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## An Agent's Best Point of View

**When you choose displays for your call center, don't just look for the prettiest pictures. We offer guidance about which types of displays are best for presenting information that matters most to agents.**

By Joe Fleischer

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Despite the saying that pictures convey a thousand words, some pictures don't tell us enough.

A recent illustration of this is the U.S. Department of Agriculture's revision of its food pyramid. As of mid-April, there is no longer one food pyramid for all. Instead there are 12.

Why? One of the reasons for the decision to introduce 12 pyramids was that the single pyramid, despite its ubiquity, was not having a demonstrable effect on people's eating habits. The ultimate goal of the multiple pyramids is to change our behavior, so that our diets are more healthful and we live longer as a result.

By presenting 12 possible pyramids, the Department of Agriculture can convey dietary guidelines for people of different ages and levels of physical activity. The medium that the Department of Agriculture is using to convey the relevance of its guidelines to the general public is a Web site, [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).

A comparable shift is taking place in the ways call centers present information to agents. For years, the most typical, if not the only, tools for disseminating information among agents in most call centers have been readerboards and wallboards, which show rows and columns of data using light-emitting diodes, or LEDs.

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But these days, companies have a choice of displays, even within the same call center, and therefore different ways to convey information to agents beyond presenting data. One of the most significant developments with displays is that it's now conceivable that a call center can have one type of display to show data, and another type of display to show images.

In our overview of what's new with electronic displays in call centers, we outline what types of displays are most effective for disseminating certain kinds of information among call center agents.

### The Role of the Readerboard

Given the emergence of plasma and liquid crystal display (LCD) monitors as possible alternatives to LED monitors, you may be wondering if there's literally a place for LED displays in call centers.

A number of executives from electronic display companies concur that LED monitors offer wider viewing angles and are easier to read from longer distances than either plasma or LCD monitors. They also agree that plasma displays in particular don't last as long and are more susceptible to burn-in than LED monitors.

"LEDs are rock-solid," says Frank Ortiz, president of **Inova Solutions**, the business intelligence division of Charlottesville, VA-based display manufacturer Inova. "There is no better way to get statistics distributed to people."

Once you establish that you need displays that are easily visible to lots of agents at the same time, you then have to determine which type of display is best for your center.

"Information should always dictate the type of display, not the other way around," advises Susan Saldibar, vice president of marketing with **Centergistic Solutions** (Orange, CA).

The consensus among the executives we interviewed is that LED displays are most effective at presenting data, whereas plasma and LCD monitors are most effective at presenting graphics.

"In recent times, there have been two primary shifts in the methods that information is delivered to the agents," says Matt Wheat, national sales manager with **Texas Digital Systems** (College Station, TX). "First, more call centers are taking advantage of the flat panel plasma or LCD displays to communicate information to groups of agents. This technology allows management to not only communicate the traditional call center and general business metrics, but also disseminate additional information in a multimedia format."

The main reason call centers even consider non-LED displays, Wheat explains, is "the fact that large plasma and LCD screens are becoming more affordable."

Centergistic's Saldibar agrees that non-LED displays are catching on in call centers as these displays become less expensive. "We're seeing managers really turning on to flat panels, plasmas and other high definition screens, especially as prices have come down on these items," she says. "They like to fill the screens with colorful graphs and bring in live feeds from a TV station or Internet site."

With that said, LED displays continue to predominate in call centers, and the data that they present typically reflect call centers' conflation of efficiency with productivity. But Saldibar does observe a growing tendency toward showing metrics, like promises to pay in centers that handle collections, so that agents see information that reveals how their efforts contribute to achieving the call center's goals.

In general, when working with call centers that use LED displays, says Saldibar, "we are often recommending larger displays, simply to hold more 'plain language' text along with team totals and the top three contributing employees' names."

What kind of data is most useful for lots of agents to see? If the data is relevant to agents' communication with customers, such as the amount of money generated from a specific campaign, then the data has the greatest impact if it's on a display that a large percentage of agents can view at the same time. Other types of data, like monthly abandon rates, are relevant to managers, but have little impact on how agents perceive the efficacy of their work, so they're less appropriate for showing to agents en masse.

