

# Vanquishing a Customer Service Killer

Bon-Ton Stores reduces in-store call volume with Internet-based telecommunications

by DEENA M. AMATO-McCOY

**M**obile devices firmly in hand, today's always-connected consumers expect quick responses, even to queries made in the most old-school of ways — via a phone call. That's not an easy task for retailers when legacy telephone systems drive callers into a holding pattern.

Bon-Ton Stores is transitioning away from these issues by implementing digital devices and an Internet-based, analytics-driven telecommunications system, a move that empowers associates, drives customer engagement and provides insight into customer service patterns.

"It is crucial for customers to talk to knowledgeable associates who can give them the information they need,

and quickly," says Phil Crist, network manager with Bon-Ton, headquartered in York, Pa. "This is what gets bodies in the door versus pushing them to buy merchandise through online competitors."

## AUTOMATING THE SYSTEM

This task is next to impossible with a landline-based telephone system that is not integrated with store systems and supports little to no visibility for calls coming into stores or specific departments. Bon-Ton had basic mobile support, minimal call routing and no analytic platform to understand call patterns — a weak foundation for an operation with nearly 300 stores.

This wasn't the company's only challenge. The chain had an aver-

age of 60 to 100 phones per store, but that number varied dramatically due to store size. "The smallest store had 30 phones, while our largest had 220," Crist says. "Our typical user is the retail associate, and we have a phone at every wrap stand and in every office."

While that gave a majority of associates access to incoming calls, Bon-Ton still needed a way to balance those calls with store associates' daily operational responsibilities while delivering a level of customer service that could assist shoppers and drive in-store sales.

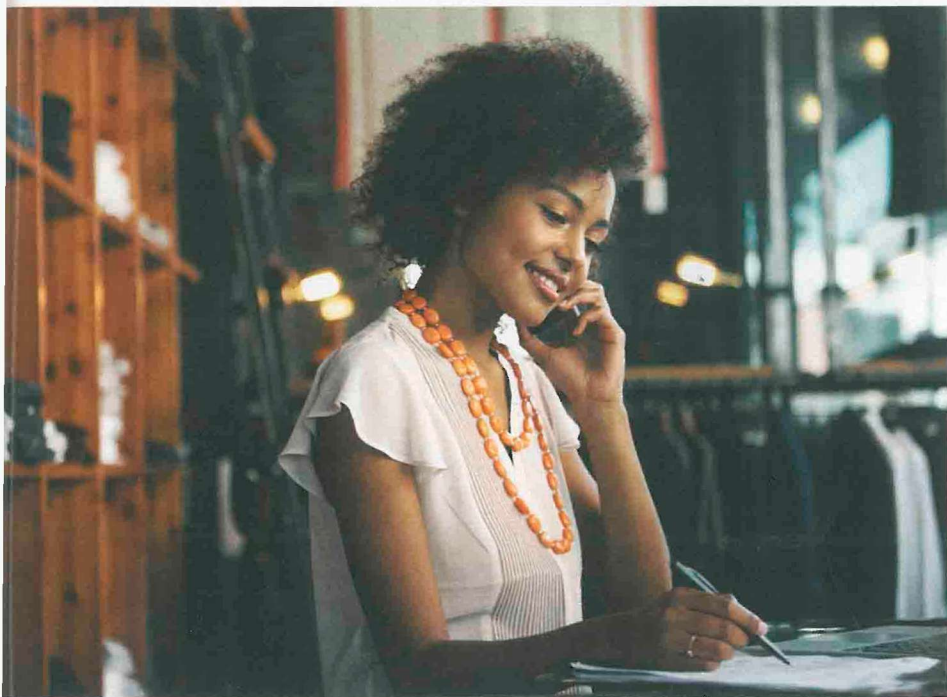
Given its expansive enterprise needs and a wide array of telephones, Bon-Ton knew it was time to transition to an auto attendant system that could automatically transfer callers to an extension without the intervention of an associate.

