

WORLD VISION TSUNAMI APPEAL

By Elise Kelsey

WHEN THE TSUNAMI DISASTER HIT, WORLD VISION WENT INTO OVERDRIVE TO PULL OFF ONE OF THE BIGGEST APPEALS THIS COUNTRY HAS EVER SEEN. ELISE KELSEY SPOKE TO ANDREW JOHNSTON, HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICE AT WORLD VISION, ABOUT THIS UNPRECEDENTED FEAT.

No one could have imagined the events of December 26th 2004 let alone the scale and magnitude of what was to be revealed. Before this date, to most people anyway, tsunamis seemed to be the making of myth and legend. But on December 26th, just after Christmas, along the beaches of up to a dozen nations, where holiday makers strolled, sunbathers gathered, and locals went about their daily business, a nightmare unfolded of inconceivable proportions. A massive undersea earthquake off the Sumatra coastline, measuring 9 on the Richter scale, caused a giant wave that devastated and destroyed whole villages, populations and livelihoods. Even today, weeks after the event, we are still coming to grips with what occurred, and what proved to be one of the world's greatest natural disasters.

At the last count, the death toll had risen to nearly 300,000 people in eleven countries. Children have been left homeless, parents have lost children, entire families have been wiped out and in some cases, whole island habitats have disappeared.

The power and devastation of this event seemed to reach out and touch the entire globe. As the full magnitude of the disaster became apparent, so did the world's response, which has been nothing short of overwhelming and unified in its approach.

In Australia the response has been significant, not just from government, which has pledged over \$1 billion in

ROAD TEST

Operating system: Customer Interaction Centre by Interactive Intelligence & Calltime Solutions	Outbound calls: On a normal day: 1500-2000 calls
Workforce management: Open Wave	Tsunami concert appeal: 2200 seats, 2500 staff, 160,000 calls in 5hrs
Seats: 160 seats onsite and 100 FTE (40 inbound, 40 outbound, 20 multiskilled for admin & phones)	Grade of service: 81 per cent of calls in 20 seconds
Capacity: 160 onsite with external capacity for a further 200+ via Enterprise Data Corporation (EDC)	Abandonment rate: 5 per cent
Inbound calls: On a normal day: 1500-2000 calls	Lines: Normally 160 but increased to 3000 for the 'Reach Out to Asia Tsunami concert appeal'
	Carrier: AAPT



ANDREW JOHNSTON, HEAD OF CUSTOMER SERVICE, WORLD VISION

"OUR TEAM HAS BEEN JUST AMAZING. THEY'VE WORKED AROUND THE CLOCK AND HAVE REALLY STRETCHED THEMSELVES BEYOND ALL MEANS."



ongoing aid, but from the ordinary community as well, who to date have donated over \$140 million to the cause. On top of this, countless companies and volunteers have put their hands up to help out in any way that they can. One of the first ways they were able to show their support was through aid agencies such as World Vision.

World Vision Australia is just one of the aid agencies that hit the ground running on the 26th December last year, but their story is an inspiring one and an important one for the call centre community to hear. What they achieved in such a short time frame and on such a huge scale was nothing short of phenomenal. Whilst contingency plans for natural disasters are always in place at World Vision, the sheer size of this catastrophe meant that anything could have happened — and it did. The industry banded together and united to pull off a real coup, not only for World Vision, but for the call centre industry as a whole.

Andrew Johnston is head of customer service at World Vision and responsible for the call centre based in East Burwood, Melbourne. On an ordinary working day, the call centre takes 1500 to 2000 calls, and makes about

the same in outbound acquisition calls. By definition, World Vision calls itself an overseas relief aid and development agency. Their normal bread and butter, if you can call it that, centres around child sponsorship. Currently they have around 325,000 sponsored children and 400,000 regular supporters who they manage through the call centre on a day-to-day basis. In addition, World Vision runs a large number of marketing campaigns throughout the year to assist people in situations such as the Philippines typhoons and the Sudan crisis.

