

Advertisement

100 Cool Call Center Things

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It has been 100 months since the final issue of Inbound/Outbound came out. At the time, it was dubbed a collector's edition because it focused on call centers in the collections industry.

More than eight years later, we would like to present you with another collector's edition. In this article, which we specially created for the 100th issue, we collected 100 of the most intriguing inventions, events and developments ever to occur in call centers.

Like the call centers we cover, this article is a collaborative effort. We would like to thank all the experts in the call center industry who contributed to this collection, including Call Center Magazine's first editor, Madeline Bodin, Response Design associate Kathryn Jackson, Telephony@Work COO and Former CMP Media show director Ed Margulies and Call Center Magazine's founder Harry Newton. We would especially like to thank ICCM president Brad Cleveland for contributing so many historical items.

You'll notice that aside from the beginning of this collection, we didn't list the items in this article in any particular order. There's a reason for this. Clearly, call centers could not have existed without the invention of the telephone, but the way call centers became part of our culture was not an orderly process. Many factors contributed to the evolution of call centers, including a legal decision nearly a century after the invention of the phone that enabled companies to install their own phone switches. The ongoing development of call centers, like the call volumes that they face, isn't necessarily something that one can plan for. Call centers are unpredictable; that's what makes them challenging and fun. It is in the spirit of fun that we present our collection to you.

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Now if you're wondering how we came up with the title, we'd like to point out that the word "cool" spelled backwards is "100C." Given that this is the 100th issue, that "C" is the Roman numeral for 100 and that both words in the phrase "call center" start with "c," we felt that the word "cool" most aptly described what this article is about. We hope that you, too, find this eclectic collection to be cool, funky and fun.

1 : Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876. The first complete sentence to be transmitted electronically was, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you!" (History reports that Bell had just spilled acid on himself, and some people speculate whether those were his exact words.) Alexander Graham Bell objected to "Hello," as the greeting, instead preferring "hoy, hoy." If he could only see just how many hellos – and bonjours, guten tags and holas his invention has spawned and witness the extent to which the telephone has shaped our lives, more than a century after patent 174,465 was issued.

2 : Bell offered to sell his new device to telegraph giant Western Union, then the largest communications company in the U.S., for \$100,000. The company declined, stating in an internal memo that, "This telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." Western Electric would eventually become part of AT&T, as would the Bell operating companies, thereby creating the Bell System.

3 : Phone got your tongue? It might have, if it had been invented by someone else. Samuel F.B. Morse invented the telegraph in 1837, and by the middle of the 1800s, there was speculation that conversations could also be transmitted by wire. In 1854, an English newspaper described how the system could work: "A plate of silver and one of zinc are taken into the mouth, one above, the other below the tongue. They are then placed in contact with the wire, and words issuing from the mouth are conveyed by the wire." (And to think that today, we complain about uncomfortable headsets!)

4 : Almon B. Strowger, credited with inventing the automatic switch, set up the Strowger Automatic Electric Company in Chicago in 1891. The first commercial switchboard, based on Strowger's patent, opened in LaPorte, IN, in 1892. The Bell Company licensed Strowger's service, and in subsequent decades the automated switchboard would replace operated-assisted switchboards at telephone companies, enabling callers to directly dial numbers without assistance. Strowger said he invented the device because he wanted a "girlless, cussless" means of getting calls through to his business.

5 : The first agents were inadvertently appointed in the 1920s when organizations began to put phones on the desks of people whose main means of dealing with customers had been through correspondence or face-to-face contact. Eventually, the association of customer service with the telephone became so strong that the advertising phrase, "our operators are standing by," was born.

6 : AT&T developed the toll-free 800 service in 1967 that reversed charges from callers to the company they were calling. As a society, we eventually learned to love 800 numbers so much that we ran out of them, and had to move on to 888, 887 and, most likely, more toll-free numbers will follow.

7 : Arguably the legislation that has had the greatest impact on the call center industry is the 1968 Carterfone decision by the FCC. The ruling allowed equipment made by businesses other than the Bell System to be connected to the public telephone system and it enforced the right of companies to hook up their own gear to

the public telephone network (so long as this equipment did no harm to the network). The decision derived its name from a device called the Carterfone, invented by Thomas Carter. The device consisted of a transceiver equipped with an acoustic coupler into which a regular phone handset was placed. By eliminating the Bell System's monopoly over the manufacturing of phone switches, the decision spawned the interconnect industry, leading to developments such as the modern PBX, IVR system and ACD.

