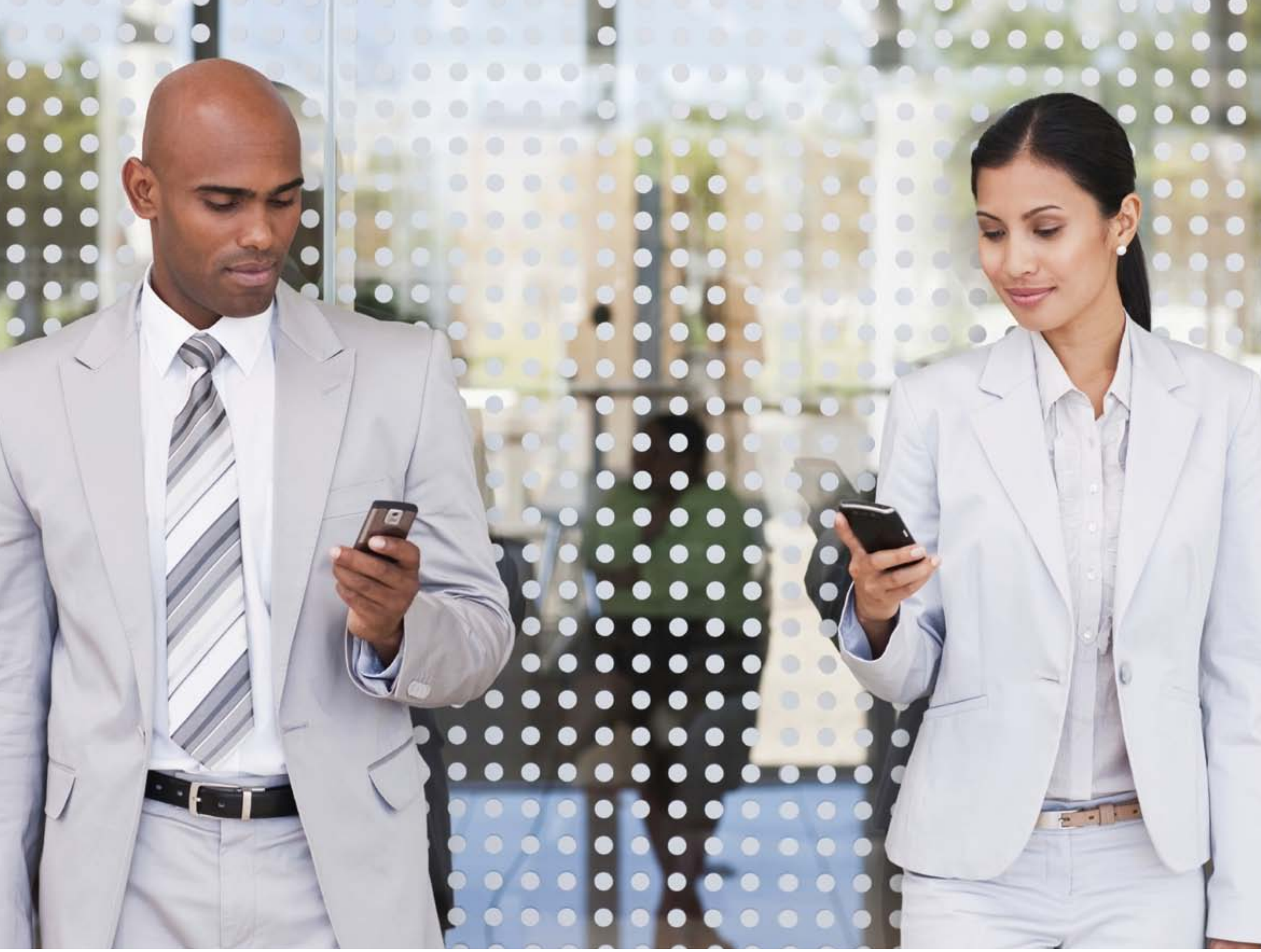
With VoIPDialing.com, implementation of the services and adding new SIP lines to your business happens within a matter of minutes. And the pay as you go is a great feature and very inviting to those businesses ready to venture into the VoIP services. We also provide live and historical call reporting online, and the ability to assign new local DID numbers in a click of the mouse.

Soon, we will also be rolling out VDialing.com, our brand of residential VoIP services over either cable or DSL connections. These services will provide savings and services for home-based agents and residential customers.

Within our services, Optimized Business provides hosted IP-PBX services for small businesses and contact centers. Later this year, hosted IP-PBX services will be integrated into VoIPDialing.com, for improved initiation and ease of new customer registration and set up. We will also be able to provide even more enhanced reporting capabilities and improved and increased value to our end users/customers.

Furthermore, OptimizedBusiness.com also provides extremely dependable and competitive rates on data and voice T1 circuits when needed, either as redundant or due to phone system limitations. So, try our VoIP Services worry-free with no term or usage commitments. We are sure that you will very quickly be ready to switch most of your calls to our VoIP services and gain those benefits.

This is a very exciting time in the telecommunications industry and I look forward to seeing more businesses opt for the savings and flexibility of VoIP services. **CIS**



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Revitalize Your Direct Mail Strategy

How to make your mail marketing more effective and earn a higher ROI

You may have heard the marketing buzz or seen the headlines: "Direct Mail is Dead." But, before you officially declare your mail marketing efforts DOA, you may want to think twice. Advances in technology and data application, along with a more personal approach, have injected new life into direct mail.

By Bryan Hartong,
Vice President of New Business Development
InfoCision Management Corporation

As a direct marketing vehicle, direct mail has a higher open rate and greater readability than any other channel. Over 80 percent of what people receive in the mail, they at least open and scan. And there's no other direct marketing channel that can claim those types of numbers.

What has changed is the approach. Organizations need to adapt their direct mail efforts to customer expectations. Customers expect you to know them. The days of mass mailings to "dear resident" are relics of the past. You need to target mail pieces to audiences that will react and deliver results.

Focus on those most apt to respond

Over the past few years, there have been great strides in business intelligence and data analysis within direct mail. Technology not only allows us to identify audiences by demographic (who customers are) and psychographic (what customers do) indicators, but also incorporate that information into mail pieces. When leveraged properly, data can help you reach the right audience and create mail pieces specific to that audience.

With data analysis and business intelligence, you can segment files using indicators and target those segments with greater accuracy than ever before. First, you take a snapshot of your customers. Who are the people responding to your products or services? You can find this through a data analysis of an existing customer file. Once you pull that data, you can run it against your mailing file to identify people who resemble current customers. Target your direct mail campaign to that specific audience.

The key to direct mail today is focusing on those apt to have the greatest response and not investing money in people who don't fit your profile.

Use results to refine your efforts

Another key to a successful direct mail campaign is tracking and testing. The goal is to streamline your efforts to generate the highest possible ROI. Before you mail any file, you segment it (create groups based on attributes like age, affiliation, region, income, etc.). Each mail piece should have a unique identifier, so that when it comes back, you know exactly who responded to it. Match that up against the segmented file to determine which segments produced the best results. Did you get a lift mailing to a certain group?

On that same basis, you can also test different appeals, messages and images within a given campaign. Each of those will have a unique identifier, so you'll be able to tie those back and see what people responded to best and can use these results to further refine your efforts.

It's important to do a lot of data analysis, not only on the front end, but also on the back end, to make sure you're effectively reaching your target audience.

Cater to your customers' response

When targeting your direct mail efforts, it's important to think outside the mailbox. Determine how individuals prefer to be reached and take a multichannel approach. Every person responds differently. Every direct marketing channel has a purpose. And they all have their advantages. Telemarketing can adapt quickly.

by Bryan Hartong, Vice President of New Business Development, InfoCision Management Corporation

You can shut it down if it's not working. With direct mail you don't have that luxury. But direct mail is less expensive and you have more real estate to get your value proposition across.

The different channels can work together to enhance your results. We've done several studies about this at InfoCision and found that one channel does not cannibalize the other; they complement each other. If somebody reacts primarily to mail, you should focus your resources on mail for that person. But you should call too. It's been proven that calling in addition to mail produces a better response. So, you still have that extra touchpoint, but you're spending money wisely in the right channels and getting a higher ROI.

