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## Speed Dialing

### **Faster, smarter, easier: How the web is boosting call center performance**

By Mary Wagner

When holiday gift-giving ramps up, things get busier at an already-busy 1-800-Flowers.com. Heading into Valentine's Day, well over 1,000 call center agents were staffing the retailer's toll-free number, answering questions, making recommendations and taking orders.

What few of the customers knew was that calling the 800 number might not connect them to an agent at one of 1-800-Flowers.com's five bricks-and-mortar call centers, but to an agent working from a phone and PC set-up in the agent's own home. In addition to the 300 outside agents it employs in its own home-based call center network, 1-800-Flowers depends on a few hundred agents from Alpine Access Inc., an outsource provider of home-based agents. In a web-based deployment invisible to the customer at the other end of the line, the home-based agents have the identical real-time access to the order management system, inventory status, and product images and information as agents in the bricks-and-mortar centers.

The introduction of the web into retailers' contact centers is making agents, and the call center itself, more effective. The web's integration into call center operations has allowed agents to move beyond the phone connect with customers in more ways, such as e-mail and live chat, permitting shoppers the freedom to communicate with the retailer in the method of their choice: a big score for customer satisfaction.

The web lets retailers access hosted services to deploy advanced call center functions at a lower cost of entry than doing so in-house, while integrating the services into their systems where needed to speed transactions, capture data and reduce human error. Web applications also are making it possible for agents to see a unified view of customer interactions across channels to ease the resolution of customer queries and issues, and putting the product and inventory data they need at their fingertips to maximize cross-selling and upselling.

Clarissa Niedzielski, executive vice president at Fulfillment Systems Inc., an outsourced web-enabled call center that serves retailers such as Junonia.com, says web functionality at call centers means higher sales and a smoother order process, among other things. They all sum up

the bigger picture of what the integration of the web into call centers is doing for retailers today. “Having web-based functionality just helps enhance the branding experience,” Niedzielski says.

#### At the heart

At Alpine, which serves a number of retailer clients, the web serves to put its remotely working home-based agent network on an equal footing with—some argue an even better footing than—the agents in a retailer’s bricks-and-mortar call center.

Alpine’s agents use the web to link from their home PC to Alpine’s web center, which passes them through to its retailer client’s systems. That gives the remotely working agents real-time access to the same data and systems available to agents working within the retailer’s in-house call center.

The web also provides online access to troubleshooting and on-the-spot sales coaching for home-based agents. Alpine uses a proprietary web chat system to connect the agents behind the scenes with coaches, who assist them in real time while the agents are on the phone with customers.

“The web is at the heart of every stage of our program,” says CEO Chris Carrington. “It aligns the needs of a company with the resources available in the marketplace in real time, and it provides a better outcome from a call, whether it’s customer service or sales.”

#### Freedom to ask

A web-enabled call center that supports multiple means of communication gives customers the freedom to contact the retailer in the way that they feel most comfortable. For Junonia, e-mail functionality at Fulfillment Systems works to handle an issue and deliver a positive customer experience.

Fit is an issue for any retailer of apparel and that includes plus-sized specialist Junonia, whose customers may experience difficulty in finding clothing that fits. That means a lot of detailed questions about fit, which some customers are less inclined to do in a phone conversation. So Junonia’s agents at Fulfillment Systems have become expert at answering them via e-mail.

“The rep has visibility into information from the warehouse management system as to sizing information and specifications on a particular product. If a consumer is uncomfortable making a phone call about a product or question, some prefer to e-mail their questions and to communicate only by e-mail,” says Niedzielski. “It just gives the consumer more options for having their questions answered in a way that is comfortable to them.”

Junonia CEO Anne Kelly is considering adding live chat to the web-based support services it uses at Fulfillment Systems’ contact center. “Chat demands a fairly high level of sophistication, and in a highly distributed center, we just didn’t have that,” she says. In the larger call center Junonia used previously, agents typically supported several retailers at the same time. Junonia didn’t generate a sufficiently large percentage of the center’s total calls to justify a dedicated

team, or even to allow any agent to develop deep product knowledge over repeated interaction with Junonia customers, Kelly adds.

