

BrightArrow Voice Dialer Interview

Raymond Bily (BrightArrow) visited Marc Porter, Information Technology Manager of Eastmont School District in East Wenatchee, Washington.

Here are the highlights of the interview with Mr. Porter:

Question: How long have you been using the BrightArrow Voice Dialer?

“We used it for the first time when school ended in 2005, for fees and fines. [Our people] were overwhelmed with the response they got. They said that we have never collected so [much fee and fine income] in such a short amount of time...”

Question: What value are you seeing with the BrightArrow product and how it is helping you as a school district?

“We definitely find that the BrightArrow dialer has improved our communication with parents. The dialer has been invaluable. We used to [with our prior dialer] make phone calls for attendance on a single trunk at three different schools; they were lucky to make it through 30 names in the time allotted in the evening just for attendance. Now attendance calls happen in a few minutes, and then they can be retried if the phone was busy or they did not get an answer -- it goes through its automatic redial, and so we are actually getting the messages to the parents more effectively.”

Question: You have 5300 students in the district; what is the volume like for actual absent calls?

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“It really depends on the school. If I were to guess I would say at the high school level there looking at upwards of a hundred a day, and then as we progress down through junior high and middle schools might only have 30, and then elementary schools are less.”

Question: That being said you mentioned that one thing this has allowed you to do is to expand the type of communications, not just reporting absence students, but for even the elementary schools there is value now in doing all dials to parents for announcements.

“We have done it for snow days. When we do that, we get great response -- the parents love that notification, because not all of them turn on the radio; not all of them hear that there is a snow day.”

“The other thing we said we did was for fees and fines, and that has just been great. The secretaries can’t say enough good about that. They probably recovered 80% more of the fees and fines that would have gone unpaid than they have in years past, because they were now able to make those phone calls directly to the parents and say ‘these are the consequences if you don’t take care of it.’ An awesome opportunity.”

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“And it interfaces so well -- it’s just so simple, the text file we need to import into the BrightArrow dialer.”

Question: How reliable is the system?

“We just know that as long as the end user is scheduling stuff properly, it always works! We just don’t have any issues with having to baby-sit it or restart it.”

Question: What kind of training time did it take to get the actual end users up?

“We then sit with them for 5-10 minutes to show them how to import a list, and that is all it takes. It’s just very intuitive; most of them figure it out on their own. There are some of the older people who are just afraid of new things and afraid of technology. For those people, we write down three steps, and they just follow those same three steps every day.”

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Question: One of the features of the product is that different users can have access to different lists; have you found that to be useful?

“Yes, we actually found that to be very useful, so that the junior high does not see the middle schools attendance lists and accidentally choose the wrong list or if they want to have lots of them on hand all the time they are not feeling like they are infringing on each others space with their various lists, and so they really like having that separation. They think that it’s set up for just them, they don’t realize its set up for other people too -- very cool.”

Question: There are a number of new features on the new version. Do you have some plans and ideas for the way you might be using some of that functionality?

“I think that the new AutoDial.exe is definitely going to be used for some of those people who don’t need a GUI, maybe they don’t understand it or they are just those people who are in a hurry. We can set our Schoolmaster application on those call sheets to save to any location we specify, so all they will have to do is, as far as an end-user standpoint goes is execute your call sheet from the student records program, and that’s it. The rest of it we can set up on the server in a schedule to look for that

file however often we decide say every 10 minutes, every half hour, and when it finds it, it automatically imports the list and sets it up to dial. So we definitely plan to use that.”

Question: Another feature that we had talked about a few years ago was the ability to say the name of the child in the list.

“Yeah -- and I think you have taken that ability one step further which can help even more. To be able to say anything during the three part recording is great; you start out with ‘This is Eastmont High School. We are calling to let you know that,’ and then there is a break -- not in actually what it is saying -- but the layout where we can actually insert a name, so we are calling to let you know that ‘John,’ and then the rest of the message: ‘was absent from school today.’ I really like being able to put something else in there, or more information instead of just ‘John.’ We can put ‘[John] was absent from first period today,’ or ‘John has a \$35 fee that needs to be paid.’ We can insert some more information in there that is not generic, because right now our recordings are all generic, something that applies to everybody. Where this may not be, that little bit can be personalized. That’s going to be nice.”

Question: If you were talking to a colleague, maybe within another school district and they are looking at this type of functionality, and they are on the fence, they are trying to show their school board why this is of value, what would be some of the advice that you would recommend in terms of helping guide them?

“First of all, I think that just about every school district uses a dialer of some sort. The main feature for us from switching from the dialer we had before was how many simultaneous messages we could get out. Before, one phone call at a time, and another, and another. With BrightArrow, we get through a huge list very quickly, so where it used to be an impossibility to reach an entire student body with a message and communicate with them, you used to have to send home papers with them or you used to have to send a mailing.”

“The reports are very nice; they really like the format. They are formatted in a nice HTML report,, saying who was dialed, what time the message was sent to them, if it couldn’t reach them for some

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reason, because it tried three times, and that is what we told it to time out at, after three tries. It tells us why it couldn’t do it, because it was busy, or because there was no answer. They always know that I really need to get a hold of this one parent because the message just didn’t make it to them, or they know that everyone was called just fine. Most of them actually print those reports and put them in a notebook. They like the way they look. They can always reference back -- a parent might say ‘well we did not get any notification’, [the school can reply back that] a message was left, or someone picked up the phone; someone got the message. Then [the parent] can know who to get after.”

I see you have some lists in other languages...have you found that to be beneficial?

“Very beneficial. We have a lot of [Spanish speaking families] in Wenatchee; everything they send home, even letters and conference notices, are all in both languages. So when we make phone calls to those parents, there are many of them who don’t understand English at all, and it would be worthless to send them a message that they did not understand. In our student records program we indicate what their primary home language is. It generates separate lists based on language to import those in, so the message goes out in the proper language.

“One of the schools does four lists every night...one in each language for absentees and one each for tardiness. And they found that it helps students to be less tardy, by sending out those reminders.

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Question: What is different from what you used before?

“Phonemaster is what we used before. It required dedicated phone lines for each school and serial port connections to your network. Who has 20 extra analog trunks to connect to?”

“I would highly recommend it to other schools!”

“Having worked directly with software developers before, whenever I have had to call [other companies] for support for any other product out there, we get the run around. That is because no one wants to take ownership or responsibility for an issue. BrightArrow has been exactly the opposite, they want to make sure that we are completely satisfied with what they have written, and they are extremely knowledgeable.”

Final Question: Would you recommend this solution, the BrightArrow automatic dialing system, to other schools?

“I would highly recommend it to other schools! Not only is it easy to use, but it has been extremely effective in the communication aspect of the parents. If they don’t know what is going on, they can’t make changes; they can’t make things happen. There is no reason not to implement it, really. You are going to have something that’s easy to use, something that is going to be effective, and something that is going to benefit not only the school but is going to benefit the community.”

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