8 : Urged on by "Phone Power" pamphlets from AT&T during the late 1960s, many companies began to see opportunities to reduce or eliminate field offices and field representatives by taking advantage of the newly introduced 800 service. Although these new telephone operators were performing the functions of in-person representatives paid much more, their pay was tied to clerical schedules – a precedent that many call center managers still struggle to eliminate today.

9 : Companies have spent millions promoting their "vanity" numbers, such as 1-800-MET-LIFE, 1-800 FLOWERS and 1-800 USA-RAIL. Some of these numbers are genuinely endearing, such as 1-800 LITTLE-1 (The RightStart catalog), 1-800 YOCASIO, and 1-800 LOVEBOAT (Princess Cruises). If only it weren't so darn hard to find those digits on the keypad.

10 : Can you spell "operator"? If you can't, you're not alone but you may not have called the phone company you thought you did. When MCI came out with 1-800-COLLECT, a service that offered reduced rates on collect calls, AT&T matched with 1-800-OPERATOR. AT&T learned, to its chagrin, that up to 20% of callers misspelled "operator" as they were dialing the number. Even worse, the most common misspelling, "o-p-e-r-a-t-e-r" was an MCI 800 number at the time.

11 : Airlines used to be notorious for putting callers on "eternity hold." Once, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune called United Airlines and got stuck on hold. The reporter got mad. He traced the president of United down. He finally found him in a hanger on the West Coast, far from his office. It took the reporter 28 minutes to find the president. The reporter asked the president, since he was still on hold, would the president mind taking his reservation? Apparently, the president did. Shortly thereafter, United's call center queues got shorter.

-Harry Newton, inventor of "Eternity Hold Conferencing," a feature in which all callers on hold get to speak to each other.

12 : Collins (now Rockwell Electronic Commerce) developed the first electromechanical ACD in 1973 for Continental Airlines in Houston, TX. The system routed calls and offered basic reporting capabilities. The ACD was in service at Continental for 20 years. In subsequent years, ACDs flourished as large reservations centers, financial firms and utility companies began implementing centralized call centers. Interestingly, Collins expected only a five-year lifecycle for the ACD at the time.

13 : During the middle of the 1970s, the term "ACD agent" came into vogue, as ACD systems proliferated. The ACD also changed the way companies managed customer service, encouraging them to set up call centers where any agent in a group would be able to answer any call. This approach, known as the pooling principle, lies at the heart of any call center, and replaced the notion that callers had to reach a given person or department within an organization.

14 : The Carterfone decision was a harbinger of the breakup of AT&T, which officially went into effect on the first day of 1984, when AT&T divested itself of the Bell telephone companies. The breakup occurred under the terms of an antitrust action, known as the consent decree, dated August 24, 1982. The existing Bell companies combined into seven regional holding companies that, at the time, offered local phone service but not long-distance service. Twelve years later, The Telecommunications Act of 1996 established conditions that allowed regional phone companies to offer long-distance service and allowed long-distance companies to offer local service.

15 : During the late 1980s, Best Western Hotels, New York State Department of Motor Vehicles and several travel agencies set up call centers in low security prisons. Agents earned hourly wages that they collected at the end of their terms. As one manager put it, "The program has been an overwhelming success. And it sure takes care of the attendance problem."

16 : The recession in 1990 was largely positive for call centers. Turnover in the late 1980s had been high, but during the recession, call centers found they could reach a more educated labor pool. This experience taught many organizations that they required a more educated labor pool, given the complexities and demands of their growing call centers, and pay and career paths subsequently advanced rapidly throughout the 1990s.

17 : The most overlooked moment in the history of call centers is the passing of the 1992 Telephone Consumer Protection Act according to Madeline Bodin. "The Act had several implications for call center technology," says Bodin. "The TCPA enforced 'Do Not Call' and limited hours that telemarketers could make outbound calls." "It really limited the use of Auto-Dialing Recorded Message Players (ADRMPs), which at the time seemed poised to take over the public telephone network," she adds. "Today, these devices have a very limited use; you don't really think of them at all. But in 1991 they were a big deal." ADRMPs automatically place calls and leave automated messages. Predictive dialers, which aim to ensure that consumers speak with live individuals, have largely superseded ADRMPs.