At Fulfillment Systems, the agent team supporting Junonia supports a smaller number of retailers, so a larger percentage of each agent's time is spent with Junonia customers. That has allowed them to advance quickly in their knowledge of the company and its products, Kelly says. "This smaller group is very rapidly becoming so extremely good with e-mail, and handling people with such a nice tone, that I'm reconsidering chat," she adds. "It's only a baby step from e-mail to live chat."

At direct marketer Infinite Mind ([inmind.com](http://inmind.com)), the web was the route to improving workflow and boosting agent productivity in its outbound sales program. Infinite Mind uses the web, TV and radio to market a program that trains the eye to read faster, in part by training eye muscles to expand peripheral vision. It's a concept that takes some explaining, so it's not surprising that of the calls TV advertising drives to its call center, only about 40% result in a sale—about 20% for the calls driven by radio advertising.

#### Closing on follow-up

That leaves a large percentage of those initial calls that don't close in a sale as candidates for Infinite Mind's follow-up outbound sales program. Infinite Mind fields a dedicated team of agents for those outbound calls, and that's where hosted call center service from Echopass Corp. comes in. Via the web, Echopass delivers an on-demand technology platform to support the team's needs—including an automated dialer that distributes leads among the agents, web chat capability and e-mail functionality for the agents. The hosted platform incorporates technologies from other providers, integrating with its client companies' customer relationship management system or knowledge base as the situation requires. Echopass guarantees service-level agreements for everything on its platform.

Hosted call center technology delivered over the web emerged as the right solution when the outbound sales team, now numbering 60 agents, grew to 10 to 15 agents, says Infinite Mind CEO Steve Glick. At the start, the outbound agents used a spreadsheet to track calls and manually dial the leads, but as the program grew, "We realized we had to buy a dialer and start feeding leads into it to make it easier to manage, or find a service," says Glick.

Glick can log on from any browser to monitor agents' calls, run regular reports or pull custom reports on call activity. "We have the ability to track when an agent is on the system, which allows us to measure their efficiency," says Glick. For about \$250 per agent per month, compared with what Echopass estimates at \$10,000 to \$15,000 per agent for a marketer to buy the same technology to equip agents in-house, hosted technology delivered online allows Infinite Mind to keep expanding outbound business at its call center, and capture on follow-up sales that would otherwise be lost.

With more than \$1.1 billion in annual sales of health and beauty products—of which the web represents a reported 79%—Quixtar Inc.'s 450-plus-seat call center is hopping as agents provide answers and clarifications pre-sale, and customer service post-sale. The web-enabled center

supports multiple means of communication with customers—and therein lies the challenge of keeping it all straight.

To function efficiently, Quixtar's call center needed a unified view of all of any customer's interactions with the call center, and it found that in software from eGain Communications Corp. When agents receive a call, they type that information into a separate customer relationship management system. eGain's integration with that system automatically populates that same call log, by customer, with any e-mail received from that customer and any response to that e-mail by an agent.

"eGain's solution helped us with getting a holistic view of all transactions," says Aaron Sundman, call center support specialist at Quixtar, an e-commerce and direct marketing subsidiary of Alticor Inc., which also owns Anway. Sundman also notes that the software is useful in tracking the call center's performance in e-mail response timeliness.

The eGain software shows how long an e-mail has been waiting for an answer and tags it with a deadline by which it must be answered to meet Quixtar's service level goals.

#### No re-typing

To further speed e-mail response and streamline call center operations, the eGain software pulls preformatted answers from a knowledge base when an agent requests one: a web service calls the knowledge base for the answer the agent requests, then automatically populates the agent's e-mail response with that answer. "No one has to re-type it," says Sundman. "The answers in the knowledge base are controlled by one group, so eGain interacts with the knowledge base in that way for a consistent answer every time."

Sundman isn't disclosing hard metrics on how eGain and its web services application are improving call center efficiency, but he says one way to measure its effectiveness is in the fact that by maintaining a rapid turnaround time on customer's e-mail queries, the call center actually receives less e-mail. "There is less follow-up e-mail from customers wanting to know when we are going to answer their question," he says. "So when you get caught up on e-mails faster, you actually have less work for yourself. It keeps customers happier as well."