

Case Study: Public Sector

Wandsworth Borough Council's innovative use of speech automated direct debit technology

Telephonetics vip
making sound
business sense



Wandsworth Borough Council is a four star London authority, recognised by the Audit commission for their dedication to continuous improvement. The council enjoys a reputation for competence and efficiency with a record 25 Charter Mark quality awards achieved across all of its departments. To further enhance their approach to sustained improvement, Wandsworth recently introduced an innovative telephony service for direct debits.

The Challenge

Wandsworth Borough Council is responsible for the billing and collection of council tax at over 132,000 properties. Daily, they handle an incredible 450 items of correspondence. In order to meet collection targets and promote ease of payment, Wandsworth introduced and actively promoted a direct debit hotline. Three full-time, temporary members of staff were then employed to answer direct debit telephone calls, during office hours.

Following the successful introduction of the hotline, senior managers were keen to review service delivery and extend opening hours. The project goals moving forward were to capitalise on the existing direct debit hotline number, provide an extended 24 x 7 user friendly service to meet customer needs and ensure calls were not abandoned.

The project was also tasked with making cost savings to enable the authority to reduce their reliance on temporary staff. The ideal solution was one that could be implemented quickly,



with minimum disruption and had good auditable trails and management information.

The Solution

On Tuesday 31st March 2009, council colleagues were introduced to a new starter 'Kate'. Kate was not your traditional new member of staff but an innovative 'virtual agent' from a speech recognition system. Kate would now be answering telephone calls into the direct debit hotline.

“Since introducing the speech automated direct debit solution, we have, to date, increased our direct debit take up by more than 40% compared to the same period last year.”

Kate works by asking a series of questions, to enable customers to set up a monthly direct debit and select a preferred date of payment. The use of speech recognition is combined with the phone keypad so council tax and bank account information is keyed in rather than spoken, thus ensuring confidentiality and data security.

Once Kate has the relevant information, she validates the customer details and bank sort code on the council system. Following validation, a confirmation letter is then issued to the customer and a detailed file is sent to the customer's bank, advising of the new direct debit instruction.

Whilst direct debits are being set up quietly in the background, management have access to instant reporting facilities showing full details of calls that have taken place including telephone numbers, times of the calls and the amount a direct debit has been set up for.

During the call, if a problem occurs with any of the details registered, the customer is put through to a Council Tax

Telephonetics VIP deploy technologically-advanced telephony systems that deliver real business benefits to our customers. Our solutions are developed with 15 years of solid performance delivery - 550 installations, and over 50 million scrutinised calls.

Our market-tailored speech solutions work to provide assistance in demanding environments, providing speech self-service, call steering, mobility, outbound messaging and business continuity.

Whether you need a solution to automate the payment of council tax or parking charges, to allow the reporting of a missed dustbin collection or an abandoned vehicle, we have the solution to meet your needs.

At a time when everybody's talking about value, beyond simply cutting costs – we can play our part in making your existing budgets work more effectively.

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call 01442 242 242 and say
"Speech matters"**



Officer. These fallback calls are handled internally via a whisper transfer (Kate tells a member of staff the

account number and reason for the transfer) before the customer is connected. This ensures that the customer does not have to repeat the information they have already provided.

The speech recognition system fully utilises the current back-end infrastructure and processes by updating accounts 'real time' using a new piece of software called Integrator. This new and innovative solution ensures the system is fully self sufficient from start to finish, alleviating the need for human intervention and reducing human error. The customer, therefore, goes away with peace of mind that their transaction has been confirmed and was successful.

Conclusion

Wandsworth Council Tax Service said *"Since introducing the speech automated direct debit solution, we have, to date, increased our direct debit take up by more than 40% compared to the same period last year. Kate handles on average 170 calls per day, with an excellent success rate in setting up direct debits."*

"Results and customer feedback have been very positive. We have conducted a telephone survey with

a number of users of the system and results show the system to be user friendly, with no one rating the system less than four out of five."

"Direct debit automation allows the great team of hard working staff we have in the council tax department to get on with other important work, relieving them of the relentless phones ringing in the back office."

The Future

Wandsworth's high level ambition is to deliver excellent customer service cost effectively, whenever and however customers contact the Council. This is tied in to a specific performance target to drive up first time contact resolution rates to over 80%. Training staff to work smarter and realise the benefits of the authority's investment in new technology are key to successfully delivering this ambition.

Suzanne Lancaster, Council Tax Manager at Wandsworth Borough Council said *"From a management point of view, direct debit set up requires little management."*

"We are considering the use of automation for other telephone calls and are talking to the company (Telephonetics VIP) daily on this project, discussing the potential for all kinds of applications, bringing them in as soon as possible."

Telephonetics VIP How we make a difference

- **Improved customer service**
Customers can call in 24 x 7 and set up a direct debit
- **User friendly**
Quick and simple to use
- **Manages traffic peaks**
Handles routine calls politely and consistently, reducing queuing times
- **Data Security**
Secure encrypted data collection
- **Single easy to promote contact number**
- **Peace of mind**
Real time confirmation of financial transaction
- **Staff involvement**
During office hours, calls can be transferred to a member of staff in the Council Tax department, as necessary
- **Remove mundane tasks**
Allowing members of staff to focus on and prioritise their workload.

