

Donnelly Communications



Sun Ray™ Ultra-Thin Client Success Story

Key highlights

Company

Donnelly Communications

Industry/Market

- Customer Care

Consultant/Integrator

- Stonebridge Technologies

Products/Services

- Sun Enterprise™ 3000 server
- Sun Enterprise 450 server
- Sun Enterprise 250 server
- 100 Sun Ray™ ultra-thin clients, providing access to all Donnelly client companies' Web sites and online catalogs

Key Results

- Low total cost of ownership
- Access to multimedia applications
- Simple administration and increased security
- Centralized control over user environment
- No maintenance at the desktop
- Online training capabilities for enhanced productivity
- Hot Desking for increased collaboration

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– Martin Tighe, President, Donnelly Communications

Donnelly Communications has been a leader in call center services for the better part of two decades. With facilities in Atlanta, Georgia and Everett, Washington, Donnelly provides a wide range of sophisticated services to its clients. “We’re not an answering service, and we don’t do Ginsu knives or Slim Whitman albums,” says Martin Tighe, Donnelly’s president, with a laugh. “We handle 800 numbers, fax, e-mail, and Web site customer service for companies that are forced by seasonality and call center load balancing considerations to outsource all or part of their call center activities.” Tighe prides himself on his company’s ability to provide those services seamlessly. “When customers contact our call center, they believe they’re talking directly to the company. In effect, it’s like the company is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.” Donnelly’s client list is as wide ranging as its services, and includes the Catholic Church, Saab, the U.S. Mint, IKEA, Ross-Simons, and other high-level cataloguers.

The call center operates like this: Once a call is initiated by a customer to any of Donnelly’s client companies, a switch routes the call to any of a number of “skill groups” — operators that are grouped together to handle like companies. Captured orders are instantaneously available to the client company via FTP or instant e-mail alert. If the client requests it, hot leads can be forwarded directly to field agents for follow-up. Or the information can simply be stored on the server for the client to download in batches.



Time to Update

The services are sophisticated — but the old desktop technology the call center representatives were utilizing certainly was not. “We ran green-screen dumb terminals,” says Tighe, “with command-line interfaces and absolutely no graphics capabilities — that’s hard when you’re doing Web or catalogue fulfillment.” In fact, Donnelly call center representatives had stacks of clients’ catalogues at their stations, and they would have to thumb through the catalogue right along with the customer to complete the order. Tighe knew it was time to update — and fast.

So in October 1999, he made what he considers to be one of the smartest technology choices he’s ever made — replacing outmoded dumb terminals with new Sun Ray™ desktop ultra-thin clients. “We wanted to go graphical, Java™ technology-enabled, multimedia. So we had a choice — either PCs or these new Sun Ray systems.” Tighe concedes that many of his competitors use PCs, but he was reticent to go in that direction. “If you’ve ever walked around a call center that runs PCs, there are always a few stations that are broken and there’s always a crew of guys with tool belts fixing them,” he says. In addition, he was worried about the cost — not just in initial outlay, but the total cost of ownership, including maintenance costs and the high cost of downtime and lost productivity. “So we bought 25 Sun Ray systems to test them out,” he says. “When we plugged them in, we were amazed: We went from no-tech to the highest levels of sleek, modern, innovative technology, just like that. It was like someone waved a magic wand.”

The Perfect Tool

Instantly, Tighe knew what he was looking at: the perfect tool for “heads-down, order-entry data processing.” First of all, Sun Ray systems require absolutely no maintenance at the desktop, and all compute services, including control of the graphical interface, run on the server. Maintenance, administration, and

upgrades also take place on the server, and appliances are easily managed from a single point on the network, eliminating the need for costly, time-consuming desktop administration. “People just don’t realize how much it costs to maintain PCs and terminals,” Tighe says. “This one’s broken. That one’s frozen. The other one won’t boot. There’s always some sort of maintenance taking place. With the Sun Ray ultra-thin clients, it’s different. Sun says they’re ‘low cost of ownership.’ I say they’re ‘no cost of ownership.’ The Sun Ray clients have required almost no maintenance — and that results in a lot of money saved for the company. And a lot more productivity.”

