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Case Files | Customer Focus

Hello, Dolly!

A virtual, Web-based call center helps this custom doll maker find made-to-order agents.

BY ESTHER SHEIN

The Company: My Twinn

Founded 1992

Headquarters
Englewood, Colo.

Call center agents 25 to 400, depending on the season

Mission Create one-of-a-kind dolls personalized to look like their owners Target customers 30- to 50-year-old women with children between the ages of 4 and 12

WHEN CUSTOMERS CALL My Twinn's toll-free number, they're toying with plunking down some relatively serious cash for a doll. Not just any doll, mind you. But a doll that's custom-made to look just like their child—right down to the freckles. So it's not surprising that these customers have a lot of questions. And that's why My Twinn is delighted to have agents like Kris Burns, a college-educated mother with five children of her own, handling the calls. The company is able to get such agents because it has outsourced its call center to Alpine Access of Golden, Colo., whose 430 agents work out of their homes on flexible, and often part-time, schedules.

A few years ago, Englewood, Colo.-based My Twinn decided to outsource its call center operations because the seasonal nature of the doll business made it hard to justify the overhead of an in-house call center. "When you go from 25 agents to 400 [during the holidays], the effort to recruit, hire, train and provide the space and capital needed to do all that makes it more cost-effective to outsource," explains Gail Hickert, vice president of customer service and sales. "You don't want to have a facility and equipment and space to use them only three or four months out of the year."

But after working with two separate outsourcers, Hickert grew fed up with outsourced call centers' high turnover rates, which meant that My Twinn's calls were often going to new reps who weren't very familiar with the products. What's more, the average call center employee—a woman in her early 20s

URLwww.mytwinn.com

who probably hasn't been to college—wasn't exactly brimming with empathy for My Twinn customers. And the typical My Twinn customer—a female in her late 30s or early 40s with children, often with a college degree—needs to be convinced her order is in good hands before she'll pay up to \$225 for a custom doll and matching outfit for her child. "The labor force could not relate as closely to the customer as you would like for customer relationship building," says Hickert.

In Alpine Access's home-customer-agent model, Hickert saw the potential to hire a demographic population that "would more closely reflect our customer," she says. Following a successful two-month pilot with Alpine Access, My Twinn turned over all of its call center business to the outsourcer in June 2000.

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More Qualified Agents

When Alpine Access launched in 1998 as a Web-based virtual call center, its cofounders, who had long been involved in traditional call centers, decided to upgrade the labor and hire more sophisticated agents who would be adept at using CRM technology, according to Steve Rockwood, cofounder and president. Using agents who don't have the education or background to be able to get the most out of CRM software is "analogous to using technology to build great fighter jets but then putting high school graduates—or dropouts—behind the controls," he says.

"We're bringing



Using work-at-home call center agents lets My Twinn hire a demographic population that "more closely reflects our customer."

—GAIL HICKERT, VP OF

The Future of Virtual Agents

Any technique to reduce agent turnover is worth investigating. Read Expert Analysis by Wendy Close

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...were bringing
fighter jet pilots to
handle this fighter jet
technology." Alpine Access agents have to be
technologically savvy, smart and friendly, and
"have a wonderful way online and over the
phone," he says. In fact, the company requires
applicants to audition for the job by calling in to
leave a message. Alpine Access then digitizes
the resulting "voice prints" and measures their
tonality as a way to gauge the applicants'
friendliness, Rockwood says. Hickert is
convinced she's able to get higher caliber
agents by tapping into the pool of workers who
prefer to work from their homes. An agent who
is satisfied with her work reflects a positive
attitude that translates into a more pleasant
experience for My Twinn's customers, she says.

Burns, for example, is clearly happy with the
work-at-home model. She has worked for
Alpine Access from her home in Highlands
Ranch, Colo., since September 1999. A
customer service agent and supervisor, Burns
says the Alpine Access motto of "family first"
makes it a good company to work for.

"Working out of the home isn't going to work if
you want to supervise your children," says
Burns, whose five kids are 12 and under. "But
this enables me to be at home when my
children get home from school. And without the
commuting time, I can still put in a full day."

The fact that Alpine Access works around the
call agents' schedules "makes for much happier,
motivated employees," says Burns. Happier
employees tend to stick around longer, so My
Twinn has the benefit of a seasoned staff and
fewer resources that must be devoted to
training new reps. Rockwood won't disclose the
average tenure of an agent at his company,
which had been fully operational for 17 months
at press time. But he insists Alpine Access's
retention rate is "much higher than any brick-
and mortar-facility." The number-one reason for
turnover in call centers isn't pay but schedule
conflict, says Rockwood. And the virtual model
allows Alpine Access to offer its employees
greater flexibility than a traditional call center
could.

"Obviously, the longer you have call center reps
in place the better you are able to serve your
customers," says Joanie Rufo, a research
director at AMR Research in Boston. The
average turnover time for traditional call

centers is 18 months, she says.