18 : In 1991, Florida Power and Light, a utility, published the results of a study that concluded that callers were willing to wait longer and were satisfied when they were told how long the wait would be.

19 : One of the most famous dot-coms quickly came to appreciate the need for a call center after business took off. "Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com is kind of a converted call center hero," according to Ed Margulies. "He's the guy who four years ago touted the Internet and e-commerce as the 'death of the telephone.' (Yeah, like computers were gonna be the end of paper.) But when Amazon started getting flooded with phone calls, he installed a 750-seat call center. Good for him. Good for the industry."

20 : State legislatures have passed laws that create do-not-call (DNC) databases within each state. Consumers pay a nominal fee to enter their names on them, and telemarketers must compare their databases against these lists. The Direct Marketing Association has three DNC lists: the Mail Preference Service (to prevent customers from receiving what they consider to be junk mail), the eMail Preference Service (to prevent junk e-mail, or spam), and the Telephone Preference Service.

21 : Who is the smiling agent in the big dark horn-rimmed glasses and the brown curly hair who has appeared in countless call center ads and promotions? To us, she will always be Ms. Blue Glasses, and we believe that her smile will continue as long as call centers continue to thrive. We look upon Ms. Blue Glasses fondly when we learn of new products and services for call centers. Last year, we were thrilled when she made a celebrity appearance on the poster of our first Call Center Demo and Conference in 1999.

22 : On April 25, 1988, the NBC television network aired a program called "Stressed to Kill," hosted by Connie Chung. One of the segments highlighted the stress-related problems of an agent who worked in a call center for a telephone company. The program sparked an industry-wide debate about performance standards, pay and whether or not call centers were "electronic sweatshops."

23 : British Telecommunications conducted a teleworking experiment from July 1992 to June 1993 in Inverness, a town located in the Highlands of Scotland, to determine the costs and benefits of enabling agents to work from home. The experiment observed ten operators from the Inverness Directory Assistance Center to see how teleworking affected their stress levels, productivity and overall job satisfaction.

24 : According to a November 7, 1999 article in *The New York Times*, agents who work for telemarketers that call consumers in New York City receive special training and higher wages. One firm, Teleforce, actually pays agents who dial into the city \$13.50 an hour, compared to \$10 an hour if they call consumers anywhere else. Another firm, Zogby International, hires former New Yorkers to call into the city. These firms report that the higher wages are mandatory since New Yorkers' busy schedules make them hard to reach, and when they do reach them, they're usually rude.

25 : MasterCard International's Global Service Center, located in St. Louis, MO, has employee appreciation days where agents get their cars washed at work during afternoon cookouts.

26 : Services Editor Brendan Read believes that India, specifically Mumbai and New Delhi, will become the next big call center hub. He says the cost of setting up centers in India is about one third of the cost of establishing similar centers in the US.

27 : Agents strike up many conversations at service bureau Marketing Ally in Cedar City, UT, which is located at the site of a former bowling alley. The location is a wide-open space that required little renovation, and it enabled Marketing Ally to hide all the wiring in the bowling lane gutters.

28 : Geico Direct, one of the country's largest automobile insurance providers, was among the first call centers to offer Web callback from its Web site in May 1997. It was also one of the first companies to offer insurance quotes on-line.

29 : In 1917, Agner Karup Erlang, a Danish mathematician who worked for the Copenhagen Telephone Company developed Erlang B and Erlang C, traffic engineering formulas that are in worldwide use today. Many call centers rely on the queuing formula Erlang C for staffing calculations. This formula is also useful for determining how many toll booths should be on a highway, how many elevators should be in a building and even how many toilets should be in new sports stadiums.

30 : It's easy to forget is that as recently as 1992, Windows was far from universal in call center software. The industry has progressed since then from DOS-based interfaces to the current era, where not using Windows is almost unthinkable, unless you're using browser-based software.

31 : Though no one can seem to agree on the number of call centers in the US, (we've heard estimates as high as 200,000) Datamonitor estimated that in 1998 there were a total of 69,500 call centers in the US. They expect this number to grow to 78,000 by 2003. The research firm also claims that in 1998 there were approximately 2.5 million agent positions in the US and that that number would increase to 2.7 million in 2003. Determining the number of call centers is especially difficult when you consider the number of organizations that still may not refer to themselves as call centers and the companies that may have an informal call center of only a couple of people answering phones.