Display company executives aren't in complete agreement about whether it's sensible to show data on computers of individual agents that's the same as the data you present on large displays to lots of agents. Those who argue against depicting certain statistics — namely those that typically appear on readerboards — on agents' computers argue that if agents are busy communicating with customers, then the most important information they need to see in front of them should be about customers. Otherwise, cautions Dan Boehm, Spectrum's (Houston, TX) vice president of sales and marketing, there's the potential to "bury agents with information."

Adam Higdon, a call center sales manager with the Chicago, IL-based Visual Systems Division of **NEC Solutions America**, agrees.

"There is a huge advantage in using a large electronic display," he says. "At NEC, at the center of our workspace, we run live call center queue software with statistics from the previous day and week which reflect our productivity."

Those who believe, on the other hand, that agents ought to be able to view real-time statistics on their computers argue that this is the best way for agents to see information about themselves, rather than only being able to see overall statistics for a group or for the entire center.

Although this article focuses on large displays for call centers, it's important to recognize that call centers need not be limited to using large displays to present information to agents. "We are also seeing the desire for personal metrics on the desktop in the form of a ribbon," says Saldibar.

Most makers of electronic displays for call centers offer software for presenting real-time statistics not only on large displays, but also on agents' computer screens. Among the more recent debuts of these types of tools is Texas Digital Systems' **Vitals Dashboard**.

Several companies, including Centergistic Solutions, Inova Solutions, **Symon Communications** (Plano, TX) and Texas Digital Systems, also employ some form of underlying middleware to allow call centers to convey real-time data from a variety of sources to a variety of devices, which can include large displays and agents' computer screens.

Middleware enables you to consolidate data not only from phone switches, but also from third-party software, like campaign management, customer support and workforce management tools. When you use middleware to present information to agents on displays, you provide agents with real-time information about what they've accomplished so far during the day while assisting customers, and whether agents should prepare for any spikes in calls in the hours that follow

In terms of middleware, Centergistic Solutions offers *AgentView Enterprise*, Inova Solutions offers *LightLink Enterprise*, Symon offers *Symon Enterprise Server* and Texas Digital offers *QuickCOM Enterprise*.

Different vendors emphasize different aspects of delivering data to displays. Inova is planning to introduce LED displays toward the end of this year that receive their power through connections to Ethernet networks, so you don't have to plug them into power outlets. For now, Inova offers Ethernet-powered clocks through its display systems division; the displays for call centers that Inova will debut later this year will likely be two-line wallboards. Symon also has several tools in the works, such as a hosted variant of its middleware, and software that lets you use a Web server to prepare content, such as messages, to go on your call center's displays.

Centergistic Solutions is enhancing its middleware, says Saldibar, by enabling "individual performance metrics to follow the agent when they are dynamically re-assigned to another split, or another split is added to their current group."

If we keep in mind that the delivery mechanism for sending information to agents remains consistent, whether the information goes to large displays or individual computer screens, then the decision about whether to broadcast information to many people at once, or to present it to each agent, depends on what agents can do with the information.

When you convey real-time information to agents about circumstances that affect the ability of a group of agents to assist customers in the moment, a large display is preferable to an agent's desktop. When agents have the opportunity to consider statistics in terms of their individual performance, then an agent's computer is a more appropriate destination than a large display. We'll explore this distinction further towards the end of this article.

### **A Meaningful Picture**

In addition to furnishing you with displays, as well as middleware, several vendors also provide software for presenting graphics and video.

Among these are *Inova Corporate Broadcaster*, Symon's *TargetVision* and Texas Digital's *VitalCAST*. These tools enable you to show agents presentations, Web pages, video feeds and graphical views of statistics on the same displays.

As Texas Digital's Matt Wheat explains, with non-LED displays, you can segment what appears onscreen "to show real-time information in one portion of the display while showing other content, such as training videos, promotional information, HR notices, and cable TV feeds, in another area of the display."

We mentioned earlier that certain kinds of monitors, like plasma and LCD monitors, are becoming more affordable options for presenting video and graphics to lots of agents. These displays have also become more visible throughout the

buildings where agents work.

"I definitely see plasma screens in break rooms instead of a wallboard," says Bob Brittan, senior product manager with Symon. Bill Howe, vice president of sales with Inova Solutions, observes that plasma and LCD monitors are becoming more prevalent in high-traffic areas, including break rooms and lobbies.

Executives we interviewed concur that within call centers themselves, certain types of content, like video feeds, are most useful depending on the type of business the call center is part of. In centers within utilities or insurance companies, for example, weather news feeds are important for agents to see because bad weather can result in a spike in calls.

