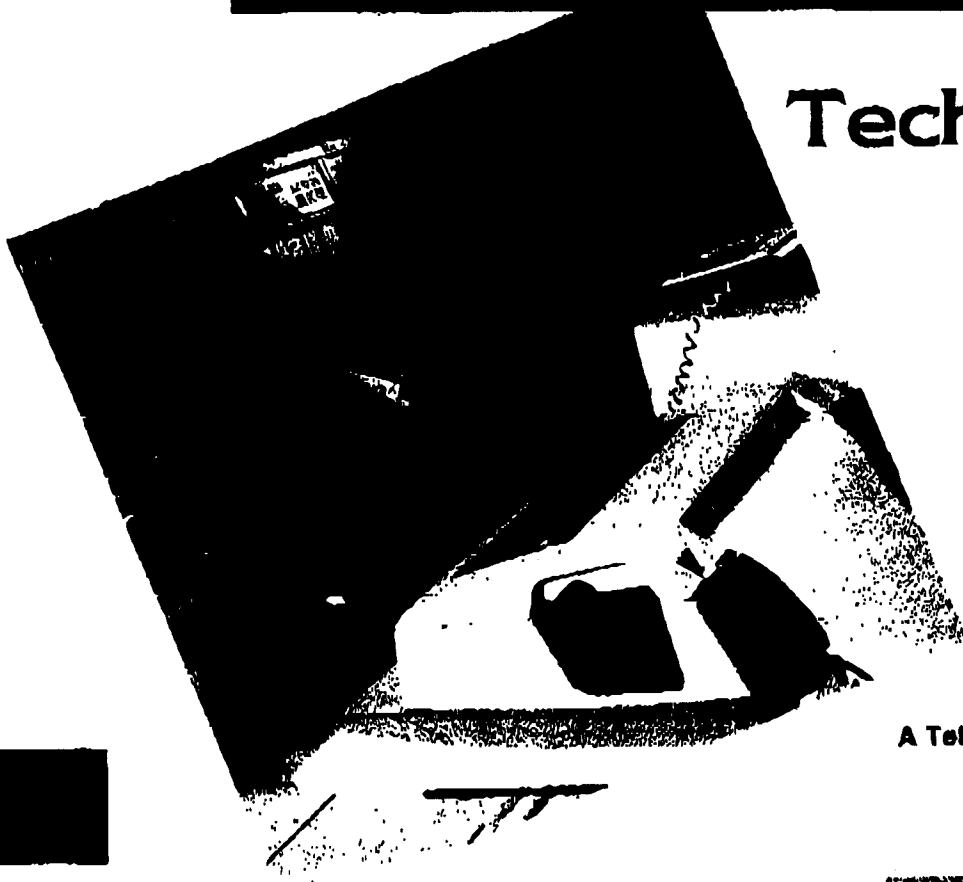


— Possible Applications —

NDC — Where Telemarketing



And
Technology
Meet

A Telemarketing® Exclusive
Interview

Tucker, Georgia, located just northeast of Atlanta, has the charm and hospitality characteristic of most southern towns. But for the last year, Tucker has had an even more notable distinction — it's the home of the National Data Corporation (NDC) telemarketing center. Opened on October 20, 1984, the NDC telemarketing center is a balanced mixture of well-trained TSRs, concerned and informed management, the best in ergonomics, state-of-the-art telecommunications technology, and more.

After spending a full day at the 650 employee center last July, it is difficult to be less than enthusiastic about the establishment. From its arrangement of TSR workstations to its large equipment room, NDC's commitment to telemarketing — and to doing it right — is evident throughout.

Because of this, the attitude at NDC is one of openness. According to R. Dean Smith, vice president of telemarketing operations, there are rarely days when the employees of the center don't see potential customers or those currently on contract coming in, monitoring calls, and touring every corner of the building.

In fact, the center has a large, well-equipped monitoring room where customers can come in, announced or unannounced, and stay as long as they want to monitor programs. "They can stay 24-hours if they wish," Smith said, "and we welcome it because we want to maintain credibility. When our clients monitor our agents, they hear good calls and bad calls, crank calls and good business calls. They see and hear everything. I think this ultimately works to our advantage because then the client — especially a new client — learns to be ready for anything. In effect monitoring helps us educate clients to what a high volume telemarketing business is all about."