As with any work-at-home model, figuring out how to keep agents motivated is an important consideration, says Rufo. "There are certain personalities that thrive when working from home, but conversely, some people do better in a work setting." To keep tabs on agent productivity, Alpine Access monitors its agents over the phone and electronically. "If I need to, I can actually see what the agent is doing online," says Rockwood. "[Agents are] home alone, but they're never alone. We're always there to monitor and support them." The company also conducts all of its training online; up to 20 agents can simultaneously log on to Alpine Access's Web training center to participate in live interactive training sessions.

Hickert also can supervise My Twinn's virtual call center on the Alpine Access website. There she can set measurements that let her monitor the agents and track things like number of abandoned calls, average call length and the percentage of calls that are handled within the parameters My Twinn has agreed on with Alpine Access. For example, 90 percent of the order calls need to be answered within 120 seconds or less, Hickert says.

The Virtual Call Center

So how do at-home agents report to work at My Twinn's virtual call center? Each agent uses two phone lines. The first is for Internet access to connect to Alpine Access's website. Through the site, agents log on to the appropriate client's CRM or order processing system so that all customer data the agents collect goes directly in to the clients' databases. (Agents handling My Twinn calls, for example, use My Twinn's Ecometry system from Smith-Gardner to log orders.) Using the second phone line, agents dial in to a master switch that puts them into Alpine Access's virtual call center, through which phone calls are routed. Then reps enter their name and password to access a particular client company.

Burns, who works 35 to 40 hours a week, says the Alpine Access Web center is intuitive, and its agents have plenty of support at their fingertips if a call needs to be escalated. "All the resources and tools have been placed on the website, and any question asked of us can be answered," she says. "That customer doesn't

even know we're working at home and not at a brick-and-mortar company.

"When I log on, I'm scheduled for one customer at a time," Burns adds. When it's time to field calls for another client, she hangs up, calls in to the same switch and enters a different password to access that company. Burns, who is cross-trained to work for six companies, monitors agents for My Twinn. (Client companies represent a range of industries, including pharmaceuticals, financial, travel, copy and fax machines, and health care.)

Better Relations, Higher Sales

My Twinn has ample evidence that switching to the virtual call center model was a smart business move. In 2000, Alpine Access agents converted 30 percent more inquiry calls into orders than agents in the brick-and-mortar call center had converted in 1999, according to Hickert. She also says that agent turnover decreased 88 percent, allowing My Twinn to save considerably on training costs. What's more, the company had 90 percent fewer escalated calls, letters and e-mails from irate customers in 2000 than it had in 1999. Hickert is so pleased, she's planning to have Alpine Access take over handling My Twinn's e-mails as well.

But that's not to say that every last call is now managed flawlessly. Devin Golden of Belmont, Mass., says the My Twinn call agents he dealt with were courteous and tried to help—but he repeatedly requested catalogs last holiday season to no avail. Although he got a 10 percent discount when his third call was escalated to a supervisor, he didn't get a catalog in time to place a Christmas order.


Hickert calls Golden's experience "unusual" and says the company bends over backward to handle as many customer requests as it can, even at the height of the holiday season. And overall, she's happy with Alpine Access. "Our revenues per labor cost have significantly increased because these people close more sales and they relate better to the customer," she says.

Agents are likely to relate well to customers because, according to Burns, the company tries to find people who have a history in the field its clients are in. She says that of all companies

she's worked for as a call center agent, she relates most to My Twinn because of its products, and the fact that her children are at the age where they play with dolls. "When you can relate to anything you can sell, of course you're going to sell it better," she says. "Most of us who work for My Twinn have children."

And if the experience of customer Kim Kill, a substitute teacher's aid in St. Marys, Ohio, is typical, agents are, in fact, relating well to customers. Kill ordered a doll in 1999 and has since placed three more orders for accessories and matching outfits for her daughter. She says she found that everyone she has talked with at the company "seems to know the needs of little girls and how they want everything just right."

Says Kill: "I had asked for a specific dress, and they were out of stock, and the [agent] was very sincere and said how sorry she was and what a cute dress it was, and how they were getting lots of orders for it." Kill notes that even when she had to change a previously placed order for doll accessories recently, there was no problem. "As far as changing my order and getting a different dress, it couldn't have gone smoother and everything I received in the mail was correct," she says. "I felt really bad calling back, but they were very pleasant."

Without commutes, cubicles or dress codes to contend with, the agents answering My Twinn's calls have less cause to be unpleasant than the typical call center agent. Alpine Access employee Burns says she looks forward to working because she can literally crawl out of bed and go into her office. "It's a wonderful job. I have no intentions of going anywhere. I'm able to juggle five children, a 40-hour workweek and all the home responsibilities, and not ever have to leave. It just makes for a happier, more content work environment. It really comes across in my voice." 

The Future of Virtual Agents

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Do you have an interesting customer-focused case study to share? Send your ideas to casefiles@cio.com. Esther Shein is a freelance writer and editor based in Framingham, Mass.

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