

The pioneers in telecommunications

ALERT Communications and Target TeleServices are leading providers of virtual office solutions and innovative direct response marketing programs. BY CLAUDIA D. NEWCORN

IN THE AGE OF VIRTUAL OFFICES, IT'S ABOUT time someone offered solutions for small to medium-sized and home-based businesses. In Wasatch Front, ALERT Communications is stepping up to the plate.

Founded 28 years ago as a traditional answering service, ALERT has become a leading area provider of telemessaging solutions, consistently adding emerging new technologies to provide state-of-the-art communications services to an expanding client base. This diversity of services has enabled ALERT to offer what the company calls "Virtual Office Solutions."

All roads lead to an operator

"Unlike traditional answering services," explains Rex Wilcox, president and CEO, "a virtual office is a cost-effective set of messaging services—such as pagers, e-mail and PCS—that are combined to allow a customer to operate their business or perform their work no matter where they are, while remaining connected—as if in they were in the office—at all times." A client can conduct business or pleasure, travel, attend meetings, work at home—knowing at all times that ALERT's trained operators will ensure that calls and messages arrive in a timely fashion.

ALERT delivers enhanced telemessaging by crafting customized Virtual Office Solutions for clients utilizing the appropriate matrix of answering services, including voice mail, pagers, cellular/PCS and satellite phones. Yet despite the high technology, the mainstay of the company's service offerings remains operator-assisted-services. Fundamental to the company's success is the human voice, unique in an industry dominated by often frustrating automated messaging systems. "All roads lead back to an operator," says Wilcox. "Unlike fully automated answering services, we give callers an 'out' to an operator at any time during the interaction. This gives an edge to our customers over those who use strictly automated versions. Operators serve as the glue that holds the entire solution together." Employees receive extensive training and development on an ongoing basis to ensure that both clients and their customers encounter a quality of service superior to any other in the market.

**REX WILCOX (L) AND
ROGER LEFEVRE (R)**
All of our activities
are geared toward
providing the best
total solution for
our clients...cus-
tomized to the
client's specific
needs.

Serving the businesses along Wasatch Front, ALERT works with a broad spectrum of clients ranging from small, single-person operations to medium and large-sized firms. Much of the current business comes from satisfied customer referrals, and the company is expanding its marketing efforts to get the word out about its services. Within the industry, ALERT's reputation speaks for itself—it has been recognized as a Top 50 Call Center from among approximately 3,000 answering bureaus nationwide.



Targeted marketing tools

Encouraged by ALERT's ongoing success, in 1991 its umbrella company, ACI Telecom Group, established the new Target TeleServices division. "This was a natural extension of ALERT's live answering services," explains Wilcox. "Originally serving the 800/888 direct response order-entry arena, Target expanded to include innovative Call Center and marketing services in 1994." Today, the company specializes in handling complex, customized Call Center campaigns, including product and service testing (roll-out feasibility), long-term customer service (dedicated



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and semi-dedicated support), media and call tracking (call sourcing and time-of-day/day-of-week analysis), boutique literature and product fulfillment services.

"Direct response teleservices are driven by either a marketing approach or a need to provide a higher level of customer service," explains Roger LeFevre, executive vice president/director of marketing. "Generating millions of dollars in revenues for aggressive companies of all kinds and sizes, our teleservices actually achieve higher profits at lower costs. This is accomplished by offering consumers free product samples, discount coupons, customer service and the convenience of at-home shopping. And you don't have to be a Fortune 500 company to benefit; we also work just as well for one-person operations." As such, the telephone effectively becomes a powerful marketing tool for new customer prospecting, testing marketing ideas, analyzing market potential and servicing customers' needs.

By tailoring direct response services to client specifications, by staffing to fit project needs—which includes training specialized customer service representatives to handle dedicated clients—and, when asked, by fulfilling the orders and literature requests of customers, Target TeleServices enables any size company to take advantage of this highly targeted and

cost-effective aspect of the marketing mix. In fact, one of Target's most successful services has been the New Venture Program, which allows first-time clients or small companies to take advantage of the direct response arena for as little as \$500.

Internet-based call center

In late 1996, reflecting ACI's strategies as a pioneer in call center innovation, Target TeleServices made history by establishing the Internet Call Center (ICC), which offers Internet-telephony IP-based Automatic Call Distributor (ACD) services. The first and only known such facility currently operating in the world, ICC operates as an outsourced call center, actively accepting calls for third-party clients. Developed in collaboration with Intel Corporation, this client/server application allows an individual to make real-time, voice/video telephone calls directly over the Internet from a Web site enabled with a "Talk to Us" button. "It eliminates long-distance toll charges and the need to have a second telephone line," Wilcox points out. "In so doing, a World Wide Web customer can connect and speak directly with representatives of companies via their Internet site to order products or services, and to obtain customer service."

ICC enables a company to capitalize on the customer's interest at that moment. Today's technology usually prohibits a person from making a telephone call without first disconnecting from the Internet, since few users have two phone lines to their desktop. By disconnecting, the caller has lost the information tool that first prompted the call, which results in frustration as he or she tries to explain over a traditional telephone what moments ago could be viewed directly. ICC interacts with a caller's multimedia PC (equipped with speakers/microphone or headset combination), providing voice, video and data over a single telephone line. Most unique is that the Internet caller remains connected to the Internet during the conversation and can converse with the call center through the Web site. This technology does not initiate a call back; communication is real time.

When asked to what he attributes his company's success and steady growth, Wilcox smiles. "All of our activities are geared toward providing the best total solution for our clients. Our computer and telephone systems are customized to a client's specific needs. All information is confidential and remains the client's sole property. Our people are our most valuable assets and are trained both technically and interpersonally to be proactive in responding to our clients' needs. We know the importance of service, and we guarantee that we will make a positive impression for the client's company." ♦

QUICK STATS

COMPANY NAME

- ACI Telecom Group

TYPE OF BUSINESS

- Sole global provider of Internet-telephony and ACD real-time Web communications services (Internet Call Center);
- State-of-the-art, enhanced telemarketing services (ALERT Communications);
- Customized direct response call center marketing campaigns (Target TeleServices)

LOCATION

- 400 West Lawndale Drive

EMPLOYEES

- 75 employees (in an 11,000-sq.-ft. facility)

KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Technological innovation; personalized/customized service; commitment to customer care; forward thinking; confidentiality.

WHAT'S AHEAD

- Expanding market penetration; capitalizing on evolving information systems technology