Call centres:
Can they drive down operational costs and increase revenues

By Alari Kenneth Alare

Call centres and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategies are of monumental importance to business organizations in today's world. Speaking at the African Computing and Telecommunications Summit (ACT) 2005 yesterday Rod Jones of Rod Jones Strategic Solutions said that well planned call centres and CRM strategies have driven down operations costs and increased revenues for many business entities.

In his presentation entitled 'Call Centres – Delivering Effective Customer Service', Jones said customer contact centres had become a critical component in the quest to achieve business efficiencies in several areas. He said the practice is global and businesses have no option but to adopt to changes taking place all over the world.

Call centres are at an early stage of development in Africa. They have the potential for growth and greater business development like seen in India and South Asian countries.

"Throughout the world, businesses of every conceivable

"Establishing a call centre is not a quick fix nor can it be achieved without an almost 'buy-in' by key organisational executives."

kind are discovering that for them to deliver effective customer service, it is imperative to deploy call centers and CRM strategies in their operations", said Jones.

Apart from reduction in operational costs, the deployment would help organisations and businesses reduce risks of client defections and ultimately increase customer satisfaction.

He however, cautioned of potential challenges faced while setting up call centres and CRM systems. "It requires total commitment from the board of directors, an intimate knowledge about customers and the target markets as well as acquaintance of the economics of the total CRM Call Centre project", said Jones.

He said that in achieving measurable success, it is vital that all levels of key management fully understand the implications of such projects.

"Establishing a call centre is not a quick fix nor can it be achieved without an almost 'buy-in' by key organisational executives", Jones warned.

He said organisations first require carrying out customer satisfaction surveys and equity studies to establish the actual needs.

"Such surveys will serve well to assist with overall project justification and simultaneously the results will highlight areas within the existing organisation's operations that will derive most benefit from deployment of a call centre", said Jones.

Jones added that organisa-

Rod Jones of Rod Jones Strategic Solutions sets a moment aside for the camera.
Pic: Alari Kenneth Alare

tions also have to accept that customers should determine their needs and values and prepared to adapt or alter their business processes. A successful deployment he said would be beneficial to customers as well.

"Similarly your clients will benefit from a successful contact centre, they will be able to access your organisation, enjoy fast, efficient services and use their preferred channel of communication", Jones told delegates to the summit which ends on Friday.

PROFILE

Eric Osiakwan, Executive Secretary, AfrISPA (the African Internet Service Providers Association) speaks to Chris Kabwato, Editor-in-Chief/Publisher, Highway Africa News Agency (HANA). Some excerpts:

Chris Kabwato: *What is AfrISPA?*

Eric Osiakwan: AfrISPA is a non-profit trade organisation that represents the interests of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) organised at national levels but membership is also individual. We focus on shaping public policy around the internet but also on infrastructure development. On infrastructure development we have focused on internet exchange points.

CK: *Why are there so few internet exchange points?*

EO: There are 13 internet exchange points. They are so few because we are late adopters of the internet and our economies have to respond to the new socio-economic order based on the internet. But the main issue is the challenge of building trust. For two or five ISPs who are competitors to decide to collaborate around an exchange point takes a long time. But there is also some good news – AfrISPA has in the last two years enabled the creation of eight internet exchange points.

CK: *What is AfrISPA doing around bandwidth availability and cost?*

EO: Internet is very expensive in Africa because price is based on bandwidth. In the developing world we pay double-circuit because of the location of the internet backbones in the Western world. To rectify this there should be trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). AfrISPA has developed a position it calls the half-way proposition in which we argue that the developed world and the developing world should meet each other half-way. That meeting is at the level of infrastructure development and sharing of traffic. We need the necessary infrastructure and the critical mass. Then our public policy engagements can carry weight.

CK: *What is the membership of AfrISPA?*

EO: We have ten members and we hope to have five more members by the end of

Eric Osiakwan drives his point home.
Pic: Chris Kabwato

the year. In addition to that we will be getting support to establish more exchange points in a number of countries.

