

Case Study

Columbia Sportswear Company

Sportswear company gives mobile employees more freedom to work and play

Published: May 24, 2007

Columbia Sportswear Company is a global leader in the design, production, marketing, and distribution of outdoor apparel and footwear. The company is always looking to make the members of its highly mobile workforce more responsive and efficient while also helping them enjoy better work-life balance. The company deployed innovative Microsoft messaging software to give its workers flexible, safeguarded access to messages from anywhere in the world. This helps the company speed every aspect of its business, and gives employees more freedom to enjoy an active lifestyle.

SITUATION

Columbia Sportswear Company hires people with high energy levels, which they display at work and play. Founded in 1938 as a small family-owned hat distributorship, Columbia Sportswear is one of the world's largest activewear clothing brands and a leading seller of skiwear and outdoor equipment in the United States. Columbia Sportswear employs more than 2,700 people around the world, and distributes and sells products in more than 76 countries through more than 13,000 retailers internationally.

Gertrude Boyle, chairman of Columbia Sportswear and "Mother Boyle," the public face of Columbia Sportswear in its advertising campaigns, says that the pace of global business tests even her energetic workforce. "The clothing market changes daily. People like one thing one day and another thing the next," she says. "We need to be out there figuring out what the public wants; but at the same time, we have to be connected to the organization. We also have to have a life outside of work, because recreation is what our business is all about. If we don't think of more efficient ways to do business and keep our people apprised of changes wherever they are, we'd never be able to go home."

She says that fast access to up-to-date information is key to the company's success. "The sooner you can get information out and get an answer back, the closer you are to making a perfect garment, shipping it, and getting it into the customer's hands."

However, Columbia Sportswear employees are constantly on the move, making it difficult to connect and communicate. Approximately 25 percent of the 700 Portland, Oregon-based employees are on the road at any one time—with customers and suppliers or, literally, in the field, testing the company's products on trails, mountains, and rivers. Barbara Cason, associate general counsel and director of intellectual property at Columbia Sportswear, says, "Columbia Sportswear is a quintessential Northwest kind of company. Those of us who work here are really drawn to the active lifestyle, to products that allow us to enjoy skiing, hiking, fishing, and all of the things that the Northwest has to offer. But at the same time, my foreign legal associates often need my help with urgent issues outside of our normal business hours. I need to be available to them in a very timely fashion, no matter where I am."

To stay in touch, Columbia Sportswear sends and receives a massive number of e-mail messages for an organization of its size—approximately 1 million messages a month. But e-mail service is not always available or reliable. "Our users might travel from an office in Hong Kong to an office in Shanghai for two weeks. They have to use whatever technology is available, whether it's a high-speed broadband connection or a slow, ancient, dial-up modem," says Ron Penrose, system administrator at Columbia Sportswear.

"One of our corporate goals is to increase communication speeds," explains Mike Leeper, Windows systems manager at Columbia Sportswear. "We want to speed up our design processes, our decision-making, and time-to-market for our products. Anything that we can do to save a couple of hours here or there moves us closer to that goal."

Leeper adds that Columbia Sportswear also wants to reduce operational costs by simplifying its technology infrastructure. "We were using four different vendors to supply communications solutions, and that meant four different support points, delays, and user frustration in moving between e-mail, Web mail, instant messaging, and telephones," he says.

SOLUTION

In July 2006, Columbia Sportswear began deploying Microsoft Exchange Server 2007, the newest version of the enterprise messaging software. "Microsoft Exchange Server has a good performance history at Columbia, and we trust it," says Leeper. Columbia Sportswear also deployed a feature called Exchange Unified Messaging, with which employees can receive e-mail messages, voice mail, calendar items, and faxes from a single inbox. Users access their messages through either a Web browser or a telephone.

At the same time, Leeper's staff began giving workers handheld devices and smart phones running the Windows Mobile 5.0 software, to give traveling workers more options in connecting with their messages and with office business systems. "We've really changed how users get to their data," Leeper says. "If they have access to a telephone, a dial-up Internet connection, or a public PC in an Internet cafe, they can connect to their messages, their calendar, and their contacts. Our workers love the freedom of being able to access messages in one place, using the same interface on all devices. They no longer have to remember multiple passwords and procedures."

BENEFITS

Columbia Sportswear now has a unified and flexible messaging solution that meets its needs as a global company while enabling employees to pursue an active lifestyle. The company has been able to reduce phone costs and the costs of business delays and missed opportunities. Using new security features, the IT staff can help safeguard confidential company information stored on mobile devices that are carried to cities all over the world—as well as on hiking trails, down rivers, and up mountains.