32 : More than four years ago, customers who played LucasArts' video games on their home computers were able to go on-line to visit the "Yoda Help Desk" (based on the Star Wars character) if they had any technical problems. Yoda, who shared his wisdom on what was then one of the few Web sites to guide customers through a series of questions to help them find solutions to problems, had assistance from knowledge management software from Inference known as CasePoint Web Server. eGain, a company that started out as a developer of e-mail routing software, acquired Inference earlier this year.

33 : Brad Cleveland, president of the Incoming Calls Management Institute, tells the story of a hotel in Texas that arranged for a local vanity number and advertised it widely. Unfortunately, callers would often transpose two of the digits and mistakenly dial a residential number instead. The woman who answered the phone had kept the same number for years, and she wasn't about to change it. She called the hotel to ask if it could get a different phone number. The hotel staff replied – in so many words – "no way." So she got even. She began taking reservations. Rooms were always available. She booked upgrades and suites. She even scheduled a wedding reception.

34 : Inc. Magazine ran a cover story on Famous Smoke Shop's innovative call center in the June 16, 1998 issue, nearly two years after Call Center Magazine profiled the company in the March 1996 issue. The article in Inc. discussed additional call centers and recognized that "today's businesses are as likely to use call centers to decrease costs or mine information as they are to use one to increase revenues."

35 : Multi-site call centers, which connect to each other over a wide area network, are likely to become increasingly more common within the next few years. Research from Dr. Jon Anton of Purdue University's Center for Customer-Driven Quality, estimates that 20% of all call centers currently have locations in at least two sites, up from 12% in 1999.

36 : The first connection between telecommunications and computers occurred before computers even emerged from laboratories with the invention of the transistor in 1947.

37 : What do call centers have in common with disco? They never go out of style. Outsourcer Marketing Ally, for example, has a call center in Provo, UT, within a former discotheque, where a glitter ball still shines over agents.

38 : We asked Ed Margulies, who has witnessed the evolution of telecommunications during the past two decades, which products have had the most influence on today's call center systems. Among his picks is Nortel's DV-1 Server. "The 'server,' as it was lovingly called, was the grandfather of all multimedia e-contact centers," he says. "Imagine this: A modular system, supporting several operating systems, that enabled voice recognition, attachments to e-mail, screen-based call control (third party call control), voice messaging and directory services. In 1985." But the DV-1 was too far ahead of its time. "Sadly, the industry just wasn't ready for it and the product flopped commercially," Margulies recalls. "Nortel was 15 years too early." The company would subsequently lift many features from the DV-1 and incorporate them within the multimedia routing systems it offers today.

39 : Nadji Tehrani, a publisher of trade magazines for the chemical coatings field, observed that ad sales over the phone outpaced face-to-face sales by 300%. Upon coming to this realization, he scoured newsstands and libraries in search of a magazine devoted to selling by phone. But no magazine covered telemarketing. So in 1982, he launched *Telemarketing*, the first magazine for outbound call centers.

40 : Oakley's call center in Foothills Ranch, CA, has a basketball court where agents have played with Michael Jordan, one of the sponsors of Oakley's eyewear.

41 : By the late-80's Omaha, Nebraska became the unofficial Call Center capital of the world. Great telecom infrastructure, available labor, plenty of space, a central time zone and a labor force comprised of people with flat non-regional accents, made it an ideal place for call centers to set up shop. Today the area is saturated with call centers.

42 : Someday, we may look upon 1998 as an important year in the history of call center management. It was in February 1998, after three years in the works, that the Call Center Industry Advisory Council (CIAC) came into existence. This nonprofit organization will begin offering certification for call center managers in early 2001.

43 : This year marks the tenth anniversary of the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act. To highlight this important milestone, we would like to salute Portland, OR-based service bureau LiveBridge (formerly known as TeleMark), which has long made an effort to recruit and accommodate physically disabled agents. The founder of LiveBridge, Patrick Hanlin, earned a Pioneer Award from *Call Center Magazine* in 1999.

44 : Telecom Developers Expo, which took place in 1991 in Dallas, was a defining moment in our industry's history. There were 67 exhibitors, a few thousand attendees, a bunch of 10'x 10' booths and lots of excitement. This show evolved into Computer Telephony Expo and began an 11-year tradition that continues in Los Angeles next year. Out of Telecom Developers Expo also grew last month's Internet Telecom Expo, as well as Call Center Demo and this month's CRM Demo.