Because software resides on the server, Donnelly was freed from one of the more troublesome aspects of terminals and PCs: user tampering. “With PCs, people load their own software, they load games, and they can introduce viruses. With Sun Ray ultra-thin clients, all that’s eliminated. They can’t be altered.” In addition, smart card technology enables call center representatives to suspend a session on one client and, by inserting a smart card in another system, to pick up the previous session just where they left off. Sun calls that capability Hot Desking, and it leads to increased mobility and collaboration among representatives — and increased customer satisfaction. What’s more, if a system should break down, users can simply plug in a new system, insert their smart card, and continue working without skipping a beat — there’s no need for any reconfiguration at all.

In other words, you just “plug and work,” and that’s an idea that pleases Tighe: “When I was a kid, my father owned a clothing manufacturing plant, with rows of sewing machines. Three shifts a day, these machines would run and run and run. One breaks, you replace it with a new one, and keep going. You could sit down anywhere and work — they were all the same. That’s the way I think of the Sun Ray ultra-thin clients.”

A Whole New Desktop Experience

Sun Ray ultra-thin clients also bring a richness to the desktop that was all but absent in Donnelly's call center facilities. Now, call center representatives are able to pull up all the clients' online catalogues with a click of the mouse, and they're able to access customers' Web pages and walk them through the ordering process, step by step. Training for call center representatives has been revolutionized, as well: Self-paced training, audio and video simulations, and client software tutorials help Donnelly's reps to keep their skill sets current.

Everyday desktop performance has improved dramatically: Because there's no processing at the desktop — Sun Ray ultra-thin clients are used for input and output only — users experience server-level performance that outstrips the capabilities of most PCs. Plus, load distribution and failover can be supported by grouping servers.

Sun Ray systems also provide access to a whole spectrum of applications running on the Solaris™ Operating System and other versions of the UNIX® operating system, Java technology, and Microsoft Windows platforms through third-party products.

But according to Tighe, “the most important thing is that we control what our representatives can access on their systems.” And that translates into more productivity, increased security, a more manageable environment — and happier customers.

Tighe himself has a Sun Ray ultra-thin client on his desktop, and it's his system of choice: “I have an IBM ThinkPad and a Sun Ray on my desk. I have a choice. And 90 percent of the time I'll use the Sun Ray clients. It allows me to do anything I need to do — and anything a PC can do.”

Putting It All Together

Michelle Lenham, the Sun sales representative now working the Donnelly account, has one word to describe Donnelly's call center before October 1999: “Klugey.” Dumb terminals and PCs are simply not built from the ground up to network, and those systems were at the foundation of Donnelly's setup.

So the first order of business for systems engineers at Stonebridge Technologies, an award-winning technology consulting firm and the integrator on the project, was to optimize Donnelly's network, helping the company to get the most out the Sun Ray systems. Howard Beckwith and Darryl Pace, the Stonebridge system integrators on the Donnelly implementation, note that Donnelly was utilizing WYSE terminals that were powered by a Sun Enterprise™ 3000 server with two processors, on a fairly flat network. Pace immediately advised Donnelly to add more memory and CPUs and to increase server swap space. “Donnelly wanted to support many users running memory- and CPU-intensive applications, and our analysis showed that the system, as configured, wouldn't give them the performance they wanted.”

Although Donnelly's main network is arranged with hubs daisy-chained to one another, the Stonebridge integrators proposed a switched environment for the call center. Integrators used “quad cards” to separate the Donnelly call center network into segments, with each segment fronting 30 Sun Ray ultra-thin clients and switches working as network “traffic cops.”

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Once the Stonebridge team shut the server down, installed the quad cards, set up the switches, and connected the server through a patch panel to the switch and on to the devices, it was time to install the software. “Sun Ray software is very straightforward,” says Pace. “The setup takes you through a series of questions, and it’s normal procedure to use the default for the majority of the questions in completing the installation. The software makes the process quick and easy.”

Then there was nothing left but to plug in and power on the Sun Ray ultra-thin clients. After the team fixed a minor glitch left over from the previous network configuration, the Sun Ray ultra-thin clients booted right up, ready to go. “And the best part,” according to Beckwith, “is that once that first client is running, you just plug the rest of them into the network, and that’s it. There’s no more configuration necessary to bring other Sun Ray clients online.”

