

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Interview on behalf of Qwest

Debbie Ecord

Heritage Operating LP

Corporate Telephone Administrator

Last updated: 2009 Jan 22



Product(s): Long-Distance
Industry: Retail, Energy & Utilities

1. Business need

"We started off doing this basically just looking at land lines and trying to get rid of a lot of bogus long-distance carriers that were attaching themselves, and then it grew into looking at our current corporate long-distance plan that we had and trying to find something that was a little bit cheaper.

Heritage likes to go out and purchase more propane companies because their goal is to be the number one propane company in the United States, and so part of that was going through and finding out where we were wasting our money, and the phones were outrageous.

So when you try to meet your bottom line, we were trying to find out where we could cut costs. Well, we found a lot of numbers and things that we were paying for that were not even ours anymore.

So when we first started this, we had Verizon as a corporate account. We had purchased a company; they had AT&T as a corporate account. We purchased another company and they had another corporate account with AT&T.

So one thing was we wanted to get everything all on one corporate long distance, so we were trying to also consolidate everything to one to where we could just send out one payment a month because a lot of the districts were also sending out payments for an individual or separate long-distance bill at each plant, and so we kind of looked at it and figured it cost about 25-30 dollars to send out a check because of payroll and everything, and this would be a little bit cheaper and easier for us just to have it all on one bill, and then also when it comes to repairs or anything go wrong, it's nicer just to have one person or one company to contact."

2. Evaluation & selection

"When we started looking at trying to reduce our corporate long distance, one of the things that we looked at, too, was how accessible and how easy it was to get in contact with anyone if we had any problems. We looked at a couple of them and whenever you would call, you would always get somebody different. A few times they would assign you a corporate person to work with, so we kind of looked at how easy it was to keep in contact with someone who would be easy to manage our account.

Another thing we looked at was how long, if we had a repair issue, it took them to fix a repair problem. We also looked at a couple of different vendors and they sent us quotes on how much they would charge per minute, how much they would charge for our 800 numbers, and we just kind of compared about three or four different companies.

At the beginning, we had three or four different companies that we already had long-distance plans with them, so what we did was I took basically a full bill from each one of these vendors and basically laid it out on the table and looked to see how much each one would charge me for my toll-free numbers, looked at how much each one was charging per minute; some charged more per minute in a state and some charged less out of state, so I looked at that and compared that.

And then I looked at how easy it was to be able to go in and check--if I need to have a number canceled, what was the process for each one of these companies? And then another process was if I need to cancel numbers because we sell districts or we move them, am I gonna be charged a cancellation fee for every time I need to cancel a number? And so we just basically laid them all out and put the pros and cons for each vendor."

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3. Why Qwest?

"A big plus was we had a local person here. One of their account reps came over and talked to us personally and worked with us and wanted to make sure our contract had everything that we wanted on it, and she worked back and forth and negotiated with our CEO here and going through Qwest to make sure we had everything we needed, and they were able to do that. They were very willing to even put amendments in the contract to meet what we needed for our company.

And then, of course, the price was much better than any other company that we found.

Since I worked for Qwest before, I knew the process on how to remove freezes and how to get them put back on again. When I would call them, it would be done within minutes. Other companies, you would call and they would give you a three to four [day] due date going out, and by knowing the process through Qwest, because I knew we had a lot of freezes on our accounts, I knew they would work with me to make sure all the numbers get brought over to Qwest and then I would still keep the freezes on my long distance so nobody could go in and change anything without my permission.

A lot of it was with the customer service. When I would call and need something repaired even on just local land lines and other things that we have--T1 lines and stuff like that--you call them and I never got passed around; if I did, I always had somebody who stayed with me to make sure the next person would be able to take care of me before she basically dropped me on the call.

And then they always had things fixed within 24 hours. Things were always working, whereas other companies, other vendors, I would call for just a little simple--for example, have an 800 number rerouted--and they would put an order in and next thing I know, they're telling me it's 24 to 48 hours to have it done. But when I call Qwest and do the same type of order, it's done in 5 minutes. So that's one reason we went ahead with Qwest."

4. Service activation

"We started off with getting everything over to Qwest by going through our Verizon corporate long distance plan that we had, so I had to basically go through an 800 to 900-page bill from Verizon and make sure I had all the numbers off of that bill that we were being charged for and get the addresses and the toll-free numbers and the correct ring-to numbers all put on one big spreadsheet, and I sent that over to Qwest and they took all the numbers off of there and put all the orders in.

