Sony Marketing (Japan) Inc.

To Provide Higher Quality Customer Support and Satisfaction
a New Facility Environment and Core System for the Call Center Was Built,
Achieving Better Business Continuity and Flexible Operation at a High Level

Sony Marketing handles all aspects of the marketing and sales for Sony products, and continually strives to increase customer satisfaction by improving the operation of its call center, which serves as an important point of contact with customers. The company was facing the challenge of improving business continuity, which it overcame by renewing its facilities and implementing a Cisco solution. This also enabled more flexible operation and improved overall work efficiency.

Lessons from the Great East Japan Earthquake led to undertaking reconstruction to build a call center that operates without interruption

Sony Marketing operates a large-scale call center in Japan to provide customer support for Sony products, including televisions, computers, digital cameras, Walkmans, and eReaders. The same call center deals with user club members and products for corporate users, and its many operators handle a huge number of calls every day. With the need to respond accurately to each inquiry on a case-by-case basis, the company decided to implement a Cisco solution centered around Cisco Unified Contact Center Enterprise Edition to provide greater satisfaction to customers. This began operation in March 2013.

They say the key driving factors behind this system renewal included improving business continuity in disasters, implementing a leading-edge system, and reducing operation load. Hideaki Saitou of Sony Global Solutions Inc., who was in charge of the system side of things, comments as follows:

- The equipment we had operated up to that point had reached the end of its service life, and we began looking into replacing it around January or February of 2011. However, in March, before an outline had been decided upon, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck, affecting operation of the call center. Under these circumstances, there was an urgent need to move forward with the project.

- To meet the requirement of a call center that can operate without interruption, we decided to transfer the equipment that had been installed at our premises to the data center of a telecommunications carrier. At the same time we accelerated our plans for a new system. The existing system used legacy equipment, so from the outset we had decided to move to VoIP and build a leading-edge environment. One of our goals was to remove the system from our premises, so it could operate with just a PC and telephone set.

Takekatsu Matsumoto of Sony Marketing (Japan) Inc., who is involved in the operation of the call center, looks back on that time as follows:

- Right after the earthquake hit, continuation of business was difficult as we had to deal with planned power outages. I could see that wasn’t going to work, so I wanted a system less likely to be affected by planned power cuts as well as disasters themselves, enabling us to provide service to our customers at all times. Our senior management saw things the same way, and that’s how this project came to be.

Details of installation

Selection process

- Architecture optimized for IP networks was well-received
- An enterprising approach to seeing the project through was also key

Mr. Saitou has the following to say about why Cisco was chosen for the call center system:

- Naturally, we weighed the pros and cons of each company’s system, including on-premise and cloud solutions. Among these, given Cisco’s background as a network vendor, they seemed to stand out as having an architecture that took network traffic into consideration. IP We felt they were strongest in IP networking, and the best fit for our requirement of making the transition to VoIP.
Kazuo Matsushita of Sony Marketing (Japan) Inc. adds these points regarding the selection process, which was based on the company’s policies and initiatives:

"Sony Global Solutions, which took the helm of this project, is a company that specializes in Sony’s IT systems. It implements a wide range of initiatives, such as the building and global integration of a variety of systems. A large amount of information is gathered from all around the world, so they also took into account the international performance of the companies under evaluation. Rather than simply focusing on leading manufacturers with a good track record, you could say the selection result was based on these initiatives and perspectives."

Mr. Saitou says he also valued Cisco’s enthusiastic, enterprising approach:

"From all the various projects I’ve been involved with up to now, I’ve learned that working together can be difficult when the vendor doesn’t also have clear intentions. In this case we needed to achieve our objectives in a short period of time, so this point was crucial. Cisco was determined to make this project a success, and they indicated that to us clearly and persistently. The fact their goals aligned with ours was another significant factor."

