

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX  
IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

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**BIG LOTS**  
Providing More  
for Less with ODT  
VISION Voice  
Response Units



By Kirk Smith, Manager, IT Data Center Services Big Lots

Big Lots is the Largest broad-line close out retailer in the country. Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, Big Lots is a Fortune 500 company with annual revenues exceeding \$3.8 billion. Their stock is traded on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol BLI. They currently operate nearly 1,400 stores in 45 states, which includes more than 45 freestanding Big Lots Furniture stores. In addition, over 680 of their closeout stores have furniture departments.

Big Lots has a sophisticated distribution and transportation system with four major distribution centers and more than eight million square feet of space. A fifth distribution center near Durant, Oklahoma is under way and will be completed in 2004. Big Lots current distribution center locations include: Columbus, Ohio; Tremont, Pennsylvania; Montgomery, Alabama; and Rancho Cucamonga, California.

Visit [www.BigLots.com](http://www.BigLots.com) to learn more about Big Lots Corporation

**Phase 1**

The Big Lots Traffic Department had a number of logistics applications where freight companies as well as the truck drivers themselves were calling in to live attendants. Items such as scheduling or inquiring on warehouse dock appointment times, canceling appointments, getting directions, and checking on the status of dropped off trailers were just a few of the questions that were posed to the associates of the department thousands of times a week. Big Lots knew that in order to maintain a high level of service coupled with an aggressive growth rate, something had to be done to automate this process. A demonstration was presented on July 31st, 2000 that showed one of the applications to be included in this first phase.

A brief demonstration of the

DDT1000 VRU system was given to the management committee. Things such as low cost of ownership, ease of customization, seamless interfaces with the AS/400, as well as complete audit trails for performance and usage analysis were just a few of the strengths of the VRU system. It was a unanimous decision from the committee to pilot a project in the Traffic Department to leverage the strengths of the system.

Big Lots took delivery of their first unit on September 20<sup>th</sup> 2000. This unit was set up to answer incoming calls from truck drivers via their cellular phones and logistic personnel. The IT staff was able to design, code, and implement the first part of the project within days of receiving the system. "We were extremely pleased at how quick the code customizations were performed and how well it fit with our AS/400.", stated Kirk Smith, Manager, IT Data Center Services. "Being able to take a system from development to implementation in this short period of time is virtually unheard of in the IT

*"The MIS staff was able to do their own development and were pleased at how quickly this customization was completed. They also built into this script a complete audit trail via log files for report generation."*

*"Big Lots is the quintessential client, proving that the ODT VISION VRU can be easily customized by the client to meet their ever-changing business needs."*  
 Terry J. Rogers, President Ohio Data Transfer

world." The Big Lots development team also built into the script a complete audit trail via log files. These log files are uploaded daily to the AS/400 where a variety of query reports are created. At any time, Big Lots could report the number of calls that the unit had answered, what part of the system was used, and most importantly, the number of callers that opted to transfer out of the unit to live personnel.

In the first year, the unit took over 81,000 phone calls for less than the cost of one new employee. The unit had an instant ROI.

**Next Application**

With the great success of the ODT VISION VRU in the Traffic and Logistics applications, the IT staff next applied this solution to the Accounts Payable Department where the associates were constantly on the phone answering hundreds of daily inquires from vendors all over the world. This unit now takes about 40,000 calls a year from suppliers, which no longer require human assistance, thus improving the overall efficiency of the department.

**In the past 3 years**

Like many companies, Big Lots chose the ODT VISION VRU for it's low cost, but fell in love with the unit for the ease of customization, ease of system administration, scalability, and line monitoring. By using their own log reports, the IT staff is able to determine best usages for their units. Over time, additional applications are now handled by this technology including Store Deliveries, Help Desk, and a complete Associate Survey System.

**Get Real**

One of the more interesting applications at Big Lots is an employee Safety and Shrink Awareness Program entitled "Get REAL" This is an employee survey, which is simple in scope and nature, consisting of four questions geared toward reducing shrink and theft as well as creating a safe working environment. "Keeping the associates sharp on this type of information is important. It is a great way to interact with the employees individually and distribute current information from the corporate level." says Kirk Smith. "Amazingly, this system is now taking about 30,000 calls a month."

