

Case Study

Royal Mail Group

Aspect delivers voice portal that allows customers to track the status of letters and packets

The Customer

Royal Mail Group plc is a public limited company, wholly owned by the UK Government, with annual sales in excess of £8 billion and more than 200,000 employees.

The Business Challenge

- Reduce customer service costs without impacting customer service.
- Create a self-service solution to manage its package tracking service.

The Solution

Royal Mail has been taking advantage of Aspect products - including Aspect® Contact Server™, Aspect® CallCenter® ACD and Aspect® Workforce Management - for years. Most recently the organization chose to implement Aspect® Customer Self Service™, an open voice portal platform which includes advanced capabilities that make the self-service experience more positive for customers and increase the number and type of transactions that can be automated.

The Results

- Fully automated 50 percent of all Track & Trace calls—around one million calls per annum
- Reduced call handling costs by 25 percent
- Provide 24 hour accessibility to tracking information
- Able to re-allocate one-third of its advisors to work on other customer service initiatives

The Customer Services arm of Royal Mail in the United Kingdom handles a wide range of customer contacts for Royal Mail, Parcelforce Worldwide, Post Office Ltd. and a number of external customers. Queries handled range from “where can I renew my passport?” to “what is the US dollar exchange rate?”

Customer Services handles a massive 45 million customer contacts each year. Approximately 35 million are by phone and 8-10 million are by post, although an increasing number are received by email, many of them direct from Royal Mail web sites.

It operates seven contact centres in Manchester, Colchester, Sunderland, Plymouth, Rotherham, Leeds and Stoke with 2,000 Customer Service Advisor positions. It also has satellite locations in Glasgow, Bangor (North Wales) and Belfast and a specialist Revenue Management Contact Centre in Bolton.

Relationship with Aspect

Following a competitive tender in 1998, Royal Mail placed its first significant order with Aspect for contact centre equipment. Since then, Aspect has been a key partner of the contact centre arm of Royal Mail, implementing solutions in accordance with its “Contact Centre Architecture and Customer Contact Centre Strategy.”

Aspect provides a range of contact centre software technologies, including voice portal solutions, computer telephony integration (CTI), outbound dialers, automatic call distributors, workforce management and applications for extending agent and supervisor capabilities to remote locations. Following a review in 2002, Royal Mail reappointed Aspect as its preferred partner for the supply and support of contact centre technology for an additional three years.

Track & Trace

The Track & Trace (T&T) service, introduced as a “live agent” service in 1993, enables customers to find out the progress of letters and small parcels sent via Royal Mail’s Special Delivery services, domestically and internationally. Items are tracked by Royal Mail through bar codes scanned at mail processing centres on their delivery journey.



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Andy Fergusson
Project Manager,
Prism Alliance



Advisors are able to inform callers of the status of items—for example, whether they are being processed at the initial mail processing centre, in transit, or being held for collection—as well as the time and date that items were delivered. T&T has proven extremely popular, receiving approximately two million customer calls each year. In the late 1990s, a web-based self-service version of T&T was also introduced.

Automating Track & Trace

Royal Mail is always keen to reduce customer service costs, as long as that cost reduction does not have a negative impact on customer service. In 2002, working closely with Aspect, Customer Services set out to examine areas within its portfolio where customer self service could be successfully implemented. T&T was selected as a “proof of concept” service and Aspect advised on deploying a voice portal to give details to T&T customers without speaking to a live advisor. After agreeing on the requirements, a review of speech recognition software vendors was undertaken and Nuance’s natural language software was selected for the project.

The Technical Solution

In April 2002, Royal Mail upgraded the 60-port Aspect® Customer Self Service™ system at its Plymouth contact centre and purchased software licenses for 60 Nuance speech recognition ports. With resilience and full redundancy in mind, an identical system was also readied for its contact centre in Stoke. Aspect Customer Self Service, from the company’s Signature product line, is a voice portal product that was then integrated with the existing T&T web application, saving valuable time and money by using Royal Mail’s existing information databases. The speech-automated T&T service was piloted in October 2002 with a small percentage of calls directed through the portal. Such was the success of the service that within two weeks management decided to route all T&T calls through the portal. The voice portal is managed today by Prism Alliance, an IT support service organization.

How the Service Works

Customers dial into the service on a local rate (0845) number printed on all special delivery item receipts. Calls are answered with an automated greeting that asks customers to speak the unique 13 digit alphanumeric tracking reference number printed on their receipts. Tracking numbers are then passed to the T&T web interface, which assesses delivery status and conveys this information to callers. Callers with multiple T&T queries can access information on all of them within a single phone call.

The user-friendly system also provides help to callers. At the end of each tracking inquiry it asks, “Would you like to hear that information again?” or “If you want to speak to an advisor, say ‘Advisor’.” There is also a built-in “confidence check.” If the system has a high degree of confidence that it has recognised the caller response, it will move onto the next step. If not, it will say “I think you said ...” or “I didn’t get that, could you please repeat.” Only an estimated 10 percent of calls are transferred to live agents because callers wish to avoid the self service system.

Results

Approximately half of all T&T calls are now fully automated—that equals one million calls per annum. “It’s been a huge success,” commented Andy Fergusson, Project Manager, Prism Alliance. “We planned that about 40 percent of calls could be automated using a voice portal and the actual figure has been even higher. Aspect and Nuance worked hard to understand our business objectives and delivered the service efficiently and on time.”

Other results from the Aspect Customer Self Service system implementation include:

- Convenient 24/7 accessibility for customers
- No customer queuing for advisors
- Service is more accessible than the T&T web service (as more people have easy access to a phone than a PC)
- Call handling costs cut by approximately 25 percent

By re-deploying one-third of T&T advisors to other campaigns, Royal Mail has:

- Significantly increased the number of advisors handling general customer service calls such as redirections
- Set up a dedicated call handling team for postcode enquiries
- Increased the number of advisors handling email queries

“I’ve not heard of a single consumer compliant about the system,” claims Alan Jones, Systems Manager, Prism Alliance. “Caller ‘avoidance’ is very low, it has proven very reliable and Aspect and Nuance have always been quick to respond to any queries we’ve had.”

About Aspect

Aspect is a global software and IT services firm specialising in applying Microsoft unified communications and collaboration to help customers achieve optimal results through enhanced business processes across the enterprise and in the contact centre. Aspect provides IT consulting, integration services and business applications. For more information, visit www.aspect.com.

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