The goal here is to see who is a mail, telephone or email responder. Then you put them into a cadence that caters to how they respond.

Aim to integrate social media

Moving into the future, multichannel marketing will become more prevalent and so will the integration of social media channels. Social media is going to play a larger role in direct marketing – and even direct mail. You can use direct mail to drive customers to social media pages, so they have the option to engage you on Facebook, Twitter or other sites. You can introduce that option in a personalized, targeted mail piece. As the generations of today become more of a factor in buying and giving, social media channels will play a greater role in direct marketing efforts across the board. **CIS**

Bryan Hartong is Vice President of New Business Development at InfoCision Management Corporation. Reach him at bryan.hartong@infocision.com. In business since 1982, InfoCision is the second-largest privately held teleservices company and a leading provider of direct marketing solutions for Fortune 100 companies, nonprofit organizations and small businesses. Along with call center solutions, InfoCision offers direct mail, business intelligence, digital printing and interactive services. For more information, visit www.infocision.com.

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CUSTOMER INTER@CTION NEWS

The Genesys Workforce Optimization suite, part of Alcatel-Lucent's Genesys 8 software solutions suite **(www.genesyslabs.com)**, has been combined with the Genesys platforms intelligent routing functionality. It includes and enables staff planning and scheduling, work delivery, real-time control and adjustments, data analysis and performance gap correlation and talent pools development based on exact training needs and accurate schedules. This mix permits contact centers to better measure and manage employee skills and work allocation against performance objectives.

Alteva (www.altevatel.com) has switched on what may be the first on-demand video auto attendant. Alteva's IP-based Video Auto Attendant offers a video stream that could be a recording of people reciting "Press 1" options to callers, or it could be much more robust, such as with graphical cues to help customers reach the appropriately skilled live agents. Video Auto Attendant includes Video Voicemail, which allows users to leave a visually recorded voice message. And in place of "hold" music, Video on Hold presents the user with streaming video which could include live events, commercials, product specials or even tutorials. There is an optional document sharing, such as graphs and performance reports live on those streams.

Alteva is working on turning Video Auto Attendant into a web-friendly solution that will allow callers to dial in through traditional phone lines or mobile devices, connect to Alteva's switching service and use a web application that will stream videos directly to them.

Aspect (www.aspect.com) has made available Aspect Unified IP 7, which unites a comprehensive set of customer contact capabilities including inbound routing, outbound dialing, voice self-service, recording, quality monitoring, short message service (SMS), instant messaging (IM), chat, e-mail and real-time and historical reporting. Here are the key features:

- Contextual enterprise routing, which allows contact centers to connect their customer to the best skilled resource no matter where they are located. Centralized administration across multiple systems and platforms through unified command and control administration provides manageability, improved visibility and facilitates efficient disaster recovery

- Dynamic inbound routing, which allows contact centers to increase flexibility and dynamic control over inbound routing through using skill requirements for specific business processes, combined with real time system performance to automatically select the best skilled resource to handle customer inquiries

- Enhanced agent desktop to support Microsoft Unified Communications and Collaboration (UCC) solutions. A completely redesigned agent user interface helps to maximize key strokes, enrich information presentation, minimize footprint, improve workflow, streamline screen pops and allow for agent personal greetings. The unified agent desktop also allows for unified communications enablement through Microsoft Lync UC solution. There is also an "Ask an Expert" functionality, available within the agent desktop, to utilize Microsoft SharePoint2010 for additional search capabilities. It supports complete workflow scripting that allows for preferred agent routing and multi-case handling and incorporates new multi-line telephony features

- Improved notification and outbound campaign management by utilizing outbound SMS and e-mail. There is enhanced dialing flexibility, improved high availability, footprint and performance and callback management

- Enterprise recording and monitoring via Aspect Quality Management 3.5, which has been tightly integrated with Aspect Unified IP 7

Bamboo Solutions (www.bamboosolutions.com) has launched BambooCRM, a cloud-based CRM tool that enables users to organize and automate all marketing, sales, customer service and product support processes under one roof. Built on Microsoft SharePoint, BambooCRM is integrated for collaboration and the sharing of information across the board.

Fuze Digital (www.fuzedigital.com) has booted up Fuze Suite 8.0 social channel software that features a social business platform that melds what it calls "smart-sourcing" with customer care and knowledge base software. It delivers integrated modules that infuse social communities into self-service and assisted-service components. It spreads out subject matter expertise across communities and within specific areas. It measures, motivates, recognizes and rewards a person's community contributions through a patent-pending reputation engine that awards points earned for them.

Intelestream (www.intelestream.net) has put several new features into its intelecrm CRM product. Intelecrm version 3.5 has Paypal and Authorize.Net on its payment choices menu. It permits users to convert Quickbooks Opportunities to Jobs. There is Google calendar integration, which enables activity synchronization including Calls and Meetings between Google Calendar and intelecrm. Users can also seamlessly archive Google docs in intelecrm. Those who utilize the intelecrm Enterprise can enmesh the intelecrm event planning tool with Google Calendar. There is integration with InsideView that adds media connections, blog references, and news updates to standard lead contact data.

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by Brendan Read

From Foe to Friend

Automated voice systems, both DTMF, a.k.a. TouchTone IVR and speech recognition, a.k.a speech rec-based, have had an unfortunate reputation as customers' foes thanks to too many poor implementations. They have driven customers to "zero-outs", resulting in higher expenses and risking decreased loyalty and lowered sales from them and from their friends and followers and others via social media, thereby clawing back the tools' cost savings. Some firms have capitalized on these poor customer experiences by trumpeting that they do not use these technologies; they connect callers to live agents instead.

This does not have to be the case though, for automated voice systems contain elements that also make them customer-friendly through providing quality service that is often superior to that delivered by live agents. These include speed through queue-elimination, consistent, accurate and clearly-delivered responses, confidentiality—these "agents" are not going to blab about so-and-so—and privacy. Advances made with these solutions have made reaching both efficiency and service/retention goals possible and affordable.

Joe Outlaw, principal analyst at Frost and Sullivan (www.frost.com) is seeing that firms are getting the message that it pays to make automated voice the customers' friends. So much so that there is a growing segment of the population that actually prefers self-service both automated voice- and- web-based. His firm estimates that up to 41 percent of inbound and outbound customer interactions will be handled by voice as well as by web self-service by 2015 from as low as 30 percent today.

"The message here for enterprises is that self-service applications must be done well," says Outlaw. "They must be fast, easy-to-use, have intuitive interfaces, accessible 24/7 from a variety of devices and always offer live assistance when requested, so that customers and prospects will appreciate and use them."

The Speech Trend

Making automated voice approachable is a slow but gradually shift to speech rec from DTMF-based IVR. While speech rec currently accounts for only 16 to 23 percent of IVR and voice portal system ports, depending on contact center size, its share, says Frost and Sullivan will steadily increase to climb to 28 to 36 percent by about 2015.

The reason is that for most interactions speech rec can be easier and more intuitive for customers to use. As speech applications improve and with this become more widespread, there will be greater customer comfort with them.