45 : This year also marks the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Incoming Calls Management Institute (ICMI), an independent consulting and educational firm built on the mission of "serving the unique needs of incoming call center managers." Gordon MacPherson, the founder of the ICMI, and Brad Cleveland, the ICMI current president and CEO, are among this year's inductees into Call Center Magazine's Hall of Fame.

46 : Call centers are receiving more attention than ever during a booming economy but did you know that it took a stock market crash on October 19, 1987 to bring call centers from the "back room" to the front page? "Callers Can't Get Through," wrote The Wall Street Journal, underscoring how important call centers had become to the fabric of society.

47 : A more positive example of how call centers entered the mainstream is the 1988 story about the GE Answer Center in *The New York Times* Consumer's World magazine. The article, "Seeking Profits in Consumer Complaints," was indicative of a growing awareness of just how powerful call centers are for building customer loyalty.

48 : "One day at a trade show a Secret Service agent showed great interest in a copy of Call Center magazine," says Madeline Bodin. "When I finally asked him what was so intriguing, he whipped out a ruler to

measure some money that was depicted. Far from caring about the contents of the magazine, he was concerned that a particular ad violated anti-counterfeiting regulations!"

49 : Training software really caught our attention this year, especially as more call monitoring companies have sought to incorporate evaluation and training modules within their suites of products. One of the most intriguing products we've seen – and which creates a new category of training software – is StarTrainer from Simtrex, a software firm based in Atlanta, GA, which enables trainees to receive simulated calls from their phones. What makes this new approach to CBT particularly groundbreaking is how it can integrate with your phone system to provide trainees with the most true-to-life call center experience possible.

50 : DaimlerChrysler and GM began rolling out communication systems in cars, which offered customers satellite positioning services, onboard maintenance diagnostics and the means to reach appropriate support centers from anywhere at the touch of a button. These options for drivers illustrate how call centers can be instrumental in transforming virtually any organization, including manufacturers, into "new economy" companies.

51 : Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams and Billy Crystal appeared on the cover of the January 1993 issue of *Call Center Magazine*, which ran a cover story about how the annual Comic Relief event raises funds by phone.

52 : The winter holiday shopping season of 1999 proved to be a publicity disaster for dot-coms and it brought down stock prices for e-tailers. Orders shipped late or never arrived. There were glaring incompatibilities between retail outlets and Web sites. Customers got trapped within poorly designed tangles of services when trying to reach organizations to resolve problems. But from that point on, dot-coms recognized what brick-and-mortar companies had known all along: that live service from call centers was what kept customers coming back for the next holiday season.

53 : Few call centers offer both training and outsourcing. Centralized Marketing Company (CMC; Cordova, TN) combines both. The firm's founder, Call Center Magazine Pioneer award winner Teresa Hartsaw, realized that training was necessary to ensure that agents and CMC's clients understood that teleservices could combine both productivity and quality. Through the training CMC provides, agents learn how to sell features and benefits in addition to handling calls. The firm also offers courses for supervisors and managers.

54 : Though Butterball's Turkey-Talk hot line, staffed by trained home economists, mainly answers questions about how to prepare turkey, some of the questions can get pretty weird. Here are some examples:

- A truck driver wanted to know if his turkey would cook more quickly if he drove faster; he planned to roast his bird on the engine block of his 18-wheel truck.
- When one woman called to find out how long it would take to roast her turkey, the economist asked how much the bird weighed. The woman responded, "I don't know. It's still running around outside."
- A restaurant owner in California wanted to know how to roast a turkey for a vegetarian menu, while another West Coast compatriot, took turkey preparation to extremes by scrubbing her bird with bleach. She called Butterball to find out how to clean off the bleach, and to her dismay, was advised to dispose of the turkey.

55 : Customer service should be quick and efficient, but it should also be zany, according to Archie McPhee. The Mukilteo, WA-based novelty company specializes in tongue-in-cheek marketing and customer service at the four-agent call center. Archie McPhee uses the same light-hearted prose in its catalogs and when responding to customers' e-mail messages. In fact, the same employees who write copy for the company's catalog also write Responses to customers' e-mail messages. Although the agents understand that

dissatisfied customers are no laughing matter, they're also serious about remaining true to the spirit that customers associate with a company that proudly proclaims that "each plastic set of teeth and gums exhibits exceptional dental hygiene."

