



Abuzz Technologies takes control of telephony and increases network security with Cisco Unified Communications

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– Morgan Drew, Managing Director, Abuzz Technologies

Introduction

Abuzz Technologies designs and manufactures interactive touch-screen kiosks. Founded in 1995 as a design agency, Abuzz produced its first kiosks as an innovative way to present its portfolio of designs at trade shows. The overwhelming response to these prototypes convinced the company to shift its focus to interactive touch-screen products in 1997.

A kiosk is a self-service terminal comprising a secure enclosure that houses hardware and software. Kiosks usually incorporate a touch-screen monitor, printer, speakers and keyboard as well as a custom-developed software application.

The company is now one of the largest kiosk manufacturers in Australia. Based in Sydney, with approximately 50 staff, Abuzz exports to 13 countries around the world, including Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Abuzz’s impressive client list includes AMP, BMW, Coles Myer, Greater Union, Hoyts, Nokia, Toyota, Westfield and Westpac.

Abuzz designs and assembles the kiosks and develops specialised applications to ensure each kiosk meets the needs of each customer. For example, shopping centre management company Westfield uses kiosks to enable shoppers to search for and locate the stores they need, while cinema chain Greater Union uses them for self-service ticket sales. Banks such as the Commonwealth Bank of Australia and Westpac use Abuzz kiosks as personnel directories.

Business challenge

Abuzz was experiencing rapid revenue growth of about 50 per cent each year, but the company’s data and telephony systems did not have the scale or flexibility required to meet its evolving business needs. Its outdated PABX phone system was proving expensive in terms of support and maintenance.

“Every time we wanted to do adds, moves or changes, we needed to call an external consultant,” explained Morgan Drew, Managing Director of Abuzz Technologies. “This slowed us down and was expensive. As a small business we need to be agile and flexible, and our phone system was holding us back.

“In addition, we were missing a lot of calls if phones weren’t manually diverted. For example, if our administration person left the front desk and didn’t divert the phone, the calls would go straight to an answering service. This was not giving our customers the right levels of professionalism and customer service.”

However, Abuzz's telephony system wasn't its only problem. The company was also dissatisfied with its data network. Staff working remotely were unable to connect to critical business applications. Network security was also a concern.

Abuzz's disconnected systems meant it had to manage multiple vendors – one for its PABX phone system, another for Linux firewall and a third for its data network. This increased the cost of managing and maintaining the company's technology systems.

“We wanted a telephony environment that would enable us to manage call flows ourselves and that would integrate with our customer relationship management system,” said Drew. “We also wanted to allow staff in the office to connect remotely to kiosks around Australia. With our existing data and telephony systems, this wasn't going to happen.”

Solution

Abuzz investigated solutions from a number of vendors before deciding on a Cisco Unified Communications solution that incorporated voice over internet protocol (VoIP) telephony and a secure data network. Cisco Partner Efficient Data Communications (EDC) acted as the systems integrator for the project.

“Abuzz was looking to upgrade its telephone system and at the same time provide a new data and communications infrastructure for the office,” explained Andrew Lowy, Director, Efficient Data Communications. “It wanted a complete solution – telephony, data, a secure infrastructure and remote access. Abuzz's previous infrastructure was pretty rough and ready and not very well designed. It was clear the company would reap enormous benefits by moving to an integrated network.”

EDC implemented Cisco Call Manager Express on a Cisco 2811 Integrated Services Router and a Catalyst 3560 48-port switch. It implemented the Call Manger Express security feature set, which provides a firewall built into the router. Abuzz also connected close to 50 Cisco 7940 IP Phones. The solution enables voice and data to run over the one network, halving Abuzz's cabling requirements.

Abuzz also implemented Cisco 800 Series Routers at all kiosk locations, allowing the company's technical staff to remotely managed and update kiosks over a secure virtual private network (VPN). The Cisco VPN also provides secure network access for staff working remotely.

In addition, EDC installed a front-door station at Abuzz's office and integrated this with the phone system. The company's hosted customer relationship management (CRM) system was also integrated with the new telephony infrastructure.

The implementation was completed in January 2006.

Results

Abuzz Technologies has realised impressive benefits from installing a Cisco Unified Communications system and integrating data and telephony on a single secure network.

Greater control and flexibility Abuzz can now administer its own telephony system, which has eliminated the costs and wasted time of constant technical support.

“Because the Cisco system is so easy to configure, we no longer have to wait for external support,” said Drew. “This gives us extensive control and flexibility and allows the business to adapt quickly to changing business requirements.”

Customer service has also improved, as the new system has streamlined the company's telephony environment.

"Calls no longer go unanswered or are lost," said Drew. "Now, if the front desk phone is not answered, the call is automatically routed through a hierarchical structure to the most appropriate person. And integrating the system with our front-door station means nobody is ever left waiting in the street if our receptionist takes a break."

Consolidating voice and data on the one network has reduced the number of vendors Abuzz needs to deal with. EDC now supports Abuzz's entire network, including voice, data, firewall and VPN connectivity. This has reduced costs and increased responsiveness.

Connected mobile staff

Abuzz has teams of remote salespeople working in Melbourne and Brisbane. Previously, these employees were disconnected from the Sydney office and used mobile or home phones to make sales calls. Now they use Cisco SoftPhones on their laptops to connect to the network and telephony services.

"The new system has made a huge difference for mobile staff," said Drew. "If we get a call through the switch in Sydney, we can immediately transfer it to someone in another state without having to ask the client to call that person's mobile or asking the sales rep to call the customer back."

Secure, reliable network

"Installing the Cisco VPN has ensured our network is very secure," said Drew. "This has made a big difference for us. Now, when staff are overseas, they can log in as if they were part of the network here in Sydney. This has boosted productivity and our customer service levels don't drop if staff are out of the office."

A secure network has also given made it easier for Abuzz to remotely maintain kiosks at client sites around Australia.

"The secure, low-cost VPN connection between our office and remote sites means we can measure statistics, monitor system health, provide 24x7 support and update content remotely," said Drew.

"We thought Cisco would be a safe bet as it's a premium product that offers very high levels of security. That's what the brochures say, and this has certainly been our experience."

Integration with CRM system

The advanced features of Cisco Unified Communications allows the system to integrate seamlessly with Abuzz's CRM system, which is hosted by an external provider.

"Integrating our telephony environment with the CRM system has really boosted productivity," said Drew. "Now we can look up customer details and use the click-to-dial feature to contact them directly, which is so much easier."

Creative solutions for Abuzz customers

The knowledge Abuzz gained from its own implementation allowed it to develop an advanced meeting room solution for one of its customers in mid-2006.

The company had colour Cisco [7970] Unified IP Phones in each of its meeting rooms. However, it still struggled to overcome problems such as staff not checking room availability and meeting times clashing.

Abuzz designed and developed a software system that uses the Cisco IP Phones as a platform. Abuzz built a server that collects calendar data from the company's calendar application and distributes this information to the Cisco IP Phones.

The phones in rooms reserved for a meeting display a red screen, whereas those in available rooms are green. The screen also displays information such as the time left until the next meeting and who has booked the room.

"With 289 meeting rooms and thousands of staff, having an efficient booking system for meeting rooms is of paramount importance," said Drew. "Our client is now using more meeting rooms for more time and avoiding interrupted meetings. The solution has really increased productivity and the effective utilisation of space. In fact, it is interested in rolling out the solution to its other offices around the country."

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