



## Serious commitment to customer service

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Rob Fraser  
IT Director  
J Sainsbury plc

### Customers ringing Sainsbury's supermarkets get dramatically improved call experiences with the BT **smartnumbers** platform

#### Challenge

Founded in 1869 and now operating 935 supermarkets and convenience stores, Sainsbury's is an iconic UK brand. It employs around 150,000 people, serving over 19 million customers each week. Sainsbury's provides customers with healthy, safe, fresh, and tasty food at value for money prices. Larger stores offer some 30,000 lines, including complementary non-food products.

If you've ever visited a Sainsbury's supermarket you'll know the customer service desk is usually busy. Dealing with phone calls, while simultaneously providing prompt attention to shoppers, is a constant challenge for customer service staff. At busy times like Christmas, telephone enquiries go through the roof, compounding the problem.

As Sainsbury's principal supplier of communications services, BT piloted a solution in 20 stores. For comparison, a 20-store control group was monitored. Using BT **smartnumbers** to route calls to

the trial stores through a hosted interactive voice response (IVR) platform, the pilot solution had the potential to take the load away from shop staff by automating routine customer enquiries.

Claire Gascoine, Senior Account Manager for Sainsbury's at BT Global Services, explains: “During that month-long trial we collated statistics about call volumes, durations, hold times, and abandoned calls. We also carried out qualitative research with Sainsbury's store managers at both trial stores and the control group.”

A clear picture emerged of improved customer service, greater productivity, and happier store staff. Christelle Heikkila, Business Solutions Manager at J Sainsbury, says: “At busy times, nearly half of customers calling our supermarkets simply want to know about opening times. Dealing with such routine enquiries more efficiently would give our customer service staff the time to deal with more complex matters.”

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### The BT differentiators

- As a trusted communications services supplier to Sainsbury's, BT was able to implement the **smartnumbers** solution nationwide in very short timescales
- Centrally managed solution hosted in the cloud, taking the burden of message updates away from stores and ensuring consistency
- Cost effective commercial model requiring no capital investment and no additional hardware
- The solution leveraged investment already made by Sainsbury's in its existing BT Featurenet voice infrastructure

# Case study

## Sainsbury's

**“The project was a great example of teamwork. We did a lot of testing with BT, which made all the difference. Every store went live as planned with no downtime.”**

Christelle Heikkila  
Business Solutions Manager  
J Sainsbury plc

### Solution

BT **smartnumbers** can direct calls virtually from anywhere to anywhere across any combination of fixed or mobile networks, while call routings can be changed online in real time. Hosted within the BT network cloud, carrier class availability is assured and everything is centrally managed, removing the burden of updating messages from stores and ensuring consistency. Moreover, no on-site hardware is required and no up-front capital expenditure is necessary. The service is backed by comprehensive management information and reporting.

Rob Fraser, IT Director at J Sainsbury, takes up the story: “There was a lively debate about call answering arrangements at our annual management conference in September. In front of 4,000 people, and having seen the trial results, I promised to solve the problem by Christmas. I was delighted with the positive can-do response from BT to that commitment.”

The platform adopted for the rollout reflected feedback from managers and staff at the pilot stores. It provides callers with four options. Store location and opening times are dealt with by a recorded message; recruitment enquiries are directed to

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Sainsbury's HR website; and calls about the Nectar rewards scheme receive details of the Nectar helpdesk. The fourth option connects callers direct to the customer service desk.

Following Rob Fraser's commitment to move forward, BT engaged with Sainsbury's. A project team was set up and a rapid wide-scale rollout plan was developed.

Claire Gascoine explains what that entailed: “The challenge was to deploy the pilot solution to 456 stores without service interruption in just seven weeks.” In fact, BT delivered the solution to 530 stores before Christmas, achieving the stretch target set by Sainsbury's. Rob Fraser adds: “The only time that changes to call routing arrangements could be carried out and tested was when stores were closed overnight. That required tremendous teamwork and a huge commitment from BT.”

Christened Project Smart Call, the existing *Voice of Sainsbury's* recording supplier created a range of messages for the initiative. Although 1,500 new voice recordings were needed, message accuracy at go live was 99.6 per cent.

For added flexibility BT provided a concatenation tool. Using this, when new responses were needed they could be quickly created from a sound bite library and uploaded to the IVR platform. For example, the tool enables automated updating of opening times by processing a data file received from Sainsbury's every evening. A new front-end system was also developed, making it simple for store managers to amend local opening hours.

The implementation was largely complete by mid-December, with the final store going live on the 23rd of that month. Rob Fraser says: “It was a tremendous effort by BT, enabling us to deliver on the commitment I made. My colleagues were amazed that we managed to implement such a complex project in such a short time. Our Director of Retail Operations still mentions it almost every time I see him!”

### Value

The benefits are very evident. By reducing the volume of customer enquiries requiring handling by Sainsbury's in-store staff, more time is available for in-store customer service activities. An instant response for the most commonly requested information, and much reduced call waiting times, are other benefits.

“Call abandonment rates have plummeted, showing a substantial improvement in customer service,” confirms Rob Fraser. Now, with fewer calls to answer, Sainsbury's customer service people present a more professional face to shoppers, with parallel positive impacts on job satisfaction and morale.

Typical comments received from managers at pilot stores included the following:

- **Sedlescombe:** “We've got much more time to serve customers. It's a Godsend.”
- **Finchley Road:** “I would rate the service as five out of five.”
- **Lytham St Annes:** “It gives a speedier response to the customer.”

Rob Fraser sums up: “BT really stepped up to the challenge. A board in Sainsbury's headquarters depicts suppliers as heroes or villains. I'm pleased to say that BT is featured very much as a hero.” Christelle Heikkila adds: “The project was a great example of teamwork. We did a lot of testing with BT, which made all the difference. Every store went live as planned with no downtime.”

Sainsbury's is now investigating extending the use of the BT **smartnumbers** and IVR platform. Options being considered include collecting customer feedback and automating stock availability enquiries.

### Core BT services

- CRM solution comprising BT **smartnumbers** and BT hosted IVR

