The fifth largest passenger airline in the United States, Continental Airlines, Inc., is committed to being a smarter, better airline. Part of this strategy is to initiate technology-related capital projects designed to help the company deliver products and services that more effectively meet customer expectations.

According to Jane Beeby, Continental’s Senior Director, Reservations Operations, Cisco solutions have played a role in this ongoing initiative. Continental uses Cisco Intelligent Contact Management (ICM) software to handle 200,000 daily transactions in five contact centers staffed by more than 5000 agents.

“Between the established carriers, low-cost providers, and new entrants, the airline industry is extremely competitive,” Beeby explains. “In this environment, success depends on using every corporate resource as productively as possible. Cisco ICM software supports this objective by helping us handle each customer contact more efficiently.”

Market research conducted by Continental confirms that an airline’s ability to provide efficient service is a key differentiator for customers when choosing a carrier. Says Beeby, “A portion of our sales come directly through the contact centers, and there are customers whose business we would not win if we weren’t able to handle their transactions effectively. We also touch a lot of Continental fliers from a customer service perspective. On both fronts, the contact center operation has to keep that customer happy and coming back the next time.”

Meeting the Service Challenge
As part of its strategy to optimize service, Continental maintains unique 800 numbers for various types of customers. For example, international fliers dial a different number than do customers booking domestic flights. Rewards Program members have their own toll-free line. To even more precisely identify individual customer needs, callers may also respond to a series of network-level prompts before being connected to an agent.

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Jane Beeby
Senior Director, Reservations Operations
Continental Airlines
Having identified both customer needs and agent skills, Continental uses Cisco ICM software to leverage this information and deliver each incoming contact to the most appropriate agent anywhere in the enterprise. According to Beeby, “The Cisco solution gives us the ability to look at our agent population spread across five contact centers and route to them in real time based on their skills and on formulas the software provides such as next available agent and minimum expected delay. This ensures that we are giving better service to every Continental customer. Now, they’re less likely to be put in a queue and more likely to be connected immediately to an agent who can meet their needs.”

**Distributing Contacts Intelligently**

For each incoming contact, Cisco ICM software receives a route request from the contact channel. The system profiles the customer using data such as dialed number and calling line ID, plus caller-entered digits and information obtained from a customer-profile database lookup, if available. At the same time, the Cisco software knows what resources are available to meet the customer’s needs and where those resources are located based on real-time conditions (agent skills, agent availability, queue lengths, and so forth) gathered from contact center equipment.

As conditions change, this combination of network- and premises-level data is processed through user-defined routing scripts that reflect a company’s business rules—enabling the Cisco ICM system to route each contact to the optimum resource anywhere in the enterprise at any given moment.

“Intelligent Contact Management is just a theory until you see it actually working,” states Beeby. “When you’ve been in the contact center world for several years, and done everything manually, to see that Cisco had a product—and to watch that product do what we were told it would do—was very powerful.

“We expected the scripting application to be user friendly and easy to operate, and the system didn’t disappoint us,” she says. “The way we run our business, we need the ability to make routing changes in real time based on how our operation is performing. The software’s scripting tool allows us to activate these changes very quickly.”

Cisco ICM software also generates consolidated real-time and historical reports that combine and normalize data across the contact center enterprise. Information is captured in an industry-standard relational database, which is accessible via screens and reports or directly through Structured Query Language (SQL) and Open Database Connectivity (ODBC) tools. Enterprise-wide reporting centralizes control over contact center operations, simplifies contact center management, and supports the implementation of consistent performance standards.

Says Beeby, “If you have multiple contact centers, traditional technologies can’t consolidate reporting information across the enterprise. With Cisco ICM software, you can see everything on one display. Being able to monitor all my centers in real time on one screen is just amazing to me.”
“I’ve dealt with a lot of telecom and technology companies, and the knowledge, responsiveness, and skills of the Cisco team are impressive.”

Jane Beeby
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Continental Airlines

Benefiting from Measurable Improvements

Prior to implementing the Cisco system, Continental used a percent-allocation service provided by an 800-network carrier in an effort to distribute calls evenly and maintain consistent service levels. However, since this tool had no visibility into agent skills or availability, results were often unsatisfactory. To compensate, Continental employees were assigned to monitor service levels at each site and perform manual changes to the network routing tool as the service level rose or fell.

“There were days when we changed the percent allocation more than 100 times,” Beeby reports. “Plus, this approach kept us in a reactive mode. We would make a change based on one set of conditions, and by time that change took effect a different problem had surfaced.”

The ICM software has all but eliminated these issues. “The system automatically balances service level and agent occupancy across the enterprise,” says Beeby. “By answering each call as quickly as possible, we minimize agent idle time—enhancing customer service while improving productivity. It’s also given our management personnel far greater control over call distribution. Now, we look at staffing, look at our statistics from the day before, look at what we’re trying to achieve and make sound, proactive decisions.”

She concludes, “Across the corporation, we have evaluated systems and invested technology dollars only when we knew there would be a payback in both productivity and customer service. I’ve dealt with a lot of telecom and technology companies, and the knowledge, responsiveness, and skills of the Cisco team are impressive. When we implemented Cisco ICM software, we saw results immediately.”