

## **“So, what is the best system to buy?”**

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As a consultant, this is probably one of the most common questions we hear during initial conversations with new or prospective clients. And although it's a consulting cliché, the answer always is “It depends”-and today that's the case more than ever. As a result of mergers and acquisitions in the contact center marketplace, most vendors can provide a complete contact center solution. Features and capabilities are very similar, with few truly unique vendor or product features. This is particularly apparent in the IVR industry. Since most vendors now support VXML (and moving towards CCXML for call routing and control capabilities) as their application development framework, the playing field looks pretty level to most customers.

So, how do you pick the 'best' system? If we assume that all the vendors on your RFP response list can supply just about all of the capabilities you're looking for, what sets the 'best' apart?

### **Look at what goes into the system**

In the past, we often spoke about a 'system' or 'solution' as an all in one package from the vendor. This is changing. For instance, you may select from several different system components when purchasing a new IVR. First there is the actual IVR platform (or vendor applications software, since that may be all they sell to you). Then there is the Speech Recognition Engine. There are several choices available, but most will work with all platforms. After that, you'll add the development environment and tools for developing applications.

### **Carefully consider support and management**

First, take a good look at your existing (or planned) support infrastructure. Is your current system supported directly by the solution provider? Is that the way your organization wishes to continue? If so, really dig into how prospective vendors will support you in the future. Make sure you do multiple reference checks. Ask about proactive support monitoring and how well the vendor manages upgrades and fixes. Is support direct from the manufacturer or via a third party distributor and/or reseller? What is the escalation procedure between handoffs?

If your team already supports the system or plans to take a more active role in supporting the technology, do you (and your IT or IS, call center, and other groups) have the available resources? As In addition, the non-proprietary server is playing a much larger role as contact center technologies evolve. Does your organization feel comfortable buying and maintaining your own server hardware? Depending upon the application(s), number of locations, and high availability requirements, your organization could easily end up with ten or more servers to monitor and maintain. If maintaining a server infrastructure is beyond your internal capabilities, consider how and if a vendor can provide this service to you. Some can provide third party hardware suppliers and support. Others offer full, managed services agreements.

If your organization will be managing more of the day-to-day 'care and feeding' of the system, you'll need to consider the following:

- What training is available, how much does it cost, and is it effective? Again, talk with existing customers for their feedback.

- Once the system is installed and running, what are the monitoring capabilities of the system?
- What are the actual Operations, Administration, and Maintenance (OA&M) capabilities of the system? If you have multiple sites, who and where will this be maintained? How deep are the 'views' into the system? How many locations or systems can you monitor? Can it be integrated into your existing system monitoring solution (i.e., NetIQ, OpenView, etc.)?
- What reporting capabilities and tools are available? By this I don't mean so much the quantity, type, and 'look' of the reports, but how will they fit with your existing reporting organization and infrastructure? Complex reporting capabilities mean little if you're unable to consolidate reports to measure, among other things, how well you're meeting your customer experience goals. Can the data from the new system be incorporated somewhere else, or is it going to contribute to what I call the *Manual Individual Reporting Complex*?

### **What about developing and maintaining applications?**

With the complexity (and in theory, 'openness') of contact center solutions increasing, application development is another important criteria when selecting a vendor. For example:

- Does your organization have, or plan to have resources to perform in-house development? Do you plan to have the vendor develop applications, or will you consider a third party application developer? This could be for IVR application development, CTI capabilities, CRM applications (into your back-end systems), or reporting applications and management. If you are moving from a touch-tone to speech interface, you'll need to train existing resources on VUI design or add new staff with expertise in ASR development. (As an aside, if you use a third party for development and support, the types of tools available with the product may not be relevant, since the development team will most likely write the application in native code, such as Java).
- If application development is a new function within your organization, what is the plan for rolling out the first wave of applications? Have the vendor's professional services create it with your team's involvement? Have your development team do the initial applications with support from the vendor? What options does the vendor provide in this area?
- Once an application is up and running how will support be provided? This starts to get into the support contracting language, but it is critically important to have post implementation support clearly defined and roles and responsibilities identified for ***you and your supplier***.

### **More considerations**

Finally, the title of this article uses the word "buy." But has your organization considered hosted technology services? With the advent of VoIP and a more distributed architecture for IVR-Speech Applications, you can have advanced contact center capabilities without a major capital investment. Many organization have services 'in the cloud', some of which you probably deal with today. And there are many hosted services companies and ASP models available for all types of contact center systems. Just one more thing to consider when you look to implement new contact center technology.

So which is the best system to buy? It depends.

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