



Gaining Insight over a Global Network

Speech analytics helps EarthLink better manage outsourced operations | BY ERIC BARKIN

In the Internet service provider (ISP) business, almost 100 percent of all customer service needs are routed through contact center operations, which can be resource-intensive for a company as large as EarthLink. With more than 5 million subscribers, the Pasadena, Calif.-based company offers dial-up and high-speed Internet service, voice services, Web hosting, and EarthLink Extras, such as home networking and security.

Calls to its call center number around 8,500 daily, amounting to roughly 1,400 hours of recordings. With that kind of call volume, manually going through and listening to a statistically significant number of calls would have been daunting, to say the least.

So in 2006, facing an increasingly competitive and mature market and watching as new customer acquisitions leveled off, EarthLink began looking for ways to cut costs and consolidate customer-service

operations while maintaining high-quality standards. The search led the company to the speech analytics arena.

“We needed an application that would allow us to mine the data out of [our calls], and we felt a speech analytics program would take us more to the heart of what our customers and our agents were saying,” says Patrick Kelly, EarthLink’s application manager for the project.

The company also determined that a speech analytics solution would be the most viable way to improve contact center performance, gain visibility into call volume, understand and prioritize critical issues, and implement process improvements.

Because cost cuts saw EarthLink outsource most of its contact center operations to partners in India and the Philippines, the company would have to accommodate for varying accents, changes in popular vocabulary, etc. It decided that a phonetic approach rather than a dictionary-based one was necessary.

“We felt—and it has worked out—that a phonetically based program will allow us more flexibility,” Kelly says. “We won’t have to keep up with the dictionary to manage that element of the tool itself.”

EarthLink tapped Nexidia to produce a proof-of-concept that would have to verify compatibility with its systems and validate return on investment estimates. A series of on-demand trials ensued, including one designed to reduce a particular kind of call with high average handle times, another looking to reduce internal call transfers, and a third focused on reducing excessive customer credits granted by agents.

As the trial rolled out in early and mid-2008, EarthLink ran into some internal resistance, namely from agents who feared their every move would be watched by the solution in some “Big Brotherish” kind of way.

“Getting our [agents] on board was a little bit of a hurdle,” Kelly says. “It took them some convincing.”

To ease their anxieties, the project team tried to make the process somewhat transparent, showing agents what was being done with the tool and what they could gain from it. Moreover, reports from the quality group looking at agent compliance issues and scoring calls with “yes,” “no,” and “maybe” were sent back to the site so that the agents involved could pull up the calls for themselves and appeal if they felt they were incorrectly assessed.

Another part of the outreach involved making sure agents and EarthLink’s overseas partners were aware of the intentions behind the Nexidia trial. “Really that was it: giving them more information and letting them know this was a partnership between us. It’s a partnership. It’s us, not the employer, telling them what to do,” Kelly says.

After four months of trials, EarthLink was convinced of Nexidia’s value proposition, and the company moved forward with an on-demand, hosted service investment.

“In the initial evaluation alone, we identified a total of \$650,000 in cost savings and several areas where we

could improve the service we are delivering to our customers,” John Bowden, senior vice president of customer support at EarthLink, said in a statement.

Through the trials and the actual deployment, EarthLink made “a lot of organizational changes” to improve the contact center. One of them was the decision to move from the hosted offering to a full-fledged, licensed, premises-based solution. Kelly acknowledges that part of the decision to use the hosted service first was fueled by a desire to test out Nexidia’s offering more thoroughly before committing to the full up-front capital investment.

BRINGING IT IN HOUSE

This strategy is becoming increasingly common among enterprises as hosted solutions are steadily being offered, and as the recession has made businesses far more penny-conscious.

In the case of EarthLink, the transition from hosted to on-premises took six months. The company waited for the right window to make the switch, which came in October 2008.

According to Kelly, the solution cost less than \$500,000 to implement, suggesting that Nexidia’s solution provided fairly immediate positive returns when compared with the savings estimated in the four-month proof-of-concept trial.

In its premises-based iteration, the solution offers EarthLink a wider bandwidth for overseas agents. The company expanded from two hosted Nexidia servers to four of its own dedicated servers, which

“We felt—and it has worked out—that a phonetically based program will allow us more flexibility.”

has increased reporting capabilities and sped operations. The on-premises system also added some back-end controls that weren’t available with the hosted solution. Despite these changes, the solution looked exactly the same to the agents, who had already familiarized themselves with it.

Since its on-premises deployment, EarthLink has improved resource allocation to the tune of \$460,000, while also increasing productivity tenfold. It has identified more than \$125,000 in savings associated with the reduction of hold/mute use at the agent level, identified more than \$60,000 in recoupable costs due to policy violations and processing errors during a two-week period, and achieved a 10 percent reduction in monthly quality expenses by charging penalties to agents who do not meet minimum expectations. It also claims an improved ability to “quickly identify inappropriate behavior,” according to Kelly. Call times have gone down since implementation, but Kelly also notes that general call volume has been lower as a result of the recession.

Currently, EarthLink is looking to expand its coverage into its Spanish division to allow for multilingual coverage. “We’re pretty much strictly English with the tool right now,” Kelly says, “so we need to get another language pack and start looking at that. We’re going to do that in the next month or so.”

The move to Spanish will require a software addition but no major overhaul of the system. It is expected to be in place within a few weeks after agreements between EarthLink and Nexidia are completed. ☒

→ App At a Glance

SINCE SWITCHING FROM A HOSTED SERVICE TO THE ON-PREMISES VERSION OF NEXIDIA’S SPEECH ANALYTICS SOLUTION, EARTHLINK HAS SEEN:

- \$460,000 in cost savings from outsourcing quality assurance operations;
- a tenfold increase in worker productivity;
- \$125,000 in savings from a reduction in the use of hold/mute by agents;
- an improved ability to identify inappropriate agent behavior;
- \$60,000 in recoupable costs in just two weeks from a reduction in agent errors and policy violations; and
- a 10 percent reduction in monthly costs by charging monetary penalties to agents who do not meet minimum quality assurance standards.

This article is reprinted in its entirety from the July/August 2009 issue of *Speech Technology*, published by Information Today, Inc. Used with permission. All rights reserved. Individuals may download, store, and print a single copy. All commercial uses, including making printed copies for distribution in bulk at trade shows or in marketing campaigns and all commercial reprints require additional permission from the publisher. www.infotoday.com