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MEDFONE business expansion featured in article,

"More Operators Are Standing By Wantagh Call Center Plans Expansion".

By Paul Perillie

Say "call center" and most Americans shrink in horror. The mealtime sales calls. The endless pitches. But now one local call center is growing—and it's growth we can be glad about.

Established in 1979 with three operators, Medfone specializes in business-to-business services such as support for insurance companies and other areas of the health-care industry. Since tripling its workforce this year, the Wantagh-based company is expanding in the areas of physicians' messaging services, customer care for other companies, and customer acquisition (tele-sales). Medfone plans to double its footprint this summer, adding 4,000 square feet to its facility, to provide even more people with potentially lifesaving information.

While many large call centers have been moving their operations overseas (particularly India) to save money, Medfone is keeping its expansion in America. In part, that's because health issues are sensitive.

"Some people feel uncomfortable when they realize they're speaking about personal matters with somebody located in a foreign country," says Rebecca Gibson, manager of educational services for Incoming Calls Management Institute, a Maryland call center consulting and education company. "Boutique firms like Medfone make their reputation by providing a quality of service and cultural familiarity that can only be found here [in America]."

At the same time, 40 percent of the staff is bilingual, a spokesman says. Medfone serves an array of major multinationals such as Pfizer. The call center screened multiple sclerosis sufferers for eligibility in new drug treatment trials, for example, taking calls from various countries in several different languages.

Between global outreach and the need for health care access, Medfone must be accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The company helped 100,000 customers get needed prescriptions without interruption when a large pharmaceutical company filed for bankruptcy protection in September 2001. During the blackout of '03, the company kept the lines open with a private generator. Other customers include Olympus and Mount Sinai Medical Center, according to Medfone's president, Jay Moses.

Consumers' calls are pre-screened by Medfone, which provides answering services for more than 5,000 doctors nationwide.

"Based on their answers, we'll tell them, 'You need to get to the emergency room' or we'll contact their physician," says Moses. Operators are not trained medical professionals, but do receive specific instructions from the doctors.

While Medfone uses the latest technologies, its first line of customer care is its people. Patti Cuevas, a Medfone team leader, oversees a staff of 18 operators. She likes the challenge her job affords her. "I like the diversity of the calls," Cuevas says. "It's not like a cookie cutter. We take care of many sensitive issues."

Perhaps Medfone's most recognizable affiliation is with legendary comedian Jerry Lewis. Lewis has survived open-heart surgery, prostate cancer, viral meningitis and chronic back pain. He found relief with a Medtronic "pain pacemaker," a device implanted under the skin that sends mild electrical impulses to the spinal cord to block pain signals. When Lewis stumps for the product on television, Medfone operators take the calls.