

## FEATURE

CLOSE

### The 2005 Service Elite Awards

*Our Service Elite awards, chosen by the editors, are presented to the customer care operations that have delivered impressive results by achieving satisfaction and customer return on investment that set the standard for the rest of the industry. We recognize Elite customer care implementations in the fields of knowledge-base tools, agent-facing desktop applications, quality monitoring, workforce management, speech solutions, and contact-center outsourcing services.*

by [Phillip Britt](#)  
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**KEY RESULTS**

**CREATIVE LABS**

- Decreased support calls by roughly 66 percent
- Lowered abandonment rate to 5.5 percent
- Doubled email contacts, while response rate has dropped to 24 hours

#### Knowledge-Base Tools

##### *Creative Labs*

Creative Labs is a leading provider of digital entertainment, with an estimated install base of more than 300 million products, including the SoundBlaster audio card and the ZenMicro MP3 and WMA player. As these devices became more popular, so did the requests for customer service for device setup, use, and other technical information. The company had to balance the customer need for support with its own need to control the cost of providing it, according to Steven Lamberti, associate director of services.

So Creative Labs introduced a series of 24/7 e-services that would improve the customer experience and reduce the cost per contact at the company's three owned-and-operated call centers in Dublin, Stillwater, OK, and Singapore.

The knowledge-base tools from KANA enable Creative Labs customers to send questions via email, rather than waiting on hold for a customer service representative [CSR] or calling when the call center is closed. While email support operates around the clock, with the queries going to whichever contact center is open at a particular time, all calls to live agents go only to the Stillwater location, which is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The IVR offers the customer the e-services option so she doesn't have to wait on hold or call back during normal business hours, which does wonders for customer satisfaction. "Our customer satisfaction level went way up, because people could reach us," Lamberti says.

The live agent support hours were cut a couple of years ago; at about the same time the company added the KANA service-resolution management solutions. Creative Labs customers, 80 percent of whom have broadband connections [and] are technically savvy, so they're very comfortable with sending queries via email or searching Creative Labs' online support to answer their own questions.

Creative Labs promises customers answers to their email questions within 24 hours, but the company recently started an express queue service with the internal goal of resolving customer queries within four hours. By recognizing key words in the query, the application routes the email to a contact center specialist with the appropriate expertise.

E-services enable Creative Labs customers to use natural language query for self-service, rather than sending email. Customers can explain their needs in their words, rather than being limited to a structured list of technical problems and other questions. If they prefer a more structured

approach, they can go to the knowledge-base area of Creative Labs' site, and in a few clicks usually resolve their questions. The knowledge base is accessed by 290,000 unique visitors every month.

Whether they use the natural language or more structured approach, the system will ask if the suggested solution answered the customer's question. If not, other remedies are suggested. The contact center will still need to handle some resolutions via the phone, but CSRs can now do so more quickly, because the support solutions have been more balanced across email, voice response, and live agent channels.



**KEY RESULTS**

**ING DIRECT**

- Garnered an ROI of 400 percent
- Gained more than \$5 million in incremental profit
- Grew call-center response rate 25 percent higher than the channel average

### Agent-Facing Universal Desktop

*ING Direct*

ING DIRECT, a retail bank with more than 10 million customers worldwide, relies on offering simple financial products to customers via the call center. Yet ING DIRECT, the \$30 billion, Wilmington, DE, subsidiary of ING Group NV, Amsterdam, wanted to build rich customer relationships without building expensive brick-and-mortar branches. To do this the company needed to combine customer intelligence with real-time analytics to maximize interactions across channels and product lines.

Using a combination of rules and real-time analytics, Epiphany Interaction Advisor helps deliver the most relevant products and messages to individual customers when appropriate during inbound interactions. ING DIRECT deployed the application to 500 agents in its contact centers and on many pages throughout its Web site. In a typical month, about 2.4 million online visitors and 100,000 callers receive personalized offers via the software. "By enhancing our systems with Epiphany Interaction Advisor we can create more intelligent interactions with our customers and offer them products and services tuned to their specific needs and wants," says David Lewis, ING DIRECT chief marketing and IT officer.

