

FLEET OF FEET

AGENTS' RIDE TO TRUCK ROLL DOLLARS

By **Martin** Vilaboy

Telecom agents don't have to just sit back and watch as system integrator and IT consultant types capitalize on convergence by encroaching on recurring voice and data revenues. Indeed, service-oriented agents now have the opportunity to turn the table and grab a piece of the installation and field repair business, all without so much as lifting a single pair of crimpers.

Late last year, Cincinnati-based Contingent Network Services launched its Telecom Channel Program, offering telecom distributors and agents a chance to earn referral-based commissions on the firm's broad spectrum of system design, installation, support and break/fix capabilities. The program, possibly for the first time, provides a means for telecom agents and master agencies to get paid on the trucks rolls that support both the services they sell and just about anything else a customer may need that sits on the physical layer.

Take the case of a customer ordering a new circuit, for example. "We furnish the activation component for the edge, right up to the demarc," says Mark Stuhlreyer, Contingent managing partner.

And that's just the beginning. In the process of most end customers putting in new circuits, "there is always going to be technology that surrounds it," says Stuhlreyer. "It's typically a total project."

So along with the circuit, maybe a new router is coming onboard, or a group of PCs, or possibly a bunch of multi-site video displays. Whatever the project, there tends to be components that fall outside the responsibilities of the carrier to activate, meaning the end customer likely could use a bit of help, either with some one-off work or just navigating an unfamiliar deployment. That's where Contingent can step in, says Stuhlreyer, ready anytime and just about anywhere to take on those responsibilities as the feet on the ground.

"That same technician coming from us to terminate the line," he says, "also can do work on the LAN."

All the while, for the agent standing in the middle at the point of purchase, the added revenue flows both upstream and down. Agents can recommend the carrier they are representing use Contingent for activations, or they can convince the customer to let Contingent handle whatever ancillary work may be part of a project. Either way, or both, the customer-facing agent earns additional commissions.

Furthermore, once armed with this fresh and extensive set of new capabilities, agents then can enter an account with their "radar up," always in search of ways to capitalize on a customer's needs that otherwise would have been out of reach.

"If it is hanging off a network or part of one, Contingent can handle it," says Russ Maney, principal and co-founder of Xponential Group, which is working with the company to bring its program to telco in-direct channels. Today, that could mean a point-of-sale terminal, premises security and wireless or VoIP gear. Down the road, it could be a refrigerator that talks to a supplier when it gets low on meat. And Contingent is willing to take on small jobs, says Stuhlreyer, if it means getting in the door.

In essence, the actual and individual services being offered here aren't necessarily unique or impossible to come by elsewhere. It's not the "what," however. It's the "how."

During the last 25 years or so, Contingent has built a massive global network of certified field technicians and, more importantly, the means to efficiently schedule, manage and monitor all those people, payments and processes. "We are an engineering firm and a process control firm, more than anything else," says Stuhlreyer.

For its on-site break/fix services, for example, once a dispatch request has been made, the company claims it can be anywhere in the U.S. in two hours or less and anywhere in 55 countries within four hours – whatever skill set, tool set or experience level is required.

"The one or two operation in the middle of nowhere presents no greater challenge than the 50 site operation in New York City," says Stuhlreyer.

At the same time, utilizing only third-party, contracted labor for its field services force provides impressive levels of speed, flexibility and scale. One truck roll in Oklahoma, 50 truck rolls in Chicago or 5,000 trucks rolls across 28 states in 30 days, it's all just a matter of going that much deeper into the database, says Maney.

For agents, this widely dispersed efficiency opens the path to quick and easy entry into the break/fix business. Enrolling in the program can be as simple as filling out an agent registration form, providing "real estate" within the agency's Web property for a

dispatch form, which is designed to route service requests directly to Contingent, and cooperating in the set up and ongoing management of the software code that enables such transactions to take place. From there, the agent simply can log onto a secure and personalized portal to watch the progress of jobs and the accruing of their commissions, all in real time.

In other cases, white label capabilities can be put into place to maintain an agent's identity throughout the dispatch request process, or a solution can be fully integrated to look, feel and taste as if the end customer's full experience lies with the agency or master agency. And since Contingent owns all the code to its software platform, the integration with channel partners, across all of the company's solutions, becomes that much easier, suggests Stuhlreyer.

All the while, Contingent's handling of repairs and other ancillary tasks that fall outside of an agent's ordinary domain represents something more than added revenue. Make no mistake, in this era of increasing convergence, every time an end customer calls upon an outside integrator, IT consultant or repair service, the door is opened to a competing sales pitch on all manner of voice and data

services. By establishing a partnership to deliver such services, on the other hand, the agent keeps the account under its control, so to speak, thereby defending its customer base from outside attacks.

Indeed, these various types of providers all racing for the same mindshare — each with their respective acronym and area of expertise — often will debate where the center of gravity lies within a customer's network. Some say it's with the circuit. Others will argue that it's the hardware or router selection. Or maybe it's the PCs or servers.

The way Stuhlreyer views things, the center of gravity on any account lies with the rep or organization that can collectively support a customer's ongoing needs, while providing solid advice to business stakeholders on where and how their money is spent most wisely in order to achieve goals and objectives.

"That creates the barrier," he says. "It is not the hardware."

Such a mindset largely explains why Contingent decided to pursue a mature group of telecom agents who have fostered strong and long-standing customer relationships. It also explains why the company is confident those same agents can successfully penetrate the truck roll business. Start your engines. □