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May 2006
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HUMAN RESOURCES

Name badges can add up. For Family Dollar Stores, that meant mounting costs associated with a paper-based system that the company used to register new employees and to put names on their chests. So it recently switched to a telephone voice-response system built internally using Angel.com technology.

Now, when new Family Dollar employees complete orientation training, they call a number, respond to approximately 10 questions and spell their names. They soon receive their name badges, and Family Dollar executives get some quick and easy-to-track information.

“Using a phone transaction is a lot simpler than going out and training someone on a new computer platform,” says Del Bristol, Family Dollar’s divisional vice president of HR operations, systems and benefits. “It’s something that everyone is familiar with. It’s very easy to use, and you get a nice outcome.”

Does a “press one for yes, two for no” survey provide results as dynamic as a company might get through computer-based questioning? Probably not, Bristol admits. But getting all employees onto a computer is not an option for Family Dollar, which has stores at varied levels of technology delivery. Internet access isn’t available to many of the company’s roughly 42,000 employees.

IVR solution

As such, an interactive voice response (IVR) solution was deemed the best option to replace the regis-

New Hires Speak Up

IVR helps Family Dollar collect **HR data** at even the most tech-challenged locations

BY REBECCA LOGAN

A Family Dollar employee name badge is no thicker than a credit card. But if you were to collect badges from five employees at each of the 6,000 Family Dollar stores and stack them flat, you would have a tower taller than most lighthouses in the discount retailer’s home state of North Carolina.

tration booklets and postcards that Family Dollar had been using for new employees.

Angel.com — a McLean, Va.-based division of MicroStrategy — was selected as the provider. Bristol's team set up and maintains the phone system and Family Dollar avoided sinking a ton of money into new equipment.

That's an integral part of Michael Zirngibl's sales pitch. "The old way of rolling out an application to employees was to buy lots of hardware and hire five people," says Zirngibl, president and CEO of Angel.com. "The new way, that we represent, is that you go to a web browser and you configure your application."

Zirngibl says Angel.com's online Site Builder toolkit is designed to make implementation easy. Typically, knowledge about an application's intent is maintained in the human resources or marketing departments, but it is implemented by the IT department. "There was always a disconnect," Zirngibl says. "With a tool like ours, we put the business owners more in charge of driving the application."

Family Dollar tested its IVR system at a few hundred stores from October through January. All employees began phoning in February.

Tweaks were made to the questions based on the early tests. For example, some people had been hanging up before completing the call, so the portion of the phone call during which employees spell their names for their ID badges was moved to the

very end.

The particular questions employees are asked depend on their positions. A person hired to work the cash register, for example, will answer questions about cash-register training.

Angel.com's service allows companies to track telephone response data on spreadsheets. If Family Dollar executives notice any response patterns that concern them, they might have an issue to bring up with a trainer, Bristol says.

Family Dollar does not have dedicated human resources personnel in each store, so the telephone system is helping information flow between the corporate office and store-level employees. "It's about knowing more and making sure the HR programs are hitting the mark," Bristol says.

Bristol declined to disclose what Family Dollar is paying Angel.com, but he says it was easy to form a compelling ROI case given what the company had spent on materials, postage and labor for handling new-hire postcards. (Angel.com's basic retail rate is 15 cents for each minute users spend on the system, Zirngibl says, and is adjusted based on the size and duration of a company's contract, as well as the level of service it selects.)

Options include a system built on a reverse look-up directory, which automatically collects name and address data from callers.

Some of Angel.com's large retail clients have used the technology to set up call-in systems for customers. KB Toys operates a store locator line

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through Angel.com, and Captain D's uses it to survey restaurant customers via a toll-free number printed on receipts.

Trumping a mouse

Zirngibl insists that there are times when telephone-based systems trump a mouse and a keyboard. "Listening to a human voice is much more powerful than reading a quick paragraph on a website. It's much more personal."

For his part, Bristol sees no drawbacks to asking employees to dial an IVR line. It is, he says, a practical way to form connections across an expansive employee base.

"Our workforce is starved for attention," he says. "This is an opportunity for them to have a voice." **STORES**

Rebecca Logan is a Harford County, Md.-based writer who covered retail issues for a North Carolina newspaper for four years.