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case study ::

Nuance and ENERGEX Partner to Deliver an Efficient and Scalable Customer Service Solution

energex

ENERGEX, a Queensland Government-owned energy provider, has been a customer of Nuance for many years. Beginning with simple DTMF (touch-tone) technology prior to 2000 and eventually evolving to a more intelligent and scalable IVR system, the customer service solutions that Nuance has provided have continued to grow and evolve to address ENERGEX's changing business needs.

Along the way, the approach has always been to provide ENERGEX with a flexible customer service solution that could scale to its needs. For ENERGEX this scalability is two-fold. The first: to manage large call spikes during power outages and storms. The second: to adapt to the needs of ENERGEX as it experienced significant changes to its business model.

ENERGEX's journey to self-service

In January 2004, Queensland experienced the worst series of storms in over 20 years. Four severe storms within a week caused major damage to the company's electricity network leaving around 400,000 homes without power.

During these storms, ENERGEX received 1.5 million attempted in-bound calls, the average number of calls for one year in one week. The contact centre was unable to respond to all of these calls, and a lack of current information in the centre meant that agents could not accurately answer many of the customers' queries.

These spikes overloaded the telecommunications networks and customers often received a busy signal, resulting in a poor caller experience. Furthermore, most of the calls were routine enquiries, but in the event of an emergency, such as a live power cable, there was no way for contact staff to prioritise emergency calls.

To overcome this business challenge, ENERGEX tasked iTa (now acquired by Nuance) with developing an auto- mated voice solution that would allow them to scale call volumes, prioritise urgent calls, proactively communicate with customers during a network outage and provide a positive customer experience on a day-to-day basis.

Working closely with ENERGEX throughout the entire project lifecycle and partnering with Telstra, an Australian telecommunications company, Nuance integrated a range of proven technologies that would enhance the customer call experience even during peak call times. The Nuance professional services team designed, developed and implemented an integrated, end-to-end solution that offered:

- Call handling capacity of over 100,000 calls an hour, made possible with increased on-site IVR ports and Telstra's avalanche platform. The contact centre can handle 960 concurrent IVR calls before calls flow to an agent or sit in a queue.
- A sophisticated self-service automated system implemented by the Nuance professional team with the ability to provide detailed outage information down to street level. This is supported by directed dialog speech capabilities that prompt customers for further information if the system cannot collect street information automatically.
- Immediate routing of emergency or priority calls to an agent.
- Skills-based routing that matches contact centre staff skills to caller needs.
- Customer 'screen pops' of IVR-collected data (relevant to the caller) delivered to the contact centre agent's desktops allowing for a more customised agent response.

- Text-to-speech technology, enabling proactive outbound calls to customers affected by outages, and options for customers to receive SMS updates for outages with the help of a Nuance custom built platform.

The results were immediate. Prior to ENERGEX's integrated speech system, approximately 65 per cent of callers wanted to speak to an operator to gain clarification around the outage. This was reduced to 12 percent, highlighting high levels of customer satisfaction with the service.

Response capability also improved dramatically. The solution delivered immediate benefits, lifting ENERGEX' s call capacity from 25,000 calls to more than 100,000 calls an hour, without callers hearing a busy signal.

The evolution of ENERGEX

Three years later, in April 2007, ENERGEX experienced significant change in its business model when the retail operations were sold to two of Australia's largest retailers. It was a move that required a complete transformation of business operations and a lengthy transition period whereby the ENERGEX call centre acted as a bureau for each of these retailers.

Acting as a bureau during this transition, ENERGEX needed to incorporate three call centres in one. Recalling the success of its integrated speech solution, the energy provider approached Nuance to replicate the ENERGEX integrated system for its two new retail call centres.

The challenge for Nuance was to develop a system that would mirror the success of ENERGEX's integrated speech system, but on a larger scale and across three separate call centres located in the one building.

The only constant is change

Twelve months after ENERGEX sold its retail business, the two retailers separated their customer service operations from ENERGEX. The energy provider was now acting as a single network distribution contact centre. As a result, ENERGEX needed to drastically scale down operations and reduce its frontline customer service agents from approximately 250 to only 50.

With significantly fewer call agents available, scalability in the event of power outages, which can increase call rates by 1,500 percent, now became a significant business challenge for ENERGEX.

Having been a long term partner, Nuance was able to understand ENERGEX's business challenge and develop an integrated solution that could scale operations as required.

"By December 2004, ENERGEX had the ability to respond to over 100,000 calls an hour. Both the strategic design and implementation of this technology by Nuance, Telstra and ENERGEX was remarkable and a credit to the partnership developed between all three parties. Illustrating the success of the project is an independent review completed by CCD Consulting in early 2006. A significant finding from this review was that ENERGEX's IVR capability is now comparable to best in class companies observed in international benchmarking of outage management (UK, USA and Canada)."

– Dayle Grant, Group Manager, Customer Contract Group, ENERGEX

"Again we called upon Nuance to assist us in this transformation, separation and rebuild of our call centre. At a time in our operations where ENERGEX managed three significant business transformation projects simultaneously, the separation of our retail arm, acting as agents for retailers and introducing full retail competition into the QLD market, the business needed knowledgeable and skilled partners like Nuance and Telstra. Together, Nuance and Telstra understood our operations and were able to work with us to make these changes rapidly and seamlessly to all South East Queensland customers."

– Peter Weaver, Executive General Manager, Customer Services, ENERGEX

The integrated solution offered the following capabilities.

Adaptive IVR Messaging: To manage large call spikes resulting from power outages, Nuance's professional services developed a system that, using incoming caller information, identifies call spikes from particular areas and responds with an automated power outage message in the IVR.