Customers with good credit scores and untapped equity in their homes might be offered low-rate home equity lines, while customers without the equity might be offered credit cards. Similarly, customers are offered deposit products based on their apparent interests. The application helps determine the customer's interest by analyzing customer click-throughs on the Web site. The

application also helps ensure the consistency of offers across channels, helping the customer receive a seamless experience, regardless of the channel he uses. When an offer is made the system monitors how the customer responds to the offer to make the next offer better. For example, if the application offers a credit card to people meeting a certain demographic, and a large percentage of them with one particular characteristic declines it, the system will stop making the offer to others with that characteristic.

The changes translate to a better bottom line. ING DIRECT has seen call center--offer response rates as high as 42 percent, and its average offer- acceptance rate rise to 9.2 percent, far higher than the channel average of 7.4 percent. Web click-through rates are as high as 28 percent, while the Web offer acceptance rate has risen to 3.86 percent, 17 times the channel average for nonmedia-rich advertisements. Thirty-nine percent of the click-throughs delivered via the Epiphany Interaction Advisor resulted in opened accounts.

The additional accounts resulted in \$5.3 million in incremental profit after one year. As a result, the company began to recover the cost of its investment in three months, and saw a 400 percent ROI in the first year of use.



**KEY RESULTS**

**CCH INC.**

### Quality Monitoring

*CCH Inc.*

Perhaps technology is the only thing that has changed as much as tax and business law in the past 20 years. Lawyers, accountants, and others who need

## CCH INC.

- Raised its customer satisfaction rating from 45 percent to 93 percent

- Dropped call handling time from 9:34 minutes to 4:42 minutes

- Dropped customer wait times from 2.5 minutes to 19 seconds

to refer to tax and business law information haven't discarded all their books, but they rely more and more on getting information for new and updated regulations via electronic means, according to Margaret Flink, CCH director of call center operations. CCH is one of the country's leading providers of information services, software, and workflow tools for tax, accounting, legal, and business professionals. For years, most of CCH's products were distributed via print in the form of books and printed documents (for example, tax forms).

Now, however, an increasing percentage of CCH's customers seek the information via the Internet or the phone, according to Flink. Yet it does a CCH customer little good to contact the company just to get tied up on the phone, either due to the call center agent getting involved on another call or due to the agent having difficulty answering the customer's question or fulfilling his request. With agents focused on addressing callers' urgent and often complex tax and legal questions, they needed a way to respond quickly. "Our users change--we have to change with them," Flink says. "We're working with a generation now that grew up with products with some level of technical sophistication."

Changing with the customers means more than just installing technology, but leaving the processes the same. So CCH installed Witness Systems' eQuality software. The software simultaneously captures voice conversations and the corresponding desktop activities of agents as they respond to customer

requests. Using this software CCH was able to see how interactions unfold and determine adjustments needed in staff, process, or technology in order to ensure a high-quality customer experience.

"With the software we were able to see areas where we needed to make improvements," Flink says. "Those changes have made a positive impact on our operations enterprisewide. Over time we increased our customer satisfaction rating from forty-five percent to ninety-three percent, partially as a result of eQuality."

The monitoring software enabled Flink to determine that agents had too many places to go for information, meaning unacceptable wait times for customers. So the company developed a proprietary intranet dashboard that enables the agent to start with a single Web page, then easily navigate to other pages from there. The monitoring software also produced reports showing that CCH's ERP system required timely navigation by call center agents. So CCH built a proprietary information system that sends a user-friendly screen pop to the call center agent when a call arrives. The screen pop includes easy-to-navigate windows for the host information system. "It's designed in a logical manner and is quick to read," Flink says.

In addition to finding where agents were delayed, the call monitoring system also enabled CCH to determine which calls were for simple information requests (e.g., forms orders) and could be handled via the Web, and which ones were for more complex questions that required a live agent.