The Tucker telemarketing center was founded as a result of NDC's years of experience having five credit card verification centers scattered across the nation. The five centers had maintained 24 positions each to handle inbound calls (NDC refers to them as direct response calls) generated by direct response advertisements.

However, NDC found a number of things wrong with this arrangement, the primary problem being that as a line of business it was considered "secondary" to the main business of credit card verification. At the most, direct response accounted for no more than 20 percent of the company's total telecommunications business, and therefore, wasn't given the internal management attention needed in terms of maintaining it as an integral part of the business. Now, with one center dedicated solely to inbound and outbound telemarketing, NDC has found that it is getting more direct response calls than it was operating on a fragmented basis — and it's making more money!

The logistics behind this occurrence are simple. With five centers, each having approximately 24 positions, any TV station that broadcast a commercial at the "wrong" time to the right audience could easily bring in 1,000 to 2,000 calls within a seven-minute period. Even if all positions were manned, the center was still going to experience a totally unmanageable peak. On the other hand, the Tucker center has hundreds of agents ready to take calls around the clock so it can handle the peaks and valleys. As Smith put it, "Right now, we're handling about 28,000 to 30,000 calls a day. When, let's say, client A is running a commercial, client B isn't. . . so you flatten out those peaks and valleys in terms of call volume. We can schedule a 100-to-200-position center just for direct response and balance out; whereas if we're fragmented in five centers, we never have a chance."

Knowing each TV station's or network's advertising schedule daily doesn't help a thing, Smith pointed out. "Anything can throw those schedules haywire — like the late breaking news of hijacking, a crisis in some government . . . anything."

Because there is no predictable rhyme or reason to calling patterns, the secret is volume. "We're running hundreds of direct response agent positions," Smith stated. "The bigger our number of positions, the less the impact on our operation."

On those rare occasions when

direct response personnel hit a peak and cannot handle a volume surge, the center doesn't need to overflow calls to another NDC center. Instead, the excess calls are "gated" to the NDC outbound or "direct marketing" representatives located in another area within the same building.

Although smaller in personnel staffing, the outbound calling at the Tucker center is quite impressive in its own right, turning out 6,500 to 7,000 calls a day. Each representative workstation is five feet wide — greater in width than the direct response agents' workstations. That's because the reps require a larger amount of desk space to hold the reference manuals stored in each work position.

Although most information is now stored in the computer and available to the reps on their screens, still a large amount of information comes to them daily in the form of printed sheets, to be added to reference manuals.

Growth in outbound representative numbers is slow, but progressive. During our July visit we learned that 24 positions were expected to be added in August making for a total of 72 outbound agents.

In handling direct marketing scripts, one rule applies, Smith emphasized: "Each representative *must* handle the script the same way each time. There's no room for creativity on the part of reps. This is what the client wants, and we adhere to that principle. We work closely with the client to develop successful direct marketing scripts," he explained. "We must capture the subject's attention in the first 20 seconds. If we don't, we've lost the call. Take one of our major customers for whom we're selling newspaper subscriptions. Our NDC salesman examined their script draft, then went to Washington, D.C. to meet with them. They, in turn, developed the final script."

"Our Tucker staff even helps some of its customers with their own TV commercials. Often, copywriters in advertising agencies have a different idea as to what will best sell the product in a telemarketing campaign. Our senior staff

Continued



ers can offer important information to ad writers, based on their expertise," Smith said.

The Technical Side Of The Center

Equally as interesting as the way business is done at Tucker is its equipment.

Heading the technical end of the large telemarketing center is a young engineer, name Andy Zazzera. A six-year veteran of the company, he explained how the complex hardware and software system is organized and functions.

"First, let me give you some numbers in the phone line department," he said. "We have 200 band-5 out-WATS lines in the center now, and roughly 500 lines from AT&T. Our AT&T bill, monthly, is now about a quarter of a million dollars."