**What's in the Future**

With three units running 24/7, Big Lots' ODT VISION VRU Units currently take in excess of 45,000 phone calls a month. Big Lots prides itself in "Bringing Brand Name Products at Close Out Prices." They must watch the costs in all areas to achieve this mission. The ODT VISION VRU has proven to be a significant tool to achieve this. In



We were extremely pleased at how quick the code customizations were performed and how well it fit with our AS/400.", stated Kirk Smith, Manager, IT Data Center Services.

the past three years, we are averaging an addition of about 12 lines a year as line capacity or new applications require. Kirk Smith states, "We are always looking at new ways to use our units and to continue to leveraging the power and efficiency of this technology." By using a combination of their own VRU usage reports and the built in graphical line capacity utility, the number of lines for each application and what areas that need to be changed are constantly being monitored. The Voice Response Systems allow Big Lots to provide low cost customer service and address 24/7 needs without expensive labor costs. By lowering and maintaining existing personnel budgets, Big Lots can provide their products at their retail

**Note from the Editor**

I am very excited to be bringing you the case study of Big Lots which is featured prominently in this month's newsletter. This is the 1st in a series of articles we hope to bring you which highlight actual customer applications and how they use our Voice Response Unit. The article was written by Kirk Smith, an associate of Big Lots, and it does an excellent job of telling how Big Lots uses our technology. We welcome articles from any of our customers who would like to share their story. This issue also covers how to use our unit for food ordering for pick up, how "Call Out" applications add new ways to use your VRU systems, and how to set up menus for foreign language selection for a session at caller's request..

Next month's issue will cover various governmental accounts and how they use the ODT VISION.

Sincerely,  
 Terry J. Rogers

This gives Big Lots a competitive edge in today's tough retail market by providing more for less.

*"In the first year, the unit took 81,000 phone calls for less than the cost of one new employee"*

***Their units now take over 45,000 phone calls a month and have proven the***

***"Low Costs of Ownership"***

## Food Carry-Out Gets Easy

Last year, we lost one of our home town heroes here in Columbus with the passing of Dave Thomas. Dave founded Wendy's and was a world famous celebrity and philanthropist. Dave worked at KFC before Wendy's and understood, if you can get the customer to carry the food out, you will sell more chicken. In fact, it was Dave that introduced the concept of the "carry-out bucket" to the Colonel as a way to induce customers to take the chicken home.

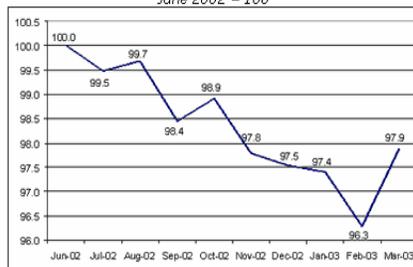
Major pizzeria companies have been using voice response units for a number of years to take pizza orders for pickup or delivery. As soon as the customer is identified by their home phone number, they are asked if they want the same as the order last placed for their profile or if they want something else. Multiple orders can be taken concurrently with logging created which includes date & time stamp for quality control.



It has been tough in these economic times fighting for business in the food industry but there is light at the end of the tunnel. "Restaurant operators are more optimistic about the economy and business conditions, according to the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant Performance Index (RPI). The monthly composite index that tracks the health of the U.S. restaurant industry gained 1.7 percent in March, its first gain in five months." \*



National Restaurant Association Restaurant Performance Index  
June 2002 = 100



Source: National Restaurant Association

\* Published April 30, 2003 on Nation Restaurant Association Web site.  
<http://www.restaurant.org/news/story.cfm?ID=54>

A working Mom is late and caught in traffic, with no time to cook. With her cellular phone, she could call ahead and not wait for the food pickup. Ordering food from you just got more convenient.

An on-demand printer just printed the order out in the kitchen for the grill cook and no personnel was used for taking the order. Your kitchen is just a factory floor and you have made it efficient

and easy for the customer to order. Besides the benefit of multiple concurrent ordering, additional information such as directions, hours of operation, specials, and amount of bill could be presented to the caller. Orders could be distributed to selected locations from centralized order processing center. Also, demographics of what is being sold can be studied.

