Helen Freeman discovers that providing 24-hour global service can be fun in the sun.

I can remember hearing the term ‘follow-the-sun’ call centre for the first time. It was about 1996. I liked it. It sounded exciting and it made me think about foreign travel; the kind of holidays where you’d pack a bag, jump in the car and drive to wherever the sun was shining.

At the time I thought that the term stuck out like a sore thumb in a market drenched in technical jargon. For once, someone had decided to use simple words to describe a simple concept; a global network of virtual call centres that divide their operating times according to time zone they’re in to provide localised service to global customers. It’s as simple as it sounds; as the sun moves round the earth, customer service moves with it.
UNDERCOVER OPERATION

Today, it appears that fewer companies are doing this — or are prepared to talk about doing it. I had thought that it would be easy to find an international company that offers its customers 24-hour service in this way. I was wrong.

I managed to find some companies that have follow-the-sun operations, but they seemed reluctant to talk. The UK airline, British Airways, runs one across two sites, one in the UK and one in the US. So does American Express. Cigna Healthcare is in the process of setting up a follow-the-sun operation, but they weren’t in a position to talk to me about it. Marriott Hotels has a follow-the-sun operation, but a spokesperson told me that it would take a couple of weeks to track down the right contact for me to talk to. [I’d always been under the impression that by providing 24-hour service companies were supposed to improve communications.]

After much searching, I found myself an organisation that’s operating a follow-the-sun contact centre. And, what’s more, they were prepared to talk to me about it. Where other organisations were hard to track down or right-tipped about their activities, PTC — a software company — was bursting with pride about its global support capabilities.

GLOBAL LINKS

PTC provides global support based around its telecom technology. It offers customers post-sales technical support with a variety of service packages. The company provides customers with multilingual support from nine contact centres worldwide. There are four in the United States, in Needham, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City and San Jose from 08.00 Eastern Time to 21.00 Eastern Time. And then it begins all over again.

The idea of managing one contact centre is daunting enough for some; overseeing and synchronising customer support across nine sites is migraine-inducing stuff. The way to avoid the pitfalls, according to PTC, is to have extensive communication between centres.

PTC has achieved this by taking advantage of the technology infrastructure it uses. In addition to the telecom links, Web-based tools and electronic communications, the deployment of its knowledge-based database solution has been key. Paul Lenfest, vice president of PTC tells me that it’s been ISO 9000 certification that has held it all together.

This provides the company with a global template for practices and procedures. It enables them to maintain a consistency across all its sites. Policies and processes are stored on a central server that can be shared globally by its entire staff.

PTC uses a Nortel solution to support its follow-the-sun operation. It recently upgraded to the latest Nortel solution, Symposium. Although there are other vendors providing similar technology today, Lenfest tells me that when PTC was selecting a solution, “Nortel was the only one doing it.” Judging by the success of its global support, the choice of technology has paid off.

The company uses toll-free numbers. They are universal, with one number for each language. To run localised services smoothly, PTC works with local service providers in the different regions. The toll-free numbers are owned by the local telecom providers. For example, in Europe PTC works with Concert. The service provider manages all the numbers and calls are routed automatically, depending on the time of day. So that staff can tell where a call is coming from, the company uses scripts to identify whether the customer calling is on a silver, gold or platinum service contract.

“There are economies of scale,” Lenfest says. As PTC has extended its reach — and service offerings — it has been able to leverage its knowledge and experience as it has introduced new centres to the global network.

A follow-the-sun operation discourages agents from working in isolation and encourages better global communications

Reasons to follow the sun

Staff
• Agents can work normal business hours; there’s no need for managers to juggle awkward shift rotas

Customers
• Customers call one number
• They can call at any time and expect normal staffing levels

Operators
• Companies running a follow-the-sun contact centre don’t have to pay overtime or special rates for staff working unsociable hours
• Having contact centres in different parts of the world also makes it easier to find staff with the right language skills to provide multilingual customer support
THE ADVANTAGES
In follow-the-sun operations agents can work normal business hours. There’s no need for managers to juggle awkward shift rotas. At PTC staff are also given the opportunity to contribute to the global knowledge database. They can share ideas and solutions with staff on the other side of the world and they can see the impact this can have on the level of customer service company-wide.

If an agent in Salt Lake City resolves a customer query, the agent can add this information to the knowledge database so that agents in other sites in Europe and the Far East can take advantage of it to help them resolve customer queries more quickly and efficiently. “Staff are brought up in an ISO 9000 environment, where they are encouraged to have a hand in how company policy is developed. They are encouraged to speak up and participate regardless of their position within the company,” Lenfest said.

With a follow-the-sun operation, it seems that everyone gains — even the customers. Customers call one number and calls are routed to the right agents, in the right place, depending on where they’re calling from and what service level contract they have.

From the customer’s perspective the links between centres are seamless. If they choose to call outside their local business hours in their region, their call is simply routed to an agent in one of the other centres. The only thing they might notice is a difference in accent.

The key benefit for the company is being able to maintain customer satisfaction. A large percentage of PTC’s business is repeat business. Lenfest says: “Customers that use the service and are satisfied will buy more services in the future.”

He adds that PTC’s follow-the-sun customer support plays a key role in keeping customers satisfied. Couldn’t PTC achieve this by running one contact centre with 24-hour service? It could, but Lenfest reiterates that PTC is committed to providing follow-the-sun support.

By employing staff during normal business hours PTC doesn’t have to pay overtime or special rates for staff working unsociable hours. Having contact centres in different parts of the world also makes it easier to find staff with the right language skills to provide multilingual customer support.

So is having a follow-the-sun contact centre about making cost savings? Lenfest says: “It depends on how you measure cost savings.”

There are cost savings to be made from customer satisfaction. He doesn’t believe PTC could match the level of service it currently provides from one centre operating 24 hours a day. He talks about service as its differentiator. He describes how companies with the best service can remain competitive. “PTC’s follow-the-sun support allows us to be competitive from a service standpoint,” he says.

THE DISADVANTAGES
PTC prefers to talk about the “challenges” rather than disadvantages of providing follow-the-sun support.

Lenfest says how important it is that staff realise that what they do in one contact centre has an effect on other contact centres in the global network. Something as simple as scheduling holidays in one contact centre can have an impact on all the centres worldwide. “This isn’t necessarily a bad thing,” he adds, “because it discourages people from working in isolation and encourages better global communications.”

PTC has grown into its follow-the-sun operation. It hasn’t always worked on this scale. When PTC was first starting out, it didn’t offer the level of service options it has today. It didn’t have the resources or investment to support a global operation either. The reason it works so well now is, according to Lenfest, because of the knowledge-base at the heart of the business. This provides staff with the information they need to support customers’ needs.

Lenfest says that today, PTC has “the breadth of knowledge, experience and resources it takes to run a successful operation.”

Finally, he speculates that those companies that are unwilling to talk about their follow-the-sun service probably don’t have the solution to make it work for them. Enough said.