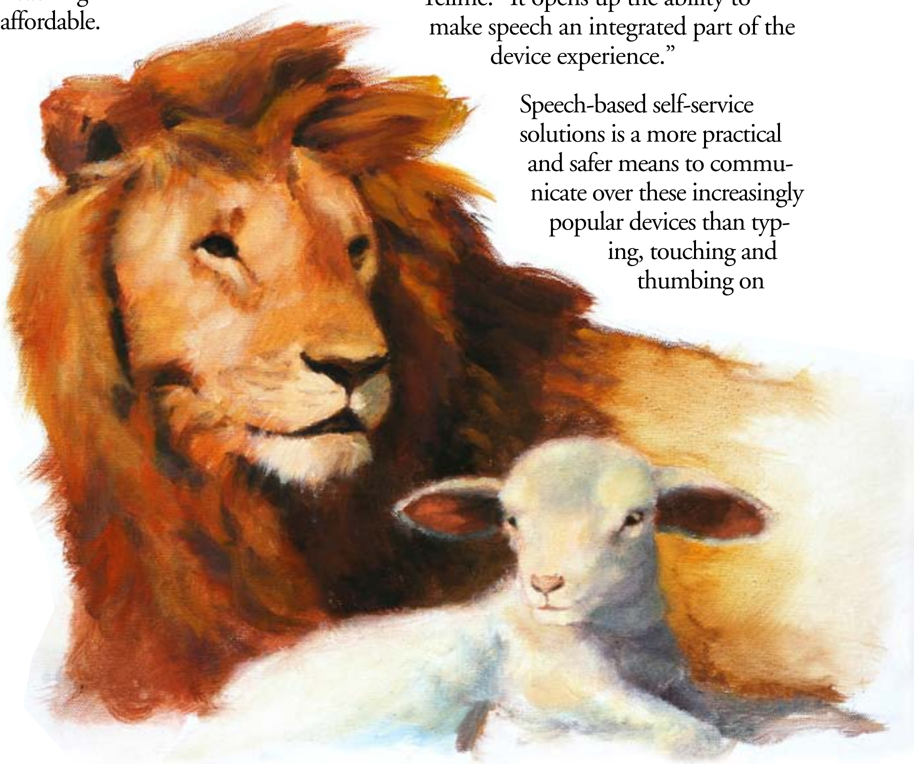
"Customers have been exposed to speech for some years now; most every vertical has a speech interaction to offer," Jeff Foley, Nuance senior manager of solutions marketing points out. "For example callers moving from one bank to another have come to expect speech self-service."

The speech rec technologies have become sufficiently powerful, functional, practical and affordable to be developed into and deployed for mobile self-service applications. These tools are becoming critical in enabling quality customer service as more customers port landlines to their wireless devices or go wireless only.

A key driver has been the advent of all-you-can-call plans. They have unshackled users from counting the minutes, making them freer to talk more and more often, including to computers.

"Doing away with the caps has given device manufacturers, OS developers and carriers a conduit to expose new services because customers do not feel they are limited in how they use wireless," explains Grant Shirk, senior product manager of IVR at Microsoft Tellme. "It opens up the ability to make speech an integrated part of the device experience."

Speech-based self-service solutions is a more practical and safer means to communicate over these increasingly popular devices than typing, touching and thumbing on



raised or on-screen keyboards. Nuance has developed a mobile care application that intercepts smart phones' calls to contact centers. It then provides answers to the most common customer service questions on the devices' displays. Even so, contact centers should not be ready to let go large numbers of live agents just yet, for going mobile has given more opportunities for customers to contact organizations when they need them.

"The creation of mobile service applications are not so much displacing other self-service channels as they are decreasing the customer effort required to contact customer service by choosing the most convenient option available," says Foley.

Refining the Technology

The gradual speech application adoption rate reflects what is still a painstaking application development processes. These solutions can take weeks if not months to install, tune and test and refine before going live.

There are signs though that speech rec is in a gradually accelerating "virtuous wheel" of innovation, improvement, demand and affordability. The Frost and Sullivan analyst is seeing growing availability and maturity of application development tools, including development environments, grammar builders and reusable application modules. The firm is witnessing three to four percent annual drops in average systems' sale prices.

"As the tools and techniques for speech application development have moved from the realm of the experienced speech engineer to a broader developer base, competition for application development has increased and costs are coming down accordingly," says Outlaw.

Pre-programmed applications are also making speech applications more affordable and viable. Businesses can often tailor these applications to their requirements through parameter settings and configurations. For more specific requirements some application customization may still be required, but with at least the shell of the application pre-built, the cost and time to deployment are less than with applications which are entirely custom-built.

Helping to drive these improvements is a shift to standards-based writing, adoption and use in application, grammar, development, interfaces and communications creation and away from proprietary software. Key among these standards are: CCXML, GRXML, VXML, SRGS, Eclipse, MRCP and SIP.

"Even though standards never seem to deliver on their full promise they are having a positive impact on the development and portability costs of speech applications," says Outlaw.

Suppliers have been refining their speech-supporting solutions. In 2010 Voxeo came out with the Prophecy 10 platform, which can support over 6,000 concurrent calls per server - more than 10 times it says the performance of other standards-based platforms. This greater efficiency simplifies and reduces deployment time and costs both upfront and ongoing support. For example, a Prophecy 10 software installation and configuration for the 16,000 port system above took less than 30 minutes in total while most other VoiceXML IVR vendors require more than a week to configure a similar-sized system.

Prophecy 10 features bundled U.S. English speech recognition and synthesis (TTS) engines; it supports more than 30 additional language engines from vendors including Cepstral, IBM, Loquendo, Lumenvox, Microsoft, Nuance and Telisma. Prophecy supports industry standards such as VoiceXML, CCXML, SCXML and SIP.

Speech solutions have improved in specific verticals in part through experience gained from existing deployments. For example when a designer understands the language callers use when asking, say about their health insurance claims, the options they create and pose are smarter and more relevant to everyday callers, reports Foley. These then generate more appropriate responses and successful from the automated systems.

Nuance measures Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) by vertical applications and analyzing which interactions perform best on a series of dimensions, including containment, caller satisfaction and authentication. With the insight gained, it can pinpoint common characteristics of best in class applications which informs future designs. This knowledge enables Nuance to offer performance guarantees for vertical-specific applications, which is more likely to have them greenlighted as it eliminates the risks and provides reliable ROI projections.

"KPI insight also uncovers applications that do not perform well with speech self-service, giving us and our customers the confidence

Farewell DTMF IVR?

The unloved DTMF IVR is slowly becoming replaced by customer-friendlier speech rec systems. Yet it still and will, for the next several years, comprise the majority of automated voice system installations. And, thinks, Joe Outlaw principal analyst at Frost and Sullivan, it will deliver value for many years to come.

That is because DTMF interfaces, where users are permitted to override prompts, can be faster for customers to use for routine interactions that entail a small number of options and they also tend to cost less to deploy. It also provides privacy and security; keying in credit card numbers and PINs is safer in crowded areas like airports than saying them out loud.

Jeff Foley, Nuance senior manager of solutions marketing, thinks though that even the latter rationale for DTMF will fade away. More sophisticated contact centers can deploy biometric voice verification, which is even more secure than touchtone since people can't steal or guess one's voice like they can PIN.

"While many still believe that DTMF should be used as a backup to speech self-service in noisy situations, speech recognition technology has significantly advanced in the past few years and has addressed many of these factors," says Foley.

The Hosted Speech Option

Sourcing cloud/hosted automated voice solutions –DTMF IVR–has long been a popular alternative to buying them. It enables rapid capacity changes to match demand, offers shorter deployment times, avoids capital and support expenses and provides business continuity through being installed on offsite servers at secured and hardened locations. The hosting firms, not the purchasers, keep the technologies current.

Hosted speech solutions have the added benefits of not having to have skilled speech application developers on staff to create, maintain and tune these applications. Most service providers will build, develop, support and tune them as part of their service.

For example, USAN offers Automated Call Care, which is an integrated inbound and outbound multichannel (speech recognition and DTMF) hosted automated voice solution that can be standalone self-service or blended into live agent services. It provides in-depth speech application development services including grammar and persona design, and application tuning including for-directed dialogue and natural language applications.

Clients can configure their Automated Call Care solutions and campaign management through web-based tools. This allows them to fine-tune their calling campaigns by changing application features and business-defined call rules.

The hosted platforms are incorporating and integrating with a wide range of functions and other channels. The Angel 4 Customer Experience Platform offers options including chat, e-mail, SMS, mobile, e-mail and phone communications, inbound and outbound. Plug-in options include voice biometrics, name and address capture, phone payment solutions, seamless CRM integration, workforce management, real-time transcription and CTI.

"We have been amazed at how quickly large enterprise customers are moving everything to the cloud," says Don Keane, vice president of marketing and product strategy at Angel.

to deploy only those interactions that are apt to work as desired," says Foley. "This eliminates time and expense wasted on applications that will not meet enterprise performance expectations."

It is people who lie at the heart of automated voice applications: designers, engineers and programmers. Outlaw sees increasing availability of skilled and experienced speech application developers, VUI (voice user interface) designers, grammar builders and project managers whereas a few years ago this separate expertise, and these positions, did not exist.

