

Telecom Teams with Gen-i to Improve Customer Service

Customer Calls get to the Right Place, Right Time.

Managing a contact centre is like performing in a high wire act – you get to walk a tightrope every day. It's the job of contact centre management to ensure that all callers are instantly directed to the right location. That means juggling the numbers of agents available to handle the relevant calls, and having the right infrastructure in place to handle unexpected increases in call volumes.

With constant variations in call flows due to abnormal events, such as marketing promotions, major communications faults or even technical outages, making accurate predictions of caller volumes are near impossible.

Which is why Telecom, which operates the largest contact centre in New Zealand, has set a new standard for customer service by implementing Gen-i's software tool, Toll Free Self Manage, to manage the peaks and troughs in call volumes. Toll Free Self Manage enables the contact centre team to track the performance of its call routing function in real time and manage call traffic across its seven contact centre locations.

Implemented in partnership with Gen-i, Toll Free Self Manage has not only increased the effectiveness of Telecom's contact centre team, it has also dramatically improved the quality of the service offered to customers, helping callers get through to sales or service as quickly as possible.

Performing a balancing act

Telecom's customer service division operates the largest contact centre in the country, handling 12 million calls each month for a broad range of services, from managing customer moves, sales of new products and logging of faults, through to mobile phone text top-ups and balance queries.

According to Peter Lord, Manager, Channel Technology for Telecom, variations in call flows due to abnormal events can make accurate predictions of caller volumes near impossible.

"All contact centres are looking for effective ways to handle inbound call flows, so that callers can get through to the correct sales or service team as quickly as possible," explained Lord. "However, building and maintaining an infrastructure to handle calling peaks and troughs is no simple task."

Although many of these calls are managed using self-service telephony applications based on IVR (Integrated Voice Response), most use a combination of self-service and back-up human operators. As a result, Telecom employs nearly 3,000 agents across 21 contact centres spread around the country.

"Our customers range from residential customers and small businesses, through to some of the largest corporations within New Zealand," added Lord.

"They use a variety of telephone numbers to access our contact centres. While many are 0800 numbers to support specific campaigns, we also support numbers for frequently accessed services, such as 123 for general residential queries.

"We not only need to ensure that we have the right number of agents available to answer the calls, we also need an infrastructure that can handle unexpected increases in call volumes and ensure all callers are instantly directed to the right contact centre location. It's not just a case of having the capacity to handle the calls, you also need a sophisticated solution to manage call flows to minimise the number of abandoned calls and increase the effectiveness of our contact centres."

"However, having the right infrastructure to manage call flows has been a constant challenge for our industry."

Walking the tightrope

Prior to the introduction of Toll Free Self Manage, Telecom relied on a labour intensive manual approach to manage and optimise the call traffic for its 540 access numbers.

Greg Fayerman, IVR Implementation & Solutions, Contact Centre Technology for Telecom, explained that each 0800 number is attached to an IVR server which directs each call to the right contact centre location. With seven IVR servers in different locations across the country, the maintenance of the infrastructure was a constant challenge.

"Whenever we experienced massive increases in call centre traffic, unplanned outages or call volume issues, we needed to manually redirect and rebalance the call traffic across the IVR infrastructure," explained Fayerman. "Each 0800 number would have to be manually adjusted in turn, taking us a long time to complete."

"For example, our pre-paid mobile phone top-up payments are due on the first day of every month. This causes a massive increase in our contact centre traffic, with call numbers rising by 500 to 600 per cent over a normal day. On a peak day we can handle up to 1.8 million calls.

"This overload would tax our old system as we could not measure the volume of incoming calls, nor easily alter the routing of calls to spread the load across all IVR servers."

In addition, with 540 numbers for customers to access Telecom's contact centres, they needed a simple way to update each 0800 number with new functionality, such as offers, promotions or services.

"To update the access numbers we would have to temporarily take one server off-line at a time to load new instruction sets, leaving the remaining six servers to handle all the call traffic. We would then repeat the exercise with the remaining servers, taking over 4 hours to complete each week," added Fayerman.

Although the team always conducted this exercise late at night, when calls were at their lowest levels, invariably some of its customers would be affected.

"All of these issues reinforced the need for a new solution that would give us the ability to tailor and control call flows in real time," added Fayerman.

"It's very important to our business that we not only offer a variety of methods for our customers to contact us, but that we also ensure that their preferred approach works as promised."

New solution sought

In order to improve its management of call flows, Telecom decided to seek advice from Gen-i's Contact Centre Services team. Gen-i used its extensive experience in providing contact centre management solutions for customers across New Zealand to recommend an automated solution based on Cisco's Toll Free Self Manage product.

The solution was piloted with Telecom's Xtra Broadband service in May 2005. With around 30 access numbers for a range of services, such as setting up new broadband connections through to various short-term promotions, the Broadband team tested and evaluated the new tool.

The success of this pilot convinced the contact centre's management to complete the full migration across all 540 access numbers, which took place during September to December 2005.

Reaping the rewards

Toll Free Self Manage has transformed the way the contact centre team works, by allowing them to track the overall performance of the IVR infrastructure and use this knowledge to make effective management and call routing decisions.

Toll Free Self Manage provides the team with the ability to create pre-defined automated business rules that enable them to tailor the call routing to respond to known peaks and troughs throughout the day, week or month. It also enables them to deal with unexpected call loads or technical outages and provide a seamless service for callers.

Real time reporting tools also give the team visibility of all call activity, and the ability to tailor and control calls at any problem time, such as staff illness and absences, or during public holidays and peak enquiry times.

"And, with a browser-based interface, it allows us to run the application from anywhere," Fayerman added. "This has transformed our responsiveness to situations and introduced more flexibility to our working hours by allowing us to work remotely."

In addition to real time analysis, Toll Free Self Manage provides comprehensive historical data reporting tools, so that management can review and analyse all call activity and, combined with their own knowledge and expertise, predict call trends and volumes and adjust the call routing accordingly.

As a result, Telecom has significantly reduced its administration requirement, from two days each week to just a half day.

Customers also win

The benefits for Telecom's customers and callers have been just as dramatic.

With no need to switch off access numbers during routine administration and maintenance tasks, Telecom now offers 100 per cent caller coverage.

"That means that all of access numbers are available, all of the time," emphasised Fayerman.

By improving Telecom's ability to manage call flows and deal instantly with urgent situations, Toll Free Self Manage has dramatically increased the numbers of successful calls across Telecom's 540 access numbers.

"Previously, at peak times some callers would experience delays and have trouble being connected," said Fayerman. "This is now experienced by only up to four per cent of callers at any one time."

Facing the future with confidence

For Telecom, the partnership with Gen-i and implementation of the new tool has exceeded all expectations.

"We were blown away by the initial demonstration and now wonder how we ever survived without it," said Fayerman. "We keep asking ourselves where it has been all our lives."

"It has transformed our work by reducing the administration overhead and improving the efficiency and productivity of our team. More importantly, it has improved the caller experience, helping callers get through to sales or service as quickly as possible, and improving the productivity and profitability of our agents."

"We love the ability to work remotely when necessary and make tweaks on the fly. While we'll always be faced with increasing call volumes and unexpected peaks, we now have the tools and the confidence to take these challenges head on and walk that tightrope with ease."