Speaking in the large, air-conditioned equipment room, Zazzera pointed first to the equipment he defined as the "heart" of the center: the Rockwell Galaxy Automatic Call Distributor (ACD).

"We had no problem in choosing this system for the new Tucker telemarketing center," he said. "We already have this ACD in all five of our other U.S. call centers, and we think it is the best one available for a number of reasons. First, there's redundancy: If a critical element should fail, it has instant switch-over to a duplicate system, and reports its condition at once. Second, it has complete MIS (management information system) reporting — essential for our man-

agement. Within this parameter, it reports on the condition of all our AT&T trunks, telling us if they are working and keeping our operating costs as low as possible.

"At NDC, we can install the Galaxy systems, test them and repair them with great skill. Actually, this particular system is a kind of hybrid, with elements of it coming to us from two sources. It is a D-1, D-2 and D-3 system, with parts of it coming to us from a previously owned system in Chicago and the rest coming brand-new from Rockwell in Downers Grove, IL. The two new elements are each GVS-150 systems."

This particular Galaxy system is actually three systems hooked up in tandem. That's the nature of the Galaxy ACDs because they're modular. Zazzera said the real way to measure this particular Galaxy ACD is to look at the number of lines it handles: 522 telephone lines (trunks).

The Galaxy ACD interfaces the AT&T lines via T-1 carriers. NDC has direct DS-1 service to the AT&T 4-E toll switching system located in Atlanta. Zazzera stated, "We were the first in the country to interface with a toll switch machine via T-1s, ever. We now have direct connect, and it definitely is the way to go. We had a 33-hour cutover — a long one, but we got there! All of our band zero comes out of the central office in Tucker. These are standard metallic circuits, but we have 21 T-1 spans dropped into the building, of which we use about 15 or 16.

We're planning to use the rest of them soon. They work flawlessly . . . It's great. We're going to do the same in all our other centers. Until getting the T-1, we didn't realize the real potential of the Galaxy ACD.

"We do have 24 channel banks hooked to this system, for all the analog ports," he said. Pointing to an equipment frame, Zazzera said, "These are 551 customer service units for the T-1 span. They provide loop-back capability for the 4-E switch in Atlanta, so they can tell to shoot circuits. The BSX is provided by Southern Bell, which actually provides the link between us and AT&T downtown. Southern Bell takes it as far as here; AT&T takes it through the CSU and then we interface direct T-1 to the TSU."

Moving to another rack of equipment, he said, "These TI processors are the CRT controllers. It's our interface with the mainframe computer at our Atlanta headquarters, in what we call Corporate Square. We have a series of cluster controllers in just three cabinets. Each TI cluster controls up to 30 CRTs on the operations floor. On the input side are the CRTs; on the output side, via dedicated data lines, is the host computer. . . a UNIVAC."

Moving to another rack, he said, "These two processors are the actual interfaces between the ACD and the CRT processors. The data link that Rockwell supplies us, with the call records, interfaces through this processor to pre-prompt the CRT screens on the



[telemarketing] floor. We have a 'hot standby' so if anything bad happens here, we can throw one switch to go to the back-up processor and get right back on the air."

Zazzera went to the CRT at the ACD control desk. "This is the terminal we use for input," he said. "It is tied to the interface processor. We store everything in that processor... all of the tables... on zero power RAM cards. Thus, we avoid the access time we'd otherwise need to go to a Winchester disk to find it. Information is in readily available memory. And because we have zero power RAM cards, should the system go down, we don't lose that memory. We bring the system right back up and the memory's right there and we're back on-line."

"We identify each one of the agent position numbers in the software. We also do this with the CRT port number, through the cluster controllers on a frame in the back of this room. So we know that if a call comes in for, say, agent 3100, the call information will be input on the CRT that's on processor 1, port 1. Agent 3101 would be on processor 1, port 3."

Back-Up Services To The Main Equipment Room

Dean Smith took us through the series of important back-up services supporting the main equipment room that houses the Galaxy ACD and the other electronic services tying it to the host computers in Atlanta.