About one year later, Beckwith and Pace configured the system that would find its way to the Donnelly call center in Everett, Washington, too. For the most part, they followed the same procedures in configuring the second network as they did for the first — except they were 2000 miles from the implementation site. “That would be difficult to do with a server and PCs,” says Pace, “simply because you would need to configure each PC individually. With Sun Ray ultra-thin clients, once the server is configured, it’s possible to just plug them in and go.”

Going Forward — With Sun Ray Ultra-Thin Clients

Martin Tighe is not at all reticent about the role of Sun Ray ultra-thin clients in his plans for the future. “We’ll replace anything that’s not a Sun Ray with a Sun Ray.” There will be a place for some PCs around his operation — for instance, in accounting, where certain proprietary applications run only on PCs. But he has already purchased a new Sun Ray system for his Atlanta conference room for audio-visual applications, and he’s planning more Sun Ray ultra-thin client purchases for his training facility in Everett. “Bottom line, there will be no more PCs in the call center. It’s as simple as that.”

About Sun

For years, customers have turned to Sun Microsystems to help them expand their business, lower their costs, and gain competitive advantage. Sun is a leading provider of industrial-strength hardware, software, services, and technologies that make the Net work.

“We make the net work means leveraging all the resources of the network for competitive advantage. Those that can harness the network will benefit from tremendous new opportunities only available by adopting the principles of network computing. And that’s what Sun Ray ultra-thin clients are all about: Using the network to deliver server-level performance and seamless access to all your applications — in a zero administration desktop that defines low cost of ownership.”

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Sun Microsystems, Inc. 4150 Network Circle, Santa Clara, CA 95054 USA Phone 1-800-786-7638 or +1 512 434-1577 Web sun.com



Sun Worldwide Sales Offices: Africa (North, West and Central) +33-13-067-4680, Argentina +5411-4317-5600, Australia +61-2-9844-5000, Austria +43-1-60563-0, Belgium +32-2-704-8000, Brazil +55-11-5187-2100, Canada +905-477-6745, Chile +56-2-3724500, Colombia +571-629-2323, Commonwealth of Independent States +7-502-935-8411, Czech Republic +420-2-3300-9311, Denmark +45 4556 5000, Egypt +202-570-9442, Estonia +372-6-308-900, Finland +358-9-525-561, France +33-134-03-00-00, Germany +49-89-46008-0, Greece +30-1-618-8111, Hungary +36-1-489-8900, Iceland +354-563-3010, India-Bangalore +91-80-2298989/2295454; New Delhi +91-11-6106000; Mumbai +91-22-697-8111, Ireland +353-1-8055-6666, Israel +972-9-9710500, Italy +39-02-641511, Japan +81-3-5717-5000, Kazakhstan +7-3272-466774, Korea +822-2193-5114, Latvia +371-750-3700, Lithuania +370-729-8468, Luxembourg +352-49 11 33 1, Malaysia +603-21161888, Mexico +52-5-258-6100, The Netherlands +00-31-33-45-15-000, New Zealand-Auckland +64-9-976-6800; Wellington +64-4-462-0780, Norway +47 23 36 96 00, People's Republic of China-Beijing +86-10-6803-5588; Chengdu +86-28-619-9333; Guangzhou +86-20-8755-5900; Shanghai +86-21-6466-1228; Hong Kong +852-2202-6688, Poland +48-22-8747800, Portugal +351-21-4134000, Russia +7-502-935-8411, Singapore +65-6438-1888, Slovak Republic +421-2-4342-94-85, South Africa +27 11 256-6300, Spain +34-91-596-9900, Sweden +46-8-631-10-00, Switzerland-German 41-1-908-90-00; French 41-22-999-0444, Taiwan +886-2-8732-9933, Thailand +662-344-6888, Turkey +90-212-335-22-00, United Arab Emirates +9714-3366333, United Kingdom +44 0 1252 420000, United States +1-800-555-95UN or +1-650-960-1300, Venezuela +58-2-905-3800