

British Gas

Creates Innovative Inbound/Outbound Customer Contact Solution to Gain a Head Start on its Competitors in the Emerging Smart Meter Marketplace

The Company

British Gas provides gas, electricity and home repair services to millions of customers in Scotland, Wales and England. Part of the Centrica Group, it is the UK's leading energy and Home Services provider.

The Business Challenge

British Gas required a customer contact solution that supported call blending, outbound campaign management and natural language speech recognition to support its new Smart Meter operation.

Smart Meters (SMs), for both gas and electricity, record the consumption of energy by households (or organisations) and then communicate that information back to utility companies for monitoring and billing purposes at the end of each day. Consumption is typically visible in near real-time, allowing consumers to see exactly how much energy they are using at any point in time. British Gas sees the top three benefits of SMs for energy consumers are accurate bills, greater energy awareness and control and better budgeting.

In December 2009 the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change announced its intention to replace around 47 million meters in Britain by 2020. And while the official start date for the rollout of SMs is summer 2012, some energy suppliers have already started installing the technology - with British Gas leading the way.

British Gas Smart Meter Rollout

In 2009, British Gas started Smart Meter trials with the aim of identifying where product improvements and business process enhancements can be made before full roll-out. To date, these trials have involved three phases. During the first phase in 2009, there was an introduction of early product prototypes. Phase two in 2010 involved the installation of a few thousand units of an improved trial product with more functionality and better reliability. Finally, the third phase starting in 2011, involves the trial of 500,000 units of an enhanced product capable of doing pre-payment as well as credit.

British Gas has also set up a dedicated Smart Meter team, including around 2,000 Smart Energy Experts (SEEs) whose target is to install 14 million meters by 2020. The team expects to be installing around 10,000 meters a day by 2012. British Gas is eager to update its customers about the benefits of Smart Meters and has set up a new area on its [web site](#) to provide useful information and give insights into how consumers can reduce bills and cut emissions.

The BGSM Contact Centre

During the 1990s, meter-reading appointment booking was outsourced by British Gas to a number of third party outsourcers. The Smart Meters programme now allows British Gas the opportunity to bring this activity back in-house, a significant move given the strategic importance to British Gas of discussing energy efficiency matters directly with its customers. British Gas also believes it will be more cost efficient to run meter-reading operations in-house.



Products

- Aspect Unified IP 6.6

Results

- Improved agent occupancy
- Enhanced customer experiences
- Faster and more accurate management decision-making
- Dramatically reduced number of 'no-access' visits to customers' homes
- Increased dials per hour by more than 40 percent

"Because our inbound and outbound calls are broadly on the same topic, it's a perfect scenario for call blending. Blending has helped us better manage peaks and troughs in contact volumes and that has had a dramatic impact on agent occupancy. Agents like the system, as well, because they have a consistent workload throughout each day - avoiding the manic periods and the lulls."

Dave Lister

Head of Service Development,
British Gas



Customers are expected to benefit from the move, too. British Gas will gain greater visibility of the customer journey - from arranging appointments to visiting customers' homes and follow-up activities - and will therefore be in a better position to maintain consistently high service standards along the way.

British Gas has transferred all outbound appointment booking and planning duties from its outsourced partners to in-house teams as of July 2011 and a dedicated BGSM operation has been created in Leeds to take over the work.

The Solution

British Gas considered a wide range of technology requirements for its BGSM operation and realised the four main areas they wanted to focus on. They needed an appointment booking front-end for agents, an integrated planning and scheduling solution, an advanced data capture solution by field teams and a comprehensive inbound/outbound contact handling solution.

After considering a number of technology options, British Gas selected Aspect® Unified IP® as its core inbound/outbound contact handling solution. Aspect Unified IP is a next-generation unified contact centre platform that unites inbound, outbound, voice portal, Internet contact, multichannel self-service and proactive contact capabilities, as well as unified communications (UC) and collaboration functionality. It really delivers a powerful range of customer contact applications to BGSM including multichannel inbound and outbound customer contact handling, call recording, advanced list management and advanced voice portal.

British Gas Services was already a major user of Aspect's unified communications for the contact centre applications and the BGSM team received a positive report on Aspect Unified IP from British Gas's Hattersley site that had recently adopted the platform product. After a number of planning meetings between British Gas and Aspect personnel, an Aspect Unified IP 6.6 solution was commissioned.

There are around 300 personnel currently employed within the BGSM office team - 180 customer contact agents within a new state-of-the-art contact centre and 120 within the planning/scheduling team. The main role of BGSM agents is to call existing customers to discuss the benefits of Smart Meters and set appointments for SEEs. They also handle inbound calls from customers wishing to set or change appointments.

Certain features British Gas utilises are Advanced List Management 4.0, which is an enterprise campaign management solution that enables organisations to centrally drive outbound strategies across multiple Aspect Unified IP systems over a wide area network. They also use the Aspect Advanced Voice Portal using Automatic Speech Recognition to confirm the identity of the customer. Aspect Unified IP has been tightly integrated to British Gas's SAP work management platform, to create a fully automated solution.

For appointment booking, the BGSM team has split the UK into 400 individual planning areas for appointment booking purposes. Each day, these areas are prioritised by the planning system based on the availability of SEEs, with the Aspect Unified IP product set to automatically dial customers in the fifty areas where there is the highest likelihood of getting an expert to customers' homes quickly and to ensure SEE productivity is maintained. Every thirty minutes, the system refreshes and makes adjustments where necessary. If British Gas doesn't have a valid phone number for a particular customer it sends a letter - with the customer able to call into the BGSM contact centre or go online to book an appointment. Internal processes have been optimised to ensure the appointment booking process is as efficient as possible for both British Gas and its customers.

For appointment reminders, customers are asked how they would prefer to be contacted in the future - by automated phone message or text. Two to three days prior to an appointment, the British Gas appointment systems contacts the Aspect® Unified IP® platform and requests that a reminder notification is sent. An automated voice message is used and British Gas's Advanced Voice Portal plays back the customer's name, along with the date and time of their appointment, using a natural-sounding voice. If customers wish to change their appointments they simply press a single button during the automated message and their contact will be intelligently routed to an appropriately skilled contact centre agent - with customer verification managed automatically within the Aspect Unified IP system.

Blended Agents

British Gas has introduced 'blended agents' into its BGSM contact centre to maximise agent productivity and occupancy. BGSM blended agents are trained to handle both inbound and outbound contacts – and may handle outbound appointment booking calls, inbound appointment-changing calls, and calls from customers that have received letters and wish to set up a SEE appointment within a single work session.

"Because inbound and outbound calls are broadly on the same topic, it's a perfect scenario for call blending," said Dave Lister, Head of Service Development at British Gas. "Blending has helped us better manage peaks and troughs in contact volumes and that has had a dramatic impact on agent occupancy. Agents like the system, as well, because they have a consistent workload throughout each day – avoiding the manic periods and the lulls." The call centre resource team manage the peaks and troughs by monitoring the inbound and outbound queues and moving agents in the system as required.

Results

British Gas believes that the setting up of the BGSM operation presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to improve brand perception and strengthen relationships. With the insourcing work nearly complete, the installation of Aspect Unified IP has had a significant impact on both inbound and outbound activities. The impact of British Gas's highly integrated customer contact systems and its revised business processes has been huge – dramatically reducing the number of 'no-access' calls. Blending activity has improved occupancy rates and the company has increased dials per hour by more than 40 percent.

With regards to working with Aspect, Dave Lister comments, "It's been a pleasure working with Aspect. When building our technology solution, we adopted an agile approach to system development and Aspect has been extremely supportive of this strategy."

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