According to Johnston, the nature of their job includes the fact that several times per year, they are likely to have to ramp up for major emergency appeals and have all systems on go. “Some of it is unforeseen, like last year’s Baan earthquakes, and at other times we might put an activity out there in the marketplace, such as a TV special.” It was for this reason that they bought Johnston on board at the call centre four years ago

— to respond to campaigns such as this and change the model under which they had operated for around ten years. Johnston, who had come from a background in insurance at RACV and AXA, was given the task of



changing the World Vision call centre model so it could act more like an outsourcing bureau. In other words, it became clear to World Vision that they needed to have the ability to scale up rapidly. “One of the things the organisation recognised back then was that the moment an appeal hits, we were likely to be caught wrong footed — unable to bring on additional staff and resources. So in the last four years, we’ve set about changing the business model to one where we can scale up rapidly and have clear plans in place for increasing the

Intelligence, Customer Interaction Centre (CIC) deployed and supported by Calltime Solutions (See Figures 1 & 2). “Essentially, it is a highly flexible telephony platform in a PC box. CIC is an integrated solution encompassing PABX, ACD, multimedia routing, IVR, dialer, call logger and quality monitoring in one system,” Johnston says, “The moment we are asked to push the button and increase our capacity, we do an evaluation of what that actually means and we move on various things that we need to ramp up the only difference with the tsunami appeal

number of seats, increasing the telecommunications infrastructure, increasing the number of bodies rapidly and quickly up-skilling and training them so that they are geared towards the World Vision aims.”

Johnston says that whilst they are a ‘humble charity’ their board agreed about five years ago to purchase some very smart technology. What they chose was a telephony system that would allow them to rapidly build call queues and alter the operating model very quickly. It would also allow them to increase capacity in the event of an emergency, such as in the case of the 2003 bushfires where they were able to set up a 30-seat inbound call

was the sheer scale and the fact that things were changing every day.”

Typically, the week after Christmas is a quiet time for the World Vision call centre. In the run up to Christmas they tend to be very busy and operate a number of acquisition campaigns for child sponsorship. This lasts

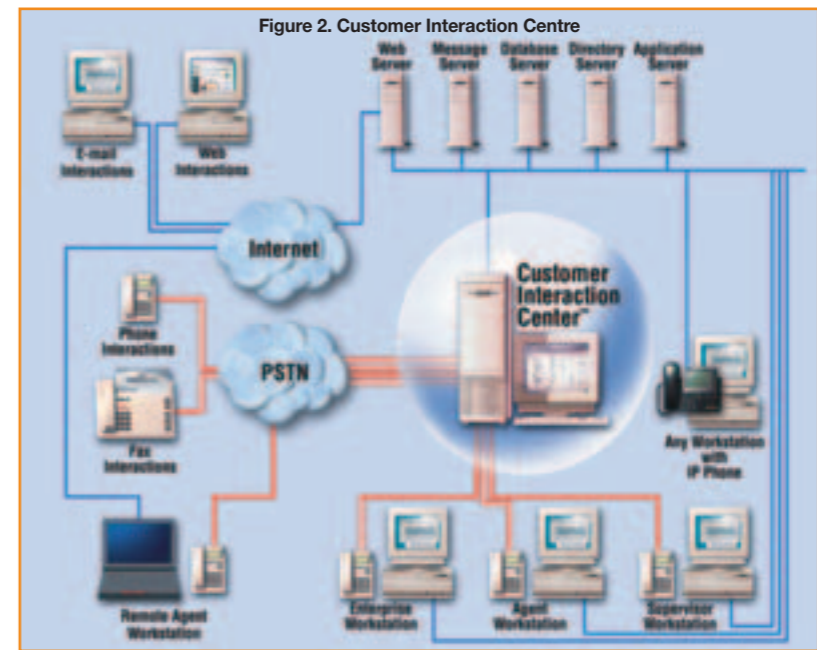
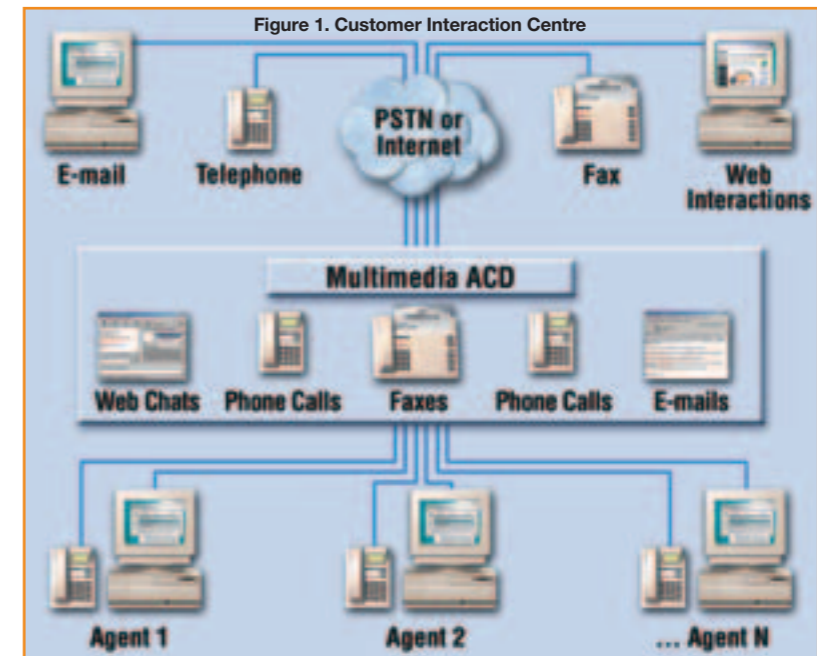
until about 5pm on Christmas Eve. They then have a quiet period up until New Year, and in January it gets busy again with a lot of people at home, feeling good about the New Year and feeling generous after the festive season.

