IBM

Dial-a-Phone drives call center innovation to serve customers faster, better and more efficiently.

Overview

■ *Challenge*
As a low-cost direct sales channel, Dial-a-Phone needed to optimize its customer support processes to ensure maximum efficiency and customer satisfaction.

■ *Why Become an On Demand Business?*
By automating key elements of its call center operations, Dial-a-Phone streamlined its processes and became more responsive to its customers' information needs. By opting for an open infrastructure, the company now has a clear roadmap to establishing true multichannel self-service capabilities.

■ *Solution*
Dial-a-Phone worked with IBM Business Partner Digital Union to deploy a highly intelligent interactive voice response system that streamlines customer contacts and—by leveraging a common reservoir of customer data—works seamlessly alongside Dial-a-Phone's Web portal.

■ *Key Benefits*
  ● *10 percent increase in agent productivity resulting from automation of security authentication*
  ● *Avoidance of more than £200,000 annually in new staff costs, including hiring, training and seats*
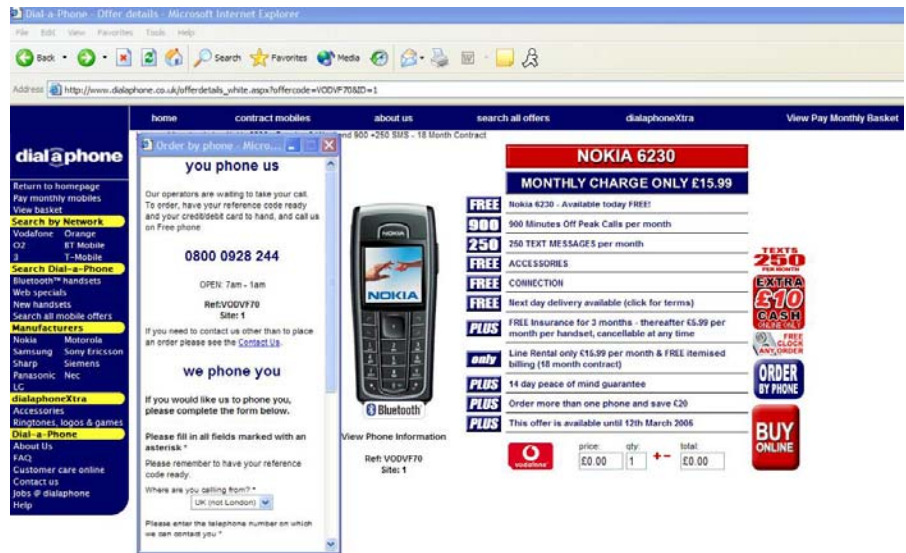
Dial-a-Phone has grown from a handful of people in 1995 to now having over 600 employees. In that time Dial-a-Phone has supplied mobile phones on monthly contract to nearly two million customers, and since it launched in 2000 over 250,000 customers have connected from the Web site.

Since its founding in 1995, London-based Dial-a-Phone (www.dialaphone.co.uk) has emerged as the preeminent direct supplier of mobile phones in the UK. Serving one of the most mobile-savvy markets in the world—where penetration is high and customers frequently trade-up their phones—Dial-a-Phone has established itself as an easy-to-use, low-cost channel. As its name implies, the company sells products and service packages over the phone (via its call center) and through its Web site. Under its business model, Dial-a-Phone is paid by mobile service providers for each customer the company delivers. As part of this arrangement,

"Digital Union and IBM are helping us innovate to stay ahead in a highly competitive, dynamic marketplace. Their flexible, open solutions gave us the agility and responsiveness that have become a must in our business."

– Ben Bennett, Telecoms & Resourcing Manager, Dial-a-Phone

ON DEMAND BUSINESS™

On Demand Business Benefits

- 10 percent increase in agent productivity resulting from automation of security authentication.
- Avoidance of more than £200,000 annually in new staff costs, including hiring, training and seats.
- Improved customer satisfaction from streamlined information acquisition
- Improved employee satisfaction and retention through automation of repetitive tasks
- Improved ability to deploy a multichannel self-service platform due to the use of an open, Web-services based infrastructure

"If we lose a sale because we drop the ball on customer service, we lose the entire investment we made in acquiring that customer. That's why meeting—and exceeding—customer expectations is mission critical for us."

– Ben Bennett

Dial-a-Phone bears the cost of everything from demand generation (through mass market advertising) to order processing, fulfillment and post-sales support.

Given the magnitude of Dial-a-Phone's investments in customer acquisition, successfully converting prospects to satisfied, paying customers is mission critical. If for any reason an order is mishandled—for example, the wrong service or the wrong phone are delivered—and the customer aborts the transaction, service providers don't pay and Dial-a-Phone effectively loses its investment. Because of this risk, and because of the narrow margins that generally characterize the mobile reseller market, Dial-a-Phone's strategies are built on efficiency and high-quality execution at every stage of the transaction cycle to meet or exceed customer expectations.

