

Merging telephone and web

Padraig McTiernan, managing director of CT-Solutions, explains to Business & Finance why companies should think about internet call centre and IP call centre solutions.

Many successful online companies such as Amazon.com have websites that can process customer transactions. But unlike books, which have an educated audience and are relatively simple to buy, many catalogue products are complex, such as high-end electronics devices. Many web consumers browse online catalogues and place an order, then cancel at the last moment.

The merging of the phone and the web, however, is opening a whole new market for today's call centres. In these cases, as customers browse the catalogue online, agents can intervene with a real-time voice call to explain the complex products and close sales. With a push-to-talk button, many web sites report that sales are up by more than 50% so IP solutions increase sales in that way.

The call centre can no longer afford to be separate from the web site. Customers cannot use the phone to browse a catalogue or read detailed product specifications. It is also difficult and sometimes impossible to do comparative shopping over the phone. Phone service is needed on the web, and web service is needed on the phone. Thus, a voice-enabled web site lets call centres boost close rates and do up-selling and cross selling; increase customer visits through increased customer dialogue; differentiate themselves from the competition by providing a value-added service with the personal touch of a live agent and enhance satisfaction by responding quickly to customer needs by text chat, web push or phone.

IP Call Centre Benefits

Some of the greatest advantages of deploying a converged solution are increased mobility and enhanced customer care. Customers can conduct transactions or receive information 24 hours a day, with little or no wait time. In addition, they can choose the interaction form they like best; some prefer email, others prefer the telephone. Their transactions are also more accurate because customers enter their own information. An open, fully voice-enabled internet call centre can manage interactive voice response (IVR), fax, email, web collaboration and phone service on a single communication server. This cuts costs and reduces time to market.

A voice-enabled internet call centre solves the problem of finding good staff. Agents can be geographically dispersed and in different time zones, so for this reason new areas for recruiting are available and multilingual support can be offered more easily. The fact that agents can work at home also makes the job more attractive to many.

Cisco's Standards-Based Solution

To help companies realise these advantages of IP solutions, Cisco announced in September the Cisco IP Contact Centre (IPCC). The Cisco IPCC is a standards-based

solution that can be implemented in a single-site environment or a multi-site enterprise. The Cisco IPCC combines Cisco IP telephony with contact centre solutions to deliver an integrated suite of proven products that enables agents using Cisco IP phones or SoftPhones to receive calls originated from traditional time division multiplexing (TDM) networks as well as voice-over-IP (VOIP) calls. Cisco IPCC is based on the Cisco Intelligent Contact Management software (Cisco ICM), which is widely deployed in traditional Call Centres supporting a wide variety of disparate legacy platforms and networks. Cisco IPCC provides a smooth migration path to IP-based customer contact solutions while taking full advantage of previous technology investments.

Better Service

As more companies seek an internet presence, the distinguishing feature between the best web sites and the has-beens is not simply presentation, but service. This includes a better interactive experience that enables the customer to determine a product's availability, cost and when it will arrive; as well as to get human help and attention. CosmoCom's CosmoCall Universe Call Centre suite allows companies to create web sites with a one-click interface to a powerful call distribution centre that routes calls using VOIP, so agents can be located anywhere. The interface allows the webmaster to create an email message, as well as letting support representatives initiate an interactive text session with the customer. The software can also provide a sound-only or sound-and-video feed to customers as a way to guide them to the appropriate web pages or products through a graphical interface.

CosmoCall integrates with customer relationship management (CRM) products from a number of vendors, allowing pop-up windows in the CRM application for incoming calls. These show the caller's information, reducing the need for redundant queries.

To mark the completion of its spin off from Lucent, Avaya has introduced six new products that provide IP solutions to enterprise customers. Under the Enterprise Class IP Solutions, or ECLIPS, banner, the products are all pure IP communications, and include IP600 IP Communications Server, the R300 Remote Office Communicator, DEFINITY IP Solutions software, the enhanced Avaya Directory Gateway, new IP telephones, and second generation IP Softphone. Products are due to ship in late 2000-early 2001. Avaya's specific plans for IP call centres are evolving.

Similarly, Nortel Networks has announced Succession IP telephony solutions including Succession Call Centre for Enterprise. It has not yet defined a clear call centre strategy for Succession. However the Meridian IP story is very credible and brings the proven reliability of the Unix based Meridian with a full VOIP capability in the LAN and WAN. Combine this with the market leading Symposium product and you have a compelling story for mission-critical call centres.

The benefits of internet call centres are clear. If your call centre is down, you're out of business. The trick is to choose the right point in the technology curve to move to full IP - an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach is called for. Ask Cisco how many fortune 500 companies are betting their business on IPCC.

#