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Sweet CT Success

Voicemail-Bearing Bears

By Ellen Muraskin

05/01/1999, 12:00 AM ET

The Premise: Direct marketer First Class Bears, Pompano Beach, FL.

The Promise: Teddy bears, ordered by phone or Web, are personalized with a greeting in the sender's voice.

The Pieces: Envox CT Studio V. 2.2, two Dialogic D/41ESC boards (moving to T-1 soon), Dialogic MSI station board for escape to live agent, eight voice lines, Windows NT.

The Plot: Some CT companies will stop at nothing - not even conspiring with my loved ones - to win coverage in a Muraskin File. Thus it was that shortly before Valentine's Day a package arrived at my doorstep, containing a collectible-quality teddy bear. The bear held a rose and wore a bow tie and a "squeeze me" tag. My daughter pounced on it, squeezed it, and it sang out a song and a Valentine's Day message - in my husband's voice!

My kids demo'ed this bear all up and down the street and Bennett won big points with all the female neighbors, but I dutifully picked up the scent of a promotional freebie. The not-too-challenging trail led me to Envox (Naples, FL - 941-793-0863), whose CT Studio solution is turning Pompano Beach direct marketer First Class Bears into a very profitable enterprise for owners Robert Casola and Kate Berger.

When somebody buys a bear on FSB's externally-hosted website (www.firstclassbears.com), their order is recorded in a local file. At 15-minute intervals, the Envox system accesses this file using FTP, parses out the order information, enters everything in a master SQL database, retrieves a PIN and customer ID from the SQL server identifying the order, and generates an email to the buyer. The email contains the PIN code, ID, a special free-phone number, and instructions for recording the personal greeting.

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Define It

Phone orders are handled a little differently. During normal business hours, calls to 877-BEAR-LUV are answered by live agents at an outsourced call center local to FCB; after hours, by agents at an offshore center. In both cases, special PINs and IDs (distinguished by sequence number from similar keys generated by the back-office SQL system) are drawn from a list and given to callers immediately. Orders and codes are then entered into an on-premise database, which is accessed remotely, by the Envoy system. When the customer calls the freephone number and enters their PIN and customer ID, Envoy's telephony server pulls the customer record from the database, confirms that credit card info has cleared, and prompts the caller (in English or Spanish) to record a 30-second greeting. The .WAV recording, saved and tagged with the customer ID number, is saved on disk. First Class Bears' fulfillment folks check the disk record, retrieve order info using the customer ID, pull the bear from stock and make sure everything's in order. Then they convert the .WAV file to the compressed format used by their chip player, save it on a chip, and load the chip into a squeeze-activated "voice box," powered by three AA batteries. The bears, made to order in China, feature a rear-mounted (marsupial?) zipper pouch that accepts the box and holds it securely. Squeeze to test, check paperwork, pack, and ship.

At least one Bear has delivered a successful marriage proposal, Casola tells me.

Envoy's Faron Richards says that neither First Class Bears nor their consultant, Jack O'Neil of IC Applications, Fort Lauderdale, had extensive CT programming experience before setting up this application. O'Neil came across Envoy's CT Studio app gen at CT Demo Fall, and with the company's help, was able to automate the ordering, credit-card authorization, and voice-recording processes in about two weeks. Enhancements and debugging took it to six weeks.

Casola says the idea for bear-enabled voice messaging came to him in a dream. He says he owes the success of his inspiration to the technology, the chip-loading part of which is patented, and to Richards of Envoy. "Without Faron, we wouldn't have gotten to this level," says Casola. "I've never seen any company take the time that he took with us." First Class Bears now wants to IP-enable the ordering part of their operation, and is looking to install DM3 cards and D240SC-T-1 telephony to support the IP volume of retail kiosks. They're also working out a business plan for the kiosks, which would let customers do web-style ordering in gift shops, minimizing the participating retailer's time investment.

Envoy's software also provides the database queries and updating required by First Class Bears' own staff and customers at kiosks. "With our software, we can bring in DHTML, VBScript or JavaScript," says Faron Richards. "I don't even know where it ends," says Casola of the Envoy software. With manufacturing, web marketing and order-taking all outsourced or largely automated, he's well positioned to reap maximum profit from his ideas.

Just to make this perfectly clear, consider competitor Vermont Teddy

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Bears, a fifteen-year-old direct marketer that makes its own bears, none of whom (presently) speak. By contrast with FCB's largely "virtual" operation, Vermont Teddy Bears employs 180 people in manufacturing and call center operations.

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