

CONNECTING SAN DIEGO'S BALBOA PARK



CASE STUDY

ASTERISK

At one time called “City Park,” Balboa Park was once a treeless scrubland of 1,400 acres overlooking San Diego. Today it is a popular tourist attraction and the nation’s largest urban cultural park. Not only is it home to the renowned San Diego Zoo, but Balboa Park offers access to 17 world-class museums; esteemed performing arts centers; beautiful botanical gardens and canyons; and dozens of family-friendly recreational activities, restaurants, and nature trails. With an annual operating budget of more than \$2 million, it has also been the site of two World’s Fairs and the Expo 2000 Millennium Celebration. In 2015, Balboa Park returns to its roots to host the Centennial Celebration of the first World’s Fair, the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. With a history of ingenuity and known for its innovative use of technology, Balboa Park’s latest IT-based project enables the Park’s many public venues to reap the benefits of Unified Communications (UC) using Digium’s Switchvox UC solution.

San Diego’s Popular Tourist Destination Keeps Visitors Informed and Saves Thousands in Business Communications Costs Using Switchvox UC

The BPOC IP project is an offshoot of two successful Asterisk-based Switchvox installations for Balboa’s San Diego Museum of Art and the Mingei International Museum by Digium reseller and preferred partner SDTEK in 2010. When the Balboa Park Online Collaborative (BPOC), a technology-based support organization for venues in the park, saw the success SDTEK had first with the Museum of Art, and then with Mingei, they contacted SDTEK founder and CEO Scott Starost about helping them build a centralized telephone system onto which any, or all, of the standalone members within the park, could connect.

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“What we implemented for the Mingei International Museum was a very basic Switchvox system,” Starost says. “But it changed their communications capabilities, and saved them money on reoccurring analog phone line charges. It was only a couple months before the Balboa director of IT called on us to help them integrate Switchvox into the Museum of Art as well.”

SDTEK is a San-Diego-based business communications specialist whose primary focus is showing small businesses how they can affordably utilize IP technology to increase productivity and streamline communications, while offering flexible, integrated solutions that reduce costs. Working with BPOC, SDTEK was able to leverage the two prior independent applications into a comprehensive Switchvox solution that would connect as many venues in Balboa Park as possible.

Because the BPOC and SDTEK had similar objectives, they set an ambitious long-term goal to connect all 26 BPOC members including museums, performing arts centers, attractions, recreational venues, and support sites within the park to a single, centralized directory. According to Heather Hart, IT Project Manager for BPOC, “We were looking for ways to share and utilize technology that would cut costs and improve communications. We knew we wanted to work with Scott, so we quickly identified the budget-friendly Switchvox system as the ideal solution for our expansive business phone system project.”

Using funds provided by the Legler Benbough Foundation and the Joan and Irwin Jacobs Foundation, BPOC built a fiber optic network throughout the park to provide the backbone for a new IP-based Switchvox solution that would not only replace existing analog telecommunications with a sophisticated UC platform; but would also save individual park members, like the Zoo and the various museums, thousands of dollars in recurring fees and connectivity costs.

SDTEK confirmed that with the new fiber in place, venues located in the park could connect to a single, centralized telephony solution. “Twenty-six BPOC members in the park have nonprofit status, so they are motivated by saving money whenever they can,” Hart says. “Nearly every operation had either its own outdated system or no system at all. Switchvox offered significant monetary savings, provided feature-rich functionality; and its flexibility meant we could add members to the system over time.”

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Starost recommended Switchvox because of its extensive features and its impressive cost savings. Having experience in deploying other competitive solutions, Starost was never fully satisfied with the value those systems provided to his clients. “I have a lot of knowledge about what telecom technologies are available and I am a fan of open source software. When I started SDTEK in March 2007, I was looking for a reliable and affordable telephony solution for small to medium-size businesses,” he explains. “Once I started installing Digium Switchvox, powered by open-source Asterisk, I saw how flexible, affordable, and powerful a solution it was.” For the past four years, Starost has been exclusively selling, supporting, and maintaining Digium’s business communications systems.

The Challenges

Balboa Park consists of well over 50 venues, spread out across 1,200 acres. Twenty-six are BPOC members. Almost all the venues had their own antiquated telephone operations. “The problems and weaknesses in the systems are diverse,” Hart explains, “A couple of departments share a telecom server with administration, which caused its own set of problems. Some of the members don’t have a switchboard set-up at all. The Visitor’s Center had as many as fifteen very expensive AT&T analog phone lines, and no phone extensions. Two of our members are new to the campus and have no phone system at all.”

Park visitors can now dial a single number and in one call to the Visitors Center they can get information on every venue in the entire park.

Although BPOC had VoIP capabilities, it was of limited benefit to them. “We had a product called Free PBX, which was running off an open source platform. It was a self-managed system and when the previous tech team had it installed, they did not sign on for any support. The appliance was unreliable and crashed all the time — and the situation got worse and worse, dropping calls and crashing several times a week.”

The Solution

Once SDTEK verified that the fiber optic network and a Switchvox UC system would provide the kind of flexibility the park needed, BPOC acquired a \$1 million grant from the Legler Benbough Foundation to pay for it. “When we showed the Board of Directors how we could save the Visitor’s Center alone \$1,200 a month by eliminating their 15 analog lines, they were all in with providing us with the capital to build the network and buy the system,” Hart says. “Without Scott’s expertise and his successful implementation of Switchvox with the first two museums, it would have been difficult to raise the capital we needed to precede with the project.”

BPOC purchased a Switchvox SMB 355 capable of handling up to 400 users, providing plenty of expansion capability from the approximately 55 users currently on the system. The high performance and high redundancy solution includes features such as mobility, instant messaging, and conferencing. “The unlimited conferencing has been very popular. We never did any conferencing before and didn’t really realize what a convenience it could be until we found ourselves with the capability,” Hart says. “In addition, the Switchvox switchboard with its computer interface has been a hit. Collaboration provides each member with the advantage of a centralized directory so inbound calls are dispersed into call groups and call queues pertinent to each member organization and the departments within that organization.” That is a huge benefit to park visitors because now they can dial a single number and in one call to the Visitors Center they can get information on every venue in the entire park.

There is still a transitional process to get each facility within Balboa Park added to the new system, due in part to existing service contracts with other vendors. As part of their ongoing connectivity campaign, the BPOC is promoting the benefits of changing over to Switchvox sooner, rather than later. Having the infrastructure in place will make it easier for everyone to connect eventually. The anticipated cost savings along with having access to much-needed support provided by a centralized system with backup capabilities is a big selling factor. “We are actively reselling the service to our members with the goal of having everyone in the park on our system.”



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