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Feature ARTICLE

VAS Creating a Virtual Stir and Quality Jobs in Rural New Brunswick

by Greg Levin

*A virtual approach to customer care that overcomes staffing challenges
and motivates agents to exceed customer expectations.*

The nine PODs that currently make up Virtual-Agent Services' outsourcing model aren't alien, but VAS employees and clients feel the PODs are out of this world.

If it weren't for these PODs, many of VAS' agents, supervisors and managers would likely be struggling to find promising full-time jobs near their homes, and many of VAS' clients would likely be struggling to meet their service level objectives.

The PODs (not an acronym) are fully functional customer contact centers—each located in a rural New Brunswick community featuring underemployed, work-ready labor forces, and networked under a common telecommunications system to form a single, virtual operation.

"With the distributed workforce concept, we 'bring work to the people,' as opposed to trying to get people to come to us for jobs," explains Bob Camastro, president of VAS and the person who is often credited with introducing the distributed workforce concept to the customer care industry. "With this type of arrangement, we can select the cream of the agent crop, as we have no minimum on call center size. We also have little to no competition for labor in the markets where we operate. This puts us in a position to provide quality service at price points that are normally associated with much lower service expectations."

Of course, you shouldn't just take Camastro's word for it; in fact, he would prefer that you didn't. Instead, he recommends that you listen to what VAS' clients have to say:

"VAS has done an excellent job for our company," says Caryl Hesel, vice president of reservations and distribution for Kimpton Hotel Group. "The employees are so thrilled to have jobs in their rural areas that they go above and beyond in customer service for our company. They are truly professional and highly motivated. The concept works—and works well."

Apparently, most of the company's other clients agree. In the past two years, VAS has won two highly prestigious awards in which end-users—not judges—do the voting. These awards include a Users' Choice Award presented by RealMarket for Contact Center Tools in July 2002, and, in February 2003, a Members' Choice Award for Best U.S. Outsourcer.

The Germination of Innovation

The idea for VAS' unique "satellite" call center concept began to germinate in the late 1990s, back when Camastro was working as vice president of call center consulting for a company called The Graycon Group. Representatives from the provincial government of New Brunswick and the local telephone company (NBTel, now known as Aliant Inc.) had come to Graycon with an interesting problem. As Camastro explains, "The province had targeted call centers as a growth industry for their community, as they were trying to add a new dimension to their otherwise earth industry economy. By all measures, they were successful and had grown to 7,000 seats provincewide. The problem was that all of the call centers were locating in the same three cities of Moncton, St. John and Fredericton, which are by far the largest communities in the province."

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The consolidation of call centers into these three locations began stressing the infrastructure of the cities and "threatening to tarnish the good name of New Brunswick as a great place to locate your calls," says Camastro. The province was desperate to find a way to spread its booming call center business out into its rural areas, where there was no shortage of good labor. Camastro was eager to get involved.

"I spent about eight months analyzing the situation... and the more I learned, the more I was convinced that I was looking at an extraordinary opportunity. There was a remarkable feel of cooperation between the telephone company and the government. The people in rural New Brunswick were educated, loyal and abundant. Most importantly, the provincial and local governments stood ready to do whatever was necessary to advance the project."

With so much potential for success, Camastro and other

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Graycon executives decided to start-up VAS as an inbound customer care provider, under Camastro's direction.

A Peek Inside the PODs

The first POD opened in the town of Sussex in October of 1999. Eight more have since been added—one in each of the following towns: Doaktown; Minto; St. Louis de Kent; St. Andrews; St. George; Neguac; Petitcodiac; and Chipman. In all, more than 550 FTEs work as agents in the nine PODs, with Minto being the largest center (92 FTEs). In addition, VAS has a management team at its Canadian headquarters in Moncton, as well as several executives and staff members at its U.S. headquarters in Schaumburg, Ill.

The PODs collectively handle customer calls for 35

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clients, most of whom are companies in the hospitality and travel industries, with a few other clients in the utility, retail/catalog sales, and roadside assistance industries. Many of the clients have outsourced 100 percent of their customer contacts to VAS, while others use VAS to help with overflow or busy season calls.

VAS has the ability to route calls on a "next-available" basis to any agent at any given POD, but Camastro explains that, "given the makeup of our client base, we do not have a need to fully utilize our system in that way." He says that VAS has some clients with their own dedicated PODs, which were built specifically for their applications; clients that share a POD but have dedicated agent teams; clients that have dedicated agents who reside in multiple PODs; and clients that share a POD and an agent team with other non-competing clients. "The beauty of our environment," Camastro explains, "is that we can do just about whatever the clients request in terms of configuration of facilities and work groups."