"As application developers build more of these solutions their development expertise grows as well as their industry-specific business process knowledge," says Outlaw. "Their skills will grow even faster, leading to more robust, feature-rich, more intuitive, lower cost, faster-to-deploy solutions that will improve the self-service experience."

The shift to open standards is in turn driving more talent into the speech field. Professionals who are increasing technology accuracy and quality across all usage environments–landlines, computers, games products and wireless devices.

"We process so many calls on our platform across so many industries our design teams and our partners' design teams are really improving on these great experiences they are already delivering to make sure speech is easier, more efficient and more pleasant for their customers," says Shirk.

Natural Language Developments

The key focus of speech work is in natural language development. Natural language speech rec comes the closest of any automated voice technology to human interaction, which means applications that use it typically have the lowest zero-out rates.

Nuance's Foley points out that natural language technology helps automated systems better understand humans' words because it can recognize a wider variety of responses even if it has never heard them before. It studies examples of what callers' might say and creates statistical models that help it understand their intents without manually predicting each variation.

The flip side is that natural language is more expensive. It also typically takes longer to deploy and refine compared with directed dialogue and DTMF.

Suppliers have been working on making natural language more customer-usable, easier to deploy and less expensive. Nuance's researchers have found ways to decrease the amount of data required to initially deploy natural language, dramatically reducing upfront costs. The firm's professional services team has developed tools to automatically employ design best practices and decrease time to market. The efforts are paying off. About a fifth of Nuance's top accounts use some sort of natural language system, reports Foley, and that number is growing rapidly.

Outlaw is seeing advances in natural language interfaces that will gradually make speech applications easier to use, leading to greater customer acceptance and adoption. They will also be capable of supporting increasingly sophisticated and interactive customer contacts.

"The promise of natural language technologies and techniques is to make computer-based applications more and more human-like and conversational," says Outlaw. **CIS**

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

Angel
www.angel.com

USAN
www.usan.com

Microsoft Tellme
www.microsoft.com/en-us/tellme/

Voxeo
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by Brendan Read

Entrusting The Technology

Hosted contact center solutions, also known as cloud or software as a service (SaaS), from third party vendors can and does deliver a widening range of functions from ACD to workforce optimization. It does so with minimal or no capital and support costs and with fast ramp ups/downs, ready updates, assured business continuity and heightened security compared with premise-installed solutions while using best-of-breed solutions from OEMs.

Having applications hosted requires contact centers to entrust the technologies that their operations are dependent on to outside firms, which means taking a thorough look at the offerings, issues entailed and at potential partners. To that end Customer Interaction Solutions interviewed several leading hosting firms. We asked them questions on:

- Changes in hosted value proposition and demand
- Purchase trends: entire platforms or portions of them
- Security, portability and interoperability
- Changes and new offerings they have made and are planning to make to their solutions

Contactual (www.contactual.com)
Wendell Black, Vice President of Worldwide Sales and Marketing

Awareness of hosted solutions has increased dramatically in the marketplace, due in large part to the immense success of the hosted delivery model for other core business applications such as CRM (salesforce.com) and ERP (NetSuite). The demand for them among contact centers is chiefly coming from existing centers moving from on-premise to hosted solutions. We expect this trend to continue as existing premise-based systems require significant upgrades or approach end-of-life. The demand is also coming from organic demand from new contact center deployments.

Demand has also quickly evolved beyond small and medium sized organizations that saw the hosted model as a way to gain contact center functionality that had been out of reach primarily to financial limitations on their ends. Today enterprises and larger contact centers are discovering the numerous benefits a hosted solution can deliver to their organizations and are frequently mandating that hosted solutions be considered.

Many customers were previously managing multiple vendors and applications for ACD, IVR, e-mail and web chat interaction management and other similar functions. They are thrilled to consolidate everything down to a single application from one vendor. The Contactual OnDemand Contact Center is a fully integrated solution so customers purchase the entire platform, although some portion of the feature set is optional.

While security, portability and interoperability concerns have been raised, much has also been written by analysts and other industry leaders about how these concerns are really persistent myths; myths that were also present in the hosted CRM and ERP markets. The hosted contact center marketplace has matured and evolved in such a way that most of these myths have since been debunked.

Contactual has passed rigorous security audits by numerous Fortune 500 companies and as such we are able to quickly overcome this concern. Hosted solutions also offer a great deal of flexibility and extensibility through integration and interoperability with other applications. In many cases, pre-built integrations exist for numerous business applications, such as CRM solutions.

Customers continuously look for flexible ways to acquire and deploy technology. This has led us to offer basic packages that allow customers to start with smaller feature sets that are more in line with their immediate needs and add options later as they see fit.

Our CRM customers have asked for, and we are delivering, a new Campaign Manager for outbound dialing integration that helps streamline business processes for sales and customer service followup activities. They like our "One Click" integration with CRM applications like Salesforce CRM and we are bringing out new additions to our supported CRM list with this "One Click" model.

Five9 (www.five9.com)
David Van Everen, Vice President of Product Management

Larger enterprises are increasingly recognizing the value of cloud-based call/contact centers. In the past year more of them have sought cloud-based call center software products that conform to the standards set for premise-based infrastructure. Larger companies have more challenging requirements for security, software integration, scalability and reliability that can only be met by leading vendors in the on-demand call center software market.

More contact centers are also looking to hosted call center solutions as their premise-based solution service contracts expire. Customers are seeing the value of a blended inbound/outbound contact center on a single platform, integrated with the CRM or lead-management system.

When there are economic pressures, most enterprise customers begin with a pilot that includes a substantial yet limited scope. Some companies start with outbound, while others start with departmental or campaign-related initiatives that provide a standalone pilot as well as a reliable proving ground to justify further adoption.

Leading on-demand contact center software vendors consider security a priority. They employ information security best practices that are reflected in standards such as the PCI-DSS, and that are compliant with the security requirements of large enterprises.

Five9 provides information security details spanning our product development lifecycle, operations and platform, enabling our customers/clients to successfully complete rigorous audits in the financial services and healthcare industries. We employ security experts that continually monitor and enhance our platform to remain consistent with security trends and best practices; each software release includes security-related enhancements.

Regarding portability, with each software solution there are proprietary elements that are not portable–call routing scripts, for example. However, with on-demand solutions there are typically more import/export features since they are often replacing incumbent technology.

Interoperability with other contact center platforms is a challenge regardless of the solution. As with on-premise solutions, most leading cloud-based solutions provide integration capabilities that can be used with on-premise solutions.

Five9 recently introduced the Five9 Virtual Call Center Release 8. This new release contains more than 100 new features. They include an option for geographic redundancy, a new library of over 100 standard call center reports, expanded Cloud APIs and many enhancements to the inbound and outbound call center software product lines.

In the coming months, Five9 plans to introduce new product options with significantly expanded capabilities in workforce optimization: call recording, e-learning, quality management, workforce management. Additionally, Five9 will launch innovative new services based on the industry-first Five9 Cloud Computing Platform for Call Centers.

InContact www.incontact.com
Mariann McDonagh, Chief Marketing Officer

The hosted value proposition has changed over the past year. As this model becomes more mainstream and as providers' capabilities grow the value proposition becomes less about their capabilities and more about the business benefits they can deliver to contact centers.

We are seeing that the size of the contact center customers purchasing our software services has grown substantially; this is no longer a solution just for small contact centers. We are beating out premise players in a growing percentage of opportunities. More decisionmakers are demanding that a hosted solution be among the options in the early phases of the selection process.

We have had several record quarters in terms of the number of contract closes. This is primarily coming from contact centers dropping their premise-based solutions as well as a significant amount of organic demand. We are seeing that as companies look to start new contact centers, they are choosing the hosted model in nearly 100 percent of the cases.

We are seeing that in the majority of cases where customers purchase only ACD/IVR/CTI, they typically purchase other components of our platform in the future. The reasons include evolving needs, such as for WFO, the ability to make additional purchases with the money saved and looking to us for additional support as their other solutions come to a point where they need to be replaced.

