



HEAT Matches Business Success with Outstanding Support at Virgin Direct

Company Name

Virgin Direct

Industry

Financial Services

Business Benefits

▪

Quick Stats

Product:	HEAT
Employees:	1,600
Calls per week:	450
Users:	
Operating Environment:	

COMPANY BACKGROUND

3rd March 1995, in partnership with Norwich Union, Virgin Direct launched with its first product, the Virgin Growth PEP, followed soon after by the Virgin Income PEP. Twelve months later in 1996, low cost life insurance, serious illness protection and a personal pension products were added to the portfolio. By August 1997, Virgin Direct was managing funds over £1 billion.

In 1997, Virgin struck an alliance with The Royal Bank of Scotland to launch Virgin One, the first bank account to combine borrowings and savings in one bank account. In 1998, Virgin Direct further extended its range of financial products to the point where it claimed to meet the majority of the public's basic financial needs.

RAPID GROWTH

In the four years to 1999, Virgin Direct grew from start-up to a major force in consumer financial services, managing assets worth well over £2 billion for 300,000 customers. Growing rapidly, and with the prospect of a new stakeholder pension business beginning in 2001, change management was joined by growth management as a key business enabler.

Additionally, the business is split between four sites in Norwich and a legacy of Virgin's partnerships financial institutions such as Norwich Union and The Royal Bank of Scotland. This complicated scenario has forced the need to reconfigure buildings, and integrate old and new technologies on an ongoing basis. "Growth relies on a tightly controlled IT environment. Control enables us to evaluate and implement new technologies and processes from a stable platform," commented Paul Harrison, IT support manager at Virgin Direct.

Virgin Direct's whirlwind success has produced an environment that was and still feels like a start-up, brimming over with enthusiasm and ideas. As the business matures, the culture needs to be tempered by formalising successful start-up's procedures and developing the organisation's infrastructure. One of the key challenges faced by management is the retention of the original creative elements in the new controlled and focused environment.

The support environment was typical of the start-up culture. Developed from an in-house system built around Lotus Notes, the IT support team ended up using valuable time and energy maintaining its own infrastructure. By 1999, the situation had reached crisis point, and a new system was needed if the success of Virgin Direct was going to continue.

"Quite simply," says Harrison: "we didn't have the time, resources or desire to create a bespoke system just for support. So it was agreed to go outside for an application."

BUSINESS SOLUTION

HEAT was evaluated along with several other products. "HEAT is used within other divisions of Virgin, so I was able to get references from within my own organisation. It was interesting to see my colleagues adapting the product, and were happy to spend the time doing it. We just wanted something that made us more efficient."

Initially it was important for Harrison and his team to get quick wins by implementing the system first, get used to basic functions, and provide a base on which to grow. Areas such as service level agreement (SLA) management would come later as the process of performance measurement starts to kick in, a vital issue key to the support operation's future success.



IMPLEMENTATION

"Half the problem was getting the various support teams to work together to provide a seamless service. In that sense, just buying the system and going through the process of implementing it was a big help. The priority is now to formalise processes and fully document everything. Information from the knowledge base will be made from the knowledge base to add value to end users," commented Harrison.

RAPID IMPLEMENTATION

HEAT resulted in a number of immediate benefits. In tandem with other procedural initiatives it supported the change control processes and provided a major win in halving the number of out of hours support calls.

More generally, an improved support operation helps provide the continuity for an IT operation that represents 10% of the total organisation, covering database architecture, business analysts and developers. "Having the IT environment under control gives us an operational edge, that's what makes us so quick to market with new products," commented Harrison.

HEAT is used for the help desk and the infrastructure support team, which covers NT-based LANs, PC/ Server failures, voice telephony, firewall problems, leased line issues, change requests and more. Between 250 and 450 queries are made to the help desk each week.

The team also supports system moves from building to building, of which there are 18 buildings spread across four sites, linked by ATM and infrared network links, and is involved in fixing network outages and coping with ageing technologies like Token Ring LANs running the original CAT 3 and CAT 1 cabling.

"If we're going to make a major investment recabling to CAT 5," asserts Harrison, "we'll have to justify the request with real examples like the number of general system faults. With HEAT the team is able to log and accurately report on all the calls that come through to the support desk. It means I can provide valuable management information."

Currently information is gathered weekly to build a statistical picture that covers infrastructure and help desk teams. It is also vital because of Virgin Direct's involvement in the financial services market, in which other bodies such as IMRO and PIA carry out audits.

"With HEAT in place," adds Harrison, "the whole environment is so much more rigorous. We can now show exactly what's been done and provide clear audit trails."

FUTURE

With a planned move to HEAT Version 6.0, Harrison is also evaluating the Web-based iHEAT for mobile analysts. iHEAT will enable analysts to log and action calls whilst away from their desks, a particularly valuable feature when there are multiple sites to an organisation. Because both the team and users have a clear understanding of what is required of the help desk, a phased approach that brings in specific functions, and gets users buy-in, has become viable.

"We're letting the system evolve organically," remarked Harrison. "In a phased approach we're adding management information, having users log their own calls and raise purchase requests directly in HEAT. It's gradually replacing manual processes."

"There's no question that FrontRange isn't the company to partner with. Virgin Direct is a good advert for HEAT, it means our sales and consultancy people are knowledgeable and reassuring when talking to the public," said Harrison.