Outside of the equipment room, surrounded by a high fence, is a 12-cylinder Cummings diesel engine, which is kept warm at all times. This engine provides full AC back-up to the total center. The transfer circuitry works in a way that, should the AC be cut, the center's batteries will automatically hold power, the diesel then cuts into service and not a single CRT scope or ACD position is lost in the process. It's a totally uninterrupted power source. (Full diesel power comes up in eight seconds.)

The batteries in the separate interior battery room can hold the ACD for up to six hours without any diesel power. The batteries supply about 20,000 amps and can sustain the entire center for almost an hour.

The Center As The Initial Site For New Galaxy 3 Software

Perhaps the most exciting innovation at the Tucker telemarketing center is its brand-new Galaxy 3 software. The center is, in fact, the initial site for the new software, and according to Andy Zazzera who devised the methodology to tie it to the NDC UNIVAC computer. "The Galaxy ACD now has become a system that's leaps and bounds ahead of anything else. In terms of blending software to software, I don't think there's anyone in the industry that is close to having this."

In perhaps an oversimplistic description, this new software takes the information from the

ACD and the data stored in the computer, draws an imaginary line around the telephone line and the CRT and creates a dedicated workstation.

Formerly, NDC's direct response agents, when handling an incoming call, heard a two-second "whisper" in the earpieces they wore. This whisper told the agent the name of the product or service the caller was phoning in to purchase. The agent would then respond by greeting the caller with whatever that product or service's title happened to be, for example, "Good morning, this is Jane. Thank you for calling the ABC Company."

In a business where time directly correlates to money, those two seconds represent a costly way of doing business. By eliminating them, Dean Smith estimates that NDC saves \$89,500 a year.

But what happens to the "whisper" telling the agent how to answer? Instead of a whisper, the agent sees the name of the product or service on a printed line on the bottom of the CRT screen. The term for this is DNI, or Dialed Number Identification. The agent has about two seconds to see and respond to this printed message (called the "gate announcer") on the CRT. Then as the agent greets the caller, the entire format for handling that client's business comes up on the CRT screen, while the DNI greeting is erased at the bottom.

The period of time, several seconds in all, between the time of the spoken greeting and the format ap-



pearing on the screen is occupied by the information being identified in the 990 Interface which sends that information to the host computer. The host computer selects the appropriate data and sends it back to the agent's CRT screen.

Perhaps oversimplistically, the *called number* now becomes the *product name*.

This software system helps eliminate errors because the first time the agent has to type any information on the keyboard is to input the caller's name and address.

Prior to DNI, the agent heard the whisper, and then took an average of four seconds to key in the name of the client, which then brought the formatted message up on the CRT screen. Those four seconds saved on the *labor* side of the system add up to dollars saved for NDC. Again, Dean Smith's figures estimate they add up to \$75,450 a year in savings.

Andy Zazzera said, "Without Galaxy 3 tied to our host computer in Atlanta, all these agents would have required dedicated lines connected only to specific customer calls coming in. Each agent would have just one script and answer only one type of call. Or, at best, each agent would hear a "whisper" and hear the company name and then have to translate the name of that company onto the CRT screen through the keyboard, and this is the point where errors can creep in."

According to Andy Zazzera, the new software system actually forces each agent to stay alert and

watch the CRT screen. If the agent doesn't catch the welcome message when it pops onto the screen, in two seconds it has disappeared.

This has been something of an adjustment for longer-service agents who were used to hearing the whisper message. They had to train themselves to look for the message on the screen. Newly hired agents don't have that problem since they've started off with the habit of looking for a welcome message.

With the introduction of the new Galaxy 3 system, productivity immediately started going up. The reason for this rapid increase in productivity is seen when one visits the work floor and watches the agent force taking calls. Any agent in a particular gate, or group, now can handle from five to eight different clients, all terminating at his or her workstation in a random manner.

Supervisors at NDC report that the agents like the system because it eliminates the repetitiveness associated with answering only one type of call. "There's a lot of variety, and that makes the agents feel better about their jobs, and it reduces errors that come with too much familiarity with a subject," one supervisor stated.

