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Fact or fiction? Call Centre technology is expensive and confusing.

A review of Magnetic North's "Maximise" on-demand dialler.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking fact. You're thinking about the large capital outlay. You're thinking about the confusing licensing, and having to pay for seats and ports and trunks and servers. You're thinking that just the thought of having to expand the technology puts you off wanting to grow your business.

If this is what you're thinking, then you're wrong. Call Centre technology doesn't have to be expensive. It doesn't have to be confusing. You don't need to be tied up with a pricing model that's so complicated not even Stephen Hawking could get to grips with it.

It sounds like you're paying for systems in the wrong way. You're buying them rather than renting them and this will be costing your business greatly. Initially, you won't find many CEO's that are happy with the idea of renting technology. After all, you'd rather own a house than rent one wouldn't you - so therefore ownership must be the best route? Houses are unique in that your equity in the property increases over time and therefore you'd really like to own this equity. This doesn't happen with technology - it depreciates over time. Why do you want to own something that's reducing in value?

How?

So how does one go about renting technology? It's possible to rent equipment that's kept on your site - in your communications room alongside your ACD and servers. This may be suitable in some situations - but a more common approach nowadays is where you don't have any equipment on site at all. With this "hosted" approach you establish a data connection via the Internet and receive voice traffic through the PSTN or via VoIP.

There are other reasons why you may struggle to get the CEO to see reason at first. They may be concerned that you're outsourcing an important part of your business. The suits may be concerned about security and reliability, about support and ensuring you have up-to-date technology. These are all very important concerns - but shouldn't be reasons to not use hosted technology. They should, however, be reasons to ensure that you select the correct product for your operation.

Lets look an example to help understand this and run through a checklist of things to look at when buying. Dialling and call recording are two items that, once a luxury, are now must haves. This makes them perfect contenders for hosted applications as there are a lot of small organisations who can't afford to invest in an on premise system but really need the functionality. This brings us to our first potential hurdle: many products are designed for very small call centres and are not suitable for anything over a few agents.

Heritage

The example that we're going to look at is the Maximise dialler from Magnetic North. These guys clear this first hurdle with ease. This is a company that was established in 1998 and have a huge amount of experience in producing real on-premise diallers for real call centres. This means they know how a dialler should work, and that their core technology has had time to bed in. You can be sure that there'll be no teething bugs here.

This is the very first thing you must consider with new technology: functionality. Forget about where the technology is based or how it is priced. Consider first if it actually does what you need it to. That was, after all, why you started shopping in the first place.

Cost

Price is the next most important thing - and here it starts to get a little more difficult. It's often not so easy to compare a standard on-premise dialler with a hosted application because of the different pricing models. There's more to think about than you may first imagine.

With the hosted product it will be quite straight forward to calculate. You may pay a small setup fee for the administration required to get you started. There's a monthly rental payment for each seat and finally you pay



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for the phone calls that you make. That's all the costs from the supplier. You will also need an Internet connection to access the service which will be another monthly fee. When purchasing this you must consider what type of business you run. Business ADSL lines may be very cheap but don't give any guarantee of service, which is no good if you intend to be dialling 100% of the time.

Already you can see that the pricing model for the hosted system is easy to account for. The more calls you make and the more agents you have, the more you pay.

With an on premise system it's more difficult. Firstly, there's the price that the supplier quotes you. This in itself is likely to be complicated; taking into account the different system elements that are required. Then we start getting into some things that can be a little harder to calculate. Obviously the cost of electricity is negligible, but you'll probably want a UPS for the system which will cost a little more. Then your staff will have to keep an eye on it, it'll need patching and updating and regular backups. What is this labour going to cost you? So far we haven't even thought about what the supplier is going to charge you for support and maintenance.

Once you've worked out the total cost of ownership you'll be surprised at the saving you can make with a hosted dialler. And better still, you won't have to bother with capital expenditure.

Support

Third on our buyers check list is support. With an hosted dialler there's no server to look after, which really helps matters. However - you'll still have plenty of questions about how to get the reports you need, how to setup the system efficiently and you'll want someone to hold your hand when you're getting started. Magnetic North have put some thought into how they're going to support the system: there's plenty of support available online so that you can get answers immediately. Full training is included in the cost of the system, and there's even a growing library of instructional videos to enable you to learn about a particular part of the system when you want to. It's as good as having a trainer on-site all of the time!

