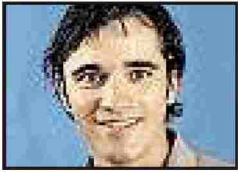


Software maker puts a call out for the outrageous



Daniel Lee

INSIDER ACTION

Sure, you may have stories about shabby customer service from call-center agents.

Maybe you had to repeat your name and account number over and over. Maybe your call-center agent seemed clueless.

But perhaps *you* weren't such a joy to speak with, either.

Interactive Intelligence — an Indianapolis-based software maker specializing in programs used by call centers — is giving call-center agents a chance to tell their stories. In a savvy marketing move, Interactive recently launched an "Outrageous Interactions" contest for agents to submit stories about their most outlandish, weird and unreasonable customers.

Call-center agents may submit entries to

www.outrageousinteractions.com until Aug. 31. The entries will be judged by a panel that includes



Interactive Intelligence CEO Donald Brown will be among panel of judges.

Interactive Chief Executive Donald Brown, with the winner receiving a trip for two to Hawaii.

Some early submissions are, um, interesting: » One agent tells of a peeved customer mailing chicken bones and copper coins to a call center as part of a voodoo curse.

» Another agent staffing a help line for guests using Internet access at hotels was talking to a guest enraged over being unable to surf the Net. The guest screamed, "If I can't get on, no one will!" The guest hung up, found the hotel's computer room and ripped out the switches, servers and cables.

» Another agent trying to help a woman locked out of her computer account asked her for security information, including the last four digits of her Social Security number. "Do you want to know my bra size, too?" the angry woman snapped.

Without thinking, the agent replied, "We already have that."

That silenced the caller until her account was unlocked, at which point the woman quietly said, "Thanks."

The contest is the brainchild

of Joseph Staples, Interactive's senior vice president of worldwide marketing. The goal is to honor agents and inject humor into a stressful job.

"We always try to take approaches that are a little outside the norm," said Brown, who deftly shifted to his sales pitch.

He said Interactive's call-center products — which account for 70 percent of the company's revenue — can help avoid many problematic customer calls. The software, he said, fully tracks each call, even if it's transferred, and uses pop-up screens to provide agents with instant access to needed information.

Richard Feinberg, a Purdue University researcher who has visited about 200 call centers over the past 15 years, said agents accumulate so many interesting stories simply because people are quick to blame companies for any little problem — even if the companies they're calling often are not at fault.

"They feel the brunt of the consumer's pain," said Feinberg, director of the Center for Customer Driven Quality at Purdue.

So, next time you freak out on a call-center agent, you may have just helped that person win a trip for two to Hawaii.

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