

## TECHNOLOGY JOURNAL

### Under the Radar

# EchoMail Can Sort, Answer Deluge of E-Mails

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**S**END AN E-MAIL to your senator, and there is a growing likelihood that it will first be read by a computer system called EchoMail.

The program, developed by EchoMail Inc., Cambridge, Mass., sorts, analyzes and even answers some of the e-mails sent to companies such as Kmart Corp., American Express Co. and Calvin Klein Inc. Now, after two years of pilot programs, more than 30 U.S. senators have installed it under a deal signed by the Senate sergeant-at-arms.

EchoMail was founded by V.A. Shiva, 37 years old, who sometimes calls himself "Dr. E-Mail." The company's program is designed to improve corporate responsiveness to e-mail by automating the processing. It recognizes preprogrammed key words and their synonyms and can even tell if the writer is angry, tipped off by exclamation points and such phrases as "I hated your product" or "please send me a replacement."

Some customers use it only to sort mail and route it to the right person, but many say it is smart enough to respond to most of the regular e-mail and to forward to humans the things it doesn't understand.

In the Senate, at least, most e-mails from constituents still get a glance from staffers. But "that's not going to last for long," says Sen. William Frist, a Tennessee Republican and technology enthusiast. He says EchoMail is good enough to categorize most e-mails and send appropriate responses.

Responding to constituents' calls, letters and e-mails occupies 30% to 60% of the staff time in many offices, says Richard Shapiro, executive director of the Congressional Management Foundation, a nonprofit group that advises congressional staffers on running their offices. The group, which is urging congressmen to deploy EchoMail or other automated services to sort e-mail, says Congress last year got 80 million e-mails, five times as many as the paper letters.

Do constituents care that their e-mails weren't read by a congressman or aide? Mr. Shapiro says that in focus groups with constituents, "people understood their communications weren't from the member. They wanted responsiveness on a timely basis. They didn't care whether it was staff or whatever."

David Archambault, president of B3 Corp., Sherman Oaks, Calif., which runs Internet promotions for companies such as AOL Time Warner Inc., its majority owner, and Bank of America Corp., uses EchoMail to reduce customer-service costs. "I read about Shiva and tracked him down. I became enamored with the technology," Mr. Archambault says.

EchoMail estimates that a company using humans to reply to all e-mails spends \$6.25 a message, while EchoMail can cut that cost in half, including the cost of humans for the

messages EchoMail can't handle.

When a client such as Warner Music is running a compact-disc sale, "Questions about a promotion become very similar: How long is it running? What are the terms and conditions?" Mr. Archambault says, "We've trained it to respond to hundreds of questions. It's smart enough to tell us when it's got something it can't answer."

Mr. Archambault says that as new questions arise, B3 trains EchoMail just as it would an employee. "We had more inconsistency with our live service reps," he says. In his tests, he says, EchoMail answered as much as 95% of all e-mails correctly.

EchoMail isn't without rivals. With 125 employees, including 30 developers in Mr. Shiva's native India, it competes with larger firms, such as Siebel Systems Inc., San Mateo, Calif., and Kana Software Inc., Palo Alto, Calif., that make software for customer-relationship management and have an e-mail component designed to help customer-service representatives respond to e-mails. Electronic-billing companies also automate handling of e-mail. And many companies design their

Web sites with forms that customers fill out to minimize free-form e-mails that computers can't understand.

When e-mails arrive, EchoMail sorts it out and immediately deletes random "spam," or unsolicited pitches.

The remaining e-mails are put into what Mr. Shiva calls the "digital refinery." There, they are analyzed and forwarded to the right department, or sent replies.

EchoMail also keeps a log of what topics generate the most e-mails and the percentage of angry e-mails.

EchoMail generally operates as an application service provider, hosting the e-mail on its own servers and charging customers 50 cents to \$2 for each message handled, depending on the amount of processing the customer contracts for. For other customers, it licenses the software for \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

When Mr. Shiva, then a graduate student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, started the company in 1995, he initially raised money from angels in the advertising community. Later, personal-computer maker Gateway Inc. of San Diego made a \$10 million investment. Mr. Shiva says EchoMail is profitable now and doesn't have any immediate plans to go public.

Companies sometimes start using EchoMail because they are inundated with mail on a topic. Kmart bought EchoMail last spring when it was starting to deal with letters protesting its decision to stop carrying handgun ammunition. Since EchoMail batches together e-mail by key words, "we get them quickly to the appropriate department," a spokeswoman says. Similarly, when Nascar driver Dale Earnhardt was killed, EchoMail sorted e-mail from customers who wanted to buy memorabilia from Kmart, she says.



V.A. Shiva