

Cisco and BT tailor Paul Smith's Voice and Data Needs for the future

Retail



Paul Smith, the UK-based fashion and clothing company, has been upgrading both its voice and data networks, opting to unite the two with the help of BT and Cisco. With its new IP-based infrastructure, it is already enjoying efficiencies and cost savings and is looking forward to a future where scalability and quality of service (QoS) can be taken for granted.

Now a famous and highly respected name in world fashion, Paul Smith opened his first shop in Nottingham in 1970. The Paul Smith company's hugely successful London branch in Floral Street, Covent Garden, started trading in 1976 at number 44, expanding into number 43 next door in 1982 and numbers 41 and 42 in 1987.

The company now sells not only its trademark high quality male fashion, but has also branched into toiletries, luggage, spectacles as well as clothing ranges for women and children.

Paul Smith has premises in New York, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris, Milan and Singapore. In January 1994, founder Paul Smith was awarded the CBE in the Queen's New Year's honours list for services to fashion design.

Employing 260 people, the company still has its headquarters in Nottingham, requiring efficient communications links between this base and its various London retail outlets.

The challenge

The company has historically operated a fairly conventional data network, and run its voice traffic through a normal PBX. It began to feel that this arrangement was denying it scope for numerous benefits.

"Until recently, we were outsourcing management of our data network to a support partner. This however was restricting the amount of development and innovation we could do, so we decided to insource network support," says Lee Bingham, business analyst with Paul Smith's expanded IT department.

The freedom that this brought led the new look IT department into dialogue with BT and the eventual adoption of a new IP-based network infrastructure.

Paul Smith



Bingham says "We had been talking to BT about both voice and data. Initially we decided to move just our data needs over to BT's NetEquip, a VPN solution, which went really well and was a great success."

This led to consideration of voice traffic and to benefits the company might enjoy by moving this to IP, such as Least Cost Routing (LCR) and better scalability. "We were at the time reaching capacity on our network switches and our PBX, and there was clearly a need for further investment," recalls Bingham. Up until this point, voice had not been a part of the IT department's remit. Now the two worlds are converging.

Owing to historic circumstances, this was never going to be an easy task. A problem long faced by the company is that its various London premises are fragmented and geographically spread. This was always going to make implementing a combined voice and data solution very difficult.

The solution

Bingham explains how the decision to trial voice over IP (VoIP) came about: "Paul Smith was offered the chance by BT to be a test site for its new QoS solution running on EquIP," he says.

To help demonstrate to Paul Smith that VoIP was the right move, BT took IT department representatives to visit Cisco and talk about its AVVID (Architecture for Voice Video and Integrated Data) platform, which would be at the heart of the solution.

"Cisco gave us lots of information and strategic advice, and this convinced us that the trial would be the right move and that VoIP technology was tried and tested enough to work for us," says Bingham.

Step one was rolling the new system out in the Nottingham headquarters. Bingham says "We swapped to the new Cisco switch, and then rolled it out to the desktops. For two weeks, we ran VoIP alongside the old PBX in tandem. Then over a weekend, we switched over to VoIP only. This went very smoothly, and paid dividends with an immediate increase in the quality of voice traffic."

Now the system connects the two main sites in Nottingham, the office headquarters and the

company's warehouse. Both voice and data traffic currently run over this local area network (LAN). The two AVVID servers from Cisco link to a gateway for connectivity beyond the LAN.

Via EquIP, data traffic now runs over the company wide area network (WAN) between Nottingham and the six sites in London. The next stage, voice traffic over the WAN, is scheduled for May 2002, when BT's QoS solution is available on the MPLS platform.

Paul Smith has since augmented the basic solution with additional technologies such as Direct Dial In (DDI) and ISDN.

The reward

The new solution offers numerous improvements. "We're benefiting already from the corporate directory, and the rich handset features," says Bingham.

He anticipates a whole load of other benefits once the London/Nottingham connection is fully online. He says "These will include savings from Least Cost Routing across our wide area network. As well as a reduction in call costs, the fact that the solution is software-based means we'll enjoy the results of new Cisco developments as soon as they are made. We'll reap these benefits with little or no work on our part, because it's just a matter of a software upgrade," he enthuses.

The returns on investment enjoyed by Paul Smith will be ongoing. For example, when a new employee starts, they will no longer need to login separately with the phone and IT departments. The new system allows for the use of a common database between the two, with one telephone and data directory.

The solution is also highly scaleable. It can scale from nought to 2,500 users with no break points in between. A PBX usually gives you just enough capacity and no more, so every time a company hires new employees or takes space in a new building, they've got a new outlay.

