

INDIA

MAKING BANGALORE SOUND LIKE BOSTON

Overseas call centers turn to e-mail and chat to handle frustrated U.S. customers

BY PETE ENGARDIO

HARI KISHAN READILY admits that he's not the best guy to put on the phone with impatient Americans. With his heavy South Indian accent and rapid, abrupt cadence, Kishan knows U.S. customers have a tough time understanding him. In any case, he says, he's "not the type of guy who likes to talk a lot."

So what is he doing processing orders for a U.S. retailer? Like growing numbers of call center agents in India, he doesn't talk. He types. Put the 26-year-old computer science grad at a keyboard, and he might as well be in Peoria. "Welcome to our wireless world," Kishan chirped to open a recent online conversation from MphasiS BFL Ltd.'s huge call center in Mangalore. He calmly tapped out crisp answers to a battery of questions from a U.S. customer frustrated that he hadn't received a cell phone he had ordered. The conversation, Kishan learned later, was a test set up by his employer with a reporter—and he passed with flying colors.

Demand for such skills is growing fast as Americans become increasingly hostile to overseas call center agents. Even if the service is actually the same as or better than what's offered by U.S.-based call centers, many Americans are turned off by foreign voices. Some 62% of U.S. consumers gripe about service if they suspect the agent is overseas—double the dissatisfaction rate with calls to agents they think are in the U.S., according to a study by Opinion Research Corp. "Irritation kicks



in when [customers] hear the accent," especially if they're already having a problem, says MphasiS Vice-Chairman Jeroen Tas. And a study by Convergys Corp., the world's biggest call center operator, with 66,000 workers in 30 countries, found that 72% of U.S. consumers claim they would rather use automated voice systems or the Web than speak with a foreign agent.

Such perceptions matter. Nearly 7 in 10 consumers say they are less likely to do business with a company after a bad call center experience, Opinion Research says. One U.S. toy retailer told the company

it pulled all of its call-center work from India and the Philippines after frustrated buyers came into stores complaining that they couldn't understand the phone agents. "They saw a real risk of eroding their brand," says Opinion Research Senior Vice-President Linda Shea.

So companies are trying alternatives to voice calls—including online chat, e-mail, and improved automated voice systems that can resolve problems more quickly. Such services account for less than 20% of consumer inquiries today, but their share is projected to double in five years. Web-based service is a popular alternative because agents such as Kishan can be fast, accurate typists and have superb technical knowledge. Many have spent years instant-messaging cyberbuddies in English. Chat "eliminates the accent issue," says David A. Steinberg, CEO of InPhonic Inc., the Washington (D.C.) online retailer whose calls Kishan handles. Online services can also be cheaper, since agents can handle two or three conversations simultaneously while they wait for responses from customers.

CULTURAL CUES

THAT HAS CALL center operators devoting greater resources to chat. As with telephone agents, MphasiS puts newly hired chat operators through cultural training. They read U.S. newspapers, learn that "AAMOF" means "as a matter of fact," and familiarize themselves with phrases such as "cut to the chase." By 2008, MphasiS expects about 30% of its agents will handle e-mail and chat inquiries, vs. less than 10% of its 6,500 Indian customer-care staffers today.

Still, voice calls aren't going to disappear anytime soon. Americans overwhelmingly prefer to talk to a live person rather than chat online or wade through automated phone menus. So companies are also beefing up efforts to neutralize agents' accents, and have started installing sophisticated voice analysis software to help call center personnel speak more like Americans. But as today's chat-obsessed kids grow up and start getting credit-card statements, electricity bills, and mortgages, expect them to spend plenty more time online with the likes of Hari Kishan. ■