56 : Telemarketing sometimes gets a bad rap, but imagine if agents continually had to dial numbers manually, only to find that most people they called weren't home? That's far less likely with predictive dialers, which are the best thing to happen to outbound campaigns since the term "telemarketing" was first created.

57 : The 1960s brought us more than just the Beatles. In 1962, Plantronics introduced the first-ever lightweight headsets, which would come to represent the agents who wear them.

58 : By the late 1990s, outbound e-mail blasts became a less costly solution to telemarketing. Such unwanted junk e-mails are known as spam after a famous Monty Python sketch, where a hapless diner says he doesn't want Spam, and the restaurant staff berates him, backed up by a chorus of Vikings singing "Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam Spam...wonderful Spam!"

-from the Computer Telephony Encyclopedia, written by Computer Telephony Magazine's chief technical editor, Richard "Zippy" Grigonis.

59 : Given that more customers are connected to the Internet each year, the voice-over-IP revolution is only a matter of time. Larger companies can afford the cost of high-speed Internet connections and IP hardware, but you can soon expect IP telephony to also gain a foothold in the mass market. For example, the Cupertino, CA-based company Lipstream offers its LiveVoice service. To use the service, you download software, which takes fewer than 60 seconds from a 28.8-kbps modem. With LiveVoice, agents and customers only need a microphone attached to a PC to send and receive voice-over-IP calls.

60 : By 1976, ten major airlines were using Collins Galaxy ACDs along with many car rental companies, hotels and credit card authorization centers. The immediate success of the ACD concept led to the formation of Rockwell Switching Systems Division. Actually, the first ACDs were not really ACDs but a far less advanced systems called uniform call distributors.

61 : Speech recognition software has added to the appeal of interactive voice response, and given callers alternatives to touchtone menus. In addition to understanding the syntax and grammar of complete sentences, today's speech recognition software work with more extensive vocabularies that can range from 50 to one million words. If the software doesn't recognize a phrase or word a caller says, it either repeats the customer's statement, offers several possible ways it might have understood the statement ("Did you say 'Austin' or 'Boston'?") or requests that the caller try again.

62 : Here's one proven technique that agents can use to deal with an angry, obnoxious caller: visualize squishing a pie in the caller's face. Services Editor Brendan Read's mother, a former bank teller, used this method quite effectively when some customer literally got in her face, separated, fortunately, by the teller's cage. "Because she envisioned taking that pie and smearing it into their face, she was able to conduct the transaction with a smile," says Read.

63 : In 1993, the implementation of 800 number portability in the US allows companies to change toll-free service from one carrier to another while retaining the same toll-free number. A new wave of competition and falling prices ensued, which dramatically improved the economics of call centers and prompted the rapid growth of networked environments.

64 : Remember childhood tea parties? Well, Stash Tea, based in Tigard, OR, holds real-life tea parties for call center agents as part of its training. Agents participate in tea tastings and attend seminars about the history of tea and of the company so that they become educated tea connoisseurs before answering calls.

65 : After establishing itself among the leaders in systems that routed data, Cisco acquired GeoTel for \$4 billion. Founded by Call Center Magazine Hall of Fame inductee G. Wayne Andrews, GeoTel was among the first companies to offer systems for routing calls among multiple locations and helped make the concept of distributed call centers a reality.

66 : Is hands-on training for agents at your call center crucial to providing good customer support? Just ask Crucial Technology, a manufacturer of memory expansion modules. The company, based in Meridian, ID, trains agents to install memory and ensures they acquire enough technical knowledge to communicate effectively with each customer.

67 : Is locating a call center in Las Vegas a gamble? Not if you offer amenities for agents like The California State division of the American Automobile Association does. The center contains a cafeteria with an outdoor patio and a relaxation room. Agents can visit a wellness center with exercise equipment that remains open 24 hours a day. Two full-time trainers help agents design their individual workout plans, and the center also offers classes on how to lose weight, quit smoking and perform CPR. The company also pays for job-related courses at local community colleges.

68 : In the early days, call center managers did it all. "We hired, trained, coached, took calls, fought daily fires, watched the service level, did the scheduling (on greenbar paper no less), monitored, formatted and ran reports, acquired technology, installed the network and cabled new stations," says Kathryn Jackson. "Today we have dedicated people and teams supporting us because one person alone cannot manage the complexity. We have service level groups, organizational development people, resource management groups, help desks, quantitative analysis gurus, complaint management groups, research groups, information technology groups, telecomm experts and human resources professionals – just to name a few."

