

## TECHNOLOGY, MEDIA & TELECOMS

The innovation flag has been waved proudly in the North West for centuries. And our telecoms and technology suppliers are no exception, picking up contracts from blue-chip companies that need to review and update how they communicate with their customers.

Much of the pressure for big business to keep up is driven by consumers, who are much more open to new technologies, especially those designed to make their life easier.

"Once people adopt technology in their personal lives they expect to be able to do so in other areas of their life – they expect a choice. Blue chip companies in particular want to ensure they are offering the latest technologies for their customers," says Andrea Wilson-Brown (pictured), managing director of Manchester telecoms company BCH Digital.

Winning contracts with national retailers and high-street banks, BCH Digital has created bespoke products to meet varying complex demands. "These companies tend to be looking

for something specifically tailored towards their needs, ranging from push-button customer surveys to 1,000-plus seat call centres," says Wilson-Brown.

BCH has often customised its off-the-shelf call queuing product. As standard, the system is able to handle lots of calls directed across multiple sites and come up with various in-built features including call recording and queue buster. These allow the caller to leave the queue if its busy, leave a message, or mid-call divert.

"Customer service is more important than ever and these features help improve a brand's image, customer service, training standards, managing staffing levels and can increase sales," says Wilson-Brown.

"We've seen a noticeable increase in demand for SMS products over the past 12 months and we expect this to continue. More and more people prefer to use SMS when possible. These products are easy to use and provide full accountability through their monitoring and report services, which is critical for bigger companies."

One of BCH's recent customers has benefited from a 53 per cent improvement in unanswered calls, resulting in increased income averaging £3,235 per branch.

Wilson-Brown says: "Being independent and knowing what can be done technically means we are often able to find a more efficient and

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## CREATIVE CONNECTIONS

THE REGION'S TELECOMS SUPPLIERS ARE HELPING LARGER ORGANISATIONS

TO MEET NEW TECHNOLOGY HEAD ON, WRITES **STUART WILKIN**

cost-effective answer. We have the expertise and infrastructure to manage it in-house, which means we can react and turn projects around quickly."

Quick thinking has enabled another of the region's suppliers to grow in a competitive market. The directors of ConvergeOne in Swinton, founded in 2008, formed a Cisco-aligned business around the three hot areas of borderless networks, virtualisation and collaboration. Over the past two years the business has won work from the Mawson Group, Pannone and the Football League, forecasting an increased turnover of £1.1m, up from £385,000 last year.

"We want to double our business again next year," says managing director Mark Johnson. "Our strength is in our flexibility. We are nimble and quick to respond to new technology, and we have good technical consultants that enable us to react quickly to market change."

ConvergeOne completely rebuilt the Football League's telecoms network foundation in 2010. Johnson says: "The organisation had two sites, one in London and the other in Preston. We have refreshed the hardware and

have a Cisco borderless network in place that works seamlessly across both sites. We transformed their expectations from Cisco's perspective."

As technology changes businesses need to invest, but they will always want value for money, in terms of hardware and professional services costs. Johnson says: "Businesses are looking for ways to improve their productivity and drive efficiencies. Our first engagement is always to find out how a business operates and how they want to make people more efficient.

"A lot haven't yet seen IT as an enabler but remote access is high on progressive companies' agendas. The business day isn't nine to five any more. It often starts at seven, especially if you have international clients. Employers want workers to maintain communication when not in the office. And people want to work from home, drop the kids off but still work a ten hour day."

Johnson adds: "Companies can make huge cost and efficiency savings by embracing enhancements such as video conferences. You can't afford to carry on operating the way you always have."

## TAKEOVER BID DECLINED AS QIRE PREPARES TO EXPAND

The shareholders of voice messaging company Qire in Liverpool have backed their instincts, by declining an offer to sell, after an impressive year.

Still in its infancy and employing 15 people, Qire certainly punches above its weight. The business is growing rapidly and after winning contracts with Lloyds Banking Group, Santander Cards and Severn Trent is expecting to double turnover to £2.5m this year.

Qire supplies an automated voice system, which replaces call centre debt collecting functions, to utilities and lenders. The system engages with a customer through an automated message, verifies identity and then takes action by either passing the call through to a call centre or

taking a payment. "By the time the call centre gets our call put through to them, the ground work has been done," says operations director Alan Layton.

Qire caught the attention of a US competitor last year, which put forward a \$10m takeover bid.

Turning this down was a brave move by shareholders but Layton is adamant they got it right. "Our shareholders felt that the offer reflected neither the current activity nor potential of the business."

The directors' confidence was boosted by the success of their contract with Severn Trent. Russell Mackuin, debt strategy manager at the water company, says: "Working with Qire's technology has been excellent. Prior to using it, up to 60 per cent of the time

a call centre agent would get through to someone other than the person responsible for payment. It was incredibly hit or miss.

Now, through interactive voice messaging, we can filter out wrong party numbers and it is simple to use and has really helped in terms of call centre productivity."

Layton adds: "There are new opportunities to use this technology. For example, notifying customers of problems such as a water outage in their area, or meter readings.

"We are beginning to work with retailers with international reach. Our strategy is to remain lean and tight and work in the markets that we know – and with the ability to follow clients into international arenas.

## Aligning your IP and business strategy

Whatever business you are in, your intellectual property protection strategy must always be driven by your commercial objectives.

A company's approach can be heavily influenced by the general perception of IP in its technical field. This is particularly relevant in the TMT sector. For example, telecoms companies have long been keen to file large numbers of patent applications to protect their technology. As such, new entrants to the telecoms market are often well advised to establish a solid patent portfolio to ensure that their technical position is viewed favourably by telecom bluechips.

Software developers in the UK and Europe have typically been more reluctant to file patent applications to protect their technology. However, such an approach can be problematic. Very large software companies are amongst the biggest filers of patent applications in the world, and put huge value on patent protection. As such, an SME with few or no patent applications may be viewed unfavourably by bluechips.

Formulating an IP strategy which takes into account these attitudes to IP is therefore key. This is particularly important for developing companies, as an understanding of what a potential bluechip partner might expect is invaluable from an early stage.

As the UK's leading IP specialist firm, Marks & Clerk has notable experience in the TMT sector working with companies at all stages of their development: from spin-outs and start-ups to bluechip companies. We are extremely well placed to advise you as to how bluechips might view your IP position for a potential collaboration or acquisition.

For questions or a free consultation, contact Mark Kenrick at [mkenrick@marks-clerk.com](mailto:mkenrick@marks-clerk.com).

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