The company’s call center is run under a policy by which each operator handles multiple tasks (call responses). This required the system-side implementation of functions for assigning calls from customers appropriately, and depending on the situation dynamically, according to operator skill. Below, Mr. Matsushita shares his thoughts on Cisco’s proposal to incorporate agile development techniques, as well as the actual build process:

"When Cisco proposed that we add the functions we wanted separately, we were worried about whether everything would actually be implemented properly as planned. It would have a significant impact on the project as a whole if the quality and schedule were not assured. We repeatedly requested clarification regarding this, and Cisco openly provided the required information, including the current status, outlook, and other details. I believe this helped clear up our concerns. The functions were also implemented to our satisfaction. I have high regard for how they enabled call center operations staff to manage and use the system, and also installed the required equipment at operator’s desks, covering everything from adjustments to confirmation. I think the definition of agile development is ambiguous nowadays, as it can be unclear how it differs from prototype development, and many misunderstand it to simply mean adding functions intermittently over a short period. In this case we interpreted it to mean adding stand-alone functions and new functions to a solid base according to user requirements. We appreciated the fact that Cisco’s explanations aligned with this almost perfectly."

Migration to a new system enabled even more flexibility in the operation of the call center than before. Mr. Matsumoto says he has noticed a big improvement in actual customer response as well as the management of assigning tasks to operators:

"Before, products were clearly divided into categories, and each operator had a set area of expertise. Now products are converging, with LCD televisions including HDD recorder functions, televisions being controllable from Blu-ray recorders via HDMI cable, etc. Freshly recruited operators support a single product (or function), but call assignment will change as their skill increases and they become versed in multiple areas. The previous system made it difficult to manage staff and skills, and assign calls flexibly in this way. It was tricky to have an operator from a given group provide backup for calls to another group. In fact, in some cases it was actually necessary to move staff to a different location."
We are very pleased to have an environment that enables flexible operation to match operators’ development.*

In addition, with the previous system it could take up to several hours to confirm the details of calls from customers, causing problems when speed was of the essence, such as complaint handling. The new system reduced this time to 15 minutes or less, greatly contributing to improved customer response capability and satisfaction levels. It seems that the response of frontline workers has demonstrably improved.

The operators in the field also apparently have no particular objections. Mr. Matsumoto says that almost all staff were able to switch over to the new system at once, as there were very few issues:

“We created an interface visually identical to the previous one for the softphones used by operators, and it appears they were able to transition over smoothly. As far as operators are concerned they are just telephones, and I think it’s fine for them to be able to use them without being aware of the underlying system.”

This migration also resulted in labor savings for operator training. The training of personnel is an inherent part of switching systems, and in the past took anywhere from several hours to several days. In this case we provided basic content for personnel to study by themselves, and around one hour of self-study was enough for each staff member. For a large-scale call center with many operators, being able to keep the strain placed on each of them low was a big deal. Another benefit was that costs decreased dramatically.

According to Mr. Saitou, they are looking into applying this approach to the swift implementation of small-scale operations, in addition to the large-scale call center operation underway now:

“By changing our telecommunications carrier and shifting to a VoIP system, we can now handle phone numbers more flexibly as well. This system is easy to adapt to the plans we have in mind, and we can construct new operating bases in a short period of around a week. We can now respond to needs swiftly without relying on equipment in a specific location as we did in the past, and we’d like to take full advantage of this. Finally, Mr. Matsushita sums up this project as follows:

“We support a broad range of products at this call center, and receive a vast number of inquiries about products that customers have used for a long time. This demonstrates the history behind both our products and our relationship with customers. A variety of skills are necessary to provide support in keeping with this history, and how we deliver on this to increase customer satisfaction is a crucial point.

Improving the flexibility of systems will expand the scope of decision-making available to management for the operation of call centers, and create the potential for a variety of business developments. That is one of the key factors for this project, and I am glad we were able to pull it off so well.”
Sony Marketing (Japan) Inc.

Head office address:
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Established
April 1, 1997

Capital
100 million yen (as of April 2013)

Employees
Approximately 800 (as of April 2013)

Chiefly responsible for marketing, sales, and related activities for Sony products in Japan.