It was a big order; we sent over 480 toll-free numbers all at once. They would work through them, and the only problems we had at the beginning was we had all those PIC freezes and LPIC freezes that we thought we had cleared up before that.

But throughout the process, they've assigned one person who puts our orders in, they've assigned us one person who does all the billing and fixes any billing errors that might have happened, and they have one person that keeps an eye on all of our ANIS coming across to where if there is a freeze on the account, he sends me an e-mail every day, 'This number needs to be fixed', so that way I can call the local carrier and get the long-distance PIC and LPICs corrected.

So I had to do that with a Verizon bill, and we're still working on that, just the last few things that're being left behind, and then I'm also doing the same thing with our two different AT&T bills.

With the PIC and LPIC freezes, I would have to call the local carrier and tell them that we need to have all the lines changed over to Qwest, and the districts would usually give me every single line that they know they have--all the phone numbers. In a few cases, the districts had a couple lines that might ring to the back that they didn't

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even know what the numbers were, and so when the local carrier changed the PIC and LPIC, those couple of numbers went through what they call like 'random billing', and so they didn't get put on the corporate account and the district would get a separate bill from them.

But all I had to do was e-mail one of the contact numbers that Qwest gave me and told them 'This is the account number and it's supposed to be on this subaccount number on the corporate plan and she would just go in and rerate it to the corporate rate and move the number over. So it wasn't too bad; I mean, we had 1,500 numbers, so I would imagine we maybe only had 30 or 40 [that] it happened to these.'

5. Overview of solution

"Most of the things that we have with Qwest is the long distance; I think were at 560-something sites nationwide, and that includes what we call 'The District', which is the propane plant itself where people come in and get their tanks filled, and that also includes different corporate locations nationwide--we have about three or four other areas for administration that are nationwide--and each one of those plants averages anywhere from six to ten lines per plant, and each one of those plants' administration office has at least one toll-free number per location. So we've got over 1,500 lines that're having to be pulled over to Qwest.

The Helena corporate office, we average over 7,000 long-distance minutes a month, but nationwide, all of our districts, they average anywhere from 100 to 200 minutes a month for their long distance; that's inbound, switched, people calling in [to] the 800, and then out of bound, too.

Within Qwest, the 13 states for Qwest have land lines and our districts have Qwest for their land lines and their DSL also. And then a few locations nationwide, we're right now working on putting in T1 lines into a lot of our locations that have more than six or more local lines there; we're switching them over to the T1 line."

6. Customer service

"When we first started this with the customer service, I would just call the regular 800 number on our bill and I would always get somebody different, but they were always very helpful and were able to fix the problem. But it was getting to where, since we were having so many numbers coming across over to Qwest, that of course we ran into different problems--like, for example, with repair.

When a few of the toll-free numbers were entered in, the ring-to number might have been entered incorrectly, so I would have to call repair and have them reroute that 800 number--and they were always very helpful.

It only takes about five or ten minutes and they have it fixed where other companies, when I did the same thing, it took them two days to get the ring-to number changed.

And then they assigned me one person to help me with the problems with all our PIC and our LPIC freezes, and he sends me reports anytime I want to let me see where we're standing on all of our phone numbers coming across as to which ones have completed and then which ones are still being rejected.

But overall, I mean, every time you call in, you get somebody very friendly, very personable, and it's almost like they're part of your team trying to fix the whole solution, be a part of everything.

If there's a problem, they're willing to help fix what their part can, and then they work with another person to help fix another area--like, for example, I have a gal that helps me with any billing problems, and while she's looking [at] that, if she sees there's a number that should be on a different account, she'll e-mail someone else there and let them know this number needs to be moved and she'll cc: the account rep that we have and cc: me on the e-mail so I know everything that's going on all the time. She stops by, makes sure everything's going okay, and she

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wants me to cc: her on all the e-mails when it comes to billing problems, problems where we need to have numbers moved, even address change--because she wants to make sure she keeps in contact to make sure everything's going okay.

And if she's going to be out of the office, she will call me in the morning and let me know that she will be out driving around and she will even give me her cell phone number so if I run into any problems. And it's nice because if I need her, she's always accessible."

7. Non-financial benefits

"We have one place to contact for all of our long distance nationwide as opposed to having four different vendors covering our corporate long distance [account].

