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ANTIDOTE FOR THE EMAIL ILLS.

By Shannon Peavey

Most customer-oriented companies have an online presence. But once they set up shop online, can they handle the inevitable onslaught of incoming email? V. A. Shiva and his company, General Interactive, offer a cutting-edge treatment for email overflow and even help you use that email to better your business, to boot!

The first time V. A. Shiva heard the words "electronic mail," he thought the term had something to do with passing electricity through letter paper. That was in 1979. Twenty years later, Shiva, who is known to his colleagues as "Dr. Email," may know more about his namesake than anyone else in the field. With a state-of-the-art technology known as EchoMail, Shiva's company, General Interactive, provides real-time messaging and relationship marketing solutions for bigtime customers from Calvin Klein to Nike to the US government.

Listen to Your E

EchoMail automatically reads, classifies, routes, tracks and centrally manages incoming email to a Web site, using 19 different methods to analyze the language of a message. The system can determine the context of a question, the attitude of the sender, what kind of customer the sender is, then either route or respond to the message accordingly.

According to Shiva, who serves as General Interactive's president and CEO, the goal of EchoMail is to build brand loyalty in real-time. "Listening and responding to the people who buy your products builds brand loyalty, and that helps you to grow your business," says Shiva. "Managers and executives struggling to transform their companies into knowledge-based, networked organizations need to understand their customers."

Or, their constituents. The US Senate came to General Interactive in 1998, looking for a way to handle the deluge of email their offices were receiving, which was greater in some offices than the volume of paper mail. "When we started this project 18 months ago, we were getting 20,000 emails on average per day," says Steve Walker, branch manager of the Web and technology assessment division of the US Senate. "During the impeachment trial we were getting up to 500,000 per day – an increase of 2500 percent. Now it's leveled off again at around 50,000 to 60,000 per day, but we knew we needed a system that

V.A. Shiva, Pres., CEO, General Interactive

could handle all that volume – we knew we were going to peak from time to time."

Though several companies offer similar solutions to the email problem, such as Egain and Tana, the US Senate found that General Interactive was the only company whose technology was advanced enough to handle the volume that they anticipated. The US Senate is currently working with General Interactive to customize EchoMail for their offices' needs and will install the system in trial offices within the next few months. "People here are going to tiptoe into this," says Walker. "Eventually everyone will have to accept some kind of automation, but right now, it's tricky, because if one email is responded to inappropriately, it can cost you big politically."

"Email use is growing 700 percent a year," says Shiva. "People don't have time to read all these emails. They want a way to quickly know what is going on. Our clients are people who already know the value of customer relationships and they have already made the decision to go on the Web to develop customer relationships."

Digital Heartbeat

The EchoMail system has an Internet-based platform that delivers immediate electronic customer care, direct marketing, lead management and data-mining through a suite of modules based on XIVA, core technology

developed by Shiva through 20 years of research in pattern recognition and classification. This research led Shiva to develop an ability to "diagnose" an email.

EchoMail's four modules: Relationship Management, Direct Marketing, Customer Care, and Lead Management, allow customers to build systems that suit their email needs, and General Interactive technologists help them to customize the software to meet particular operational demands. All analysis and feedback is done automatically, and the system can be taken out of the box and be up and running in hours. The system can be pricey; companies on General Interactive's client roster pay from $250,000 to $2 million for their solution packages, depending on the level of sophistication they need. But the companies that swear by EchoMail's abilities are a testament to the system's cost-effectiveness. Clients include AT&T, IBM, the US Senate, American Express, JCPenney, Nike, Calvin Klein Cosmetics, Compaq, Lycos, John Hancock and Unilever.

"Though JCPenney's store presence is still the source of its business, email really provides a forum for e-customer care, and that's where EchoMail is important," says Christine Thomas, Internet Customer Service Manager for JCPenney. JCPenney also uses the business intelligence function, which reads email for attitude, issue, request, product, and type of customer. "It's very customized – basically they can make it do whatever you need, whatever you want."

The EchoMail system may also prove its worth through its ability to eliminate the need for staff hired specifically to respond to email correspondence. "Our email traffic has surged," says Thomas. "We were getting an average of 4,000 emails per month last August, and as of this August we were getting 18,000 per month, an increase of 400 percent. The system categorizes and routes mail for us. Thus, where I used to have 65 people working for me, now I have 4 to do the same job."

EchoMail is not done developing, either, according to General Interactive's CTO, Bruce Padmore. "Technology is not a business," says Padmore. "Technology is a tool of business. We don't come to a company and tell them what we have to offer. We ask them what they need, we listen, and then we work on the solution."

Atypical Teenager

Shiva came to the US from India at age seven with his parents. In some ways he was a typical teenager, who grew up in New Jersey and liked baseball. In other ways he was not – bored with high school, Shiva was asked at age 15 by a physicist at nearby Rutger's Medical School to build an electronic mail system. Once he figured out what the professor was talking about, he set to work and two years later, his system won him a Westinghouse Science Talent Search Award and set him on an irreversible path that would lead him to MIT. There, Shiva studied pattern recognition for thirteen years, and realized that his work could be applied to technology.

Shiva gained further technological experience with Dataware Technologies, Lotus and Hewlett-Packard, and has consulted for the US Air Force, US Navy, Procter&Gamble and Digital Corporation. He started Millennium Cybernetics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he developed email technologies while also producing Web sites for clients involved in the arts through a sister company called Millennium Productions. Finally, in 1994, the two merged together in General Interactive.

Ready to Listen

General Interactive's operations are split evenly between offices in the US and an office in Madras, India. This not only means super-economy and efficiency, but also 24-hour, seven-day a week service. The majority of the company's 45 employees work at the company's headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The company also maintains sales offices in Portland, Washington, Washington D.C., Dallas, San Francisco and Madras. "This is the model

Bruce Padmore, CTO, General Interactive

of a twenty-first century company," says Shiva. "This is not like the typical sweatshop relationship we're used to seeing where those working in a company's Indian subsidiary would be responsible for menial tasks. In India, there is tremendous talent, and our offices there do the same kinds of things we do here. We've had next-to-nothing turnover."
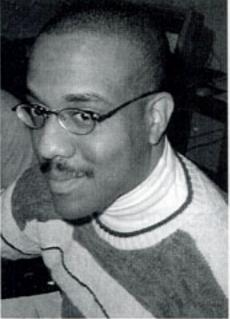
General Interactive also has a partnership relationship with Wipro Infotech of India, the number-one IT company in India, to create state-of-the-art Web sites and interactive solutions for Wipro customers. General Interactive professional services division, led by Chief Creative Officer Zoe Helene, creates interactive designs and thematic concepts for customers who need this service, including Web sites, multimedia and email campaigns, 2D and 3D animation, banner ads and education programs.

General Interactive's business strategy is not to go after the "dot-com" companies, rather they focus on major companies like Citibank, JCPenney and American Express. "These are the ones that will still be around after all the dot-coms go away," says Shiva. "We know that these companies are inevitably going to get on the Web, and once they do, they have to be able to handle the email they're going to get. Our challenge to corporate America is: Are you ready to listen?"

With all this early success, the obvious question is: What is the plan for the future? "Since we have no venture capital, there's no pressure to go IPO, but we are definitely looking very hard at that route," says Shiva. "For now, we're still trying to perfect our system."

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