HipLink

Retail Customer Case Study

INTRODUCTION: For over a century, this major grocery store chain evolved from a tiny family shop into a major retail operation with over 300 locations throughout Texas and Mexico, and 75,000 employees. The Chain's remarkable growth can be attributed to its steadfast commitment to exceptional customer service, low prices, friendly store atmosphere, and a strong sense of innovation, especially in adopting leading-edge technologies.

To meet customer demands for a more comprehensive and convenient shopping experience, this one time grocery chain has expanded its operation to include general household merchandise as well as in-store services such as pharmacy and photo development, Keeping stores open, well-stocked, and without interruption is now highly dependent on its large information technology (IT) support and advanced communication infrastructures.

STREAMLINED TECH SUPPORT FOR 300+ STORES:
The retailer's IT and IS Support processes have multiple teams in place to ensure business continuity and quickly address issues. Should there be an unplanned electrical or network outage, for example, a "911 Point-of-Service" support team is immediately activated to bring store registers back online, or to resolve technical issues that could slow down warehouse and inventory supply chain applications. Having the right tools including more intelligent communication technology has become a key component of their business continuity implementation strategy.

"In the past, an outdated paging system was used to coordinate communications between our different support groups" recalled a Senior Systems Specialist with the retail chain. "The system inevitably ran into problems if a trouble ticket couldn't be resolved by the company's service desk, the first line of support."

Under this old escalation system, escalated trouble tickets were distributed to the advanced support teams as individual pages, one-by-one through a single pager carrier. The paging software supported only one carrier, and did not support different carrier protocols. Messages could not be sent reliably and simultaneously to entire groups, as a result, the communication channel clogged, and a tremendous amount of time was wasted with phone calls between store managers and technical support to track down the status of open trouble tickets.

FLEXIBLE AND INTELLIGENT ENTERPRISE WIRELESS COMMUNICATIONS: After an exhaustive search for a better solution, the retailer selected HipLink, an enterprise wireless messaging and two-way communication software that would integrate with HP Service Manager, their service desk application and other monitoring systems and transportation applications. It would also allow them to send alerts and messages through virtually any carrier; and work uniformly with the retailer's preferred protocols such as HTTP, TAP, SNPP, and SMTP.

"HipLink's SOAP interface facilitated quick integration with HP Service Manager," described the Senior Systems Specialist. We were able to quickly send, track, and escalate alerts to different IS support teams, irrespective of the individual receiver's mobile device or carrier."

After implementing HipLink's extensive capabilities, now when an issue is escalated by the Service Desk to Level-2 Support, the tickets are parsed into a SOAP message generated by a Java script. The message is delivered to the correct Support team member recipients, and can be received via the desired communications channel including landline, cell phone, and SMS text.

The intelligence of HipLink communications is visible when an incident occurs that requires immediate resolution. For example, if the SNPP Gateway is down, HipLink is smart enough to detect it, and will re-send the message via an analog tap. Before, the teams were restricted to 'fire and forget' message notifications.

Through HipLink, the grocery chain has been able to solidify their technical support operations in the U.S., resulting in a cost savings of over a $100,000 a year with more efficient use of the overseas support team. The Indian team has been transformed from using a "trouble ticket queue manager" to a more effective problem resolution system for escalations. Much of this was achieved with HipLink's text-to-speech voice module, where messages are instantly relayed directly to the phones of the overseas support team, for better response and smoother communications.

HIPLINK EXPANDED TO WAREHOUSE-TO-DRIVER COMMUNICATIONS:
With over three hundred stores throughout Texas and in Mexico, the retailer's fleet of trucks is moving inventory twenty-four hours a day. Drivers depend on regular pager communications from warehouse personnel alerting them of store destinations, delivery times, where to pick up trucks and trailers, and what products to deliver. Before HipLink, these critical messages were handled manually to individual drivers, and often getting lost. With HipLink, a text file issued by a mainframe computer is sent to HipLink, where it notifies everyone in the file with the correct message. This is done about four times a day by the warehouse administration staff from their desktops by hitting a button on a custom built GUI to load the mainframe file, and then hitting "Send" to get the file over to HipLink via the SOAP API.

HIPLINK PLAYS A ROLE IN RESTORING OPERATIONS DURING NATURAL DISASTER:
For a retail chain business, any interruption in business means lost revenues, an extended downtime can be crucial to company customers and employees. In yet another demonstration of HipLink's flexibility, in September of 2008, massive Hurricane Ike roared through the U.S. Gulf, affecting a large portion of eastern Texas, including the cities of Galveston, Corpus Christi, and Houston. Mass evacuations were ordered ahead of the eventual massive damage

to numerous affected communities. As part of the retailer's Emergency Preparedness Team, different systems are used to coordinate and restore operations including bringing IT systems back on line. HipLink was used extensively in the days following the storm to coordinate people to stores, and get equipment running.

"HipLink was definitely a vital player in positioning people where they could be the most effective in restoring service to our customers, including support technicians dispatched to dozens of stores throughout Houston," affirmed the Senior Systems Specialist.

What built this company into a major regional retailer such as dedicated employees committed to exceptional customer service and progressive use of technology, contributed to the fact that its Houston area stores re-opened in less than a week, heralded as the first grocery store operation to do so.

GREATER FLEXIBILITY, HIGH ROI AND EXCELLENT SUPPORT:
What started as a replacement for outgrown technology, HipLink found a home in other parts of the organization, including its role in business continuity and emergency and incident message notifications. Because of its extensive communication and protocol coverage, flexible architecture, reliability, and high performance, this retailer's experience with HipLink continues to deliver a high return on investment. Although difficult to quantify how much has been saved by the Support teams ability to shorten store downtimes, it has been widely acknowledged throughout the company that Support's faster response and more efficient communications have contributed greatly to smoother store operations.

As a result, the organization is planning to expand HipLink's use with other new business processes as well as implement within its Mexico operations. But, the IT teams also know they have a strong tool to better equip them through unplanned challenges as well.

"We're getting a lot of value out of HipLink, including their exceptional technical support. During the evaluation phase, HipLink Technical Support gave us fast, knowledgeable answers," said the retailer's Senior Systems Specialist. "The other companies we looked at took forever to resolve issues. To our thinking, if we're having problems during evaluation, what's their support going to be like if we buy? For the last several years, we've found that the HipLink software seldom requires attention, but when we do have questions, we're receiving the same level of quality in service and support."

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