

TAKE MESSAGES - MAKE MONEY

Providing a message-taking service is a business opportunity that might seem a bit out of date in today's age of wireless telephones and personal digital assistants. However, establishing a Message Call Center that specialized in personal message taking by trained agents represents a service business that is not only in demand, but profitable as well.

WHAT IS A MESSAGE CALL CENTER

A Message Call Center provides message taking and delivery services for a wide variety of business clients. We are not referring here to an automated, voice mail type of message service, but rather an agent-assisted personalized message service. A service that caters to the individual messaging requirements of each client served, and one where each incoming call is handled by a communications agent - that is to say, a "real" live person.

THE CLIENTS

Just who, in this communications rich day and age, would pay for the services of a live-answer Message Call Center? After all, voice mail, pagers, and wireless telephone services can keep anyone in a state of virtual constant contact. So, why pay to have someone answer your telephone?

While virtually any business can benefit from the services provided by a Message Call Center, for certain types of clients - like doctors and other medical professionals - subscribing to such a service is a virtual must. When a patient with a possible heart problem calls their doctor, for example, the patient can't be expected to leave a message at the sound of the beep and wait for a return call! There must be a "real" person handling the call transaction.

Other clients might simply desire a more professional business image, which is something a Message Call Center agent can provide. Still others might wish to differentiate themselves from what has become the corporate norm - by having their calls answered first by a person rather than an impersonal automated answering system.

Finally, there are clients that need to have specific information extracted from a caller in order to properly respond to the call. Rather than expecting the caller to sit through a lengthy machine-generated inquisition and risk them hanging-up and taking their business elsewhere, they become Message Call Center clients.

The range of potential Message Call Center clients would include:

- ? Members of the medical profession
- ? Emergency service organizations
- ? Sales professionals

- ? Technical service organizations
- ? Independent service individuals
- ? Cable companies
- ? Real estate offices
- ? Bail bondsmen
- ? Towing services
- ? Limousine services
- ? and many more

The important point is that in spite of recent advances in personal electronic communications, the need for personalized, live-answer messaging services exists, and will not be going away any time soon.

A VIABLE MARKET

The Messaging business has been around for almost 50-years in the form of Telephone Answering Services. In recent years, these businesses have broadened the range of services they offer their clients to include alpha-numeric paging, voice mail assist, fax message delivery, e-mail message delivery, text message delivery to wireless telephones, and even order entry services. Because of recent technological advances and lower prices for computers, Telephone Answering Services have been able to morph themselves into Call Centers with a Messaging specialty.

While the actual number of Message Call Centers has declined since 1987 to about 4,500 nationwide, the annual revenues billed by these services has almost tripled to over \$2.4 billion. This improvement in revenues is mainly due to technical advances that have made it possible for even a relatively small business to take advantage of new communications services for a modest investment.

This trend of increasing revenues is expected to continue, because:

As our daily lives become ever more automated, the price we're willing to pay for personalized services has increased.

There are situations where interface with another human is absolutely required.

There are even more situations where personal interaction would be considered a definite benefit - even a selling advantage.

From YOUR business point of view, the benefit of establishing a Message Call Center lies in the long-term recurring revenue stream the business can generate. The message services you will provide are important to your client's business success. Servicing even as few as 300 accounts can produce average monthly revenues in the range of \$40,000, or about one-half million dollars per year – ON A RECURRING BASIS. Once your business and clientele is established, and assuming you provide a consistent level of quality service, this recurring revenue stream is almost assured. And further, because this is a business where your operating costs are readily identified and controllable, pre-tax profits in the 25-35 percent range are not unusual.

GETTING UP AND RUNNING

There are many good business books on the general subject of deciding whether or not to start a new business. The questions of fit with a present business, the size of the initial investment, projected revenues, break-even point, profit potential and return on investment must all be addressed. Rather than go over this well-covered ground here, we will just address a few items that are unique to starting a Message Call Center business.

A. Telephone Service

It's apparent that some level of telephone service will be required for this business. The start-up telephone service requirements for a new Message Call Center are relatively modest. You can easily get started with only four Direct-Inward-Dial (or DID) lines, 100-DID numbers for handling in-coming call traffic, and three or four business lines for handling out-bound calls for dispatching pages and for fax message delivery. DID telephone service offers you the advantage of handling a number of different DID telephone numbers on a few DID lines connected to your answering equipment. And, since each DID telephone number represents one client, you can see that it's possible to service many clients with relatively few connected lines (more about this later).

B. Answering Equipment

Specially designed answering equipment is an absolute necessity for efficient call processing. The services your Message Center will be providing imply labor-intensive activities. Therefore, the equipment you select to help your agents handle incoming calls and dispatch messages is a critical element in the success of your business.