Self-Service Outage Reporting: Another initiative to mitigate the impact of calls spikes is self-service outage reporting, which offers customers the opportunity to report their outage via the IVR rather than wait in the queue for a customer service representative. A directed dialog speech application prompts customers to answer questions to locate the customer's premise and lodge an automated fault report.

Emergency Strategy: ENERGEX has a separate emergency line which feeds directly to customer service representatives in normal call conditions. Historically, statistics show that over 50% of callers down this line are calling to report a loss of supply rather than an emergency situation such as wires down. To mitigate the impact this has on the ability to quickly respond to true emergency situations, ENERGEX now directs these calls through the IVR during peak call load and customers are updated with any known outages at their premise before being offered the option to transfer through to the emergency line.

Disaster Assistance Plan: Additionally, to help manage service in the event of wide-scale emergencies such as major storms or floods, the Nuance professional services team worked with Telstra to develop the technology to support the Ergon ENERGEX Disaster Assistance Plan. The system allows Queensland's metropolitan and regional energy providers, ENERGEX and Ergon, to assist each other and combine their call centre efforts during large scale events. The system uses Nuance's desk-top soft phone that allows Ergon Energy's contact centre agents to take ENERGEX calls in remote locations as well as access ENERGEX systems for caller information or data about outages.

Dayle Grant said, "This was a great step forward for disaster recovery planning for both Ergon and ENERGEX. Having each other to call upon in times of need provides both companies great peace of mind in knowing that we can be there for our customers in the event of a large scale outage such as severe storms or cyclones."

Remote Agents: ENERGEX's call centre is also supported by remote agents that can be activated from home when required, taking calls when ENERGEX experiences large spikes in the call centre. Helping to implement this functionality, Nuance's professional services developed a custom platform using Dialogic telephony cards, Genesys CTI integration software as well as customised software for desktop soft-phones. Developing such a system allows ENERGEX agents to connect from remote locations simply by using a laptop and wireless modem or mobile phone to connect.

The remote agent platform improved agent response time dramatically. Prior to this system, out-of-hour agents were taking an average of 1 hour to get to the contact centre in an event. However, with implementation of Nuance's remote agent custom platform, the average agent response time is now less than 20 minutes.

Together, these solutions and technologies successfully addressed ENERGEX's business need, allowing it to scale its contact centre as required. And true to Queensland's tropical weather patterns, the customer service solution has been tested several times since, during the Gap storms in 2008 and most recently during the 2011 Brisbane floods and Cyclone Yasi in Northern Queensland. The system is tested annually and has a proven capacity in excess of 100,000 incoming calls handled per hour. ENERGEX has maintained IVR satisfaction rate greater than 80%.

"The sale of our retail business presented us with a scalability problem as we downsized from a 250 to 50 seat capacity contact centre which still had to meet high call volumes in power outage events. Nuance was an integral part of meeting this new challenge, working with us to develop, build and implement a variety of mitigating strategies. Our recent strong performance in major natural disasters is testament to our success in this area."

– Peter Weaver, Executive General Manager, Customer Services, ENERGEX

ENERGEX and Nuance

Nuance's Australia/New Zealand country manager, Peter Chidiac believes that flexibility is a key to the success of any customer service strategy and ENERGEX is a leading example.

"ENERGEX is a great example of how to align customer needs with business intent. The ability to adapt and change with your customer is essential to any call centre and in particular, the utility sector where customer service is paramount," said Mr. Chidiac.

"The call centre capability, speech and IVR applications have matured since 2004 to a stage where ENERGEX is now able to offer customers choice in having their enquiries responded to either via immediate recognition of an outage in their area, an option to report a power outage in their street via a self-service speech option or to speak to the right person regarding their particular enquiry. This scalability, flexibility and reliability in our

Nuance products and professional services implemented:

- Directed speech solutions
- Intelligent call routing
- Adaptive IVR messaging
- Ergon ENERGEX Disaster Assistance Plan
- Remote agents

ENERGEX's business results include:

- Average IVR satisfaction rate greater than 80%
- Call capacity of more than 100,000 calls an hour
- IVR observed as best-in-class in international benchmarking of outage management
- Agent requests for outage clarification reduced to 12%.

system is critical to ENERGEX's business operations and enabled ENERGEX to respond to its customers during the significant flood event in January 2011, backed up only two weeks later with the assistance to Ergon following Cyclone Yasi," said Dayle Grant.

"Nuance has grown to understand our business, which has them well equipped to meet our ever changing business requirements. They are intuitive, progressive and responsive to our needs – a combination that has cemented our business relationship and led to our confidence in their capability to deliver to our business requirements."

What's next for ENERGEX

The ENERGEX leadership team is keen to continue the journey towards a self-service voice solution. The business is currently exploring new and innovative ways to improve the customer engagement process.

"Just as we did in 2004, we are now looking towards making the next big step in broadening the service channel offerings via integrating speech technology, multimedia and web, to give our customers consistency of service and choice on how they interact with us and gain similar benefits for our customers and ENERGEX as we have done consistently since 2004," said Dayle Grant

About ENERGEX

ENERGEX is a Queensland State Government-owned energy provider and one of Australia's largest energy companies. It distributes electricity to over 1.2 million commercial, residential and industrial consumers in Brisbane and across South East Queensland. This accounts for about 90 percent of the South East Queensland population.

About Nuance

Nuance is a leading provider of speech and imaging solutions for businesses and consumers around the world. Its technologies, applications and services make the user experience more compelling by transforming the way people interact with information and how they create, share and use documents. Every day, millions of users and thousands of businesses experience Nuance's proven applications and professional services. For more information, please visit: www.nuance.com.