We have established the inContact Trust Office whose mission is threefold. The first goal is service reliability. The Trust Office works closely with engineering and operations to ensure our systems and networks are designed, managed and able to support 99.99 percent uptime. Second it creates, approves and audits security processes. We uphold the highest security standards and are certified with PCI, Sarbanes-Oxley, FCC and CPNI. We are also certified as a Safe Harbor Partner. The third is to ensure performance and scalability. To achieve this we work closely with network planning and network operations to ensure that network growth and design match our customers' growing demands.

We recently introduced quality monitoring, screen recording and workforce management powered by Verint. Tightly integrated with the inContact survey and recording solutions, the new inContact Quality Management system enables contact center managers to see a holistic view of agent performance and the overall customer experience. It allows managers to identify skill gaps and gain insights in order to train more profitable agents and deliver a brand-differentiating customer experience.

We also have a number of upcoming enhancements planned for our platform. Key among them is enhanced reporting with Qlikview, Universal CRM plug-in agent, social media routing and SMS routing.

LiveOps (www.liveops.com)
Paul Lang, Senior Vice President, Product Management and Marketing

The hosted value proposition has not changed but the model has become very interesting to enterprises. We do see a lot of companies looking for a better value proposition that are coming to end-of-life with their hardware/software solutions. Typically the premise-based solutions are costing too much to maintain. With the acceptance and proof points the cloud-based providers are showing it is driving a lot of attention.

Many large enterprises start with a pilot and move through to larger organizations upon success, but most are making large shifts by unplugging their premise solutions and simply turning up contact center cloud solutions within days. Once they see the delivery of this promise, they can easily add locations, remote agents, and even outsourcers to the solution in the same instantaneous fashion.

Security should be a significant consideration when looking at a cloud-based solution. Security is core to the LiveOps Contact Center Cloud platform. There are dedicated security experts monitoring 24/7 with in-depth security and risk audit controls surpassing industry standards and regulations set by Gramm-Leach-Bliley, HIPAA, PCI and Sarbanes-Oxley, among others.

USAN's Hosted Fraud Insight Protects Customer Interactions

The Federal Trade Commission reports that credit and charge card fraud costs cardholders and issuers hundreds of millions of dollars annually. To apprehend the perpetrators however, can be a manually intensive process as it often consists of tracking fraudulent acts after transactions have already occurred. A more effective approach is to detect the villains and their footsteps before any crimes are committed.

USAN (www.usan.com) is a leading hosted contact center firm. It handles millions of customer interactions each day, and therefore has a strong interest in protecting them. It has devised the Fraud Insight solution, which is a fraud pattern analysis engine and case management tool to track and status suspected cases.

Fraud Insight takes in data from many points of interaction and applies a configurable rules engine to automatically detect suspect activity. It monitors and tracks key "Fraud Indicators" (FIs), such as ANI, digital footprints and account numbers to look for questionable activity. When this occurs and is identified for a given customer interaction it is flagged in the system along with any other potentially related interactions. This provides investigators with a real-time view into potentially at-risk FIs across all media types.

The results from clients are promising. USAN reports that one major financial institution client has seen tremendous savings from using Fraud Insights and while another is piloting the solution.

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Our roadmap for the year ahead will focus on productivity and management. Some highlights include expanding on our reporting and analytics offering to give greater insights both in real-time and historically. We will introduce screen capture capability to complement our comprehensive recording to give an integrated view of customer engagement and interaction; extending our integration capabilities to third party applications using our extension API set; and enhance outbound capabilities with improved usability and campaign management.

TeleTech (www.teletech.com)
Tina Valdez, Vice President, On-Demand Operations

TeleTech has seen a significant increase in demand for hosted services. What is driving this demand is that customers/clients need more flexibility to solve major business challenges, and they need the solutions now, not next year. Hosted technology delivers this flexibility and can be deployed very rapidly.

TeleTech is seeing more complex deals involving multiple departments looking for integrated solutions. They need to work more collaboratively to drive business results. We are helping clients solve a broad range of interesting problems, such as revenue conversion, penalty reductions, lost revenue, security considerations and social media.

Business continuity continues to be a major concern. Clients who have historically wanted to manage everything in-house are growing more comfortable bringing in an outside expert. As vendor solutions have matured, the risk level has declined.

Approximately 80 percent of TeleTech's clients want component solutions, and 20 percent are selecting the entire platform. The flexibility allows them to solve specific business problems and not have to undertake an entire conversion at once. This reduces the complexity and risk of the transition by reducing scope and delivering quick wins for the business. Solutions for HR and workforce management are the most-requested components.

We are experiencing two emerging trends for solutions: social media and revenue conversion. As the consumer landscape has evolved with social media, clients need integrated solutions to address the new realities of providing multichannel support. Many clients are also transforming their traditional contact centers into revenue centers.

More than ever, clients are concerned about fraud and security. TeleTech is certified with numerous security programs including HIPAA, PCI, SAS70 and Sarbanes-Oxley.

TeleTech helps clients address portability concerns by helping them to consider the benefits of open-market systems and hosted options. Our systems use non-proprietary, enterprise-class technology so we can integrate into other systems as clients' needs dictate.

As most clients have customized environments flexibility is critical. TeleTech is delivering data feeds, service calls and interoperability across platforms and across continents.

One significant change is in employee mobility. Today, employees are not bound by the four walls of a contact center. They may be connected virtually from home, or working in the field and using a mobile connection. The technology must have the flexibility to meet these needs. We offer robust solutions to respond to clients regardless of their requirements while still maintaining the highest level of security.

Verizon (www.verizon.com)
Tom Smith, Manager, IP Contact Center Product Management

We are continuing to see a shift toward hosted services. While the value proposition itself has not really changed, with economy beginning to bounce back but with capital budgets still tight, enterprises are more open to invest in hosted solutions with an eye to improving the customer experience.

The bulk of the demand is coming from customers who have end-of-life premises solutions, and are replacing them with cloud-based services. Next is organic demand, as new businesses start up and other businesses return to growth mode.

Another key factor is that more tools are available to provide the enterprise with visibility and control of their hosted services. Verizon for example, offers Verizon Enterprise Center, a customer portal that enables our clients to manage their network-based services, streamline business processes, and control critical business functions.

There certainly are some customers who are willing to host their entire contact center function in the cloud, and we expect to see that trend accelerate. But the majority of our customers are deploying hybrid solutions, in which the intelligent services in the network are interfacing with their premises equipment. Many of our customers supplement their premises-based ACDs with network-based IVR and intelligent (skills-based) call routing. Others use our intelligent contact routing (ICR)-integration service to enable their premises-based routing engines to control routing and queuing in the network.

Premise-based solutions will always be a good fit for some customers using some applications, so the hybrid model is here to stay. But other customers are likely holding onto the premises components temporarily and will reconsider going all-hosted when their current equipment reaches end-of-life.

Verizon offers multiple levels of security: network, physical and procedural. As for portability, Verizon's philosophy is a commitment to open standards. For example, our Open Hosted Speech Service runs on a VoiceXML Forum-certified platform, so customers can create their own VXML apps that run in the Verizon network today and could be redeployed to another standards-compliant platform in the future. We have certified many of our cloud-based platforms for interoperability with the leading vendors' premises solutions.

Over the past year Verizon has begun offering our suite of IP contact center services with local number originations, in addition to toll-free. We have added IP terminations for the Open Hosted Speech Service. And we have enhanced our customer enablement and reporting tools to provide clients with even more visibility and control.

We have also deployed a flexible IP contact center infrastructure that will enable us to launch even more contact center services, to deploy advanced capabilities such as video, and to support unified communication and collaboration, breaking down the barriers between the contact center and the rest of the enterprise. This will enable our customers to adapt to the communication needs and preferences of their own customers, providing them with a competitive edge. **CIS**

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Jumpstarting your Contact Center with Communications as a Service (CaaS)

It's a balancing act for contact center executives everywhere: improve the quality of customer interactions, but minimize expenses to do it. Ok, how? With advanced applications like intelligent ACD routing and quality monitoring to improve the customer experience, and especially with its pay-as-you-go approach for minimizing startup costs and ongoing expenses, many contact centers are turning to Communications as a Service, or CaaS. Moreover, in a dynamic business climate, contact centers are also discovering how flexible CaaS is, and how rapidly it allows them to adapt to whenever needs dictate.

