

## TECHNOLOGY A Special Report

# If You've Got a Phone

Call-center technology helps firms keep potential clients from slipping away.



BY DON ROUTHIER

**T**he growth of many successful law firms is connected to their marketing efforts and how they respond when the phones ring. Successful firms use consistent advertising campaigns in print and broadcast media, which generate demand for their services and establish them as recognizable names. If they do it right, they never mishandle a call once a prospective client dials in for help.

For example, we've all seen ads for personal injury legal assistance. With a toll-free number and call-handling technology, these firms can manage every new prospect, automatically routing calls to the most appropriate litigation team or office location.

The best way to turn prospects into clients is to handle those initial calls with care and personal attention. Callers who need help are looking for an assuring voice to consult with them. Getting trapped in voice mail or having to endure long hold times will make the caller more likely to hang up in frustration and go elsewhere for legal representation.

One way to prevent problems is through contact-center technology, which can help ensure that a prospective client doesn't slip through the cracks of spotty call coverage or a confusing menu of options.

There are several contact-center products that can be added to a phone system to help firms better manage incoming calls. These products give administrative staff instant control of where calls are routed, if the firm has multiple locations, and who gets to handle them. Most changes can be made through a Web browser. In addition, reports can be generated that monitor every aspect of a contact center's performance, letting firms know when they need more incoming lines, more staff to accommodate calls, or other refinements.

### CALL DISTRIBUTORS

The key component of a contact center is the automatic call

distributor (ACD), which is a software package that can be loaded into many of today's business phone systems. ACDs route incoming calls to the most appropriate person or group within a law firm based on the type of information or service the caller requires.

The combination of extra marketing and the publication of one or more 800 numbers can lead to numerous calls—some from people who need urgent attention. This situation requires a means, such as ACD technology, for prioritizing calls and positioning them with the next available person in the telephone pool.

Callers who require expert assistance are sent to the next available specialist. Those in queue can receive prerecorded messages to keep them motivated to hold a bit longer. And if too many callers are holding for too long—as revealed by up-to-the-minute management reports—more staff can be allocated to answer calls during peak hours.

If the law firm has a telework program in place to permit staff to work at home, the ACD can automatically reroute calls to remote staff, expanding the availability of paralegals or specialists. For example, all calls that reach a pre-established holding threshold of two minutes can be rerouted to staff working remotely until the call backlog is reduced.

Another useful contact-center feature is silent monitoring, which lets an administrator listen in on the calls of newly hired staff, for example, to make sure they are representing the law firm in a professional, courteous, and competent manner.

### INTERNET TELEPHONY

Law firms with locations spanning different time zones might want to consider networking multiple contact centers together. This enables additional call coverage after normal business hours and provides backup when inclement weather shuts down a busy office.

Call costs can be greatly reduced when Internet technology is used to support teleworkers. The main contact center can link any number of teleworkers over secure Internet connections,

thus avoiding costly toll charges between networked locations. To receive calls from the main contact center, a teleworker needs only a phone that supports the Internet Protocol (IP) and a broadband DSL or cable connection.

Instant messaging allows call handlers and administrators to communicate with each other quickly and securely. During a busy period, for example, the administrator can ask people to delay going on break. Call handlers can use instant messaging to request assistance from the administrator or an expert while on a call in order to ensure service quality.

### **800-NUMBER CALL ROUTING**

If remote offices are not equipped with an ACD-driven contact center or are not tied together with IP technology, another way to handle after-hours calls would be to specify alternative call routing through the 800-number service. In that case, the public telephone network controls where calls go during peak hours or after the normal business day. Calls can be routed to another law office, remote teleworkers, or even a third-party answering service trained to handle such calls.

### **MANAGING MORE CALLS**

Increasing call volumes without adding call agents inevitably means callers spend more time waiting, possibly leading to frustration, abandoned calls, and lost client opportunities. During longer hold times firms can implement some simple contact-center strategies, such as the following:

- Providing callers with an expected wait time
- Creating and serving recorded announcements to callers to provide them with basic information or a Web page location without the need to speak with staff
- Allowing customers to leave a call-back phone number

### **REFINING THE CONTACT CENTER**

To manage efficiently and cost-effectively, firms will need ready access to the call information collected by the ACD and stored on a separate server. Today's contact-center management systems are browser-based and provide numerous capabilities.

- **Historical reporting:** Firms can obtain reports about any contact-center activity over any date and time horizon. This enables firms to easily measure and demonstrate contact-center performance against service objectives and tweak contact-center operations for improvement.

- **Historical monitoring:** Firms can review the performance of the call center over any time period and at their own pace in simulated real time. For example, an administrator can view each call handler's state (busy or idle), how long he was in that state, and when he logged on and off. Queue activities and call volumes also can be monitored. This allows past service problems to be analyzed so they can be avoided in the future.

- **Real-time monitoring:** Firms can view real-time displays of call handler and queue activity, allowing administrators to manage the contact center based on current conditions. They can track the performance of individual call handlers and provide feedback. They can also respond immediately to changing traffic volumes and queue conditions.

- **Data mining:** Firms can search through all call records and apply filtering parameters to find virtually any contact-center event, such as call hang-ups. This allows an administrator to easily identify call handler or queue events that led to a breakdown in client service, for example.

- **Forecasting:** Firms can forecast contact-center agent requirements based on historical information, average talk times, wrap-up times, and service-level objectives. Also, administrators can perform "what if" scenarios to better understand the implications of their management decisions before implementing them, which allows contact-center resources to be planned and managed more effectively to meet expected traffic volumes.

These contact-center management capabilities can be extended across multiple locations, enabling administrators to receive up-to-the-minute reports and view real-time call handler and call queue activity displays via the firm's data network or the Internet—all from a Web browser.

Just a few years ago, contact-center technology was affordable only to the largest enterprises. Smaller firms simply couldn't cost-justify the investment. That gap is now closed. The advent of affordable communications technology enables law firms of any size to expand their client base and business with contact-center functionality and Internet connectivity added to the office phone system.

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