This year, however, things went very differently. Johnston says he got wind of the tsunami disaster

centre and managed around 100 thousand calls in three days. It also meant they could on-sell capacity and do outbound work for charities at cost or act as a disaster recovery site for other call centres.

The system they chose was the Interactive

at about 9pm on 26th December. Already, there was an escalation process in place at the World Vision headquarters. The emergency relief team was gathering all the key stakeholders together from the customer service, media and marketing teams, and by that night



they had moved into evaluation mode. They had to try to decipher exactly what had happened, how big the disaster was going to be and what the media would be like over the proceeding days. “So much of what we do is driven by the media”, explains Johnston. “It’s not like advertising — where you buy advertising space and you know exactly what is going out to the public. With media it is far less predictable.” So on the 26th, Johnston also started to call his leadership team — putting them on notice for what was about to take hold. “We started dusting off our contingency plans for increased seating and bringing more bods in. One of the big challenges is predicting the call and activity volumes when you just don’t know what message is going out to the marketplace.”

As it turned out their predictions were pretty accurate, and due to their ability to call on high volumes of temporary staff along with World Vision volunteers and train them up rapidly, they were able to scale up for the appeal within hours. “Where it became more challenging”, said Johnston “was when our media department started to pull off coups with the media.” For instance, on the 29th December, Johnston received a phone call to say the ‘Sunrise Program’ would be on site on the 31st December doing live crosses from the call centre for the tsunami



AAPT splay system	
On the night of the tsunami concert appeal, AAPT was able to splay calls to the various call centres involved in the appeal.	
Percentage breakdowns were estimated based on call centre capacity.	
<i>Contact Centre</i>	<i>Number of Successful Calls</i>
UCMS Flinders	19,669
NAB1	50,884
NAB2	51,257
RACV	28,051
Telstradome	17,350
UCMS Dorcas	29,529
World Vision	16,809
Total	213,549

appeal. This gave Johnston less than two days to scale up for an event that was being aired between 6am and 11am — not normally a timeslot during which they are fully staffed. “The normal media stuff that was going out via news bulletins was relatively easy to predict”, said Johnston, “but once you get something like ‘Sunrise’ saying they are going to do live crosses, being able to extrapolate that and predict the number of calls you are going to receive can be quite challenging.”

The next call he got was on Saturday 1st January informing him about the ‘Australia Unites: Reach Out to Asia’, tsunami concert appeal, which would be broadcast on channels 7, 9 and 10 on the 8th January. “This gave us four working days to assess and pull together a solution to support that”, said Johnston. Then, on the 3rd of January they also found that they’d have to support the *World Cricket Match* appeal on the 10th January. “So we jumped from the *Sunrise* program to the *Concert Appeal* and then to the *Cricket Match*, all in the space of one week, and while still managing an increased level of normal traffic.”