69 : Aleksander Szlam, who founded, Melita International in 1983, is credited with the invention of the predictive dialer. In 1993, Szlam patented call blending, which enables agents to switch between handling inbound and outbound calls. Melita, named after Mr. Szlam's sister, now goes by the name eShare after it acquired the on-line communications company last year.

70 : Convergys, one of the largest service bureaus in the world, has a grocery store at a center in Heathrow, FL.

71 : Kathryn Jackson recalls that call centers used to "aim for, and sometimes reported, the mythical service level of 80/20." "Most of us never knew where this 'best-in-class' goal originated, but we strove for it nonetheless," she says. "There are urban legends about its derivation. Some say that it happened this way: a group of managers were discussing their service level goals for the coming year. One manager said, 'Well, you know, customers will typically wait for three rings before getting frustrated. That means we should answer all our calls within three rings (or 18 seconds, since a ring cycle is six seconds).' The next manager said, 'Hey, we can't answer every call in 18 seconds. That's too expensive! If we answer 80% of the calls, we'll be doing well!' As the months wore on, 18 seconds were soon rounded to 20 and teams everywhere agreed that the goal of 80% of the calls answered in 20 seconds was a good decision."

72 : The first 911 call took place in February 1968 in Haleyville, AL. The 911 number has since become available nationwide. Unfortunately, many people dial this number when there isn't an emergency. In our May 1997 issue, we covered the city of Baltimore's introduction of 311 as a number for residents to reach the police in nonemergency situations.

73 : Software company WordPerfect (now owned by Corel) pioneered the "visible queue" in the mid-1980s. The company set up its system up to enable "queue jockeys" to make announcements of expected hold times to incoming callers.

74 : In 1993, The FCC began to regulate phone service for cable TV companies, following a flood of complaints to Congress and the executive branch of the federal government. The case further underscored the public's growing reliance on call centers.

75 : The most amusing name for a communications server, writes Zippy Grigonis in his encyclopedia, is a "voice router." "These devices aren't voice routers, of course, but by using the word 'router,' a company's IT department can claim jurisdiction over their phone system," he points out.

76 : The second most amusing name for a communications server is the "UnPBX," a term that is descriptive, yet received some backlash, since you wouldn't call something that wasn't a toaster an un-toaster, for example.

77 : About ten years ago, Kathryn Jackson was facilitating a training session at a conference. "I'll never forget the conversation I had with one of the attendees," she recalls. "He was a businessman running a local food delivery service that employed 25 people working on the phones. "The businessman commented, 'You mean, there are others like me?' He couldn't believe all the years he thought he was the only one who ever had to deal with call center issues (although he didn't even know he ran a call center). For him, to find out that there was an actual industry was almost too much to handle." "We no longer struggle to discover that we are called a call center. Now we are struggling with the most appropriate name for what we are – a call center, a contact center, a customer interaction center, a help desk, a customer service center...well, you get the picture."

78 : The coolest way to track your outsourcing programs," according to Brendan Read, is service bureau "APAC's CustomerAssistance.com's Webcam that lets you peek over the shoulders of agents at APAC."

79 : Even the writers of Seinfeld recognize call centers. From one episode: Phone rings. Jerry answers, and we hear the voice on the other end say, "Would you like to subscribe to the NY Times?" Yes, says Jerry, and hangs up.

80 : In another episode, Jerry answers the phone, listens for a moment, and then politely asks the telemarketer for a home phone number. After a pause, he says: "Oh, you don't like it when people call you at home? Neither do I." He then hangs up.

81 : The Seinfeld writers have also recognized IVR systems. In one episode, Kramer's phone number is changed to one that is confusingly similar to 777-FILM (it is actually 555-FILK). He imitates an IVR system guessing callers' requests by figuring out what touchtone buttons they are pressing and providing them with movie information in a computer-like monotone. When he is unable to understand their touchtone entries he asks, in the same monotone, "Why don't you just tell me the name of the movie you'd like to see?"

82 : You certainly didn't need to dial ten digits to reach someone in 1878, when the first telephone exchange was installed in New Haven, CT.

83 : The World's Dumbest Decision When I formed *Call Center Magazine* , I originally called it Inbound/Outbound. I figured that described what we were going to write about – phone calls coming and going. The magazine limped along. Then one day a reader wrote me. He'd bought the magazine on the newsstand, thinking it was a shipping magazine. He was very disappointed and asked if I would send him his money back. I did, with glee. The next day we changed the name to Call Center Magazine. The magazine exploded.

