

IC AND ICWORLD

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CALLING ALL CUSTOMERS

A year ago the CSA Czech Airlines call center in Prague was in free-fall and customers were hanging up in droves. But today satisfaction levels are stratospheric. It's all due to new technology and a new determination to succeed.

Today, we couldn't run the business without it," says Michal Laurich, Head of Direct Sales and the man in charge of the new CSA Czech Airlines call center in Prague. Yet less than one year ago, calls to the airline's traditional call center had fallen to less than 500 per day, and the trend was negative. "The overall service level was very poor, and fewer and fewer people were using

the call center," reports Laurich. It was clear that something had to be done. A Request For Proposals was issued—a public challenge to deliver an innovative and powerful new call center to CSA. Founded in 1923, CSA Czech Airlines is a member of the Sky Team alliance with Air France, Alitalia, Delta Airlines, AeroMexico and Korean Air. The carrier operates a young fleet of 35 airplanes, employs more than 4,400 people in 49 offices in the Czech Republic and around the world, and carries more than 3 million passengers a year to 69 destinations in 43 countries. "CSA has a highly visible presence and a solid reputation in the market," notes Petr Klauda, Head of Siemens ICN in Prague. "Clearly we were interested in winning the business, but it was equally clear that we were up against some very tough competition." To prepare what they hoped would be a winning proposal, the Siemens ICN team in Prague poured a great deal of effort into understanding just what the airline hoped to accomplish.

Airlines everywhere were having to cut costs and find better ways to run their businesses, and CSA was no exception. But what were the specific business issues that CSA hoped to solve, and how could Siemens' technology expertise be put to work most effectively to address them?

Key objectives

CSA's Michal Laurich outlined a broad-based set of objectives: the new call center must enable the airline to extend the reach and range of its services to customers and raise quality of service standards throughout the company. It would expand the number of languages from two (Czech and English) to at least six, enable effective automation of routine tasks, and permit qualified agents to complete a higher number of transactions in a more efficient manner. In

addition to live agents, new channels including a voice portal, email and SMS would open up direct access to CSA through a call center operating not just during regular office hours, but 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In effect, as envisioned by Laurich, the CSA call center was to be "first and foremost a sales channel." "That was a tall order," recalled the head of Siemens ICN Prague, Petr Klauda. "We had the right technology and expertise to win the bid—but we would still have to convince the customer." A detailed proposal was prepared based on the powerful feature set of HiPath ProCenter Advanced V5.1 and a natural language voice portal provided by CreaLog, the Munich-based software developer and consulting firm that specializes in voice recognition and text-to-speech voice portal technology. CSA's Laurich was skeptical: "Siemens promised us the voice portal would successfully recognize natural speech in six different languages 99.8% of the time. We didn't believe them."

Top level technology

Tall order or not, Siemens ICN Prague won the bid. Looking back on the decision, Michal Laurich noted that although CSA had received competitive proposals, they were impressed with the high level of technology provided by Siemens. In addition, he said, "Siemens has excellent service here in the Czech Republic.

That's important because CSA requires very high service levels, and quick answers to off-hour problems as well. Siemens has a very efficient help desk and good response times.

They monitor the system to ensure it's running error-free – because every minute the call center isn't up and running we are losing a lot of money now." Mr. Laurich also mentioned another factor in the decision. "We felt that Siemens is quite established in the Czech market, and their reputation





really plays a role.” HiPath ProCenter Suite provides a complete range of call center solutions. CSA selected the high-end ProCenter Advanced solution set, which would allow CSA to respond quickly to the rapidly changing dynamics of its business.

The ICN Prague team installed HiPath ProCenter Advanced on the HiPath 4000, Siemens’ real-time IP communication system, and worked closely with the customer and CreaLog to fine-tune a powerful solution that had an immediate positive impact on CSA’s business.

The implementation process, however, was not without its challenges. CSA holds information that it wants to make available to its customers in a variety of databases.

For each type of customer query, a special dialogue had to be written and programmed into the voice portal. In addition, the system had to be taught to handle English.

Not Cambridge English, which is “native” to the portal, but English as it is spoken by Scandinavians, Germans, Russians—all those CSA customers for whom it is a second language. As it turned out, this wasn’t an issue.

The portal learned how to recognize the many different ways English is spoken, and easily handles the same sort of variations in Russian, German and the other CSA languages.

Two nines reliability

There is, evidently, more to conversing with a robot than meets the eye, and CreaLog’s Head of Marketing, Jürgen Walther, is justly proud of his company’s role in making this project a success. “Natural-language voice recognition technology has made great progress in recent years, and together with Siemens ICN we’ve put it to excellent use in the CSA call center.”

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CreaLog, in fact, is the first HiPath Ready Premium Partner for voice portals, for the most part, due to the seamless integration of its technology into the HiPath ProCenter solution suite. At CSA, this fascinating technology plays a key role at the front end, the critical

point where callers first come in contact with CSA.

As Michal Laurich recently exclaimed: “It works! We’ve been monitoring it for several months now, and we’re very near that number—the system understands callers 99% of the time.”

