Fundraising and the Virtual Call Center

Is the on-demand call center right for you? Use these tips to capitalize on this trend.

By Jim Dvorkin

Many nonprofits use the phone to raise funds for one simple reason. It works.

The challenge is to set up a calling center that meets nonprofits' unique needs. Many technologies are too expensive for the average nonprofit and too inflexible to let organizations quickly increase or decrease the number of people making calls on their behalf.

As a result, more and more nonprofits are taking a look at virtual or on-demand call centers. Such systems offer a variety of advantages over traditional calling centers. They require less office space and resources, make it easier to recruit and train telemarketers, and facilitate fundraising during peak periods.

What Are the Advantages?

Cost Savings

On-demand call centers provide all the features of a traditional call-center operation. The big difference is that you don't need to maintain expensive hardware and software. Instead, an on-demand call center is hosted by the technology vendor and paid for on a per-telemarketer, per-month basis. As a result, you can get a call center up and running

without investing large amounts of money upfront, making it possible to put together a professional phone-based fundraising campaign on a small budget. You can focus on working with telemarketers, while the vendor takes care of managing the technology and equipment.

> **On-demand call centers eliminate inefficient and wasteful use of capital.**

In addition to reduced capital requirements, on-demand call centers deliver other savings over traditional systems, including far lower long-distance charges through Internet-based (VoIP) calling and lower maintenance costs. Your expenses are reduced to the cost of adding a single telemarketer, rather than adding a completely new system.

Flexibility

The seasonal nature of fundraising work makes on-demand call center systems ideal. When you need to gear up and add new telemarketers for a big fundraising campaign, you can simply add a new call-center seat. Once the fundraising campaign is over, you can reduce telemarketer count by

any amount without concern for unused capacity or additional fees.

In a conventional situation, call-center software licenses are typically bought in blocks. That means you may need to purchase extra technology for busy periods or have a reserve inventory of technology on the shelf during slow periods. On-demand call centers eliminate this wasteful use of capital.

On-demand call centers also offer geographic flexibility. Your telemarketers, whether paid or volunteer, can work from their homes. This flexibility helps in recruitment and reduces telemarketer turnover. Reporting capabilities make it possible to connect your at-home telemarketers to the same resources, just as if they were all working in one location.

Tips for Selecting the Right Call-Center Solution

It's important to find the right on-demand system for your organization. Here are a few important steps to take before you choose a vendor:

1. Decide exactly how you'll be using the call center—the number of telemarketers you'll hire, where they'll be located, and which of the following features you may need:

- the ability to make outgoing

calls, receive incoming calls, or both.

• customer-relations management (CRM) tools, which create two-way exchanges with customers to give you information about what they want and help you anticipate their needs.

• predictive dialing, a technology that automatically dials telephone numbers, adjusting the calling process to the number of telemarketers it predicts will be available when someone answers the phone.

• automatic number identification (ANI) (also known as caller ID), which displays the phone numbers of calling parties.

• interactive voice response (IVR), which lets a computer detect voices and touch tones and respond with pre-recorded messages, directing people to press certain numbers on their phones to signal their wishes.

• real-time reporting, a software tool that provides real-time performance information for a network of telemarketers so that they can respond to rapidly-changing conditions.

• call scripting, which gives your telemarketers a series of consistent ways to respond to predictable questions.

• computer telephony integration (CTI), which coordinates telephone and computer interactions.

• automatic call distribution (ACD) and skills-based routing—technologies that assign incoming calls to the most suitable telemarketer.

• call recording software, which automatically records phone calls directly to your computer.

2. Check what potential on-demand vendors can offer.

• Ask potential vendors to let you speak to some of their customers who are using call centers in the ways you expect to use yours.

• The quality of Internet-based calling varies with different vendors. Be certain you'll receive business-quality VoIP.

• Determine how easy it will be to learn the new system and how telemarketers will be trained.

• If you'll be linking multiple locations or at-home telemarketers, decide what tools exist for them to interact with one another and for management to monitor and assist them.

• See how potential systems will integrate with your other programs.

• Check to see if you can use the new system with your existing 800 phone number.

• Find out what support each vendor will give you and your telemarketers. Support offerings may include, for example, free 24/7 phone or e-mail support, comprehensive online FAQs, training, and manuals. ■

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Creative Fundraising Ideas

Get a Clue! Pique Interest with a Scavenger Hunt

Looking for a fresh idea that goes beyond the traditional fundraiser? A scavenger hunt, either indoors or out, is a fun adventure that can also teach participants more about your organization based on the clues you use. Find scavenger-hunt resources at these Web sites: www.watsonadventures.com, www.thegogame.com,www.scaventures.com,www.drclue.com, www.scavengerhuntanywhere.com, www.teambuildingusa.com, www.cityhunt.org, www.scavenger-hunt-idea.com, www.mymysteryparty.com.

Add a Twist with Box Lunches

Years ago, ladies would create box lunches, and gentlemen would bid on them for a chance to enjoy the food as well as the company of the preparer. At the Hearts of Gold Cantaloupe Festival & Fair in Fallon, Nevada, local dignitaries assembled lunches, and residents bid on each lunch for a chance to eat with the person who prepared it. The box lunch social raised $1,700 for the Boys & Girls Club of Fallon. For more creative fundraising ideas, see "Special Events Galore!" (www.stevensoninc.com).

Attract Wealthy Donors

If you want to attract people of means to your organization, focus on events that capture their attention, while keeping your mission in mind. Here's a sampling of fundraising events that appeal to people of wealth: fashion show, art exhibit, seminar on exotic travel, gourmet food event with chefs, golf classic with a unique twist, celebrity speaker, reception for Harley Davidson owners, wine tasting, string quartet performance and reception, black tie gala, estate planning seminar, cooking demonstration, reception for visiting dignitary. ■