



Florist's Business Blooms with High Tech and High Touch

Case Study: George K. Walker Florist



Issues

- ◆ Time consuming and unwieldy steps involved in processing telephone orders
- ◆ Long hold times and caller abandons during peak seasons
- ◆ No management statistics
- ◆ A traditional phone system that lacked functionality and was expensive to maintain

Solution

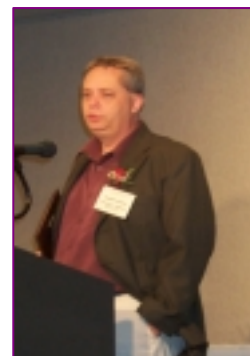
- ◆ Flexible converged communications system that integrates with the MAS Management System

Results

- ◆ Efficient call routing
- ◆ Shorter call connect time
- ◆ Screen-pops with caller profile
- ◆ Increase in orders with fewer calls dropped
- ◆ Bottom-line increased profitably

Since opening its doors in 1961, George K. Walker Florist of Winston-Salem, North Carolina has watched the floral industry become increasingly competitive. Part-time flower arrangers and dot.com overnights now often go head-to-head with even the most established enterprises. President Joe Hinson, who began by delivering flowers for George K. Walker twenty-six years ago, says his daily mission is to uphold the company's traditions while building an increasingly profitable business model. And in today's world, that means having an airtight business plan and the best customer service around.

His company's new converged communications system from Alternate Access® is George K. Walker's competitive advantage on both counts. From sales and marketing, to customer service, Hinson says, "The telephone makes or breaks our business. The last thing you want to happen is for a customer to have a bad experience with your phone system. To deliver premium service, while planning for the future of our company, we've found this is the only way to go."



Joe Hinson, President

And just to test that theory, Hinson installed his new phone system twelve days before Mother's Day – a florist's busiest time of year. The result – by eliminating extra processing steps that cause communications gridlock, George K. Walker's orders were up by 20%. Fewer calls were dropped. And the average time agents were on the phone with customers went from 4 minutes to 3 minutes. Hinson says, "We are very pleased!"

A Nightmare Replaced by a 'CAN DO' System



George K. Walker's old phone system was a proprietary nightmare. While straightforward in day-to-day usability, it was limited in function. The slightest adjustments were either not possible or were expensive to implement because each required outsourcing to the telephone vendor.

A move to a new building provided the impetus for Hinson to find a replacement communications system, and after talking with Alternate Access he says he considered nothing else. "A new system just fell into our plans; and this one is so flexible," he says. "It seems that anything we want it to do, our new phone system CAN do."

By deciding on a software-based strategy that unites the power of his desktop PCs with the reach of his telephones, Hinson has opened up a world of possibilities for his forty-year-old floral business.

Customer Service is Fine-Tuned to the Individual

First on the list is customer service. Before an incoming call is queued to a George K. Walker agent, caller ID pulls up all known customer account information on the computer screen—such as customer preferences, former orders, birthdays, anniversaries. Not only is access to account information immediate, says Hinson, but the screen pops also rate the customer according to how much he or she buys – and even provide scripts for different situations. When the agent takes the call, her screen might read something like, "This is a top 100 customer. Do not suggest red roses, his wife hates red roses." With all this information readily available, the agent can concentrate on selling to the customer instead of stumbling through an order.

Hinson says, "Nine times out of ten, we can tell who is calling before the call is taken. The agent can verify the customer's name, greet him, and begin having a conversation – such as, 'Is your friend in the hospital okay, do you need to send anything to her?'"

Customers are also able to call into George K. Walker 24 hours a day and get delivery confirmation. They punch in their order number and a recording gives them delivery status.

Hinson says the floral company is also programming Interactive Voice Response (IVR) applications to automatically tell callers account balances, payment options, and payment address without the need to tie-up a call center representative's time.



Within the next month, George K. Walker will begin conducting regular automated customer satisfaction surveys using its own phone system. A survey script might read something like, "We made a delivery to your home yesterday and are conducting an automated survey to learn if you are happy with your order. Please rate your overall experience using the keys 1 to 5 on your phone, with 5 being excellent service and 1 being poor service." At the conclusion, George K. Walker sends a \$5 coupon to those participating in the survey, to be used towards their next order. And all responses are automatically downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet.

A Sales Tool That Brings Marketing Ideas to Reality

Hinson's business plan for George K. Walker includes delivering information to potential customers in as many ways as they can receive it. He invests heavily in television, radio, and print advertising, direct mail, online promotions, and strategic sponsorships.

Hinson is glad that his new phone system is as comprehensive and full-featured a sales tool as Walker's other marketing efforts. He says, "When we found Alternate Access in Raleigh, NC, Kelly Lumpkin, CEO, came to see us in Winston-Salem the next day. From there things moved very rapidly."



George K. Walker uses a Linux-based computer system with MAS, an award-winning application written specifically for florists, that has functions particular to the industry. The author of the MAS application, Abner Maldonado, based in Scottsdale, AZ, is also George K. Walker's IT guru. "As MAS and Alternate Access talked technology, the ideas for the system just kept coming," says Hinson. "We found that we could do so much as far as merging all our communications – telephone, fax, Internet. The sky's the limit with what we can do."

Abner Maldonado concurs, "Kelly really knows communication systems, and I really know computers and operating systems. We've been a really good team."

Hinson adds, "It's good to have a vendor who will work with you to get you where you want to go. Kelly is such a good technologist, and he is always thinking ahead – he comes up with new suggestions for how we can use our system before we've even thought it up." And what a change that is from what George K. Walker had experienced before.

"One of the best features is that we can record our own messages and program them ourselves," Hinson says. "With our old phone system, I had to call the vendor the day before. They'd tell me they would make the change between 9 and 10, and I should switch my modems during that time. After 10:00, I'd have to switch my modems back. And then I'd get a bill for \$120 – for probably no more than two minutes work."

"All of us are looking at the bottom line, and our new converged communications system is truly the only way to go. It saves me money and makes my life so much easier."

A Quick Return on Investment

With the installation of George K. Walker's new phone system just two weeks before Mother's Day, Hinson knew he was taking a risk. After all, 90% of his holiday business would be conducted over the phone. "I told Kelly I was comfortable trying it then," he says. "And we had no problems at all."

The switchover took less than four hours and was accomplished in the late afternoon/early evening, when Walker's calls roll over to its national call center. "We were experimenting with the system at 8:30 that evening," Hinson says, "and were full steam ahead at 8:00 the next morning."

Hinson's staff took to the system immediately. Alternate Access technicians were on hand to answer questions, which were simple inquiries such as, "How do I transfer a call?" and "How do I turn up my volume?" George K. Walker agents all work from computer stations, and their familiarity with a Windows interface made learning the new phone system a snap.

Have there been any surprises at all? Only one, says Hinson. "I am amazed at just how pleased I am with this purchase. It's one of the best investments I've ever made!"

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