

# CALL CENTERS MEET THE INTERNET

A telephone-messaging firm looks to enable superior customer service.

Illustration by Nicholas Wilton / SIS



**SALES** and service over the Web bring with them the reality that online customers are likely to become ticked off. Either they won't be able to navigate your site to find answers to their questions, or they'll have to go offline to call a customer service rep (CSR). Either way, your company is faced with a disconnect.

But a number of leading-edge businesses are now building the foundation for Web applications that will enable CSRs to look at Web pages collaboratively with customers, pointing out pertinent information and giving one-to-one contact through video-screen pops. These applications will incorporate data, video and voice for live one-to-one service over the Internet.

"We realized we'd lose customers if we relied on traditional means," says Roger LeFevre, CEO of Target TeleServices, a Salt Lake City-based telemessaging firm for companies such as Intel. The organization supports toll-free number servicing through an

inbound call center. "The hardware is there, and MCI and AT&T are out there beefing up their networks. They know Internet functions will completely eclipse what they've done in the past. Our mission is to help customers, whether business or individual, choose the means of communication they want: interactive online, 800, fax on demand, direct local line or any other traditional means."

Driven by Intel's requirement to use video/data/voice technology in a real-world environment, Target has embraced multimedia. The company's software from PakNetX (PNX) of Salem, N.H., identifies calls as Web- or telephone-based, alerts CSRs and then provides a script to walk customers through Web pages. "If a shopper is known to like red wool sweaters, the CSR could point out Web pages highlighting red wool sweaters," LeFevre notes. Eventually the software might also incorporate data mining to create customer profiles for

target marketing based on account numbers, phone numbers and IP addresses.

These types of call center apps are emerging in three key areas: technical support, where PC windows and files are manipulated through an Internet connection; Internet banking and trading, where customers complete complex transactions using data/audio collaboration; and Web-based retailing, which enables CSRs to offer online assistance and eliminates the need for customers to disconnect their Internet connection for a CSR call-back.

PNX's solution runs on a standard server and leverages the "push-and-pull" of the Internet, says LeFevre. "In a multimedia environment, we can talk to our customers over the Internet live and for free. With a video camera, we can have TV-grade video with customers. People will feel more confident in their decisions if they can interact with a live person in real time."

LeFevre's CSRs are equipped with 300-megahertz or faster Pentium PCs with 56K modems, sound cards and dual monitoring headsets to handle the Internet and public switch telephone network.

PNX's Automatic Call Distributor 2.0 is in beta at Target, providing call transfer, audio and video streaming. LeFevre is also toying with DVD-style advertisements so telephone or Web callers can watch entertaining videos or company ads while on hold.

—Susana Schwartz

## ▶ BY THE NUMBERS

**Company:** Target TeleServices

**Revenue:** \$6.5 million

**Employees:** 200

**Problem:** Letting customers choose their means of interaction in an increasingly Web-based business climate

**Solution:** Client-server software that provides call transfer, audio and video streaming to enable reps to assist customers live online

bill payment system is extremely helpful for busy people like me," states Louis Ball, department administrator for the submarine technology department at the laboratory.

"The bill payment system saves me a lot of time, effort and brain power and best of all there are no checks to write, stamps to buy or, in some cases, bill payment due dates to remember."

### Cars Over The Internet

Members also see advantages in buying cars over the Internet. Along with the new bill payment option, the credit union began offering autos and auto loans over the Web site in September.

The autos are offered through a private-labeled version of AutoVantage's (Stamford, CT) auto buying program. APL had previously offered the program via a private dial-up service.

Members can view car summary guides online and request new car pricing on a desired automobile by accessing and selecting the auto buying services function.

*"It's our hope if they buy a car, they'll come to us for the loan."*

"It's our hope if they buy a car, they'll come to us for the loan," Carol explains.

The web site also enables the members to:

- ✓ Use CyberCash wallet,
- ✓ apply for a Visa credit card,
- ✓ apply for loans,
- ✓ Join the credit union (this option is open only to Johns Hopkins APL staff),
- ✓ order checks,
- ✓ use a financial calculator,
- ✓ interface with Intuit's Quicken and Microsoft's Money personal finance programs, and
- ✓ survey members.

## PC Microphones To Influence Future Call Center Structure

*While many companies use email or "call back" buttons through their Web sites to enhance their customer contacts via their call centers, these will soon be antiquated features, says Roger S. LeFevre, executive vp of ACI Telecommunications Corp., Salt Lake City, UT, who spoke at International Quality & Productivity Center's Launching and Managing an Internet Call Center seminar in Chicago.*

### Talk To Us

Roger says these features will soon be largely supplanted by real-time "talk-to-us" buttons. They allow customers to use a microphone attached to a PC to talk live to the call center agent. Customers can simultaneously look at information on the Web, or browse other sites, if he is placed on hold.

The change in customer contact options is in reaction to recent technology upgrades. Most PCs sold during the last year came equipped with microphones, or at least have the internal configuration to easily add one, Roger explains.

### Evolving Call Centers

Behind these talk-to-us buttons will be automatic call distributors (ACD) and gateways.

- ✓ **ACDs**—help direct calls to available agents, minimizing the time a customer is on hold.
- ✓ **Gateways**—provide the means for companies to have "a call center within a call center," with a select group of agents equipped with PCs with full Internet access to handle customer communications coming from the Web.

Other agents will have more traditional call center setups. Roger also foresees fast growth in smaller call centers with less than 50 agents, many of them working on an outsource basis for other companies.

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### Business To Business EDI

*"Business to business EDI [electronic data interchange] is much further ahead than where the banking industry is..."*

—Diane Casey, Grant Thornton, at Microbanker '97 Conference and Expo