Driving call center innovation

One such area is post-sales support. While many companies view post-sales support as a pure cost center, its importance within the sales cycle makes it a source of competitive differentiation and operational efficiency. In Dial-a-Phone's post-sales support call center, agents field some 4,000 calls per day from customers seeking information about delivery dates, billing and other account information. Ben Bennett, Dial-a-Phone's Telecoms & Resourcing Manager, saw both an opportunity and a challenge in improving efficiency through process innovation. By streamlining inbound telephone interactions through automation, Bennett saw the opportunity to handle Dial-a-Phone's burgeoning growth while minimizing the need to add, train and equip call center staff to meet it. The challenge, however, was to find a way to implement this process automation while not only maintaining quality of service—but actually improving it.

There are two basic components of Dial-a-Phone's inbound support calls. The first was the security check, during which customers authenticated their identity through a series of script-based questions. In the second, more interactive phase agents addressed customers' specific queries. After examining these processes in detail, Bennett concluded that the most effective strategy would be to initially focus on using voice recognition technology to automate the security check. As a well-defined and script-driven process, the security check represented the most straightforward automation opportunity with the most immediate benefits and—as such—provided the most expeditious path to showing the business value of call center automation to Dial-a-Phone's senior

management. But it was also just a beginning. The larger plan was to create a set of core capabilities that it could gradually integrate across its entire range of customer-facing channels according to its own timeframe. Thus, whichever path Dial-a-Phone took, Bennett knew that openness and flexibility would need to be key attributes.

To make the solution a reality, Dial-a-Phone sought a provider with the requisite voice response expertise and—just as important—was able and willing to tailor its offering to fit with Dial-a-Phone's incremental deployment strategy. Bennett explains: "We wanted a provider who was willing to share some of the risk we were taking, someone who could provide us with the flexibility up front to demonstrate value to our internal stakeholders. Digital Union met both these criteria." An IBM Business Partner, Digital Union provided the core technology—through its Speak-ez voice recognition offering, which was built on the IBM WebSphere Voice Server and WebSphere Voice Response for AIX platforms. The company also provided critical innovations to help Dial-a-Phone resolve thorny technical challenges, foremost of which was the need to recognize the UK's alphanumeric postcodes, which are required of customers during the screening process. To achieve this, Digital Union used IBM WebSphere Studio Application Developer to create a powerful new algorithm that triangulates existing data about the customer to streamline an extremely challenging recognition process.

The solution's main technology components include the Speak-ez solution, which is running on top of IBM WebSphere Voice Server deployed on an IBM eServer pSeries. When a customer call comes into the call center, it is routed through an automated call distribution switch to a server running Speak-ez. Using the customer's telephone number, the server then uses Voice XML to query a backend database, which then sends the request back to the server. The server then uses Speak-ez's voice recognition to automatically run through the list of security questions—including the postcode—with the goal of authenticating the caller. If necessary, the server again compares the customer data gathered through IVR to its backend database to fine tune and verify the customer's information record. Once verified, the system then hands the call to a live agent, who can then bypass the tedium of screening and begin to directly address the customer's problem.

Getting to the customer faster

By automating a major portion of the customer contact, Dial-a-Phone's solution increased both the efficiency and overall quality of the process. While the company's roughly 120 agents now spend an average of 33 seconds, or 10% less time on each call, it is the ripple effects of this metric that are arguably the most profound business benefit. Because its agents are 10 percent more productive, Dial-a-Phone can now handle that much more additional call volume without hiring and training additional agents, enabling it to avoid an estimated £200,000 in annual staffing costs. What's more, relieving agents of the repetitive security

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Key Components

Software

- IBM WebSphere® Voice Server
- IBM WebSphere Voice Response for AIX®
- IBM WebSphere Studio Application Developer
- Speak-ez (Digital Union)

Servers

- IBM eServer™ pSeries®

Business Partner

- Digital Union

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screening has improved their job satisfaction and has enabled them to focus their energies on solving customer problems. For their part, customers are more satisfied because they can now get answers to their questions more quickly which strengthens customer relationships and retention.

As it looks to expand on this initiative, Dial-a-Phone has also begun reaping the dividends of its open, scalable architecture. And as its call processing demands increase, the pSeries' ability to scale horizontally ensures a seamless, cost-effective growth path, while WebSphere Voice Server's use of open standards gives Dial-a-Phone more flexible infrastructure options. As Dial-a-Phone's customer management strategy evolves to its next stage—multichannel self service——Bennett sees Web services as an important enabling technology. "Building our system on the IBM WebSphere architecture and its Voice XML capabilities has given us the critical foundation we need to integrate more backend data and introduce more innovative services," says Bennett. "The system will leverage the same data as our customer portal system, which makes it easier for us to provide a seamless experience for the customer, regardless of how they choose to contact us."

As a channel player in a low margin industry, Dial-a-Phone's current expansion into Web services ties directly into its top bottom-line priorities— maximizing both operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Leveraging a common repository of customer data is not only more efficient from an infrastructure point of view, but also provides a smooth path for the automation of additional call center functions. Thus, in the same way a customer Web portal can personalize the presentation of information, Bennett sees Dial-a-Phone's call center system leveraging its knowledge about the customer to automatically deliver highly relevant information via text-to-speech. "Digital Union and IBM are helping us innovate to stay ahead in a highly competitive, dynamic marketplace," explains Bennett. "Their flexible, open solutions gave us the agility and responsiveness that have become a must in our business."

For more information

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