One of the highlights of VAS' virtual operation is a dedicated Operations Control Center (OCC)—dual-located remotely and redundantly in both Schaumburg and Moncton—which manages real-time routing and all forecasting, planning and scheduling for the nine PODs. "This allows our PODs to focus entirely on call handling and customer service," says Camastro. ... "This is unlike most

multisite call center operations, which feel a need to maintain a full array of overhead functions in each center."

Big Impact on Local Economies, Employment

While Camastro is very proud of the efficient and quality service that VAS is able to provide its call center clients, he's perhaps even more proud of the positive economical impact the company has had throughout New Brunswick.

"With 500-plus workers, VAS makes a notable impact on the overall provincial economy, but our biggest impact is in the local communities where we locate our PODs. Not only do we bring new revenue to these communities, but we also help to stimulate the areas surrounding our offices given the traffic we generate."

And, of course, the people who make up the local labor markets certainly are not complaining, not with the new lease on employment life that VAS' PODs have provided.

While unemployment has not been a major problem in the past in these rural regions, underemployment has, says Camastro. "Given the nature of the traditional earth industries in the areas where VAS operates, it is common to find seasonal jobs in agriculture, fishing, forestry and tourism, but few full-time, year-round jobs." He adds that the few full-time jobs that are available tend to be low-paying with little or no benefits.

Camastro, however, doesn't claim that VAS is doing the labor force in rural New Brunswick any favors; the way he sees it, these people are educated, hard workers who deserve the good job opportunities his company has been able to provide. "Our agents are refreshingly courteous and helpful by nature, and have a solid educational background, with 75 percent holding a junior college or university degree." Camastro points out that New Brunswick has a very advanced education system, with community colleges in every region of the province, most of which even offer call center/customer service-specific courses or programs. "Given New Brunswick's strategic commitment to the call center industry," says Camastro, "a student is able to take a customer service course in one of the community colleges to better prepare them to work in a call center."

Comprehensive Recruiting, Customized Training

Just because there is an abundance of qualified candidates in the region doesn't mean that VAS takes agent recruiting and training lightly. The company uses a host of recruiting tools, including the New Brunswick Jobnet (the provincewide employment database), newspaper ads, college placement programs and employee referral programs. VAS receives ample assistance with recruiting from regional economical development agencies such as the Regional Economic Development Commission, Provincial Economic

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Development Commission, Human Resources Development Canada, and the New Brunswick Community Colleges. "Each of these government bodies runs ads on our behalf and supports our recruiting and training efforts in numerous ways," explains Camastro.

To ensure a good hiring fit, VAS has implemented a comprehensive pretesting process that each agent candidate must complete. The process includes, but is not limited to, the testing of keyboarding skills, PC literacy, spelling, customer service skills, communication skills and geography knowledge. Those who pass the prescreening process move on to a multifaceted interview process, the highlight of which is a Web-based psychological performance profiling tool. The tool works by "cloning" VAS' 15 best agents (updated regularly) and determining the common performance denominators among them. From this information, a "preferred applicant" profile is then created and used to evaluate how each agent candidate measures up to the call center ideal.

Even the most rigorously screened candidates, once hired, will need to gain client-specific skills and knowledge if they are to succeed on the phone floor of one of the PODs. That's why VAS invests so much effort in initial and ongoing training.

"Each of our training programs is client-specific and focused on meeting each company's individual needs," says Camastro. "Our training is designed to combine theory with practical hands-on learning in an environment that reduces stress and encourages people to work together and share ideas with respect and dignity."

To learn the specific training curriculum and absorb the unique corporate culture of a given client, VAS trainers participate in train-the-trainer programs at the client's facilities. Following these sessions, the VAS trainers return to New Brunswick to conduct training classes with newly

hired virtual agents. Another training option for clients is to send their own trainers to New Brunswick to conduct new-hire sessions; however, most clients choose the train-the-trainer approach.

No Pain, No PODs

While adopting a virtual—and rural—approach to customer care enables VAS to overcome staffing challenges and to exceed customer expectations, it does present its share of challenges. The biggest such challenge is the sometimes excessive travel and conferencing needed to foster strong relationships and effective communication with clients, and a sense of "one-ness" among the widely distributed PODs.

Still in all, it's a relatively small price to pay for abundant quality labor and excellent service, according to Camastro.

"The extra travel and conferencing is more than worth the time and cost given the quality of the workforce we have been able to assemble with the distributed workforce concept. Having worked in large consolidated centers in the past, I have found that quality communication is more a function of how well people work with each other rather than whether or not they sit in the same room."

Okay, but how do the actual VAS managers—the people who have to endure all the extra travel and conferencing—feel about their jobs? Strangely enough, they aren't complaining.

"[The] distributed workforce has been a godsend," says Pennie Delaney, a VAS regional manager. "It has allowed me to build a very enjoyable and stable career within my community. Many thanks to Bob Camastro for bringing this opportunity to the rural areas of New Brunswick." ■

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