The voice portal takeover greetings and handles routine queries, reading back answers in “text-to-speech” synthesis from the CSA flight schedule database, for example, or from the caller’s frequent flyer account. For callers wishing to book a flight, in the “pre-qualification” phase of a call, the voice portal dialogues with the caller—in English, Czech, Russian, French, German or Spanish, passing this information to HiPath ProCenter’s skills-based routing routines, which route the caller to the next available agent.

The voice portal also recognizes the desired departure city and destination, dates and flight numbers, and sets up this information for the agent’s screen.

Just which agent is available, however, is more complicated than it sounds. With six different languages spoken, an agent must be identified who speaks the caller’s language well enough to satisfy the query and complete the booking successfully.

The agent must be familiar with

CSA booking system and procedures, and be able to jump in at an opportune moment to offer an electronic ticket, for example, or additional value-added services such as a hotel reservation at the destination city. Agent skills, in other words, must be carefully matched to each caller and query. HiPath ProCenter's patented skills-based routing technology enables CSA to pass pre-qualified calls – not simply to the next free agent, but to the agent it has identified as most suitable to handle each call.

Callers prioritized

To make matters even more interesting, HiPath ProCenter Advanced makes it possible for pre-qualified callers to be “prioritized” in the queues.

Although at CSA today the average time a caller spends waiting to speak to an agent is around two minutes, it is still possible, within that brief period, to “advance” the airline's most valuable customers. Holders of CSA Frequent Flyer Gold and Silver cards, for example, find themselves automatically “jumping the queue” in a virtual equivalent of walking into an airport executive lounge.

They are immediately identified as CSA's most loyal and valuable

customers, and treated accordingly.

When operations at the new CSA Call Center began, the number of customer calls jumped almost immediately from under 500 to 1000, and before long to 1200 per day. The number is due to reach 1600 shortly, with the trend set to continue as more and more calls are routed directly through to Prague. British Telecom handles routing of calls from the local countries to the CSA Call Center.

“Services such as luggage tracking have been brought into the call center and extended to a growing number of countries, and pre-flight check-in through the center has also proved very popular with customers....”

Customers call PSTN local or toll-free numbers in each of the countries, where calls are either taken by local office staff or forwarded directly to Prague through BT's call center services.

Since routine queries are handled automatically, caller waiting times have been drastically reduced, as has the high cost of having highly qualified CSA personnel answer mundane questions.


Picking up a call in Prague costs one-third of what it does to handle the same call in the UK, for example.

Furthermore, reports Michal Laurich, “the people here in the CSA Call Center are generating new business, and that is very important for us.

They are picking up more calls, our working hours are extended, and we are offering more services.”

Services such as luggage tracking have been brought into the call center and extended to a growing number of countries, and pre-flight check-in through the center has also proved very popular with customers – on arrival at the airport they need only pick up their boarding cards.

The addition of HiPath ProCenter support for SMS and email has also opened up new channels to CSA's customers. All of these efforts have contributed to a marked increase in customer satisfaction, as the high standards and quality services delivered through the contact center reach out from Prague across the entire network of CSA operations.

Less than a year old and already a success story, the CSA Call Center at Prague Ruzyně Airport continues to expand the reach, range and quality of its services to CSA customers. Michal Laurich smiled. “I told you, we couldn't get along without it.” 





FREEING UP STAFF TO TAKE CARE OF CUSTOMERS

Michal Laurich is responsible for direct sales at CSA Czech Airlines, in particular the CSA Call Center, built with HiPath ProCenter Advanced V5.1 and a CreaLog voice portal. ICW spoke with Mr. Laurich in late November, 2003.

ICW: What were your main objectives for the new CSA Call Center?

Michal Laurich: Cutting costs was the main thing, and improving the standard of service. We wanted to centralize call-handling – picking up a call here in Prague costs us one-third of what it costs in the UK, for example. We also wanted to extend our hours of operation and raise the number of languages spoken. That way we reach a much bigger share of our customer base.

ICW: You're working in six languages – is that enough?

Michal Laurich: For the moment. A lot of people in Europe speak English, at least as a back-up. So if all the lines are busy at the CSA office in Oslo, for example, the call automatically rolls



Michal Laurich, Head of Direct Sales and the man in charge of the new CSA Czech Airlines Call Center in Prague.

over to Prague, where we answer in English. We're also taking over all calls from Ireland, the UK, Germany, Spain and France – as well as the Czech Republic, of course.

ICW: One of your main communication channels is an interactive voice response system. How do your customers like talking to a machine?

Michal Laurich: We didn't believe the voice recognition technology would be so reliable. But it works, remarkably well, and has been very well accepted by customers.

For anybody who just wants to find out how many miles are left in their Frequent Flyer account or when the next flight is to Paris, it's fine. And if they want to speak to an agent and book a flight, they won't be kept waiting long.

ICW: What would you say are the main benefits of the new call center?

Michal Laurich: The very high standard of the service and the satisfaction of the customers. That's the biggest benefit you can get.

ICW: Has it been a worthwhile investment?

Michal Laurich: Today, we couldn't get along without it. Even if you first have to invest in this technology, it's much more effective to automate routine tasks and put our people to work taking good care of our customers – and selling.