"We needed a foundation that could electronically answer the most common questions consumers seek answers to when making purchase decisions," Crist says.

This task was easier said than done, however. Some Bon-Ton stores opened decades ago — and supported equally aged infrastructures — while others have more modern communications platforms. This made Crist's list of prerequisites just as diverse as Bon-Ton's previous telecommunications system.

"We wanted a new solution that could fit into all locations, could work with IP-based voice service delivery, be flexible enough to centralize data and manage reporting and be a scalable, 'survivable' system," he says.

"Many providers were pushing cloud-based solutions, and while cloud could be a great option, if we lose our Internet connection we wouldn't even be able to pick up a handset and call someone at the other end of the building. We needed more



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support.”

In addition to being technologically advanced, the new system had to be cost-effective. Bon-Ton knew it would be too expensive to “rip-and-replace,” Crist says, “and even more costly when modernizing older stores.”

### A COST-EFFECTIVE SOLUTION

After evaluating up to 10 different providers, the retailer joined forces with telecommunications firm Vertical Communications to implement a unified communications auto attendant system. It allows users to communicate across multiple locations, as well as “integrate next-generation features while supporting existing technology,” says Dick Anderson, executive vice

While it is forward-thinking, Bon-Ton envisions that this system will eventually help the company eliminate customer service desks and transition to a model where managers simply carry wireless phones that can connect them to any department or division store- or enterprise-wide.

Bon-Ton started deploying the unified communications technology to support two pilots in fall 2014. Positive results pushed the retailer to outfit “about a dozen stores in January, and then we began our large-scale roll-out,” Crist says.

The Vertical Wave IP system now supports all voice-related operations in 30 stores; Bon-Ton is using Spectralink mobile phones, which are integrated

store hours per week, directions, and so on,” Crist says. “It was a task that we handled manually, but now this automated system made that cumbersome task disappear.”

The reports have revealed that most people using the system will hang up within 30 seconds, typically hearing the greeting, navigating to store hours, getting their answer and disconnecting.

“This is fantastic,” Crist says. “This means we have served 50 percent of callers immediately. It also means that our in-store associates are not overwhelmed with calls simply asking whether we are open today. This also allows calls that need to get through to specific departments or associates to get through faster. Fewer shoppers are placed on hold, and the phone is ringing in-store less, as well.”

### NEXT-GEN OPTIONS

From a support standpoint, Bon-Ton’s IT team is receiving fewer tickets and issues due to its IP-based private brand exchange, which is switching calls between enterprise users. The system utilizes local lines while allowing all users to share a certain number of external phone lines.

Bon-Ton is in the process of rolling out the system enterprise-wide, and remains on a steady deployment schedule. “On average, we will roll out between 20 and 40 stores per year,” Crist says.

“We will keep up a steady pace, and do as many as we can. Having 30-year-old phones in our network means this system will save the company money. Why should we keep spending money on remediation when we can add this system that provides next-generation communication options that supports our current operation and positions us for communications efforts in the future?” **STORES**

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president and general manager of Vertical Communications.

Bon-Ton was most attracted to Vertical Communications’ digital, IP-based phone system. This was a benefit in older stores that would have required sizeable investment in alternate configurations.

“Using digital solutions means I don’t have to spend significant budgets to rewire stores and add new phones to support new infrastructures,” Crist says. “These also directly integrate with wireless and IP-based phones, which are a big part of our future expansion plans for the next several years.”

with the Wave IP system, and Vertical end-points at their fixed locations. An integrated auto attendant enables callers to get general information via an automated system without requiring interaction with an associate, including driving directions and operating hours.

Customers can also leave voicemail messages that are automatically coded and routed to the correct associate. Messages can be delivered via email and retrieved on mobile devices.

The system also has integrated analytics that enables Bon-Ton to decipher auto attendant call volume. “It enables us to understand how many shoppers used the system to ask for