As a result, CCH created self-service applications that led to a jump in Internet self-service from 44,000 transactions in 2003 to 164,000 in 2004. The number of calls dropped only slightly, from 298,000 to 290,000, in the same time period. But now these calls were the more involved ones, meaning the agents were providing a higher level of customer service for the calls they were handling.

## KEY RESULTS

### KNOLGY

- Increased first-call resolution by 70 percent

## Workforce Management

### Knology

Competing against some leading and financially strong cable providers like Comcast and Charter, Knology has to rely on exceeding customer expectations to sell telephone, digital cable, and broadband Internet services.

"In order to convert customers to Knology, our service has to be better," says Steve Harrison, Knology contact center director. "Not everyone will move for price, and you don't want people who will move for just price, because then [a competitor] will come out with a lower price, and the customer will move

19 percent

- Decreased call abandonment rates by 31 percent
- Improved customer satisfaction by 121 percent

again."

Knology made outstanding customer service the focal point of its marketing program with its "Sterling Service Promise," which gives each customer a 30-day money back guarantee to deliver only responsive and friendly service.

When the company instituted the guarantee it monitored traffic load and staffing for its call center with a pen and paper. That solution, which didn't work that well to begin with, was not going to keep Knology competitive in terms of customer service for very long. It was not as simple as knowing that calls would be heavy on Mondays and slow on Wednesdays, for example. Payment questions, which make up as much as 50 percent of the call load due to a recent change in the billing system, could come in bunches depending

when invoices were mailed.

Staffing levels for the workforce of 330 were too high on some days, too low on others. On some days workers had very little to do; on others, however, the phones would be ringing off the hook, meaning abandoned calls, dissatisfied customers, and disgruntled workers. "We needed to gain a certain efficiency in order to adhere to our business plan," Harrison says. The company looked to automate its scheduling (balancing actual work activity with staffing levels) by choosing the Blue Pumpkin Workforce Optimization Suite from Witness Systems.

"By deploying the Blue Pumpkin suite we are operating much more efficiently and competitively, as well as providing an unprecedented level of customer service that is absolutely essential to winning customers to our side," Harrison says. "Knology [now] has the ability to balance service quality, costs, and employee satisfaction."

With better staffing levels Knology's call center has upped customer satisfaction from an abysmal 42 percent to nearly 93 percent, a critical factor in customer retention. The call abandonment rate has fallen 31 percent, and first-call resolution rate has increased 19 percent.

"It costs a lot more money to go out and get a new customer than to retain a current customer," Harrison says.

Employee satisfaction is another big part of the equation. Before the automated system workers would dread coming in to work on some days, because they knew they would be going at 100 percent, ending the day exhausted. On the lightest days they'd wonder why they came to work at all. Now they can expect a steady, but not overwhelming, flow of work when they're scheduled. That improved job satisfaction comes across in their voices when they're talking to customers. "Better job satisfaction improves a CSR's overall performance," Harrison says. "Happier employees make for happier customers."

**KEY RESULTS**

**LIBERTY WIRELESS**

- Dropped the number of calls going to agents by 40 percent
- Reduced costs by 30 percent
- Decreased

### Speech Solutions

#### *Liberty Wireless*

As a rapidly growing mobile virtual-network operator, Liberty Wireless has to control costs while providing outstanding customer service. Though the company used an IVR to help service customers who were starting service, renewing their prepaid cards, or paying their bills, the technology didn't provide the level of customer service that Liberty Wireless sought. Plus, 80 percent of customers still wound up talking to a live agent, a time-consuming proposition for them and a costly one for Liberty.

"We were looking for ways to maximize the customer experience and control our costs," says George Wolfand, senior vice president of mobile virtual-network operations. "Using speech is a lot easier than entering a lot of numbers for the account, getting out a credit card, and putting in those numbers. By the nature of the wireless product, you're often in a location where it isn't very easy to dial, like when you're in a car." So Liberty Wireless added speech applications from BeVocal to more effectively automate its customer care system. Enabling customers to use speech recognition

calls per  
subscriber by  
over 60  
percent

capabilities helps Liberty project its desired image of a high-tech professional company.