According to Dean Smith, the total costs to convert all of NDC's Galaxy ACDs to Galaxy 3 software was \$1.3 million, with the conversion costs at the Tucker Center coming to \$216,000. He estimates that payback on the new software will be about 11 months, including

NDC's own development and its hardware costs. "We literally got 100 percent return in our first year. Since we carry the ACD system as an investment credit for 10 years, the return on this software was 10 times faster."

Hiring And Recruiting

Recruiting and hiring are ongoing efforts for NDC. Because the *employment* rate in the Tucker area is high and because the center experiences about 15 percent turnover on average, necessitating the hiring of approximately 50 new people a month, one key to maintaining a consistently competent staff of TSRs is the company's resourceful recruiter. The other is employee referrals and word of mouth. According to Jim Thompson, manager of human resources for the center, approximately 80 percent of new hires, many of them family members, come in contact with the company through its employee referral program. In addition, although NDC seldom utilizes the services of employment agencies, temporary agencies are relied upon to help staff "special temporary projects."

The caliber of recruits is an important consideration for NDC. While 29 percent of NDC TSRs have college degrees and many are working toward a degree, Thompson explained that two of the more important screening criteria are verbal and typing skills. In terms of verbal skills, enunciation, diction and "personal presence" are sought after



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qualities. "We're careful as to local and regional vernacular," Thompson said, "and then we do written tests, language comprehension, and the standard typing test."

"We also look for people who have had experience in interacting with people — those who might have previous telemarketing experience, customer service, retail sales and the like. We first have a telephone interview with a recruit. Based on that interview, we then ask them to come in for a face-to-face meeting," he said.

Thompson also stressed that candidates likely to become employed by NDC are highly versatile, work well under pressure and must be able to interact with clients. In addition, a track record of punctuality and good attendance is an extremely important factor since four workshifts are maintained each day and adherence to work schedules is critical.

The NDC Training Program

Training of TSRs is serious business at the NDC telemarketing center. Two large rooms are devoted completely to facilitating training, and are equipped with working replicas of actual workstations complete with CRTs, keypads, and headsets. The company employs two to three full-time trainers whose sole responsibility is the education of groups of new TSRs. These groups receive 18 hours of generic telemarketing training (40 hours if they have previous telemarketing experience) and additional time for specific projects.

Trainers have the right to reject any recruit and in turn, center managers have the right to reject any trainee. "In fact," said Jim Thompson, "the training department and the center managers and supervisors sit with the trainee the first half-day and write up an evaluation and agree that the individual stay before that person actually becomes a part of the payroll. We're looking for quality personnel as far as possible."

Thompson also described the program and people monitoring that constantly takes place at the Tucker center. Each project manager has a staff member who monitors program quality to assure

that agents are handling the product or service program the correct way. Supervisors are also required to do "people monitoring." Each finding an agent who isn't performing correctly will do counseling immediately. Or the supervisor may elect, on the spot, to send the agent back for retraining. Ten to fifteen percent of the TSR force receives refresher retraining.

In addition to training, the company is dedicated to keeping its employees, on all levels, informed of matters of importance to the company. This information flow appears to be paying off as 13 employees have been promoted to supervisory positions in as many months.

The Ergonomics Of The Center

From floor to ceiling, the 54 thousand square foot Tucker telemarketing center is a display of ergonomic detail. The floors are covered with static-free carpeting, the ceiling with acoustic panels. Workstations are arranged in a chevron pattern and each station is separated by an acoustical divider. Every position is equipped with a CRT and all representatives wear headsets. Overhead, lights are shielded by maroon colored cloth which helps screen out glare on the CRT screens and helps dissipate noise while still providing direct light. To help foster group spirit and to provide easier management, the direct response and direct marketing groups are separated by floor levels that are five steps apart. Finally, a vending area is provided for the employees which contains two refrigerators, two microwave ovens, lockers for all employees, a pay phone and a handicap lift.

Each of the components discussed in this article are important to the success of any telemarketing center. Put them together and you see why the NDC Tucker telemarketing center is, truly a study of telemarketing at its best.

Written and reported by Linda Driscoll and Joseph Levinson

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