

Booming business for call centers

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With a booming call-center business in India, technology companies are focusing on complying with U.S. rules for offshore dialing and are finding themselves expanding into other countries -- kick-starting a new era in call-center technology.

"The reason why the U.S. exists as a bigger market is because Americans are more amenable to outsourcing -- they are used to working on telephones," said Prabhat Agarwal, chief executive officer and managing director of Parsec Technologies, a Gurgaon-based company that specializes in providing the technology behind many Indian call centers.

"There's no end to what you can outsource from the United States," he added. "The U.S. government believes in open trade -- trade regulations are not as protected as they are in other countries."

Statistics show more than 50 percent of Americans still prefer to use the phone to finish applications for credit cards and so forth that were started online.

Despite the often-negative stigma faced by Indian call-center dialers, clients are U.S. companies wanting simply to have a job done more efficiently at half the cost of a setup at home. Agarwal's company is focused on developing technology that avoids hassling those who are on the do-not-call lists in America, as well as enabling call centers to maintain low costs in calling.

Most Indian call centers focus on dialing offshore for clients based

predominantly in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Parsec develops its technologies for Indian call centers making collection calls primarily to Americans for a variety of reasons. These range from calling those who have defaulted on their credit-card payments to selling new long-distance providers -- requiring an intricate calling structure that includes several party layers.

"The technology takes care of U.S. regulatory measures," said Agarwal, explaining two of the major issues are avoiding hassling those on do-not-call lists and ensuring that the abandon rate is non-existent, as per U.S. law -- the call must connect as soon as it is answered.

Parsec's technology, which it calls its Paragon software, is developed at the company's headquarters in Gurgaon, right on the edge of the Indian capital of New Delhi. Having started in interactive voice-response-system technology, Agarwal said that he and some friends saw an opportunity to delve into Paragon technology about four years ago, as the call-center boom came to India.

"We saw this emerging as a bigger market," he said, "we have over a hundred call centers as our customers just in India."

The technology essentially involves having a database of numbers bought by vendors from U.S. suppliers. Numbers are dialed in automated fashion, then go through a dialer system by which they are transferred to a "MUX," which compresses and decompresses the voice of the agents sitting in India. When the call enters U.S. hosting territory, it connects and is then transferred to an agent. These agents, located in India, are flashed necessary information about the person they are calling on their computer monitors.

Legalities play a role in offshore dialing under various circumstances. "For example, if I'm calling you to switch your long-distance provider,

the law requires that there is a third party independent verifier sitting in the U.S.," said Agarwal. He explained that once the call goes through, this individual must be called and patched into the conference -- from where he and the customer can go through the verification details of the conversation.

Additionally, he said that tight regulations can be "barged" into by qualified supervisors, for auditing for quality purposes -- a factor that Indian call centers take very seriously.

Long-distance calling was once very expensive -- calling the U.S. long-distance used to cost about a dollar a minute. With technological development in India, it now costs as little as 20 cents.

More recently, Parsec has established a base in Manila, Philippines, along with several other large independent company owners, including the wealthy Indian industrialists, the Hindujas.

"There is a similar outsourcing boom going on there; they are about a year behind India," he said, "But I think there's a big benefit culturally in Manila -- they understand Americans much better." This Agarwal attributed to the fact that there is a large U.S. military base in the Philippines as well as a larger population of immigrants to the United States than there are from India.

India has its own advantages, he said, adding that for something like marketing, Manila is better, although he added that the city has its own problems -- including a smaller working population and less advanced technology.

"We are basically suppliers to the industry," said Agarwal, according to whom the market is very big and will only continue to grow. "Our focus is now on markets coming up, such as those in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and

Bangladesh."

Changing times means also adapting the product to change with the needs of the business -- new functions such as Internet adaptability, Voice over Internet Protocol and constantly changing U.S. regulations fuel evolutions in technology.

Agarwal said that frequent Indian energy issues do not pose any problems for the company, saying that in the United States he has seen everything come to a complete standstill when the power goes out -- not so in India. "Electricity is getting better," he said. "We have captive power generator sets, and things don't stop -- it can be painful and inefficient, but things go on."

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