



I Dreamed IT



I have talked a little about telephones before — how important it is to keep in touch, how the telephone is the first interaction customers have with a producer, and how I dreamed about finding a telephone system that did everything I imagined, and then some.

My dream system would enable me to escape my physical office and place it wherever I was at the time: at home, out of town at a conference, or overseas on vacation. My telephone system would track, log, and route every call to find me wherever I was. It would know who was important and from whom to take a message. It would be accessible from anywhere by almost any means and it would do all of this without being complicated.

As most readers know, my cell telephone is an extension of me. The biggest drawback in using it, though, is that it is not convenient to forward telephone calls to or from my office with it. My office's old telephone system, like most small business telephone systems, could not treat unrelated telephones as extensions. This would force callers trying to reach me to hang up the call to my office and then dial my cell telephone. How inconvenient!

Telephone Advantage

With the continued convergence of computer and telecom technologies, it was only a matter of time before an intelligent telephone system would emerge. After much research and comparisons of many different makes and models from manufacturers, my agency settled on a new telephone system from Artisoft (www.Artisoft.com). Long-time computer gurus will recognize the name. Famous for its Lantastic Networking Software in the 1980s and early '90s, Artisoft has moved forward to concentrate on designing a next generation telephone system: TeleVantage.

My experience in purchasing several office telephone systems for my agency has been that the major problem was that, by design, systems are proprietary and contain rudimentary programming logic. Here is how it goes: An extension is busy or no one answers, so the telephone system simply transfers the call to the voice mail. While a system like this may be OK in an average agency setting, the automated agent looks for more.

TeleVantage addresses the limitations imposed on legacy systems by moving the call routing logic and handling to a software solution. This, along with implementation of next generation hardware that works with both new technology and legacy systems, means that someone who might have invested in a Meridian

telephone system, for example, could continue to use the telephones purchased for that system while upgrading the actual system. In my opinion, this ability and its many other features place the TeleVantage system above all the others at which our agency looked.

Providing telephone system logic in a software solution offers many advantages. The system is connected to our contact manager, so our telephone system knows all of our clients. Comparing the caller I.D. number to our database, the telephone system can greet clients with a special greeting, place them in higher priority queue, and even route them directly to their producer. Callers who block their caller I.D. numbers can be prompted to enter their telephone number. Even faxes that inadvertently are sent to the wrong number can be routed to the fax machine.

Am I Dreaming?

Among my favorite features of the TeleVantage system is the PC-based call manager, which enables me to review call logs and voice mail or monitor telephone calls from anywhere in the world. Call recording features enable my agency to capture every telephone call in and out, or only the ones that I choose. I then can archive those calls on CD or e-mail them. The system can route and set priorities for callers based on my preferences. And, last but not least, the system treats my cell telephone, or any telephone for that matter, as an extension.

When I tell the system that I am out, it will route my calls directly to my cell telephone — no intervention needed. If I do not answer within a given time, the system takes a message on my behalf or offers the caller more options.

VOIP

There is enough exciting technology in the TeleVantage system to make almost any techie's heart race. Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telephony technology enables users to add extensions over high-speed Internet connections. Recent improvements to VOIP technology can provide IP telephony without the lag time that was problematic only a short time ago. This brings intra-commuting ("Intra-Commuting: What a Concept!" Life Insurance Selling, March 2002) to reality. Place a computer and I.P. telephone on any high-speed connection and ta-da! You have an instant remote office.

Intra-Connecting

With the system, it is possible to tie two remote agencies together and make communications between them seamless, without the high expense of dedicated lines. This could be advantageous for high volume agencies in several ways: To save money, an agency with multiple locations could concentrate a T1 connection at one office, or a fast growing agency could have producers work from home, allowing for virtual expansion with few limits, while reducing or even eliminating the need for additional office space.

While slightly more costly to implement on the front side, the many benefits of the system offset that investment over the long term. Fee-based producers will find the call-tracking features in TeleVantage priceless.

In retrospect, I cannot count the number of times I wished I had recorded a telephone conversation or been able to review a telephone log of all our incoming and outgoing calls, from anywhere. Now I can. How many important calls have I missed because I was unable to see an incoming caller's information while being on another call? Who knows, but that no longer is the case.

The TeleVantage system small business edition can handle four lines by eight stations and easily can scale all the way to 192 telephone lines with 480 stations in a single chassis. Multiple systems can be linked to provide an even larger capacity.

I have dreamed about a system like this for a long time. While this may be out of reach for individual producers, a system such as this is an agency's dream come true. It has everything a producer could want: easy-going sophistication, good looks, and intelligence.