As mentioned earlier, up-scaling is part of the World Vision contingency plan. They have a capacity for 160 seats at the call centre in Burwood East and according to Johnston it is no drama to increase to a capacity of over 400 seats within hours. For

this they use their disaster recovery site, Enterprise Data Corporation (EDC) who is able to handle overflow seating during peak activities. “We would normally spill first to them and then, if we needed more seats, we’d send a call out to the industry.” For the tsunami concert appeal, however, Johnston quickly recognised that they would need well in excess of their normal increased capacity — in fact, they were looking at a requirement for around 2200 seats and 2500 people during a 5- or 6-hour shift.

As it turned out, Johnston said he didn’t need to call anyone. Instead he received calls from around 20 external call centres all offering their site, staff, and support. “Bear in mind that this was the beginning of January when most people are on holiday. I couldn’t keep up with the number of call centre operators phoning in to say they wanted to help. What we had to do very quickly, however, was sift through these offers. We knew we’d need to use some of them, but we had to work out which ones were close enough in proximity, which ones had the right internal infrastructure, and which ones had the right external carrier support to be able to hold up — given this was

going to be an unprecedented event.”

- In the end they opted to go with six sites including:
- The World Vision site (160 seats);
 - NAB (1000 seats);
 - RACV (300 seats);
 - Telstra Dome (Purpose-built call centre 200 seats); and
 - UCMS (520 seats at two sites).

Once the overflow call centres were established, World Vision worked with each site to develop an internal call queue which was homogenous across the six sites. This meant that each site would have the same upfront welcome message and the same on-hold message, all with a World Vision flavour. “The beauty of most current telephony platforms, whether MIS, ACD etc, is that you can replicate call queues fairly easily, quickly and cost effectively”, says Johnston, “So it really didn’t matter what each call centre’s internal call system was, so long as we could replicate the call queue and they had internal capacity to withstand constant activity across those sites for five or six hours.” World Vision then worked with their telecommunications carrier, AAPT, to develop a simple