I have one bill to look at instead of having five or six different bills coming to me. And then also I'm able to go on with Q.Control--which is on the Internet--anytime I want to even see if certain numbers are being billed on the correct account and make sure they're being billed correctly, and so I'm able to go in to look on our whole corporate account to make sure all the numbers are coming over.

Qwest assigning a particular person to keep an eye on the PIC and LPIC freezes has saved me an enormous amount of time because I don't have to keep going in there or keep checking with districts or their local carriers to see if the order's completed; they have somebody who keeps track of all that, so that has saved me a lot of time to where I can fix other problems in other areas of our company."

8. Measurable benefits

"I would say we've cut our phone bills more than half on the corporate long distance.

The other one would be where it comes out to paying the actual bill itself, mailing out a check to each location. By the time we have our districts scan in their bills into our computer system and it comes up to us here in accounts payable and then we process the checks out of Montana and mail them out--well, we figured it costs about 25 dollars per check to be mailed out by the time we pay payroll and all the other operating expenses on that check.

So whereas before probably close to 100 or more districts had their own long-distance bill that we were having to send separate checks out to, and so that was costing money. So now we're getting everything onto Qwest and we send one check out to them a month.

Before, with our other vendors that we had, one vendor was charging us five dollars a month for [each of] our 800 numbers and another vendor was charging us 30 dollars a month for [each of] our 800 numbers, and now with our corporate plan with Qwest, I only pay one dollar a month for [each of] our 800 numbers, which is a big savings right there because I have close to 600 toll-free numbers that we pay for every month.

When we started going through this and we were cleaning out our Verizon bill, I found locations where numbers had been disconnected, but Verizon, the way they work is if you did not call them and actually go through their process to cancel that account, they kept billing you for it, so there were several places where we were paying for reoccurring fees on services that we were not even getting at all anymore.

And the same thing with 800 numbers; we had quite a few 800 numbers that were no longer active and nobody was using them--in fact, a few of them had already been given out to another company so when you called it, it rang to another company, but they didn't cancel them out because nobody went in and actually said 'We need this number canceled', whereas with Qwest, when you moved a number or if a number was disconnected, it automatically stopped billing you--but we're finding with our other vendors, they were charging us 30 dollars a month for [each of the] 800

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numbers that we haven't used in probably two years."

9. Areas for improvement

"One thing I think to be improved is the Q.Control. It gives you a lot of good information in there, but I know with the land lines you can go in and do more changes, but with the Q.Control on the Internet with just the long distance, it doesn't give me much option of changing; I just go in there and look at data. So I'd like to be able to go in there, if I need an address change, to be able to go in there and do that.

Another thing is on that Q.Control, I would go in there and it would show me that we had a particular 800 number, but in reality they might have rejected the resport form, and so I'm thinking that we have it because it's showing up in Q.Control, and so I put a cancellation in there--next thing you know, our 800 number goes down, so I have to get Verizon to bring it back up again and try to go through the whole process to bring it back over to Qwest. So it would be nice if they didn't even show up in Q.Control until it was confirmed that Qwest has them."

10. Future plans

"What we're gonna be doing in the very near future is to work on getting all of our plants' numbers over on the corporate long distance [account], but another thing we're looking at, too, is I'm in the process of pulling all of our plants that have got six or more lines at their location and then I send those addresses and everything to our local account person here and she goes through and lets me know which locations are able to have T1 lines placed there by Qwest.

And so we're looking at that to try to give each one of the districts better quality for their Internet and lower their prices on that, too.

And then in the different states that Qwest has, once we get all the long distance done, we're gonna start working state by state on getting one Qwest bill for all the locations in that state and have it go through on Q.Control so the district managers can go on the Internet and have access to information also."

11. Recommendations and advice

"I recommend to anybody before they start the process, to check with their local carriers on freezes on their long distance and then just make sure you have every single line, everything is all together and ready to go before an order gets placed because if it's all there when an order gets placed, then it seems to run a lot smoother.

Look into other aspects with Qwest, too--for example, with the T1 lines, if they're looking into long distance, maybe look at going with something like with a T1 line where the long distance is included because the DSL and the land lines might be more beneficial all in one as opposed to just pulling your lines over to the corporate long distance.

We had quite a few of them that we worked on getting all the lines over on the corporate long distance and now we're going with a T1 line, where it would've been a whole lot easier from the very beginning just to get everything put on the T1 line."