-Harry Newton founder, *Inbound/Outbound Magazine*

84 : Tim Berners-Lee, a British physicist, is widely credited with the invention of the World Wide Web, laying the groundwork as early as 1980. A profile of Mr. Berners-Lee in the May 19, 1997 edition of *Time Magazine* compared his work to the invention of the printing press. For call centers, the Web has created the on-line customer and the new role of the on-line agent, who doesn't just provide service by phone.

85 : The floral industry has become a \$15 billion industry, according to an article in the February 21, 2000 issue of *Time Magazine* , led by well-known call center operations such as 1-800-FLOWERS, which was among the first call centers to sell on-line in 1994.

86 : A September 4, 2000 article in *The New York Times* described how sports-related Web sites rely on service bureaus, such as Global Sports Interactive and EFanShop.com, to sell merchandise for them rather than take the financial risk of engaging in e-commerce by themselves.

87 : The creation of a new TV show on the Food Network, "Emeril Live," featuring celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse, led to "an onslaught of 50,000 callers clamoring for tickets [that] disrupted service at a New Hampshire call center in 1998," according to a September 6, 2000 article in *The New York Times* .

88 : 1969 was a good year, and not only for the Mets. It was also when the FCC cleared MCI Telecommunications to offer long-distance service and introduced the start of what would become fierce competition for long-distance customers.

89 : Microsoft purchased the Web-based e-mail system, Hotmail, in January 1998, leading to the widespread use of free e-mail and making it absolutely necessary for call centers to offer e-mail response services.

90 : Brendan Read's ideal call center would resemble Xerox's support center in Webster, NY, where agents sit in open yet private workstations, rather than in cubicles.

91 : In 1999, ABC launches "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" which quickly becomes a worldwide phenomenon. In order to get on the show, millions of would-be millionaires call an 800 number and answer trivia questions via an IVR system. ABC was saved, two guys won a million bucks, and another barrier to IVR usage falls.

92 : USA Networks' acquisition of service bureau Precision Response made Barry Diller, chairman of the cable network, "a call center kahuna," in the words of the January 19, 2000 edition of *The New York Post* .

93 : A July 28, 2000 article in *The New York Post* described how brokerage firm Quick & Reilly began "beefing up its call center, based on research and customer comments [which indicates that] although investors like the option of placing unassisted trades on-line, they also like to know that they can reach a broker if they want to."

94 : Can a call center's average speed of answer be too good? An article in the July 12, 1997 issue of *The Economist* described how "in an effort to improve its telephone banking, Citibank has installed a system that alerts managers when a call is not answered by the third ring." "Though this might not suit sleepier climates," the article added. "One big British firm recently told its employees to stop picking up the phone at the first ring, because it unnerved customers."

95 : Scheduling in call centers was an important issues during the recent 18-day strike at Verizon. A September 4, 2000 feature in *The Washington Post* , describes how Verizon cut the maximum number of mandatory overtime hours from 15 hours to 7.5 hours per week in its new contract with customer service reps. The reps must also receive 2.5 hours' notice before they are asked to work overtime.

96 : Technical knowledge in help desks isn't enough. In a June 21, 1998 article in *The New York Times* , Eric Rabinowitz, president of IHS Helpdesk Service, says he prefers to hire full-time support reps with experience as "flight attendants, salespeople, even bank tellers" because of their skills in customer service.

97 : Dell announced on August 31, 2000 that it would open a call center in Bangalore, India, to serve customers on the subcontinent and possibly in other English-speaking countries; Tata Infotech, an outsourcer, will answer calls for Dell.

98 : As described in an August 2, 1998 article in *The New York Times* , call centers have become an important business in Maine, and not only in Freeport, home to catalog company L.L. Bean. In Belfast, ME, which had double-digit unemployment, former chicken pluckers are now call center agents for credit card company MBNA.

99 : Despite the rumors that the "Love Bug" e-mail virus that sickened many computers in spring 2000 may have originated in the Philippines, the island earned a reputation as an emerging tech support hub for companies such as AOL and Andersen Consulting.

100 : Capreol, a small town in Ontario, Canada, opens a service bureau in June 2000 to help reduce its 17% unemployment. The city's mayor reports that agents often bring in home-baked goods to create a friendly and productive work environment.

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