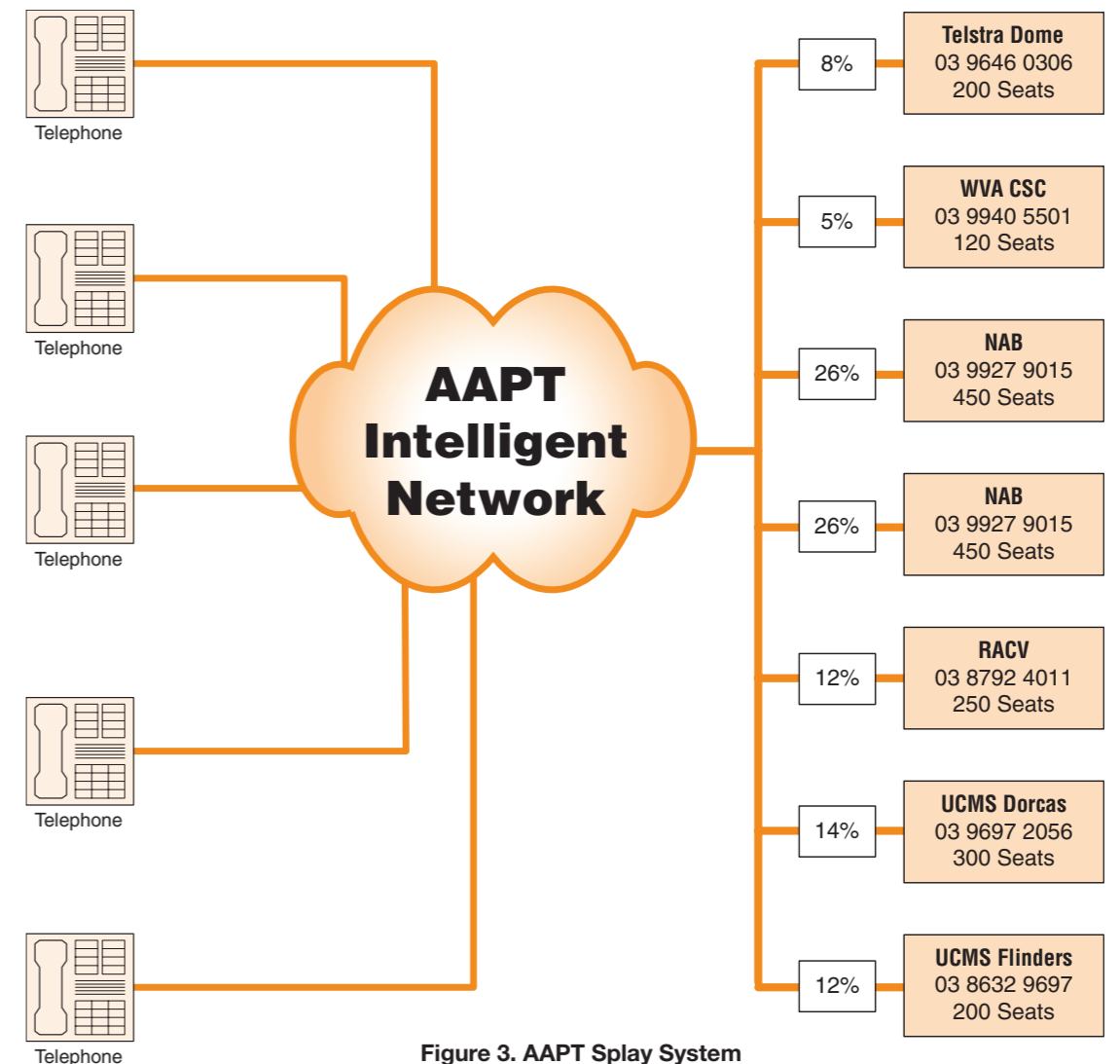


Figure 3. AAPT Splay System

network splay system. This meant they had to work out how many calls per hour each site could manage based on their trunk capacity. AAPT then used an internal system to splay the calls so that the appropriate percentage of call activity was sent to each site. Percentages were predicted in advance of the concert. The World Vision site for example, received 5 per cent of the calls, while the NAB site, which had a much larger capacity, was able to take 52 per cent of incoming call activity (See Figure 3). An operations hub was also set up at the Telstra Dome where AAPT were on-site to constantly monitor activity at

each site. Essentially, the six sites were able to act as one virtual, single call centre. "I've learnt the hard way that you need to keep these things really simple", said Johnston, "So we just had very simple call queues. We did not spill traffic from one site to another if one site filled up. The danger is, if you don't get the percentage breakdown right you'll have some sites that fill up and others sitting idle. Our estimate was, however, that we were going to have more traffic than we could handle at the peak times, so that all lines would be busy, and that is how it worked out." As a backup, the AAPT representative who was on-site at the Telstra Dome had a system in place which would enable them to balance percentages as they went if things started to trend away from their original estimates.

The biggest concern, said Johnston, was whether AAPT would be able to carry 3000 concurrent calls and 30,000 plus concurrent number attempts on the night of the concert. The fear was that some or all of the public system could crash, something

which, according to Johnston, happened to Optus about 9-10 years ago. "The local exchanges blew up", said Johnston, "and they basically had no call capacity." To counter such an event, AAPT went into overdrive to sure up the system including collaborating with Telstra to set up a ghosted system with a separate 13 number. "Capacity and stability were our main concerns", said Johnston. "We knew we would get call attempts in excess of 3000 lines, so on the night we sent messages out via the TV for callers to be patient. We felt this was better than having callers hit dead space."

On the night of the appeal the six call centre sites were primarily staffed with volunteers. "Typically we try to avoid using volunteers who just walk in from the street because it can be difficult to know whether they are going to be suitable for customer service roles", says Johnston. Throughout the year, however, World Vision uses a number of volunteers

and therefore has a fairly smart operation when it comes to accessing extra people. It was then a matter of getting staff briefed and ready to hit the phone lines. As part of their contingency plans, World Vision training and development staff had already put together training modules which they were able to pull off the shelf and tailor according to the appeal. This involved putting Q and A information together and walking staff through the transaction process, which for donations includes recording names, addresses and contact details along with donation amounts and payment methods. Johnston says, "From zero to 60 minutes we are able to get people through the training and

