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Tripping up "Walking Payphones"

Preventing hit-and-run subscribers from making thousands worth of calls in a weekend under assumed identities.

By Elen Muraskin

01/07/2002, 10:05 AM ET

The Premises:

St. Maarten Telephone, Philipsburg, St. Maarten

The Problem:

Fraud, inflexibility, and human error take a toll on telco revenues.

The Pieces:

- Sentori Billing, Mediation, and Customer Care software
- Oracle database

The Payback:

- Automated, real-time, multi-network CDR collection assures complete billing cycles
- Flexible report creation spots hit-and-run account fraud before huge losses accrue
- Flexible rating engine allows billing for present and future competitive plans
- Market segmentation allows tailored promotions

The Plot:

St. Maarten Telephone is a provider of local, long-distance, wireless telephony and Internet access in multilingual (French, English, and Dutch) Saint Maarten, a 37-square-mile island 150 miles southeast of Puerto Rico. To promote competition, the local government prevents them from bundling all their data, wireline and wireless telecom services together. So St. Maarten

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Define It

Telephone operates TDMA and GSM wireless service as TelCell, landline service as TelEm, and its ISP business as TelNet.

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While the telco could not bundle its services, it did need a new billing system to converge disparate wireless networks: GSM and TDMA, both pre- and post-paid. It needed a tool for improving customer service in all three island languages and currencies: U.S. Dollars, Dutch Guilders, and French Francs. It needed a way to segment the customer base into pre-and-post paid across disparate networks. And it needed a system that could reduce the company's exposure to plain old human error and fraud.

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As things stand, TelCell and TelEm each have their own servers running the Sentori (Laurel, MD - 240-568-6201, <http://www.sentori.com/>) billing, mediation, and customer care system. Brian Mingo, general manager for TelCell, notes that the TelCell deployment converges CDRs from both the Siemens EWSD switch, supporting his GSM network, and the Nortel DMS-MTX, supporting TDMA. Several customers have both phones, using TDMA for roaming within the U.S. and GSM handsets to take their numbers with them on European trips. The billing system also rates and bills for CIBER roaming files that come in from Bell South, and TAP3 roaming CDRs that come in from the GSM provider. (Mingo is trying to migrate all his subscribers to GSM; he believes the wireless standard will win over in North America as it has in Europe, as it supports more services and security features.)

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In addition to preparing printed bills, TelCell and TelEm use Sentori to reconcile prepaid accounts. Sister company Smitcom, an international long-distance wholesaler, invoices TelCell with TelCell's own Sentori system as well, and also uses it to settle with its own suppliers: the WorldComs and other international carriers.

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St. Maarten Telephone previously ran a Comsoft billing program on IBM AS400s. IBM expertise was rare and expensive on the island, Mingo says. The open, Oracle-based Sentori allows the telco to use common reporting tools. The old billing system was also vulnerable to error and fraud. When batch tape files of CDRs had to be manually taken off shelves in several departments

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and loaded for rating and billing, a month-long billing cycle could wind up missing days or hours of transactions.

"Now we can't have that problem, because we've taken out some of the human factors. The system keeps close track and fills up the whole month cycle, and you can easily see every transaction," says Mingo.

Sentori's "pre-commit" view of rated bills allows TelCell to spot wide variations from a normal billing cycle and to correct rating mistakes before bills are printed. Example: "Let's say there's a country that has just acquired a new dialing plan, and it has delivered it to one department, but the department fails to forward it to billing."

This did happen once. Revenues appeared to skyrocket, because the destination of calls made to relatively nearby French territories was not recognized; such unidentified calls defaulted to a three-dollar-per-minute rate instead of the normal 60 cents. "We detected that in the pre-commit stage, so it was easy to turn it back and rerate the month, and then commit it with a delay of only a few days," says Mingo.

Stamping Out Fraud

Cell phone cloning isn't a problem on St. Maarten, but fraudulent subscribers, who get postpaid accounts under forged ID papers, are. They "resell" their service by loaning out their handsets to "customers" who run up huge bills in international calls before telcos notice. These hit-and-run subscribers then vanish.

"We have no third-party means of identifying people," explains Mingo, although in the States, Sentori does incorporate third-party address verification. TelCell's fraudulent subscriber would "pay the deposit to start the account on Friday, and over the weekend he'd resell minutes on his cellular phone - it's like a walking payphone. On Tuesday or Wednesday you'd notice the guy hit you for 20,000 Dutch guilders over U.S.\$11,000."

With Sentori, Mingo devised a report that would show daily from the rating engine if anyone made more than 50 calls per day or ran up bills over a certain amount. That report listed all possible fraud cases, leaving actual disconnect up to human intervention. The telco did not want to risk disconnecting legitimate, recognized, high-volume customers. This trap has saved TelCell 2% of total wireless revenues, reports Sentori.

TelCell plans to use the web-based billing module of Sentori in the near future, and are readying flat- and group-rate pricing plans for early this year. They also use the browser-based eCAM software for agent views into bills.

Two years ago, Mingo's choice for billing systems came down to VeraBill (subsequently acquired by Mind CTI) and ASC (since renamed Sentori). "ASC won because we put a lot of stress on mobile service, which is much more dynamic than PSTN. ASC had a very strong module in mobile billing. VeraBill couldn't immediately support TDMA as well as GSM, and Sentori already had a roaming module." They will be ready, Mingo notes, to produce convergent wireless,



A promotional banner for ICMI. On the left is the ICMI logo, which includes the text 'icmi' in a large, bold, blue font, with 'International Customer Management Institute' in a smaller font below it. To the right of the logo, the main text reads 'SMART STRATEGY = STRONG LEADERSHIP: AN EXECUTIVE WORKSHOP ON CALL CENTER STRATEGIC PLANNING' in white, bold, uppercase letters against a blue background. Further to the right, a grey box contains the text 'Uncover proven strategies.' in a blue, italicized font. At the bottom right of the banner, a dark blue button with white text says 'REGISTER NOW'.