

NorthPower thrives in a deregulated marketplace



Overview

■ **The Challenge**

Centralize call center operations with the implementation of a reliable voice response system, while maintaining profit levels and achieving a high level of service

■ **The Solution**

IBM WebSphere® Voice Response with DirectTalk® Technology and IBM DB2 Universal Database™ running on IBM @server xSeries servers

■ **The Benefit**

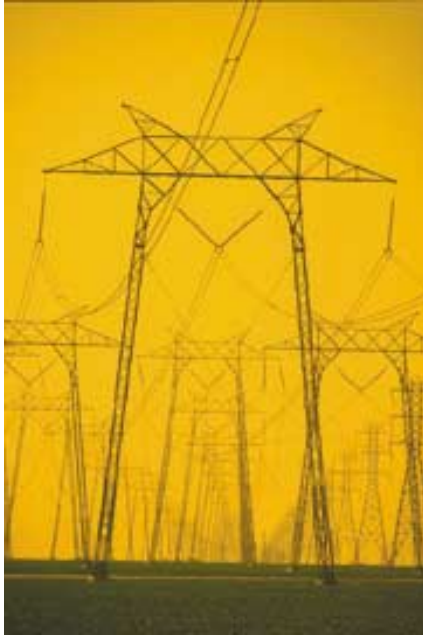
Enables utility to provide realtime, on-screen management details for inquiries, gives customers access to vital information whenever needed, and provides opportunity to expand customer base and world-class performance, further strengthening position in the marketplace

The marketplace

The Australia and New Zealand marketplace has long accepted Interactive Voice Response (IVR) as the initial entry point for developing call center automation. With this high level of customer acceptance, IVR can now be used in almost any area of customer service to create a distinct advantage. In Australia, the deregulation of the utilities market has led many companies to search for a competitive advantage—retaining profitable customers while driving down customer service center costs.

One such company is NorthPower, the energy services corporation serving Australia's northern New South Wales (NSW) state. Formed by a voluntary merger and incorporated in 1996, NorthPower has emerged from the restructuring of the New South Wales electrical supply industry as a leading Australian energy company. NorthPower is building a new company from the ground up, redefining every part of its business culture with the aim of being the preferred energy partner for customers throughout the country.

“With WebSphere Voice Response, we are able to offer our customers reliable, 24x7 service. They know they can rely on NorthPower to provide critical, up-to-the-minute, detailed information on restoration time.”



To this end, NorthPower has established a state-of-the-art customer call center, enabling customers to do business over the phone 24 hours a day, every day of the year. This has been achieved across a very large and decentralized geography (230,000 square kilometers) serving both small and large customers, many with special needs and unique challenges. NorthPower selected IBM to install and implement IVR services after a rigorous and highly-competitive evaluation. As a new start-up, NorthPower faced several challenges.

Deregulation and the business challenge

Deregulation has brought many challenges to the energy providers of NSW. Since residential electricity prices have been maintained at 1992 levels, creating an effective cost reduction of 13 percent, efficiencies were required elsewhere in order to maintain profit levels and still achieve a high level of service. To do this, NorthPower automated services such as emergency messaging, call routing and account payments through IVR. By centralizing call center operations, the company managed the set-up and operational costs of the 24x7 operation. Meanwhile, NorthPower continues to add new technology services (such as Internet access) for their customers.

Centralizing customer care

An initial requirement was to provide centralized customer care services, emergency services and maintenance management across a vast geographic region which needed to be operational 24x7. NorthPower used WebSphere Voice Response to answer all calls in selected regions, giving those callers the latest information regarding any planned or unplanned outages, with the option of speaking to a Customer Service Representative (CSR) if required.

All general-inquiry callers selected IVR options for services such as making account payments using debit or credit cards. Other callers were routed to the best agent for their needs. The IVR had to provide detailed management information, both realtime and historic, to support effective facility management. Additional options, such as connection and disconnection services and account inquiries are planned to round out NorthPower's world class service.

The new IBM system had to be implemented quickly. It had to be flexible, allowing rapid changes to accommodate NorthPower's growing business, and it had to work reliably. A key to meeting these objectives in a very short time was the selection of WebSphere Voice Response IVR integrated with Java applications, IBM DB2 Universal Database and NorthPower's PABX (originally Fujitsu, but subsequently changed to Nortel Meridia). User interfaces were created as Java applets running with Web browsers or through NorthPower's intranet using TCP/IP.

Management information is readily available

Call center management and staff can view a status map of NorthPower's service regions, showing registered outages. Regions affected by outages are displayed in different colors, allowing rapid assessments to be made by operators. Registering an outage is simplicity itself. The operator selects the affected region from the status map, then the locality within the region gives the reason for the outage—the expected time to resolve it—and any actions to be taken by customers. The last summary screen displays the message to be read to callers from the affected region. There is no room for errors. The system routes callers from any affected region to the IVR; there they hear the message providing them with information that is specific to their own area.

To provide near realtime, on-screen management details for both emergency and general inquiries, caller usage patterns, bar charts, pie charts and custom graphs are presented through Web browsers. Options are also provided to display historical information. This information is obtained from the IBM DB2 Universal Database using Java scripts.

Meeting future competition

With a complete deregulation of the NSW electrical market planned by January 2001, NorthPower must prepare to meet new competitive challenges for its domestic customers. This also provides an opportunity for NorthPower to further expand its customer base, expanding its world class performance in customer care and energy services to all areas of the state. The establishment of a strategic alliance with IBM ensures that NorthPower has ongoing access to world-class Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solutions, allowing the utility to further strengthen its position in the marketplace.

To learn more

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