

Case Study

Success Story: Marks & Spencer Money

Leading financial services organisation relies on Empirix hosted service to ensure two million credit card holders are handled through multi-site, high-volume virtual contact centre.

UK's Leading Retailers of Clothing, Foods and Homeware

Marks & Spencer Money, the new name for Marks & Spencer Financial Services, is the financial services division of one of the UK's leading retailers of clothing, foods and homeware, serving 10 million customers a week in over 360 stores. Since 1985, Marks & Spencer Money has offered its customers a range of financial solutions including a storecard, personal loans, car buying plan, life assurance and general insurance products.

In 2003, the company offered 2.6 million carefully selected Charge card customers an upgrade to the “&more” Credit Card and loyalty scheme. To make certain that its new venture would live up to the company's high standards for convenience and customer service, Marks & Spencer Money brought in Hammer On-Call, the hosted testing service from Empirix to make sure that its contact centre ran at an optimal level.

Marks & Spencer Money's decision to upgrade store cards to Credit Cards meant a complex project for the company's technical infrastructure team. Until 2003, Marks & Spencer Money's

contact centre handled call volumes averaging some 40,000 calls per week. Providing service and support for the new card initiative required the development of an enhanced contact centre operation that could handle card upgrades and other card-related call volumes exceeding 10,000 calls an hour, with up to 1.5 million calls expected in the first eight weeks.

Marks & Spencer Money set out to create a virtual contact centre (VCC) that could sort and deliver both voice and data to three different locations. The VCC would be deploying Web-based VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology on an unprecedented scale and complexity.

“When launching a new financial services product the success of your contact centre in dealing with new enquiries is critical. It's your customers first interaction with the new brand and there should not be any technical problems that could affect them,” says Phil Hilton, Marks and Spencer Money's Solution Delivery Manager.

“Prior to the launch we were essentially replacing much of our telephony infrastructure with new technology

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Phil Hilton
Solution Delivery Manager,
Marks & Spencer Money

MARKS & SPENCER

COMPANY

Marks & Spencer Money

INDUSTRY

Financial services division of the Marks & Spencer PLC

ENVIRONMENT

HP Netserver, Solaris, Oracle, Lotus Domino

EMPIRIX SOLUTIONS

Empirix Hammer On-Call

WEB SITE

www.marksandspencer.com/money

that still had to be proved on the scale that we were planning,” says Brendan McPhillips, VCC Test Manager for Marks & Spencer Money. “We expected the upgrade to be a very popular offer and projections were for high call volumes in the early stages. There wasn’t going to be a period of nice, gentle increases in call volume while we embedded the new technology and worked through the integration process.”

“We required a whole new VCC for the three locations that would allow us to operate round the clock and handle overflow during peak call times,” recalls McPhillips. “We needed to be sure that voice and data routed to the right place at the right time.”

Near the end of 2002, software testing consultants, together with the Marks & Spencer Money team on the VCC rollout, decided that it would be beneficial to carry out high intensity, end-to-end load testing on the entire contact centre operation to ensure optimal standards. One consultant mentioned Empirix as a likely source for effective testing solutions.

One of the biggest challenges addressed by the testing plan was that much of the new infrastructure — including phone trunks, agent desktop hardware, and LAN capacity in the three contact centres — wasn’t due to be delivered until shortly before the launch. “With that in mind,” says Hilton, “Empirix worked with us to develop a ‘building block’ strategy

based on testing each component as it arrived. In the end, that meant we did a lot more testing than we might have done otherwise, but it also meant we gained a lot of information about how each component worked, which helped us move faster in diagnosing potential problems in the entire system.”

“We came across a number of technical issues that could have ultimately affected some customers,” McPhillips says. “We found the IVR quite stable in performance terms, but the interfacing into backend systems — the data gateway and the middleware developed by Marks & Spencer Money — did see quite a few problems in terms of load. In the end, I think we found and fixed over a dozen fairly critical performance issues in those systems in order to get them to the level we needed to support our launch.”

Operating on a tight timetable, Hammer On-Call enabled Marks & Spencer Money to conduct repeated tests involving multiple vendors and sites, with as many as two dozen people inside and outside the company all logged on to a secure Empirix Web site, tracking test data in real time.

“Because of the level of integration — not just with our immediate providers but with their third-party suppliers — toward the end we often conducted tests with people at multiple locations watching what was going on in their particular pieces of the system while

also monitoring the actual test results via the Web. We were all linked together on a conference call, comparing notes and that actually worked quite well.”

“One of the key successes of Hammer On-Call was that we were able to do lots of last-minute diagnostic testing that quickly and easily pinpointed the reason for a performance problem. We could often tweak the system during the actual test and see what difference it made — or we could very quickly run the same test over again to check whether our adjustments had paid off. By the end of the process, we were experienced and knowledgeable enough to do testing with as few as three people, plus the two Empirix technicians supporting us off-site from the US,” says McPhillips. “Empirix not only gave us good data, but a way to share the data. Everything we came across was solvable because we had all the key parties looking at the same thing and sharing their experience in real time.”

The entire project culminated with the launch in October, right on schedule. “The launch was a big success,” says Hilton. “Some of the peak demands on the system in the early weeks actually took us beyond anything we’d done in testing — sometimes eight or nine thousand calls in half an hour-but we never reached the point where we weren’t able to serve customers properly.”

“There was never a time,” says McPhillips, “whether the middle of the day or the night in the US or the UK, when we couldn’t get Empirix personnel to accommodate us with a test. Even when a test ran late, or we wanted a quick rerun, they were always willing to help and available to us.”

Marks and Spencer Money views its Hammer On-Call testing program as a sound investment. “Marks & Spencer Money wants customers to have a great experience whether that be in our stores or in using our financial services. When the stakes are high and you’re pushing the bounds of a new contact centre technology, I would recommend Empirix,” concludes Phil Hilton.

For a complete list of offices worldwide, or to find an authorized distributor in your area, please visit:
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