Minimized Startup and Ongoing Costs

In a contact center, the total cost of ownership for a premises-based communications solution adds up from software and hardware plus implementation services, data center infrastructure requirements (integration, energy consumption, etc.), system maintenance, upgrades, IT staffing and, at times, the need to scale to more users and features. On a balance sheet, the greater these initial and ongoing expenditures, the lower the return on your technology investment is likely to be.

However, reducing costs and increasing ROI is where a hosted solution model, such as CaaS, is at its best. While the scope of operations naturally varies from one contact center to another, a July 2007 Frost & Sullivan research report ("The Hosted Model: Why It's Revolutionizing the Contact Center Industry") found that, when compared to a premises-based solution and equivalent functionality for 100 agents, CaaS can produce a cost savings of 23% over 5 years. The savings primarily come from:

Simplified deployment. CaaS eliminates the initial capital investments for hardware, middleware, software licensing, and months of costly vendor services to implement a premises-based solution. With the CaaS model, the service provider maintains the platform and applications, allowing a contact center to deploy a solution rapidly and pay only for the functionality and capacity it utilizes, often on a monthly fixed-cost basis.

Service provider administration. Although many CaaS offerings extend user and application administration to the customer, vendors routinely manage overall system integration, configuration and administration requirements on the back end, including upgrades and ongoing support. Doing so allows a contact center to reduce its own IT staffing and operations costs.

On-demand scalability. With most premises-based solutions, scaling for more functionality and higher user counts to handle peak volumes requires adding hardware, user licenses, telco services, etc. But, since peak volumes are temporary, a contact center can leverage the CaaS model to scale up for a period of time — usually by activating user licenses or new apps on-demand as needed — and just as easily scale back down to avoid paying for excess capacity when peak volumes aren't in play.

Virtual capability. CaaS deployments are increasingly being offered via a choice of IP-based LAN, WAN and MPLS networks, meaning contact centers can expand virtually and recruit skilled agents from almost anywhere geographically. By equipping remote agents to work at home by way of networked end-user capability, contact centers find it easier to hire and retain top-producing agents, and reduce the amount of expensive office space and equipment required for an in-house agent workforce.

Advanced Contact Center Applications

Many CaaS providers are offering à la carte application suites, and afford contact centers of any size the same functionality previously attainable only with on-premises systems. That means contact centers from a few agents to several hundred or more can get CaaS-based features ranging from auto attendant and IVR to intelligent ACD routing, predictive dialing, blended inbound/outbound capability, recording, quality monitoring, automated satisfaction surveys, and workforce management, among other features.

Ask the EXPERTS

INTERACTIVE INTELLIGENCE

by Roe Jones, Product Manager, Communications as a Service, Interactive Intelligence

Application Control for Individual Business Units

Along with their advanced functionality, most CaaS solutions also allow a contact center's business unit managers to configure the applications they use — say a training manager who wants to establish recording rules and scoring guidelines in a recording app to gauge agent performance. Two benefits to this level of control: 1) managers can implement changes far more easily, since they know what's required for their unit's specific operations, and 2) they can bypass IT processes than can be both time-consuming and frustrating.

Increased Flexibility for a Dynamic Business Environment

Foremost with the CaaS model, forget a total infrastructure rip and replace to get started. To fit an organization's existing network and telephony architecture, many CaaS providers offer flexible deployment options that include traditional Time Division Multiplex models (TDM, the makeup of PBX systems), networked voice over IP (VoIP), or a hybrid TDM/VoIP approach. Deployment model considerations can depend on:

- An organization's need to supplement an existing PBX or on-site phone system with advanced services, without impacting on-site hardware or software
- A desire to move to an IP-based solution and appropriate network (LAN/WAN) readiness for VoIP
- Whether contact center operations are centralized or highly distributed
- The required time frame to deploy on the new platform
- Requirements for local control of customer data, such as call recordings and call detail records

Adjust Accordingly with No Hidden Costs or Downtime

Change is the nature of any business, and the ability CaaS gives a contact center to adapt without adding costly new infrastructure is invaluable. Consider a center in which average monthly volumes require ACD call routing for 50 agents. Throw in an upcoming sales promotion and more incoming calls, however, and the CaaS model makes it possible to inherently add IVR and more agents to handle the increased volume. Contact centers can even use CaaS to test drive a new application without making a large up-front investment for hardware and software licensing. For instance, try predictive outbound dialing for a small group of agents first. If the test drive goes well, all the better. Just add the new feature for a fixed monthly fee per agent, for all the agents you want. **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

Navigating the Compliance Rapids

If complying with laws and regulations can be likened to navigating a rapids-strewn river, here are the rocks and undercurrents for contact centers to watch out for:

Stiffer Telemarketing Law Enforcement

More than ever before contact centers should take every possible step to comply with U.S. federal and state telemarketing laws. The major reason is money: big federal and state budget deficits that are forcing officials to extract funds from whatever sources they can avail themselves without annoying voters.

Ryan Thurman, director of sales and marketing, Contact Center Compliance expects stepped-up enforcement in 2011. Telemarketer crackdowns yield fines that, subtracted for costs, yield treasury hauls as well as good publicity for the lawmakers.

Consumers have become very aware about the do not call DNC; it is very easy to get on the list and to file complaints against suspected violators, he adds. Yet many individuals are not aware of the DNC registry exemptions, such for companies they have existing business relationships with.

"The federal DNC registry is a popular consumer program but a complicated one to comply with as states have imposed further restrictions that are often more stringent, which makes it easy to trip up telemarketers and make them easy targets," Thurman points out. "There are about 196 million numbers on the national list but there are many that should not be on it such as businesses and numbers that have been disconnected and re-assigned.

Also 13 states still maintain their own DNC lists, some seven years after the federal DNC law went into effect–that also required states to roll their lists into the federal one. Thurman's firm ran the state lists against the federal database at the end of 2010 and found there were 4.5 million numbers on them that are not registered on the national DNC list. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reported that 36 states had their own DNC lists prior to the national list going into effect in 2003.

"The DNC lists are still a revenue generator for the states," explains Thurman. "And they are under no pressure within the states or by the federal government to give them up."

New Caller ID Regulations

Identifying callers, including where they are located, has become much more challenging with the advent and increasing popularity of VoIP, which uses IP addresses that could be anywhere that callers log in from, along with cellular phones and telephone number portability. That is because a phone number's area code may no longer be in the areas–or states–in which the called or calling parties' resides.

There are new readily-available applications that permit fraudsters to easily spoof legitimate callers' names and numbers', tricking called parties into answering their phones. These tools have made tracking and apprehending these perpetrators difficult.

The U.S. Congress has responded with the Truth in Caller ID Act of 2009 that President Barack Obama signed into law December 22, 2010. The legislation outlaws transmitting misleading or inaccurate caller ID information via any communications voice service, including VoIP, for criminal purposes. It does not permit firms to prevent or restrict any firm or individual from blocking any caller identification service.

The FCC has been charged with developing enabling regulations that would be applied to the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA) with a June 22, 2011 deadline. The agency must also report to Congress on whether additional legislation is necessary to prohibit the provision of inaccurate caller ID information in technologies that are successors to telecommunications service or IP-enabled voice service.

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Meanwhile the FTC has been seeking input as to whether it needs to modify the Telemarketing Sales Rule (TSR) to protect consumers from altered caller IDs, facilitated by technologies such as VoIP and if so, how. The agency issued on December 7, 2010 an advance notice of proposed rulemaking on this subject; comments closed January 28, 2011.

Michele Shuster is an attorney and partner at MacMurray, Petersen and Shuster; she has extensive experience in telemarketing laws and regulations. One of the issues she sees with the Truth in Caller ID act and other caller ID rules is that they do not specify which name, a company's legal one or the specific brand being represented, should be on the ID. She has at press time not seen a clarification from either the FCC or FTC.

"I recommend that in the meantime that a company use its company name or a name that is registered with the appropriate Secretary of State as a business name," says Shuster.

Do Not Text?

SMS/text messaging has become a popular means for individuals to communicate with each other. Marketers have quickly caught on, and so are lawmakers, responding to consumer complaints from being charged for these unsolicited and unwanted messages.