Instant Response for Business That Can't Wait

Unified messaging is revolutionizing the way Columbia Sportswear employees work and play. Users have access to their e-mail, voice mail, calendar, and contacts, whether they are meeting with distributors in a boardroom in Berlin or rafting the Deschutes in eastern Oregon.

Bill Tung, vice president of international sales and operations at Columbia Sportswear, spends about 40 percent of his time traveling around the world. "Being responsible for a global business, it's absolutely vital for me to have instant access to e-mail, voice mail, faxes, financial data, and company reports," he says. "Having all these capabilities consolidated on a single device that fits in my pocket saves me a great deal of time. Recently I was sitting with a customer in Moscow when I received a voice mail from our Tokyo office about an urgent order delivery that we needed to coordinate through our Portland office. I was able to download the needed order information and call the Tokyo office to relay an approval. In minutes, I was able to clear up an issue that might have taken days or weeks before."

Barbara Cason from the legal department says, "When you do business globally, it's hard to maintain a 9-to-5 work schedule. When my European colleagues are leaving, I'm just getting to work, and when my Asian colleagues are getting up, I'm ready to go home. For example, I handle our anti-counterfeiting program, and we have customs seizures in many countries throughout the world. Generally, a customs officer will hold seized goods for only 24 to 48 hours. With my smart phone, I'm able to receive an e-mail message after business hours, check the photos of the suspected articles, verify their authenticity, and respond to my colleague in Estonia, China, or wherever, immediately."

"With the right software, you can be as effective outside the office as you are in the office. You don't have to be at corporate headquarters anymore to make an impact on the business," says Mark Sandquist, vice president of global apparel and equipment for Columbia Sportswear.

Reduced Costs, Increased Efficiency

Columbia Sportswear is also using its new software to help reduce costs and make its operations more efficient. For example, employees who travel to meet with the company's global network of partners, distributors, and suppliers must frequently check the voice mail system; if they miss a message, the differences in time zones can cause significant delays in manufacturing and delivery. The soft costs of business delays can add up to millions of dollars in lost opportunity.

"You can't tell customers, 'Mark's in the Orient; he'll get back to you in four days,'" Sandquist says. "If we wait too long to get customers the information they need, they go with someone else. You've

got to be proactive, you've got to be aggressive, and you've got to make decisions. You can't wait around. The new technology is 1,000 times faster than the old Web e-mail, which allows us to respond quickly."

In the past, constant long-distance calls meant high phone charges. Leeper says that Unified Messaging is changing that. "Because our users can access their voice mail messages from their mailboxes, they can avoid the large long-distance phone charges that we've had in the past," Leeper says. "It makes employees' lives easier, too. They don't have to figure out how to call the U.S. from every new country that they visit."

In other circumstances, telephone access to mailbox items might be the ideal solution for a traveling employee. Cason says, "One frustration that I have when I travel in foreign countries is that frequently I don't have the right adapter to hook up my computer. With all of our messaging capability in one place, I can get my phone messages and my e-mail messages with one call."

Users who are traveling much shorter distances are also able to be more efficient. Penrose says, "A lot of people use the software to send 'I'll be late' messages for meetings. I use my mobile phone to check my e-mail on the way to work every morning. When I walk in the door, I don't have to deal with the 75 messages that came in overnight."

"With the ability to easily access information 24x7, it allows Columbia users to properly handle time-sensitive issues while living a more balanced life," Leeper adds.

Enhanced Security for Data, Downtown or Downstream

Employees can use their handheld devices in Europe, in China, or deep in a forest. If they lose the device, staff can remotely erase all the data in seconds. "If I were to lose my smart phone containing confidential legal information, it could have significant negative impact on the company," Cason says. "Now, I can simply call our IT department and have them wipe out all the information on it."

This more manageable approach with enhanced security extends to other types of communication at the company. For example, Columbia Sportswear has been able to consolidate its disparate mix of third-party instant messaging software tools to just one. When fully implemented, the Microsoft instant messaging software will provide antivirus and archiving capabilities to instant messaging companywide, helping to make those communications more secure and audit-ready.

"Armed with the latest messaging software, our users have access to their data and to one another from anywhere in the world, securely and efficiently," concludes Leeper.

EXECUTIVE BIOGRAPHY

Bill Tung joined Columbia Sportswear in September 2003 and was named Vice President of International Sales and Operations in December 2004. From 2002 to 2003, Mr. Tung worked for The Body Shop as regional director of North Asia. He was employed by The Rockport Company from 1994 to 2002, where he served in a variety of capacities. From 1991 to 1994, Tung worked for Prince Racquet Sports as sales and marketing manager of Asia-Pacific.