We've acknowledged the trade-offs between LED and non-LED displays in call centers. Plasma and LCD monitors give you more choices than LED monitors about what kinds of content you can show, but they're not without significant limitations.

Besides requiring agents to view them at narrower angles and at shorter distances than LED monitors, plasma monitors run the risk of retaining the images that appear in such a way that images seem to burn into the screen. Executives we spoke with point out that there are ways to prevent burn-in, such as by rotating one or more images around a screen. (This approach is comparable to the way in which screen savers mitigate burn-in on desktop computer monitors.)

Some middleware tools, like Inova Solutions' LightLink Enterprise, let you automate the process of turning displays on and off, so that you don't risk inadvertently leaving these displays on when you're not using them. But even with these precautions, you're still not going to make a plasma display last longer than an LED display.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of non-LED displays relative to each other? LCD monitors are generally more costly and smaller than plasma displays. As Inova Solutions' Howe acknowledges, the images on LCD monitors move more slowly than images on plasma displays. But, as Howe also points out, LCD monitors last longer than plasma monitors. One reason they last longer, explains Howe, is that since they're lit from the back, they're less vulnerable to burn-in.

These distinctions notwithstanding, the most important choice for call centers isn't necessarily whether to go with plasma or LCD monitors; the decision is whether to add non-LED displays to accompany the LED wallboards or readerboards call centers already have. Part of that decision hinges on what additional equipment you need to present data, graphics and video on various types of displays.

With the growth of the Internet and of wireless networking in particular, it's become essential that displays become part of your network infrastructure. In call centers, LED displays were among the first to enable you to address and control them over IP networks. The same capability is available with non-LED displays, too.

Symon, for instance, offers its *Symon Digital Appliance (SDA)*, a display controller that you can connect to your network. The appliance includes an 80-gigabyte hard drive, and lets you control what content appears on myriad non-LED displays, including projectors, plasma monitors and LCD monitors. Symon's SDA comes in four models, which feature a combination of different options, like TV

tuners and the ability to control displays over a wireless network. The appliance requires that you use Symon's middleware, version 8.1 or later, to determine what content you disseminate among agents, and how this content will appear, before it shows up on your call center's displays.

As you think about when to send information — be it statistical or graphical — to large displays, and when to send information to agents' computers, it's best to place this decision in the context of performance. When agents communicate with customers, it's easy for agents to overlook how one conversation makes a difference to the performance of the company, let alone the call center.

The information that you broadcast to agents places agents' work in perspective. News about an incoming storm is more than an indicator of a likely increase in call volume; it indicates that agents' skills with assisting customers will be especially valuable during and immediately after the storm arrives. Given that call centers can share information, including video, that directly affects customers in the moment, call centers, and the agents they depend on, are better prepared to help customers when customers need them the most.

As Chris Capo, Spectrum's director of global alliances, puts it, "The concept of real time has become more important, not less."

In a different but nonetheless significant way, information about customers' demand for service, or the total revenue agents generate, allows each individual agent to recognize what effect his or her interactions with customers have on the center's performance.

With this in mind, it's useful to treat the presentation of individual statistics on agents' computers outside the realm of electronic displays. Information that you show on displays to a group of agents fulfills, or ought to fulfill, a different purpose than the information you show to each agent. The purpose of information that's visible to groups of agents simultaneously is an ongoing reminder that their work contributes to the company's goal of serving and retaining customers. The purpose of presenting information on an agent's computer is to highlight how well that agent communicates with customers, and how the agent can improve.

It's difficult for agents to concentrate on customers they speak with and their own statistics at the same time. If agents are to get a clear sense of their performance, they need to be able to absorb performance metrics during times when they're not communicating with customers. The best time for agents to make sense of individual performance indicators is during the times they receive training or evaluations.

Just as one food pyramid is not enough to convey how individuals can meet their nutritional needs, one type of display isn't enough to convey information that enables agents to be most effective in their jobs. We will consider the value of disseminating individual performance metrics to agents in our upcoming feature articles about performance management.

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### **Picture This**

Here's how to reach the manufacturers of displays for call centers, as well as providers of tools for presenting information to agents on these displays, that we mentioned in this article. For information about additional vendors, visit the buyers' guide on [www.callcentermagazine.com](http://www.callcentermagazine.com).

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