The New Jersey Assembly has passed, and the state's Senate is considering, a bill that would prohibit sending unsolicited advertising by text messaging if they will force recipients to incur charges or usage allocation deductions. It would require communications firms to permit their customers to block all inbound and outbound text messages from them. Similar legislation has been introduced into neighboring New York State's Assembly.

Shuster recommends that firms treat SMS/text messaging like calls to cellular phones; if required obtain express signed consent from their customers before sending them.

"Most companies would and should not be alarmed if such legislation is passed to make that law," says Shuster. It will, however, significantly impact resources available to businesses to provide their optimal customer experience."

Is "DNCC" Next?

Is "DNCC" i.e. "Do Not Call Cellphones" next? Firms could be required to obtain signed consent from American consumers before live-agent-calling as well as delivering pre-recorded messages to their cell numbers, even when there are existing business relationships.

An FCC proposal to harmonize the TCPA with the FTC TSR on pre-recorded messages, announced in a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) in 2010, may have that effect if this requirement is included in future enabling legislation.

If such regulations go into effect observers fear it could have a devastating impact on outbound calling by telemarketers and collections firms–potentially rivaling the Do Not Call (DNC) registries. That is because more Americans are porting landline calls to wireless devices and increasing cases going wire-free altogether.

"If this proposal becomes a regulation this is going to create problems as 25-30 percent of U.S. population is cell phone-only," Thurman points out. "How many people are realistically going to signing consent for firms to call them for marketing purposes?"

Telemarketing calls, with certain exemptions, have long been prohibited to wireless numbers. Yet telemarketers have long had the right to call them if consumers had given their consent by providing them with their cell numbers.

Michele Shuster explains that the FCC issued declaratory rulings in 1992 and 2007 that "persons who knowingly release the phone numbers have in effect given their invitation or permission to be called at that number, which they have given, absent instructions to the contrary…"

The NPRM also includes proposing that the FCC align with the FTC regulations on permitting consumers to automatically opt-out of receiving pre-recorded calls without waiting to reach agents to do so via leaving messages. The FCC would also adopt the FTC's per-campaign limitation on predictive dialer abandonment rates that it says would thwart telemarketers from focusing more on less-valued customers with a disproportionate share of abandoned calls.

Shuster has been advising as a proactive measure that her clients obtain express written–signed or e-signed–consent to contact consumers, including on their cellular phones, whenever they interact with them.

"I would like to see the state of the law remain as it is," says Shuster. "If a consumer provides a cellular number at which to be contacted, a company should be able to

ATA's Compliance and Legislation Programs

The American Teleservices Association (ATA) offers an integrated set of compliance and legislation education, certification and issues advocacy programs for its contact center members. It represents more than 4,000 contact centers that account for over 1.8 million professionals worldwide.

The ATA will be holding its annual Washington Summit that focuses on federal and state legislation issues October 10-12, 2011 at the Gaylord National Hotel. It is sponsoring a series of Compliance Seminars and the next ones for 2011 are in Dallas, Texas, April 28, New York, N.Y. Sept.8 and Phoenix, Ariz. Dec.1.

The ATA also sponsors the ATA-SRO, a comprehensive set of outside-audited standards that incorporates applicable government regulations and consumer protection rules. These provide contact centers with a platform of best practices, documentable procedures and measurable compliance tools. The program goal, says the ATA, "is to assure a positive teleservices experience for consumers and provide an objective system that reinforces companies' commitment to government compliance."

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contact the consumer at that number absent instructions to the contrary."

More Stringent Data Security Laws

Authorities are cracking down on financial and identity theft and fraud. And they are writing more legislation and rules requiring companies to protect this information.

Three states, Minnesota, Nevada and Washington, have adopted the Payment Card Industry (PCI) Data Security Standard (PCI-DSS) standards into their data protection laws. PCI-DSS applies to all entities—including contact centers that store, process, and/or transmit cardholder data.

Massachusetts has a strict new set of regulations–201 CMR 17.00, which went into effect March 1, 2010, requires firms that own, license, store and/or transmits residents' personal information to have and maintain written comprehensive information security programs.

The rule, backed by Massachusetts General Law 93 chapter 93a, Regulation of Business Practices for Consumers' Protection, says firms must have secure user authentication protocols and secure access control measures. Encryption is mandated for personal information that is to be transmitted across public networks and via wireless. Also for such data that is stored on all portable devices especially laptops; password-protect is not enough.

The regulation stipulates that companies must have and keep current firewalls, operation system security patches and security software that must include malware protection. They must also educate and train employees on computer security, including the importance of protecting personal information.

Many contact center solutions offer means to comply with these standards and laws. Calabrio's recording solution uses an advanced API that enables a contact center to stop and/or start voice and/or screen recording automatically. When a user enters a web-based application or touches a sensitive field within an application, the Calabrio API pauses the recording so that credit card or other sensitive data is not captured.

Kristyn Emenecker, Verint's vice president of solutions marketing recommends contact centers consider AES 256-compliant encryption with strong key management that protects data when it is recorded, in transit and archived. Verint's Impact 360 PCI and Recording Encryption solution offers it along with encryption, RSA key management and the option to pause and resume recording automatically based on desktop events or an API trigger. It also provides audit trails, access controls and server hardening capabilities.

"In most cases this PCI adoption by states has no impact on what an organization needs to do to be compliant, but it can raise the stakes for those that may be less-than-motivated by PCI alone," says Emenecker. "Most industry watchers expect to see Federal legislation on data security at some point, but that of course remains to be seen."

Call Recording Permission

The scripting "your call may be recorded to ensure quality" is not just there as information. It is there to comply with regulations. While U.S. federal law requires that one party must be aware and provide consent that the calls are being recorded there are several states that require them for all parties unless there are statutory exemptions, Shuster points out.

Evan Kahan, vice president of operations at Majuda recommends that inbound and outbound call scripts ask consumers for their permission to record their calls and if they say no, to stop the recordings, maintaining their refusals as records.

"Most companies have the permission scripting on the inbound calls but many forget to have them on outbound," Kahan points out. **CIS**

Creating a Compliance Culture

The key to compliance is building it into the corporate culture, where it is carried out as a natural part of doing business.

InfoCision Management Corporation has a compliance culture and supporting practices. It has an internal API that helps save time in making changes to software when a new or changing law or regulation must be applied to the IT process of a particular telemarketing program. It is also an accredited contact center under the American Teleservices Association's ATA-SRO compliance certification program. And as a condition of hire, every employee must sign a Client File Policy Agreement which says they agree to protect confidential information. This includes client information from scripts as well as personal consumer information they collect.

"Leadership needs to set the tone and a positive example for all employees to instill the importance of maintaining compliance, not just for the company but for clients as well," InfoCision chief of staff Steve Brubaker points out. "If a company's CEO does not place a high value on staying compliant, those feelings will trickle down throughout the company. The price of noncompliance is steep; potentially putting a company out of business and negatively impacting the client's reputation."

The following companies participated in the preparation of this article:

American Teleservices Association
www.ataconnect.org

Calabrio
www.calabrio.com

Contact Center Compliance
www.dnc.com

InfoCision
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CASE Study

by Brendan Read

Analyzing the Conversations

It is not enough anymore to monitor agents' conversations with customers and then schedule coaching sessions. These interactions must be carefully analyzed with the aid of screen and speech analytics solutions. Firms that have done so have experienced improved performance and bottom-line results. Here is one such example:

Healthcare Revenue Recovery Group (HRRG), a division of TeamHealth, a large healthcare professional staffing and administrative services firm, provides medical debt collections services. HRRG has 74 agents, split between contact centers in Lathrop, Calif. and Plantation, Fla. Its focus is on improving revenue recovery while retaining patient customers.

HRRG needed a cost-effective, systematic means of monitoring and assessing agent performance that would provide a sound basis to coach and train agents to achieve those goals. It found monitoring alone was not adequate in identifying which agent skills were crucial to increasing collections revenue and in measuring usage of those key skills.

HRRG needed a cost-effective, systematic means of monitoring and assessing agent performance that would provide a sound basis to coach and train agents to achieve those goals.

