



Contact Center Case Study: **SMT Makes The Call With Voice Broadcast Technology**

By Steve Adams

One of the basic tenets of business is that happy, satisfied customers are loyal customers. This principle is the foundation for the entire contact center industry. Yet while much of the focus in this area is on inbound telephone calls from customers with questions or complaints, proactive outbound calls that keep customers informed about changes in products or services, changes in policy, items requiring an action on their part, and other information can be very valuable in building a strong relationship.

The challenge there, however, is one of scale. Small businesses with customer lists in the hundreds can easily reach out to all of them at once via the phone. Large organizations with hundreds of thousands or even millions of customers find phone outreach far more difficult, both in terms of cost and timing, and thus tend to rely on more impersonal methods such as e-mail or direct mail. It was this dilemma that caused SMT Direct, a provider of outsourced contact center services, to look for an alternative that would provide the best of both worlds – the relationship-building personal touch of a phone call with the mass scalability available through e-mail and direct mailer.

The Customer: For the last 10 years, SMT Direct Marketing has been a leader in providing premier outsourced contact center services across multiple sectors on behalf of Fortune 500 companies. The company specializes in high-touch industries such as financial services, telecom, retail and healthcare. Headquartered in Toronto, Canada, SMT Direct Marketing has additional contact centers in India, Pakistan, Dubai, and Mexico/Latin America.

This broad base of operations allows SMT Direct Marketing to stand out from typical contact center outsourcers by offering a range of options that “maximize the customer experience” rather than simply providing the same services at a lower price. As a part of this core belief they are always looking for new ways to help clients deliver the right message at the right time to the right customers while remaining cost-efficient.

The Challenge: For many large organizations, particularly those in the financial services and telecom industries, the need for outbound communications with customers is driven by a temporary but important event. For example, bank customers may need to be informed about a limited-time change in interest rates for a particular type of account, or a wireless carrier may introduce a new service plan that offers advantages to certain types of customers. Whatever the event, the word needs to be spread quickly.

Study after study has shown that telephone calls are more effective than e-mail or direct (snail) mail for gaining customer attention and spurring them to more immediate action. Yet the logistics of large-scale outbound phone calling are intimidating. Making live calls to a large customer base requires three things: a substantial investment in technology, office space, and personnel to make the calls; time-consuming and costly provisioning of additional, temporary phone lines; and training of the temporary workers in both the specifics of the offer and the culture of the company. In addition, if the scale is large enough it becomes more difficult for even the best organizations to assure consistent quality throughout the entire temporary workforce.

Some organizations choose to solve the triple challenges by outsourcing, but in truth all they have really done is shift the problem rather than solve it. Someone will still be paying for equipment, provisioning, and training, and call quality will have to be meticulously monitored to assure consistency. Then, when the project is completed, there is little residual benefit that can be carried forward to other projects if additional equipment and office space were temporary. Conversely, if they were purchased the contact center now has additional overhead and unused capacity that will sit idle until the next project.

As an organization dedicated to providing both quality and value to its clients, these options was not acceptable to SMT Direct. According to company President & CEO Tony Nadra, "When an event occurs we need to be able to react quickly to our clients' needs. Sometimes the window of opportunity is very small. The cost of having idle equipment standing by for one of these activity spikes is higher than the business model will allow. But not having it available on short notice might mean a costly delay in getting the word out." What the company needed, was an automated means of broadcasting voice messages without impacting the company's own telecom costs. And that meant the outsourcer would have to become the outsourcee.

The Solution: As it turned out, the solution was a lot closer to home than first anticipated. SMT Direct Marketing had been using an Internet fax service to send and receive faxes over the Web for several years. When SMT Direct Marketing first heard that the company was introducing voice broadcast service in 2003, Nadra was intrigued immediately.

SMT Direct Marketing signed on for the service at its inception and has used it with success on more than one hundred voice broadcast campaigns for a variety of clients ever since. Nadra says it is simple to use and effective. "Where it used to take weeks to get an agent-based voice campaign in place, we can now be ready in an hour or less," he says. "Our clients definitely like the quick response time. We will record a .wav file with the message, upload it into the hosted voice system, upload the call list, and when it's all ready click on the send button. It couldn't be easier." This simplicity makes the system ideal for both ongoing campaign series or one-off messages that need to be delivered on a timely basis.

SMT Direct Marketing uses voice broadcast in a variety of ways. For example, the company can use the recorded message for all calls, have different recorded messages depending on whether there is a voice or answering machine pickup, or even kick live pickups over to an agent standing by. Every call gives the customer the ability to opt out to a live agent at any point if he/she needs more information or wants to take an action.

Nadra emphasizes that voice broadcast technology is being used strictly to provide important information to existing customers. “Our clients are not using it as a prospecting tool,” he says. “Nothing is being sold on these calls. Instead, we are providing their customers with information they need to know, such as an approaching cutoff date to clear out old voice mails when customers are changing their phone service to a different carrier. The idea is to be more responsive and proactive in order to help customers take advantage of all the benefits these clients have to offer.” It has also been used to poll voters in the U.S. and Canada to help election campaigns tweak their messages to targeted audiences.

From a logistics standpoint, SMT Direct Marketing chose a hosted voice broadcast solution. This choice incurred no equipment or software costs. Nadra says it is also superior to predictive dialer-based systems because it eliminates the telecom costs associated with using this internal software. While the service has only been used out of the Toronto headquarters to date, Nadra expects it to be rolled out to the other contact centers soon.

Another feature he likes is the ability to generate and view reports quickly. “As soon as the process comes out we are able to get a report,” he says. “We can even go online and watch the progress live as it happens. That’s very important to us, to assure we’re delivering on the promises we’ve made, which is one of our 10 Guiding Principles.”

The Result: The best indicator of the effectiveness of the company’s voice campaigns, according to Nadra is the response rate they’re generating. He says customer response to the voice messages has been more than double the accepted industry rate for direct mail. Clients have considered that to be a phenomenal success, particularly given the short-term nature of most campaigns.

SMT Direct’s clients are also reporting lower inbound call volumes in the period following program changes. They view this as a positive on two levels: A) there is less user confusion and frustration due to lack of awareness of the changes, improving customer relations, and B) the clients don’t have to add or redirect resources to support the changes, lowering their costs while keeping other projects and areas focused on their primary responsibilities. In addition, SMT Direct’s clients are seeing lowered customer turnover during transition periods, which shows they’re doing a better job of maintaining customer loyalty.

“The more our customers grow, the more difficult they find it to maintain a direct line of communications with their customers,” Nadra says. “This technology gives us the ability to help them get to all the right customers at the right time with the right information, and in a way that stands out. It has definitely made a difference in the success of our clients.”

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