Consider the answering, or messaging, system as a "revenue-generating machine." It's the engine that will drive your Message Call Center. It must operate reliably 24-hours each day, all year long. It must handle calls efficiently, and be easy to use. And, the company you purchase it from must be available to provide 24-7 technical service.

The equipment must perform these key functions:

1. It must identify incoming calls and know which one of your clients the call is FOR. To do this, the equipment uses one of the incoming DID telephone numbers mentioned earlier, coupled with the feature of Call Forwarding.

When you add a client to your messaging system, you assign them one of the DID telephone numbers you received from the telephone company. When they want you to answer their business line, they Call Forward that number to the DID number you assigned to them. Your messaging system recognizes this DID number, and knows to which client it "belongs."

2. Once the call is identified, it must present client-specific call handling information to the agent to help the agent efficiently handle the call in a personalized manner.

3. It must distribute calls among the agents for work load leveling and call processing efficiency. Typically, an agent spends only 30-60 seconds interfacing with a caller. In this time a call must be

answered with a personalized greeting and an accurate message taken. It's not unusual for an agent to see several other calls on their screen at the same time, in addition to the answered call. An efficient answering system not only routes calls to agent positions, but also re-assigns them based on their call status and duration - that is whether they are ringing or holding, and for how long.

4. It must allow for the storage of text messages taken by agents, and the process of typing and storing these messages must be quick and simple.

5. It must provide quick access to stored client messages for several reasons:

- (a) A client might call and ask the answering agent to deliver their messages verbally, or
- (b) A client might request that an agent extract some information from a previously delivered message - a telephone number, for example, or
- (c) A client might request that a previously alpha-paged message be re-paged

Each of these service requests would require that the agent have fast and random access to all stored messages on the system - both delivered and undelivered.

6. It must track various agent, client, and traffic activities. A 300-account Message Center can easily process 60,000 or more incoming calls each month. Add to that about 7,000 dial-outs, 15,000 alpha-pages and perhaps 15,000 faxed messages and you'll understand why activity statistics are important to track.

7. Keeping track of various operating activities is one side of the coin. Generating meaningful reports for billing purposes and for traffic, client, and agent analysis is critical for effective system management.

8. Once a message is stored, it must be delivered to a client to complete the transaction. While some clients may call-in and collect their messages manually, most will elect to have messages delivered to their office fax machine, their alpha pager, their digital phone, or even to some combination of these devices. The system must be capable of dealing with all these forms of automatic message dispatch.

This wide range of features and capabilities combines to make a Message Call Center System a very specialized, complex piece of equipment with exceptional mission-critical reliability demands. That is why careful equipment selection is an important element in your decision process.

C. Staff and Facilities

It should be obvious that people will be of paramount importance to your success. Providing quality service will require a carefully selected, properly trained, and well managed staff. And because a Message Call Center is a 24-hour operation, personnel must be available around-the-clock. If you are currently operating a 24-hour business you might be able to use some of your present employees to staff the Call Center during the midnight shift when call volume is normally light. Do not, however, make the mistake of trying to totally run this business using shared employees - it will not work.

24-hour service businesses like paging companies and alarm monitoring centers have added a Message Call Center activity to take advantage of existing facilities (and some staff). The goal is the "generation of additional revenues through optimization of present staff and facilities."

D. Investment

You'll have to spend some money. Your one most significant investment will be the cost of the answering system. Be prepared to invest about \$20,000 for a start-up system, and \$60,000 or more for a larger system. The actual equipment cost will depend on the system's size, as measured by the number of agent positions and port capacity, and its range of special features. In general, your initial startup costs can be relatively modest, since not all service elements need be provided at the outset, and equipment, telephone service, space, and even labor can be scaled down at the front end, and expanded as your business grows.

In summary, a Message Call Center is a solid business opportunity. It represents an opportunity to establish a professional and long-lasting business that will generate a steady, recurring revenue stream over a long time period - with an attractive profit potential. It's a business opportunity that will track the growth of the economy, yet is normally not seriously affected during times of economic slowdowns.

<p><i>Compliments of:</i> Axon Communications A Division of Telescan, LLC 10679 Midwest Industrial Blvd. St. Louis, MO 63132 www.axoncom.com (800) 770-7662</p>	<p>We invite you to call us to discuss any questions you may have about telephone messaging as a business opportunity. Our staff is available to answer your questions about the business, telephone service requirements, equipment, staffing, and setting rates. Our advice is FREE, with no obligations. Call (800) 770-7662.</p>
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Telescan provides the most reliable systems for the Telephone Answering Service industry. Telescan hardware and software solutions provide a full range of services for inbound message call centers. Telescan's Spectrum System, powered by the Prism DSP digital switching platform, applies the latest technology to optimize the live-answer messaging application.

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