When weighing up how good the service a company may provide will be, one of the things you must think about is the technical knowledge the staff will have in house. With some on-demand systems, the supplier has simply purchased an on-premise dialling system and is allowing multiple clients to use it. This means that they're unlikely to be experts on that particular system and you may have to wait a while to get the answers that you need. Looking at Magnetic North, it's nice to know that they've wrote the system themselves. The front line support that you deal with will have access to the developers, who are all based in the UK, giving you confidence that they've got the best knowledge available. Magnetic North are so confident that they offer a service level of 4 hours to fix - something that's only possible because the equipment is hosted by the people who made it.

Reliability

This brings us on to our next point: security and reliability. You're going to be intrusting some very important customer data to this system, so you want to know it's going to be safe. You need to know that other people can't access it. More importantly, you need to know that you'll be able to access it when you want to. You don't want the server to be down. Make sure the system is in a secure data centre, and that they've got a business continuity plan as good as your own. This is far more likely if you're trading with an organisation with a good reputation.

Flexibility

An important point on our check list is flexibility. In the current climate it's important that your business can remain quick and agile - and having a system that supports this really gives you a competitive edge. If the pricing hasn't already brought you round to the hosted way of thinking then having this competitive edge certainly will. Maximise, and it's call-recording partner Optimise, are both a specific type of hosted application known as "on-demand". This name reflects the speed in which your account can be setup and modified: whenever you want it, it's there. On-demand systems provide flexibility in two ways.

Firstly, you need some flexibility in the size of the system. Some days you'll need more people on the phone, other days less. Maximise will allow you to change the number of seats you use on a monthly basis. This means



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that you can scale down for the holidays and not be paying for empty seats. It means you can double the number of staff for a pilot without the worry that you'll need to fill the space afterwards.

Secondly, you want to have the best technology available. What you don't want to hear is your supplier telling you that you've got to pay an upgrade fee to get the latest bells and whistles - and you're usually told that you need to invest in some additional hardware and software to make it function. This just isn't a consideration with

Maximise - your hosting partner will keep the system up-to-date for you, and will deal with the project management of upgrading. Another headache you'll never have to worry about again.

Logistics

Right. So Maximise is looking great in theory, but how will the logistics actually work with your call centre? As we stated earlier, the common way to make a data connection to the system is via the Internet. In the case of Maximise, this is through a web interface using your normal web browser. It's just like visiting your favourite website. This is used for simply making the calls or alternatively, if a supervisor or manager is logged in, will also allow you to load data, configure campaigns or run reports.

Magnetic North have done well to make this interface intuitive: it's XP look and feel should mean that any member of staff who is familiar with a PC will be able to get on with Maximise very well. This factor is quite exciting. It's been designed so that you don't need to be a rocket scientist to configure campaigns. The unique object based outbound dialling approach means that it doesn't take hours to setup, move and reconfigure campaigns. After all, what's the point in configuring the same settings time and again for each campaign when they're all so similar?

Once an agent has logged into the system through the web, Maximise will then need to know how to pass telephone calls to them. It does this by calling the DDI of the phone at their desk - and the number that is called can be configured by a supervisor. Maximise dials this number to establish a voice path which will remain open until the agent logs out. Some hosted systems are providing this inbound leg of the call over IP, but Magnetic North has steered clear of this for the moment. There's an obvious cost saving in providing it via IP but this still hasn't swayed them. Whilst they're confident of the technology working at their end, they're concerned that not enough customers will have the high-quality networking components required for reliable VoIP transmission. They expect to review this decision as the market matures.

Compliance

We all know that silent calls are giving outbound a bad name at the moment, and we always assume that it's down to rouge call centres. However, often the problem lies with vendors who don't provide these call centres with the correct tools to work responsibly. Maximise doesn't use answer machine detection because it's not reliable - and this is a real positive step. If another manufacturer tells you their AMD detection does work, then they're lying. The system has built in support for TPS and in-house suppression lists, and with a host of Crystal reports and real time displays you can be sure that you're compliant with all legislation and best practice.

So...

Maximise ticks all our boxes. Even though we may not have been keen on the idea of hosting initially, we can't find a reason not to follow this route. We don't want to invest in an asset that goes down in value, but we want the security of using technology that's proven in the marketplace and is run by a company that we can trust.

More importantly of all, it makes our business light and controllable. It's providing us the flexibility we need to stay profitable in the current environment. And it enables us to dial responsibly. The question is - will you ever buy a system again?!

The author, Darryl Beckford, is an independent call centre consultant specialising in selecting the correct technology for your business. He writes product reviews for CCF magazine, recently sat on the DMA's contact centre council and has been heavily involved in the campaign to secure a future for outbound calling in the UK.