In the three weeks from 27th December, World Vision managed:-

232,559 Phone Calls
61,106 Web Donations
261,456 SMS Donations
555,121 Total Interactions

'Australia Unites — Reach Out to Asia Tsunami Concert Appeal'

The following call centres assisted World Vision in the tsunami concert appeal on the 8th January, 2005:

The World Vision site (160 seats)
NAB (1000 seats)
RACV (300 seats)
Telstra Dome (200 seat purpose built)
UCMS (520 seats at two sites)

A number of external call centres also offered their assistance to World Vision for the concert appeal including:

All Centrelinks sites
All Medibank Private sites
Several Salesforce sites
Several ANZ sites
Link Telecommunications
Vodafone
McNair Ingenuity Research
Australia Post

The ATA also offered assistance, e.g. speaking to other sites

Carriers involved with the SMS appeal included:

Telstra, Singtel Optus, Solutions International, ITEC Community Telco, Virgin Mobile, Simplus, Primus Telecom, B Digital, Southern Cross Telecommunication Holdings, Austal United Mobility Pty Ltd, People Mobile Pty Ltd, Commander Australia Limited, AAPT, Vodafone and George/Telecorp

ready to get on the phones — its pretty rapid fire, but typically we don't have problems. Then when staff hit the floors we try to maintain a one-to-10 supervisor ratio". This means that when the first few calls are being taken (in the first half-hour) and people are still bedding down their knowledge, there is loads of supervisory staff there to support them. "It's really simple but it works really well", says Johnston.

In addition to phone calls on the night, donations were being taken via the Web and through SMS messaging. SMS donations were a new initiative for World Vision and the system was set up to run from Friday 7th January until 11th January, 2005. In another show of solidarity, all industry carriers got together and made an agreement to take SMS donations for the appeal. There were three options for SMS donations: \$2, \$5 or \$10. It was decided to cap donations at \$10 via this channel for two reasons. Firstly, the carriers were hesitant to add any more than \$10 to a customer's phone bill and secondly, for legal reasons. People can claim \$10 donations or less as a tax deduction without an actual certificate. Anything over this amount needs a tax certificate. "Because we couldn't see who the donors were, we couldn't get their details, and it was going to be impossible to issue receipts." As it turned out the average donation via SMS came in at \$9. For phone calls, the average donation was up at \$105!

In the following days it became apparent that the hard work and intense effort put in by the World Vision staff had paid off. The *Concert Appeal* raised \$21 million dollars in one night and this was backed up with a further \$15 million raised at the *World Cricket Match* appeal. To date World Vision has raised \$75 million.

The support from the industry was incredible. Companies such as Mars and Cadbury delivered pallets of food and drink to call centre staff, while volunteers and staff worked tirelessly for the cause.

The biggest challenge, says Johnston, has been coping with a sustained period of intense activity, while at the same time being able to creatively and reactively solve complex challenges as they come up. The other challenge has been that of keeping staff motivated and enthused throughout such a long stretch of activity. "Our team has been just amazing", says Johnston. "They've worked around the clock and have really stretched themselves beyond all means. The great thing about

Funds raised via World Vision



Concert Appeal:
\$21 million

World Cricket Match:
\$15 million

Total to date:
\$75 million

Average donation received:
\$105

Total interactions to date:
+ 570,000 (phone/web/sms)



working for World Vision, however, is that it is its own motivator."

"I have had to take our consultants and put them into leadership roles across six sites for our biggest appeal ever and they responded to that challenge beautifully."

"It's been an amazing event to be part of and its been great that the plans we've had sitting there have been robust enough that when presented with something that far exceeds what the plans were supposed to do, they actually stood up", says Johnston. "But it would not have been possible without the industry responding to our needs like they did." ■



Tim Costello, CEO, World Vision

"The call centre is the heart of World Vision and it came under enormous strain and opportunity with the tsunami appeal. It really stood up magnificently under the pressure. It was amazing to see the dedication from the organisation and all the volunteers involved."

"The appeal has now finished but we are going to be there for five years in the countries where the tsunami hit. We're there for the long term and even when it's not at the top of minds or in the media, we'll be quietly rebuilding and serving these devastated areas."