The firm turned to speech analytics, as the solution would enable it to automatically "listen" to 100 percent of its calls and assess agent performance in a completely objective manner. Only with such comprehensive and objective monitoring could small changes in agent usage of key skills be immediately and accurately measured.

In November 2009, HRRG chose UTOPY's (www.utopy.com) Collections Optimization, a speech analytics solution built on the UTOPY SpeechMiner platform that is specially formulated to improve delinquent accounts collection. It includes a knowledgebase of key collections skills and the phrases spoken by agents when leveraging those abilities. It has dashboards, analytics, reports and alerts which measure and monitor skills usage. UTOPY Collections Optimization also includes UTOPY Intelligent Coaching products that permit supervisors to easily create targeted and individualized training, both coached and self-learned.

The UTOPY solution software was installed and configured in December 2009 followed by initial identification of critical agent skills and tuning the system. It went live in February 2010.

HRRG set out two metrics to improve: collections revenue and phone payment rates. It pinpointed their top- and bottom-performing agents in terms of revenue collected. Then UTOPY identified the skills that best differentiated them. It discovered that HRRG's top performers utilized specific techniques much more often than the company's bottom performers. For example, top performers created urgency more than twice as often, suggested a payment plan almost three times as often and suggested reimbursement nearly four times as often as bottom performers.

UTOPY recommended that HRRG train all of its agents on critical collections skills, which took place in mid-June 2010. The firm then advised focusing ongoing training and coaching efforts on these skills by coaching bottom performers to utilize the techniques more often and training new agents on effectively leveraging the key abilities.

HRRG agents practiced their skills in role plays and were evaluated with real customer calls during training, coaching and self-learning sessions until the agents became very proficient with them. Agents are encouraged to recommend their calls for "Best Practice Libraries" which are managed by Intelligent Coaching and agents can win a gift card if their call is selected. HRRG also runs other contests to create excitement about and maintain focus on the key skills.

The UTOPY solution began having immediate and dramatic impacts. The results far exceeded expectations thanks in considerable part to the UTOPY solution. Actual revenue was 20 percent more than the expected revenue every month after the ramp-up period, which translated to an additional $3,234 in revenue collected by each agent each month. Key skill usage improved over 13 percent, prompting 32.5 percent more phone payments.

HRRG has many plans for further leveraging its UTOPY speech analytics solution. It hopes to utilize speech analytics to detect all incidences of non-compliance and immediately alert management of the occurrence. Also, in the same way that speech analytics identified the key collections skills and helped train and coach agents on those skills, the key compliance skills can be identified, taught and learned.

"UTOPY enables HRRG to measure and monitor agent performance on every call, in exactly the same way for each agent, which was impossible for us to do previously using traditional methods," says David Friedlander, vice president of operations at HRRG. **CIS**

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by Brendan Read

Customer Interaction Solutions Magazine's 26th Annual Top 50 Outbound Teleservices Agency Ranking

For more than a quarter century, Customer Interaction Solutions has delivered its "Top 50" Teleservices Agency Ranking. And for the 26th time, we present our Outbound rankings (as always, the Inbound rankings will follow in the April issue). The Top 50 ranking has become the benchmark for businesses seeking high-capacity teleservices agencies.

Ranking and Qualification

The ranking of Outbound "Top 50" agencies is numerical, with 1 indicating the largest (highest call volume). We ranked the "Top 50" agencies based on the number of minutes each was billed by each of its phone companies for telephone service for 12 months, from November 2009 through October 2010. Qualifying teleservices agencies were required to submit responses to a detailed questionnaire, indicating the nature of their operations and listing the number of billable minutes for that 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 provider used, certifying the number of minutes for which the providers billed the agencies during the evaluation period. Agencies that did not supply third-party verification were disqualified, with certain exceptions. In those situations, we allowed providers 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. There is an asterisk (*) next to the names of all such agencies.

There were 29 agencies meeting the minimum requirements for this year's rankings. Category A comprises of 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). Agencies that appear in both categories are marked with a dagger (†).

Category A – U.S. Domestic

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

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

3. DialAmerica (Mahwah, N.J.) *
www.dialamerica.com

4. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/Salt Lake City, Utah)
www.teleperformance.com

5. Alorica, Inc. (Chino, Calif.) *
www.alorica.com

6. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) including Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * †
www.influentinc.com

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

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

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

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

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

12. Callbox, Inc. (Encino, Calif.) †
www.callboxinc.com

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

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

15. 121 Direct Response (Philadelphia, Pa.)
www.121directresponse.com

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

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

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

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

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

21. Affinitas Corporation (Omaha, Neb.) *
www.affinitas.net

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

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

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

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

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

Category B — INTERNATIONAL

1. Teleperformance Group (Paris, France/Salt Lake City, Utah)
www.teleperformance.com

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

3. PCCW Teleservices (Hong Kong) including Influent (Dublin, Ohio) * †
www.pccwteleservices.com

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

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

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

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

8. VOXDATA (Montreal, Quebec, Canada) *
www.voxdata.com

9. 24-7 Intouch (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada)
www.24-7intouch.com

10. Callbox, Inc. (Encino, Calif.) †
www.callboxinc.com

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

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

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Brendan B. Read, *Senior Contributing Editor*

Avoid Lawsuits, Avoid Credit Checking Applicants

While there is little likelihood of major new laws and regulations coming down from the conservative-swaying Congress and state houses, the Obama Administration and many of its state counterparts have given notice that they will enforce existing ones to the max. And that includes regulations impacting on employment.

The case in point is credit checks for job applicants. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) announced on Dec.21, 2010 that it was filing suit against Kaplan Higher Education Corporation under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The commission says it is a violation of the act "to use hiring practices that have a discriminatory impact because of race and that are not job-related and justified by business necessity".

"Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was intended to eliminate practices that serve as arbitrary barriers to employment because of a job applicant's race," said Regional Attorney Debra Lawrence of the EEOC's Philadelphia District Office in a statement. "Employers need to be mindful that any hiring practice be job-related and not screen out groups of people, even if it does so unintentionally."

Kaplan's side was reported in a Bloomberg article that also appeared Dec.21. "The company conducts background checks on all job applicants, including credit histories for those who handle financial matters," the company said.

Kudos to the EEOC. Credit checks are the equivalent of debtors' prisons because they punish individuals who have been struggling to survive in this tough economy and who got behind with their bills by denying them the employment that they need to pay off their debts; a Catch-22 if there ever was one. Only in rare circumstances, such as if an employee is required to be bondable, should this practice be allowed.

Some law firms are raising the red flags on this issue. A January 19, 2011 blog by Sheppard Mullin, Richter and Hampton points out employers should determine "whether there is a sound business reason to obtain such information because, if it is not directly job related, it could be considered discriminatory."

"Moreover, employers should be aware that credit checks are not always accurate indicators of a person's qualification for a particular job or a valid predictor of job performance," adds the firm.

Sheppard Mullin points out several states–Hawaii, Illinois, Oregon and Washington–ban or severely restrict credit checks in hiring. Many more may be joining their ranks, including Connecticut, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Vermont and Wisconsin.

Are there grounds for credit reports for employment screens? The law firm's blog says yes: if the employees handle "money and assets, makes fiduciary decisions or has access to private financial data."

This last one may be the excuse for contact centers to use credit checks because many of them are handling personal financial information especially as agents are prodded to convert sales and support calls into telemarketing transactions. Yet there are a wide array of safeguards and strict standards governing and protecting data such as PCI-DSS, which is backed by law in some states; Massachusetts has tough new privacy and security regulations.

And with how closely monitored every keystroke and utterance is, agents would have to be extremely stupid even if they could get access to try and get away with stealing data. There have been few instances of it happening even offshore; if this was the case there would be screaming headlines—and quick action by lawmakers.

I once worked for a publishing firm that covered commodities. One day all of the reporters and editors were herded into a room and were warned, "don't even think of insider trading". Enough said. No credit or other background checks, though the firm did mandate pre-hire drug testing as it was the corporate parent's policy.

Would not a similar warning approach to contact center agents on financial information on top of the other laws and measures for contact centers be fairer, more effective and less costly than credit checks? And be less likely to get unwanted attention from the government?

If businesses want to truly avoid restrictive laws and regulations they can start apply some common sense. **CIS**

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