First Call is an application that a customer activates when using the phone on the Liberty Wireless network for the first time. The customer turns on the phone and the application provides a speech-based tutorial that informs the user about service features. Though the new customer still finishes the call with a live agent, the first call application saves a lot of time at the beginning of the process by automatically giving the customer needed information, according to Wolfand.

Another application, Hotline, makes it easier for customers to pay their bills. When a customer is late paying a bill or is out of prepaid minutes and tries to place a call, Hotline activates. The customer uses this feature to identify himself, pay with a preauthorized credit card, or learn of where to make a cash payment. About half of the customers use prepaid plans, with the other half on yearly or other subscription plans. Customers can dial \*1776 (keeping with the Liberty theme) at any time to learn how many minutes they have remaining.

The speech applications each finished in the top tier in overall caller satisfaction, call completion, and call consistency levels across all customer service operations that VocaLabs has studied, including live agents and automated systems. "When we evaluated Liberty Wireless' voice-automated self-service applications, we found that Liberty's system provides a superior level of overall customer service," says Peter Leppik, VocaLabs CEO.

Liberty Wireless expects to expand on the speech-enabled applications in 2005. The company is looking at adding speech applications that would enable customers to change their rate plans and answer some FAQs. Liberty is also looking to provide the speech recognition capabilities for its telecommunication partners that share the wireless company's platform.

KEY  
RESULTS

NEUF  
TELECOM

■ Dropped  
customer  
service costs  
by 40 percent

■ Decreased  
costs by 20  
percent

■ Grew  
customer base  
by 15 percent

### Outsourcing Services

*Neuf Telecom*

With 20,000 kilometers of high-speed fiber optic cable covering France, neuf telecom (NT) is quickly converting customers from dial-up Internet to not only broadband Internet connections, but also to Voice over IP for their telephones, and in the second half of 2005, television over IP.

In 2004 alone NT's percentage of customers using broadband Internet connections grew from virtually nothing at the beginning of the year to 90 percent by the end of December, according to Marc Nardo, the company's director of contract relationship management.

Yet that growth also means increasing demands for contact center support. So the company not only had to maximize the efficiency of its contact center in France, but also one newly opened in Morocco. The latter now handles 35 percent of all NT calls. The second call center was added because economic and social constraints made it impractical to expand the existing one.

To seamlessly operate call centers in different countries required technical support, as well as global expertise in providing call center support, so NT partnered with ClientLogic to provide consistent service levels and consistent average handle times regardless of which contact center handled the call. The total call center staff for both locations grew from 70 to more than 400, due to the increased demand for support. So that the second call center could supply seamless support, agents were given 40 hours of additional training on French culture and expressions. "They built a training plan that they made us follow, helping us keep a good rhythm," Nardo says. "To have [support] with good, strong methodology is the key."

Implementation of a rigorous quality control process helped ensure that agents adhered to company goals to provide excellent customer care and quick, but accurate, call resolution. In only two months after implementation the Morocco call center achieved the same average handle-time as the onshore call center.

In addition to upgrading the personnel in number and through training, ClientLogic also had NT implement a pan-European VoIP network using Avaya technology, part of a network architecture that optimizes the bandwidth available between France and Morocco. The combination of improved technology, an additional facility, and more personnel has helped neuf telecom to improve customer support while controlling costs.

By handling the easy calls more quickly, NT is also handling the more difficult level II calls, those which may need specialist attention in a much more timely manner, according to Nardo. Rather than handling these calls in a batch mode several days later as before, now specialists can get to the level II calls in a shorter amount of time. "Now, 90 percent of the people who call us are able to reach somebody, no matter what time of the day they call," Nardo says. "That means we're paying less to service customers. Now, rather than calling two or three times, they're calling only once."

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