When you install an IP telephony set, you just connect it to a PC with no extra cabling required. It also offers ease of management, and being web-based can be managed from anywhere.

“Paul Smith can look forward to a world of new possibilities, such as browsing the company’s intranet with the new IP-based handsets,” says Sally Patchett is an IP and networking consultant with BT’s HotHouse Convergence Team. She is part of the team that has been integrating the IP solution, helping to converge the worlds of voice and data.

Mark Lamont of Cisco was involved in the consultation phase of the AVVID solution, continues the story. “What convinced Paul Smith was the promise of a quick return on their investment, and the cost savings that IP telephony would deliver them. They could see that what was offered was more than just technology. We were offering them increased efficiency and financial savings.”

He names other benefits: “You can plug your IP handset in anywhere in your organisation, and it’s always the same extension. When you think it costs an average of £70 to move an ordinary extension, there are already some pretty direct savings there. Our IP solution drives the black art out of telephony.”

Cisco’s VoIP solutions have the benefit of openness, he says. “If you pick a Nortel solution, it is difficult to interoperate fully with a Siemens solution because both are proprietary. Once you’ve bought into those vendors, you’re locked in. Our model is not like that. It is open for lots of third party developers to produce applications for. It’s important to us to be standards-oriented.”

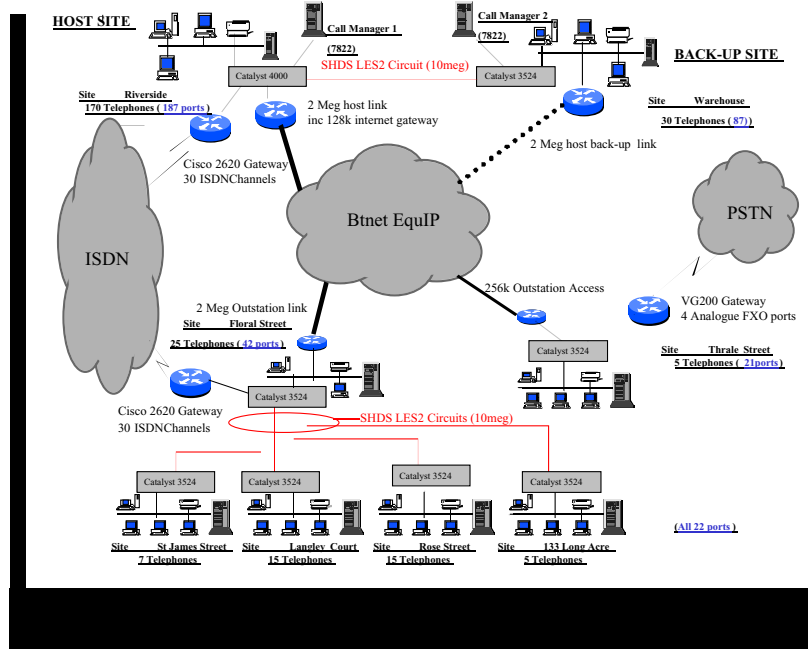
Lamont acknowledges there have been barriers in the way of IP telephony in the last few years. “The main one was its newness and the lack of an installed base. It looks like a great solution to many organisations, but they want reassurance before they buy into it. They want to balance risks against benefits. Now, I’m glad to say, IP telephony has moved on well beyond the bleeding edge, and we’re starting to see general acceptance and early mass adoption.”

The future

Lamont says what is important is not what Paul Smith can do with the solution today, but that they are investing in a strategic solution that is only constrained by the imagination of their XML developers. Future releases of Cisco software will be

rich in new applications which could never have been possible with old world voice solutions “IP telephony is developing fast. Already it has achieved a maturity in four years that took mainstream telephony 100 years,” he says.

Bingham also looks to the future with enthusiasm. “We’re going to start looking at developing on XML soon, which an Internet-based solution will let us do. We’ll also look to add additional services into the handsets. All that limits us is the speed at which they can be developed. We’re also looking at hot desking, which will be great news for all those who travel between Nottingham and London.”



Conclusion

Paul Smith is breaking free of the shackles imposed on it by running a separate network for voice and data. It can now look forward to a converged system that has already begun paying for itself in costs saved. It is also benefiting users with improved QoS, better user features and better manageability.

Bingham says that while VoIP may still be in its infancy, there’s a lot of interest being shown in it. “Lots of people have asked us about our experience of VoIP. From our point of view, it was a choice for the future. We could have replaced our old PBX with a new one, but we felt that with VoIP we were investing in the long-term rather than bringing in a quick fix.”



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