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### IP-based system key for growing call center

By Barney Beal, News Director  
10 Apr 2008 | SearchCRM.com

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BEVERLY, MASS. -- As the phones ring and customers cancel newsletter subscriptions or reorder "Rice-n-Shine" meal replacement here at the headquarters of ITV, message boards throughout the call center display the call queue, wait times and other statistics.

It's all par for the course for a company planning explosive growth over the next several years and one reason ITV selected a full IP-based contact center suite to run its call center operations. ITV offers infomercial services. Clients come to ITV with their products, predominantly natural health remedies, and ITV creates and produces an infomercial, buys airtime around the country and provides customer service and shipping.

Business is good. Founded in 2003 out of a direct marketing company, ITV moved into its Beverly headquarters, complete with production studio and call center, in 2006. That move coincided with the decision to switch from a PBX-based system to the IP-based i3 system from Indianapolis-based Interactive Intelligence. That decision was predicated partly on a plan for growth.

"When we moved into this building, we initiated i3. We had 110 agents, and there are now 400 agents between [Beverly], Biddeford ... and Chicago [ITV's satellite call center and shipping facility, respectively]," said Christopher J. Meusel, director of information systems. "We were already thinking of using at-home agents. We want to expand support out of this building."

ITV wants to have 10,000 to 15,000 agents taking calls from home in the next three years. Customer service calls come in to Beverly and the 50-seat office in Biddeford, Maine. ITV also uses independent business owners (IBOs) as sales agents. They take calls from the 1-800 numbers flashed on the screen during infomercials.

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"Our current supplier with the at-home agents has limited accessibility to data and functionality changes," Meusel said. "We have a quality control center that listens in to the agents' calls. We're asking i3 to extend the API so we can use their administrative user interface via Web Services. We want to be able to access the user agent configurations here and change specifications in accordance with our business needs via dynamic triggers instead of a human administrator."

The ability to easily integrate with Interactive Intelligence was a major selling point for the system, according to Meusel -- that and the price. The company does much of its own development work. It runs a homegrown CRM system.

"I'm a very data-oriented person. I don't think one system is better than another, other than they keep data better than another," he said. "What matters to me is price and how I can affect the data. I've found that a third party doesn't know my business, no matter how hard they try; i3 gave me the best hooks into that."

#### Managing a growing, remote sales force

Until recently, IBOs worked out of the Beverly location, as did customer service. ITV's aggressive growth plans required that they move the agents offsite and into their own homes. Turnover also had become an issue. Calls were routed to agents

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based on their ability to close sales on different products.

"One reason we wanted to remove sales from here was the lower-end agents couldn't close," Meusel said. "Few people were making money, and the lower 25% was constantly revolving. Now, we're no longer shackling them."

There are challenges with managing a remote, independent sales force, however.

"When they were here, I used to say I wish they were at home; and now that they're home, I say I wish they were here," said Jesse Jalbert, director of campaign management.

As independent business operators, the sales force pays to receive calls coming in from the infomercials. They then receive commissions on the sales and future renewals. They are required to attend webinars in order to qualify to field calls. ITV communicates via email, blogs and instant messaging agents when should expect a spike in call volume. ITV is currently working to establish a central portal for the IBOs.

Revenue per call is the primary metric for ITV agents.

#### Feeding insight back into the business

The system provides some unique insight for the business. For example, i3 allows agents to record calls into .wav files with the click of a button, and the CEO of the company will download a handful of service calls to listen to on his MP3 player.

Call volume also helps ITV determine whether they need to re-record an infomercial. It's immediately apparent if a particular show is effective or if ITV needs to make changes based on response as the program goes live, Jalbert said.

Companies moving off a PBX system or considering launching an IP-based contact center should be ready for change, Meusel advises.

"Plan to grow," he said. "We moved into this building and had 40 people, which quickly grew to 50 and then to 110. Suddenly, we need 600 agents. We had no proxy to handle it. We weren't prepared for the growth. Plan it out even if you don't buy it all at once."

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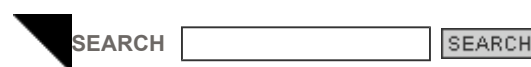
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