

ACTIVISION

Gaming Company Scores Easy Seasonal Call Scalability with inContact



The 2008-2009 Christmas season rocked for video game vendor Activision Publishing, Inc. – literally. During the three-month holiday sales period that year, the exploding popularity of the company’s Guitar Hero franchise detonated a blockbuster 85,000 calls to a customer service department that could handle only 24 concurrent calls on a 10-year-old phone switch. An emergency mid-holiday upgrade to inContact’s cloud-based, scalable-on-demand call center platform »**eliminated the expense of buying a holiday-sized phone switch that would sit 80% idle the rest of the year,** »**equipped the company with previously unavailable performance metrics and reporting to help optimize call handling,** and »**enabled an outsourced call center to be supported on the same platform as in-house customer service staff with full visibility into outsourcer activity.**



Business

Interactive entertainment
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Challenges

- Insufficient switch capacity
- Highly seasonal call volumes
- Missed calls during holiday
- No detailed performance metrics
- No archiving of metrics data
- Nominal reporting
- No outsourcer support
- Work-at-home option for future

Results

- Upgrade for low monthly fee
- Scale up or down in minutes
- No need for expensive, large switch
- Support in-house & outsourced agents
- Detailed performance metrics
- Comprehensive reporting
- Two-week mid-holiday deployment
- No upfront equipment costs
- No in-house telephony team needed
- Easy addition of home agents

Pump Up the Volume

For Activision, the need to amp up call center operations was directly related to the 2006 acquisition of the original Guitar Hero publisher. That transaction added guitar-shaped game controllers and other hardware peripherals used by Guitar Hero players to a product lineup that had previously been software-only. With the extra support required for the hardware as well as soaring sales fueled by Activision’s ongoing expansion of the series, November-January customer service calls skyrocketed from 7,700 in 2006-2007 to 25,000 and then 85,000 during the next two holiday seasons.

The company’s aging NEC phone switch and small in-house tech support staff were unable to handle the load, frequently leaving some callers dangling. The switch was no longer manufactured and could not be expanded.

Activision’s legacy equipment also was handicapped by limited metrics capture, 30-day-only data retention, rudimentary reporting, no call recording or do-it-yourself ACD or IVR scripting capabilities, and lack of support for outsourced or at-home agents to handle overflow calls. Managers created spreadsheets to archive the data but could do little with the information because of the poor reporting functionality.

In the wake of the 2007-2008 holiday call surge, Activision began researching their upgrade options. Evaluators quickly zeroed in on the newest telephony game in town – the on-demand model – for its ability to address the company’s extreme seasonal fluctuations in call volume without buying for peak demand.

“It made no sense to purchase an installed switch to accommodate 50 agents for three months of the year and then use only 10 of the ports for the other nine months,” said Kirk McNesby, Technical Operations, Activision Customer Support. “We would have been overbuilding as well as overspending.”

Buy Small, Scale On Demand

With a cloud-based switch and automatic call distributor (ACD), Activision could contract for a minimum number of agents, increase their port allotment during the holiday rush and scale back afterward, only paying for the number of active agents in any given month. The company could also easily and transparently bring on outsourced agents or add phone work for at-home agents currently handling email inquiries without extra infrastructure expense.

In mid-2008, after evaluating the leading hosted providers, Activision selected inContact because of its feature set, price structure, and a unique-in-the-market self-owned telecommunications backbone that provides complete control over both connectivity and call routing to ensure quality of service. The rollout was scheduled for March 2009.

Plans changed, however, when the late 2008 release of Guitar Hero World Tour sent call volumes into the stratosphere with the addition of a new guitar controller as well as the franchise's first drum kits and microphones. That's when another benefit of inContact's Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) deployment model – the ability to deliver services over an Internet connection with no need for in-house equipment installation – came into play.

“Our December 2008 call volumes were running more than triple the previous year. Callers were getting fast busy signals that made it look as if our 800 number was down. We needed immediate relief,” McNesby recalled. “We brought inContact staff in during Christmas week and went live with the new system two weeks later for 16 in-house agents and 35 others at a second facility without missing a beat.”

The inContact switch answers all calls, transfers them to Activision's third-party interactive voice response (IVR) system, and then delivers them to the appropriate agent without ever relinquishing control. Ports can be added or subtracted in minutes, easily accommodating the holiday surge as well as crisis situations like the occasional crash of a gaming server. A crisis like that can spark 25,000 distress calls in a single day from immobilized online gamers, requiring a bigger pipe to calm customer nerves.

Outsourcer Added

Six months after the initial cutover to the inContact platform, Activision decided to divide call handling between in-house tech support personnel and an outsourcer dedicated to warranty and replacement issues. Here again, inContact scored with its ability to support multiple sites with no physical infrastructure. The inContact ACD seamlessly distributes calls to the appropriate location based on the caller's IVR selection or 'warm' call transfers by in-house agents that smooth the escalation path.

“Outsourcer support is critical for us. We release 10 to 15 games a year, each with two to four SKUs for gaming platforms like the Nintendo Wii, Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation. Our in-house tech support staff deals with technical issues related to each release, but we have discovered that it's much more efficient to have an outsourcer deal with issues like return materials authorizations (RMAs),” McNesby said.

“The beauty of doing it with inContact is that we can route, manage, log and analyze calls to both groups using the same system.”

“inContact solved our holiday call overload problem with its on-demand scalability, but it has done much more. With integrated support for our outsourced call center and comprehensive agent performance metrics and reporting, we have the tools to be much more efficient than ever before.”

Kirk McNesby
Technical Operations
Activision Customer Support

All in the Game

That ability to log and analyze both in-house and outsourced calls in granular detail is another major benefit of Activision's migration to inContact. The company can now track agent metrics ranging from average answer speed and abandon rates to call length, post-call wrap-up time and duration of lunch breaks, use the data to identify underperformers and determine whether the operation as a whole is meeting pre-defined service levels, and otherwise keep tabs on performance.

“It's a level of detail you need to effectively run a call center,” McNesby said, “and we did not have it before.”

Activision is also using inContact's ECHO survey tool to measure customers' call center experience, inControl scripting tool to change ACD routing and IVR messages without outside assistance, and a custom integration with RightNow Technologies' hosted CRM system to automatically display customer name and warranty information on the agent's screen when a warranty customer calls in.

All of these features add up to smoother call handling for Activision customers. And that's music to any gamer's ears – Guitar Hero or otherwise.