Services to the public at large cannot stand drastic changes

INTERVIEW WITH **NIKOLAI SAVLUKOV,** DEPUTY GENERAL DIRECTOR OF OAO MGTS [MOSCOW MUNICIPAL TELEPHONE NETWORK], AND **DMITRIY STOLYAR,** SALES DIRECTOR OF FRONTRANGE SOLUTIONS


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Earlier this year, MGTS implemented a hardware and software solution for the 09 Automated Operator system provided by the company FrontRange Solutions. We spoke with representatives of the two companies about the progress of the project.

– **Why do we need a new automated information service now?**

Nikolay Savlukov: First of all, as a company in which a controlling interest is owned by private shareholders, MGTS is focused primarily on earning revenue. We are currently marketing outsourced call-center services, for which we naturally rely on operators we have already trained.

About 200 people currently work in the free 09 Service, and they handle a large volume: about 80 thousand calls are processed every day. The quality of the 09 Service is measured by criteria such as the percentage of requests that cannot be answered and the response time. These criteria are very limited, so it is not possible simply to transfer operators to the outsourcing service.

Secondly, we were constantly receiving complaints about the operation of the automated information system that functioned from 9:00 PM to 8:00 AM and on weekends and holidays, when the 09 operators were off-duty. The automated system listed the telephone numbers of 20 emergency services, and in order to get the number they needed, customers had to listen to the entire list, which took about 4 minutes.

We needed a system that could replace that nighttime information system by significantly expanding the scope of information provided, improving the quality of service, and, in the long term, giving us the opportunity to use the operators for outsourcing services. On July 1, we launched the 09 Automated Operator service based on the solution provided by FrontRange Solutions, to replace the automated nighttime information service.

MGTS is one of the largest local wire communications operators in Russia and Europe. In 2004 MGTS's customer base expanded to 4.2 million numbers, over 49 telephone numbers per 100 residents of the capital. The company's share of Moscow's fixed communications market is currently about 77.2%.

Using this system, customers can get information on over 2000 important public services: medical institutions, emergency services, transportation companies, city government agencies, etc., that were specially selected from a database. This list will continue to expand. We plan to fully "roll out" the system, identify any problems, and only then launch it during the daytime as well. Services to the public at large cannot stand drastic changes. Therefore, such a large-scale change in the way we work with our customers must be implemented gradually.

– **Why did you choose the solution offered by FrontRange Solutions?**

Nikolay Savlukov: We reviewed several options for solutions from various providers. But FrontRange Solutions was the only company at the time that had real experience in implementing a similar system, with the CenterTelecom branch in Kaluga. That was a key factor in our decision.

– **Tell us about the Automated 09 service.**

Dmitriy Stolyar: We offered MGTS the option of building a system based on IP telephony, since that is economical and has sufficiently flexible setup capabilities.

When we studied the task, we realized that it would be impossible to organize access to all the information that should be in the menu structure in the "traditional way", i.e. by tone dialing. We proposed a solution that uses Russian speech recognition technology and displays dynamically changing textual information in Russian, which made it possible to create a system that provides information automatically in the manner that is most natural for the customer – by verbal request. The system recognizes speech with 95% accuracy.

Our colleagues at MGTS suggested a solution to this problem that was unusual for us: using standard personal computers located at the 09 Service operators' work stations for the voice recognition system. The system currently uses 14 computers. Operators work at these machines in the daytime, and the same computers are used for the automated information system from 9:00 PM to 8:00 AM.

FrontRange Solutions Inc (USA) is the largest producer of specialized CRM solutions for managing interaction with clients and automating services. Its products include the GoldMine system of automating the operation of sales departments; HEAT/ITSM, a comprehensive solution for service-related issues; and IPCC, industrial contact centers.

This configuration reduced the startup cost of the system and saves on subsequent maintenance expenses. Capacity can be increased fairly rapidly as the expected demand on the system rises.

This project is unique in every way. It is now the largest speech recognition system in the country, and it has a vocabulary of 5000 words. For example, our customer at the CenterTelecom branch in Kaluga limited their system to 50 words.

– How long did it take to implement the project?

Dmitriy Stolyar: For such a large-scale project, the timeframe was extremely short. We began work in March, and the system was launched on July 1. I would like to mention the excellent professional work of our colleagues at MGTS: the information they selected on the basis of statistical analysis – what people who call the operators actually ask for – was clearly structured, which minimized the time we had to spend recording it and setting up the system.

– Could this solution also be applied in other areas?

Dmitriy Stolyar: Systems like this are needed primarily by semi-governmental and private communications operators. They are our main preferred clients.

FrontRange Solutions offers not only baseline IVR services. Our main emphasis is on additional solutions that enhance the value of these services and make them more attractive to customers. We have been promoting and creating speech recognition systems in Russia since 2002. These systems make it possible to enhance the accessibility of services for all population groups, create additional fee-based services, and increase the profitability of the company.

– How would you assess the effectiveness of the project as of today?

Nikolay Savlukov: In my opinion, simple information services should operate in this way. We have been consistently satisfied with the operation of the system, we have had no complaints about the speech recognition, and the average duration of a call has decreased to 1.5–2 minutes. Moreover, when you are not just passively listening but participating in the process, it matters less how much time you spend on the line.

I should mention that many of our customers are still using rotary-dial telephones. With a speech recognition system, they have the same ability to use the service as people with tone-dial phones.

We have not yet seen any serious problems with the system. We are glad that everything has gone well and the automatic information system has the capability to expand further. For example, Russian is the baseline language now, but the system can provide information in other languages as well. If the city needs to do this, for example during Olympic Games, visitors to the city would have information support: the system has a function allowing the inclusion of up to 40 additional languages.

Perhaps people are not yet accustomed to using an automated information service. But in the future, services that assume that the caller interacts with a live operator will become the most expensive services. For example, the fee-based 009 Service emphasizes service: the client not only gets a telephone number, but can also order a taxi and reserve tickets, for which an operator simply must be on the line.

The technology we have implemented in the 09 Service is convenient and economical. The customer can control the call and get the necessary information, and we save resources and can use our operators for other tasks. ■