*A family on vacation could call up an 800 number and get chain restaurant's location in a city they are visiting including directions and hours of operation.*

## Using The ODT VISION VRU to Call Out

Most of the applications we see our clients use the ODT VISION VRU for are call in routines. In these voice systems, the user is making inquiries, placing orders, or doing various applications interactively 24/7 where the caller's phone is now a terminal to the client's data. The common thread of these applications, the caller has originated the call. If you think this is all your Voice System could do, you have left out half of the possibilities.

The ODT VISION VRU can also be used as an I/O which originates the call or the sending of an e-mail. We recently had a city government which implemented an application where they call in to their ODT VISION VRU and record a voice file. They then enter a code for the type of person which should receive this

recorded message. The unit now goes to the database, finds each profile that matches the selected query, calls each person, plays the recorded voice file, and then logs the date and time stamp to the system log file for audit trail purposes. **One possible use of this application is to call in emergency street maintenance personnel for snow removal. The city plans to use it for a variety of Other functions as well.**

A utility company may want to call customers to remind them of a late payment so service can be continued or to verify service appointments. We also have seen firms call out to find replacement workers to fill a shift. Call out is also a way to provide surveys to existing customers. We have a home

heating oil company who sends their drivers home at night and on the weekends with loaded tankers. When a customer calls in to report they are out of home heating oil, they first enter their phone number to identify the account, the unit then looks up the last order and they are



asked if they want the same order as last time. Once the order is defined, the driver gets a email to their digital pager to go the customer's address and delivers this amount and type of fuel. The driver now calls the unit to report that the delivery has been made. All actions are logged with date/time stamp for quality control.

*"What calling should your unit be doing?"*

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## Get Your Own Demo Today

Go to [www.ODT VISION.com](http://www.ODT VISION.com) to get your own demonstration of the ODT VISION Voice Response Unit which will run on any Windows based PC of Windows 98 or later with sound card and speakers. This is a simplistic order entry and shipment status system which is running off a Microsoft Access database. The demo is in the test mode and you will be using the "Test Phone" feature of the ODT VISION VRU to simulate a phone call to the data.

Manuals and case studies are also available on the web site.

## HOW THEY DO THAT? "Caller selecting the foreign language for this call session"

### How to change voice files to reflect language that the caller selects at the beginning of the session

One of the big benefits to release 5.0 of the ODT VISION VRU is that the language spoken on any line can be changed at the caller's request even though the data on the host system or database is in English. You can supply a user menu where up to 10 different foreign languages could be offered for the application.

Before this release, the ODT VISION VRU like many of its competitors, assigned foreign languages on different lines. The main problem with this is that you would have to have different phone numbers for different types of callers. In addition, you would have to do capacity studies as to how many lines are needed for each language such as English, Spanish, French, etc.



With Version 5.0, you just add a user menu within the script where the caller selects the language for this session. The unit is then directed to the recorded application voice files and system voice files which will be used during this session.

- Only one phone number is needed for all languages
- No capacity issues as to how many lines should be used for each language
- Makes Configuration Easy
- Additional languages can be added at any time

### What the Code Looks Like

First, all languages to be used must be recorded on the unit and stored in either different folders for application voice files or the proper container for system voice files. Next, you must ask the caller which foreign language they want for this section

(up to 10 Languages can be used per line)

ClearDigits

```
RtnCode = Play "Lan.vox",0,"@" ;press 1 for Spanish or any other key for English
```

```
ReturnCode = GetDigits 1,"@",5  
Lang = DigitBuffer
```

```
IF Lang = 1 THEN
```

```
; User has asked for Spanish prompts
```

```
LANGUAGE SPAFEMALE,  
"C:\Program Files\ODT VISION\Voice  
Files Spanish"
```

```
ELSE
```

```
; User has asked for English prompts  
; this is already set so nothing has to  
be done
```

```
ENDIF
```

You need to reset the system back to English during the hang-up sequence so the system will go back to the main default of English for the next caller.

```
ENDTHECALL:
```

```
; reset the prompts back to English
```

```
LANGUAGE VVSYSTEM, "C:\Program  
Files\ODT VISION\Voice Files"
```

```
Onhook  
RwaitforRing
```

### System Voice Files

System voice files are stored in containers (I.e. VVSYSTEM.VAP which is USAFEMALE (Default)). They are used when the system reads values such as dates, dollar amounts, etc.

### Application Voice Files

Are the recorded voice banner prompts called upon by the script.

Example:

```
"Please enter your 9 digit social  
security number."
```