CK: *What is the relationship of AfrISPA to public policy-making bodies?*

EO: We have had some very positive relations with some African governments, for example, Ghana where we have negotiated the reduction of telephone costs by 40%. We have also engaged with NEPAD and participated in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

ICT industry associations create synergies says AFICTA

By Brenda Zulu

Associations within the Information Communication Technology (ICT) industry need to create synergies after identifying common interests to create a larger market.

Adrian Schofield, convenor for African Federation of ICT Associations (AFICTA) made this call at the seventh annual Computing and Telecommunication (ACT) Summit taking place at Crowne Plaza Hotel in Sandton, Johannesburg, South Africa.

The ICT industry associations are largely represented by business, government, academia and professionals among other groups. These various groups need to work together to create synergies after they identify common interests to create a larger market.

In an interview, Schofield observed that Africa has too many ICT associations and that there was duplication. He encouraged people involved in ICT to participate in big events such as the ACT and the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) among others.

He pointed out that it was important for ICT associations to come together because they would then know how to approach issues such as regulation, taxes and levies, trade promotion, costs, hardware, soft ware, bandwidth and development of policy.

Examining existing organisations, William Stucke, Chairman of African Association of ISP Associations (AfrISPA) said it has taken time for ICT associations to reach where they are today.

Schofield observed that the ICT industry needed a lot of volunteers, and communication by members of the same organisation was important.

Answering a question on how organisations at global and national levels could work together, Schofield advised that the approach on issues that affect at global and national levels should be looked at differently.

Meanwhile, Julie E. Ukeje from the Nigerian Metrological Agency said institutional networking was important to help complementation of ICT organisations.

"One person cannot have it all. We can do without duplication that is why we need to review and check what has been done," said Ujeke.

Re-inventing the wheel of enterprise management

By Juliet Nanfuka

Satellite technology has contributed towards the growth of business enterprise in Africa. Speaking at the African Computing and Telecommunications Summit taking place in Johannesburg, Ibrahima Guimba, Managing Director of Intelsat South Africa, presented satellite solutions which he said were proving effective in both cost and efficiency as support systems.

Intelsat is one of the global leaders in satellite capacity and end-to-end solutions.

He added that satellite, through its cost-effectiveness, versatility and easy deployment, has offered enterprise management a wealth of solutions and has spread across the continent.

While satellite solutions have been offered, Africa still faces many challenges in enterprise management. Enterprise management are the processes behind business. Michael Thatcher, regional technology officer of Microsoft Corporation, however, asked,

"Are these challenges or are they opportunities that we are facing?" He added that Africa's diversity has elements making it unique from the rest of the world.

Microsoft saw an opportunity in Africa's multitude of languages. This has led to the development of language interface packs which will allow for basic functionality to be available in languages other than English thus making the use of computers more accessible to locals and thus further the development of enterprise

in Africa. "We hope to enable people and businesses throughout the world to work to their full potential," Thatcher said.

However, as enterprise grows the security risk grows as well. "Cybercrime is growing faster than the world economy," claimed Matthew White, CEO of Iona Press Services. He suggested that the establishment of secure systems along with the development of enterprise management systems may have an initial high cost but could prove valuable in the long run.

Voice over IP changing economies of telecommunication

By Alari Kenneth Alare

Liberalisation and the introduction of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) are changing the economies of communications in Africa. This was said yesterday during the African VoIP Forum at the on going African Computing and Telecommunications (ACT) 2005 Summit at Crowne Plaza Hotel, Sandton in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Three speakers, Terry Sanderson from Verso Technologies, Mike van den Bergh of Gateway Communications and Anneke

Grond of Gilat Satellite Networks said VoIP technology had reduced the costs of telecommunications in Africa.

