The Body Shop International plc provides a range of natural cosmetics and toiletries. The UK-based beauty retail major, which has around 2,600 stores across 65 countries, has a widespread presence in India, especially in the metro cities. {K2Splitter}

The Body Shop International plc provides a range of natural cosmetics and toiletries. The UK-based beauty retail major, which has around 2,600 stores across 65 countries, has a widespread presence in India, especially in the metro cities. Quest Retail Private Limited, which is a part of the Planet Retail Group, is the master franchisee of The Body Shop in the country.

The company launched its first Indian retail outlet in 2006, which is also the year when it became a part of the L'Oréal Group and was delisted from the London Stock Exchange. Being a largely e-commerce-driven retailer, upgrading IT and telecom systems has been an important consideration for the company to achieve a strong performance over the past several years. Its telecom network has also played a major role in running enterprise resource planning (ERP) applications, along with internet telephony and the web, thereby reducing commuting costs for customers. According to Tarun Bali, head of IT at The Body Shop, "Retail operations are complex and require continual changes in technology to serve end-customers well."

tele.net takes a look at the existing telecom and IT infrastructure of The Body Shop India…

Current status

The IT department of the retail major has been implementing various innovative solutions in order to fulfill customer expectations and facilitate operations management for the company.

At present, the retail major has an extensive front- and back-end operations-based system, with a primary focus on data security and business applications. It uses a hardware-based virtual private network to connect to data centre resources, facilitating round-the-clock connectivity of stores, warehouses and the e-commerce channel. It runs an integrated customer loyalty programme and uses a centralised gateway solution to provide customers with personalised offers and gifts on purchases. In order to aggregate and analyse customer data to enhance differentiation, transactional information is sent to the head office for quick analysis by

stakeholders.

The retail major has a dedicated technical team to handle and operate the various points of sale (POS), ERP and human resource management system applications. For its network infrastructure, the company has outsourced services to various vendors, based on their domain expertise. "The benefit of third-party specialisation is that it allows the IT manpower to focus on other business operations," says Bali. The Body Shop currently uses SAP IS integrated with TP POS at its retail outlets, with a customised loyalty solution built into the POS architecture. Bali feels that vendor support is very essential, but at times, failure to understand the urgency of the network infrastructure problem can lead to customer inconvenience.

Key challenges

The Body Shop's various retail outlets run on networks offered by different internet service providers (ISPs), with access to a biometric attendance system and CCTV video streaming at the head office. However, due to the use of different ISPs, there has been a problem of asymmetric broadband connectivity at different outlets, which leads to delays and transmission losses, and impacts billing. With the expansion of outlets and sales, and the resultant data growth, data backup has become a challenge for the company. In order to minimise data loss, it has implemented external storage devices at the retail outlets.

The way forward

The Body Shop plans to improve its IT and telecom infrastructure to enhance customer satisfaction, as well as streamline the management of its operations. With an increasing number of outlets and customers, the company is planning for bandwidth prioritisation to reduce the internet load between applications. It is also looking to implement data loss prevention solutions to monitor leakages.

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