



Harriet Carter®

Harriet Carter taps Infradapt to upgrade its contact center and PBX platforms.

OVERVIEW

Harriet Carter, founded in 1958, is a privately-owned retailer of distinctive gifts and specialty brands--including many "as seen on TV" products. Harriet Carter and its sister company Fresh Finds ship catalogs to millions of homes annually.

Its Montgomeryville, PA headquarters and regional offices receive many thousands of calls each day, including catalog orders, customer service, operations, purchasing, and administration--with some of these departments receiving calls 24/7.

Despite having a relatively modern Avaya Definity PBX platform, Harriet Carter struggled with platform feature limitations and high maintenance costs. After reviewing many alternative platforms--including other open-source telephony products--Harriet Carter ultimately selected a solution based on Asterisk Business Edition and Presence OpenGate.



REQUIREMENTS

- Robust contact center solution including analytics, agent monitoring and screen recording, order-entry screen pops, skills-based routing, and other features.
- Platform and vendor capable of dealing with Harriet Carter's large telecommunications infrastructure--three carriers deliver circuits over a DS3 and 12 additional PRIs.
- Capability to upgrade from traditional TDM circuits to SIP trunking using g.729 compression without repurchasing equipment or software.
- Flexibility to change overflow rules to Harriet Carter's third-party outsourced call centers "on the fly".
- Vendor capable of supporting Harriet Carter's complex needs and gracefully transitioning groups from the existing Avaya platform without downtime.

THE SOLUTION

Harriet Carter's large carrier footprint, volumes in peak periods exceeding 15,000 calls per day, a need to integrate several solutions, as well as the requirement that the platform contain no single points of failure, presented a considerable architecture challenge.

Ultimately, a meshed approach based on Asterisk Business Edition was chosen that employed Presence Technology's OpenGate contact center solution. Asterisk servers connect Harriet Carter's network to the PSTN, allowing calls to flow to the internal contact center groups (using Presence OpenGate) or to third-party outsourcers based on call volume and wait times.

The Presence OpenGate solution adds enterprise-grade contact center features that gracefully integrate with Harriet Carter's existing environment. For example, call center agents run the Presence agent toolbar on their Windows desktops, managers have access to real-time productivity and other analytics via the Presence Supervisor dashboard, and Harriet Carter's internal order fulfillment systems can integrate with Presence's Microsoft SQL database backend.

CHALLENGES

Migrating hundreds of users to a new contact center and PBX platform without downtime or wholesale disruption was a project requirement. The process, which spanned several months, included implementing hardware, testing PSTN facilities, training, and eventually the transition itself.

A deployment methodology utilizing Asterisk to "front end" the existing Avaya infrastructure allowed Harriet Carter and Infradapt to gracefully transition business groups to the new platform one-at-a-time, preventing the need for wholesale disruption.

"Giving us the control and flexibility to transition users slowly made the upgrade a much easier sell internally and made the whole process a relatively smooth one," stated Lowell Bergey, IT Director at Harriet Carter.

"During pre-deployment carrier interoperability testing, a major problem was discovered with one of our carriers"

Solution includes technologies from:



POLYCOM®

networks,” explained Mr. Bergey. He continued, “Infradapt and Digium worked diligently with them to resolve their problems, including over the July 4th holiday.”

One of the original project objectives—re-using an inventory of Avaya IP-handsets—proved to be problematic when firmware issues were discovered that prevented some features from working properly. “We had a problem with the handsets where several features as well as a registration function were not working correctly. Fortunately, there was a market for those phones on eBay and we were able to install new Polycom phones with minimal expense,” explained Mr. Bergey.

RESULTS

The objective of upgrading Harriet Carter’s platform during the summer in advance of their peak holiday shopping season was concluded successfully. Beyond flexibility and a reduction in total cost of ownership, Infradapt’s solution employing Presence and Asterisk delivers a number of important new features.

Jon Depew, Harriet Carter’s Call Center Manager explained, “it’s difficult for me to quantify the impact that the Presence software has made on our call center—in part because we are seeing some of this data for the first time. The Avaya software we had limited our ability to see how well or how poorly we were doing as a group. We went from drinking from a leaky faucet to drinking from a fire hydrant when it comes to the number of tools and the amount of data that was suddenly at our disposal (and we are still trying to soak it all in).”

He continued, “There have been several productivity improvements with the Presence agent desktop software, including eliminating 5-7 seconds at the beginning of each call with auto-answer, and an additional 6-8 seconds at each call’s conclusion where agents previously recorded the phone number and call outcome manually.”

Lowell Bergey added, “One of the more surprising benefits to the Presence screen recording feature was the ability to debug occasional problems with our internal order entry system. What would have taken a developer a full day to research and simulate, we are able to see exactly what happened and fix problems within minutes.”

The ability to fully monitor and record both in-house agent and outsourcer calls has had additional benefits. Mr. Depew, explains, “We have been able to hold our answering services to a MUCH higher accountability ... While we have discovered for the most part our answering services do a decent job, we were also surprised by some of the misinformation that was being given to our customers. It is very empowering to have the proof of a recording to back up your claim. What can they say to dispute the facts of how a call was mishandled when you can send them the MP3 of the call?”

“We have been able to cut down on customer fraud in situations where the customer claims they were told one thing and in reality the recording shows they were told another. ... I have personally seen the very real benefit numerous times,” Mr. Depew continued.

Mr. Bergey explained, “Infradapt was a great choice and helped us integrate the new platform with our systems to allow us to re-route calls to outsourcers from our BlackBerrys based on real-time wait times, as well as change our sales program to accommodate fluctuations in call volume so that we don’t lose sales.”

Jon Depew concluded, “I am definitely excited about our transition to Presence and Asterisk. For the first time in my 13 years in this call center I finally feel like my supervisor team and I have the tools we need to ensure that our customers are receiving the high level of service they deserve and that our agents are getting the coaching and positive reinforcement they need.”

ABOUT INFRADAPT

Infradapt is a leading regional technology solutions firm, providing comprehensive IT consulting and outsourcing. Its customers span many industries from small-to-mid sized businesses to multi-location Fortune-1000 enterprises. Infradapt’s solutions range from basic IT services through multi-tier outsourced support and business continuity solutions. Infradapt has a strong IP Telephony (VoIP) service concentration, specializing in designing, integrating, and supporting converged voice networks including multi-site and call center systems. Recognized nationally for service and engineering excellence, Infradapt is the company experts choose.

More information: www.infradapt.com

ABOUT DIGIUM

Digium®, Inc., the Asterisk® Company, created, owns and is the innovative force behind Asterisk, the most widely used open source telephony software. Since its founding in 1999, Digium has become the open source alternative to proprietary communication providers, with offerings that cost as much as 80 percent less. Digium offers Asterisk software free to the open source community and offers Asterisk Business Edition and Switchvox IP PBX software to power a broad family of products for small, medium and large businesses. The company’s product line includes a wide range of hardware and software to enable resellers and customers to implement turnkey VoIP systems or to design their own custom telephony solutions.

More information: www.digium.com

ABOUT PRESENCE

Presence Technology is a software company specializing in advanced solutions for the Contact Center. Its software solutions optimize resources and increase efficiency of the interactions between companies and their customers. Featuring a highly-qualified professional team along with its network of strategic partners, the company has helped customers worldwide across Europe, South America, South Africa and the USA.

More information: www.presenceco.com



Above: Harriet Carter headquarters, North Wales PA.