"The technology (VoIP) offers significant opportunity to reduce charges due to its innovation and competitiveness on the international market", said van den Bergh. He noted that VoIP had several merits over the circuit switched technologies.

"Considerably, there is better utilisation of bandwidth, ease of inter-operability and much lower capital and operational costs," said van den Bergh.
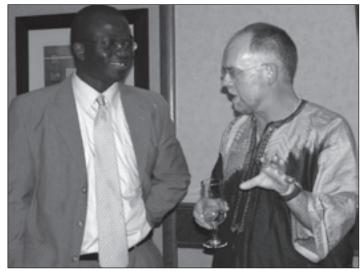
Sanderson on the other hand said VoIP

traffic could run over different networks unlike the circuit switched technology of voice transmission.

"Voice over IP is here and is driving all costs down. It can run over an already established network like digital subscriber line (DSL), wireless local loop (WLL), fibre optic and even over a power line", said Sanderson.

During her presentation, Grond said that voice capacity over a satellite network could be used for other applications when not in use to ensure a better management of bandwidth.

unwind:

Delegates are caught enjoying themselves at the Intelsat hosted gala dinner held last night at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Sandton, Johannesburg.

ACT 2005 delegates share lighter moments at the Intelsat Gala Dinner. Pictured above is Intelsat MD South Arica, Ibrahima Guimba (left) chatting to AITEC Africa Chairman and event director, Sean Moroney.
Pics: Minoshni Pillay

PROFILE

Sean Moroney is the Chairman of AITEC Africa – a company specialising in IT exhibitions and conferences. Moroney spoke to Chris Kabwato, Editor-in-Chief/Publisher, Highway Africa News Agency (HANA). Below are some excerpts from that interview:

Chris Kabwato: *Who is Sean Moroney?*
Sean Moroney: First and foremost I am an African. I am committed to the development of Africa. I started off as a business journalist and researcher. Through my journalism background I published a computer magazine and since then the ICT sector has become my area of passion.

CK: *What is AITEC?*
SM: AITEC stands for African IT Exhibitions and Conferences and we launched in 1990 when we ran our first event in Zimbabwe. That went successfully and that grew into an organisation with offices in 5 countries — Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ghana and Nigeria and a range of partner associations in various African countries. So we have developed a range of national and regional events such as ACT which is regional.

CK: *Give me a background to the African Computing & Telecommunications Summit (ACT 2005) of which you are currently holding the seventh annual edition?*
SM: We started in Cambridge in 1999 and it was quite an exciting event because suddenly we realised there was a constituency in Africa that was really committed to getting the internet going on the continent. So ACT has become internet-oriented — the subject area is the development of the internet in Africa. In 2001 when we held ACT in Pretoria we played a key role in the launch of AfrISPA (the African Internet Service Providers Association).

CK: *At what point do telecommunications and computing meet?*
SM: The internet is the unifying force at an international business level. It brings together a whole lot of technologies together. But it is also quite frustrating that so few Africans can connect to the internet and these are some of the issues a platform like ACT tries to address.

CK: *As the key driver of AITEC what is your personal vision for Africa?*
SM: My personal vision is that we have to cross borders — not just in terms of countries — but in terms of private-public sector cooperation. The importance of the private sector and free enterprise has to be acknowledged by policy-makers.

CK: *What do you see as the ICT challenges for Africa?*
SM: One of the sessions we had was on Policy and Regulation. Regulation is a big challenge —the interests of the state monopoly telecoms operators unfortunately influences policy to a great degree.

CK: *And the solutions?*
SM: There is no easy fix. There has to be increased competition. There is also need for increased awareness by the consumer and that can translate into pressure on politicians and service providers.

LEFT: AITEC has appointed Zelda Axsel of Zee Extreme Events as its event management partner for ACT 2006 and its other Southern African events. If you have any queries regarding ACT 2006 please contact Zelda Axsel on 0723263240.
Pics: Shalen Gajadhar