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Call centers thriving in Las Cruces

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Jun. 22, 2009 (McClatchy-Tribune Regional News delivered by Newstex) -- LAS CRUCES -- Through all the talk of recession, rising unemployment and an uncertain future, there is one industry that has grown and thrived in the Las Cruces area.

Call them customer support facilities or call centers, there are companies with locations that employ hundreds of employees to work the phones and handle calls about a wide range of subjects such as Direct TV, cell phones, airline reservations and a variety of others.

Robert Martinez, center manager CyraCom's call center at 2303 Divot Ave. in Las Cruces, said his company employs close to 100 people and has just renovated and expanded its facilities.

"We've got this whole side of the building to fill," Martinez said as he pointed to row after row of empty cubicles with computers and phones. "We're looking to hire between 60 to 80 representatives."

CyraCom provides language services to hospitals, health-care institutions as well as for other, non-medical clients, and needs bilingual employees, one of the reasons it opened in Las Cruces in 2006.

Las Cruces Joanne Gonzalez is a lead interpreter at CyraCom and said she has worked there for about a year and a half.

"I was recruited through Manpower," she said. "It's excellent here. There's definitely a lot of room for moving up, there's lots of growth."

Cincinnati-based Convergys Corp. (NYSE:CVG) opened a call center at 4201 N. Del Rey

Blvd. last year to answer calls for a telecommunications client.

Site Director Martin Grygar said that, the facility

opened in April 2008 with 60 workers and has grown to a size of slightly more than 700 employees and is looking for more.

"We are currently hiring," Grygar said. "We've really received some interest from our clients to grow our head count."

John Munoz, site director for Sitel in Las Cruces, which employs nearly 600 workers, said his company -- which handles customer service calls for Direct TV -- is still hiring at its 2100 Summit Court facility.

"We range the mid 500s to the lower 600s," he said of the number of employees.

Munoz the company has been pleased with the labor pool it has to drawn from in the Las Cruces area.

"Our applicant flow has really grown," he said.

With the NFL season just around the corner, he said his facility can expect more calls as people sign up for the NFL Ticket with Direct TV.

Robert Wagner, area director with the New Mexico Workforce Connection office in Las Cruces, said because some of the call centers employ hundreds of workers, there is bound to be turnover.

"They have a constant job order with us," he said. "Convergys and those other types are hiring all the time."

He said many potential workers have to pass a computer test.

"They pay pretty well and they offer benefits," Wagner said.

Some of the locations require training sessions that can last for weeks. At Sitel, Munoz said pay starts at \$8 an hour and there are incentive and bonus plans, plus employees also get Direct TV for free. Grygar said that Convergys pay ranges from \$9.50 to \$12 an hour. Martinez said CyraCom pays is "competitive with full benefits."

There are other customer support centers in Las Cruces as well. Frontier Airlines has a

facility on Hickory Loop and VMC Customer Contact Center has opened a place to provide customer support for Apple. Last year, Allstate (NYSE:ALL) opened what it calls an express customer support center at 170 Roadrunner Parkway.

Frontier had to cut back on staff last year due to the recession, but this spring hired some more employees, although it is not currently hiring.

"We've been able to take a step forward," said manager Ruben Servando Valdez.

Empereon Marketing has a facility at 2255 S. Main St. and employs about 120 to 130 workers for outbound calling, said Brandon Brooks with the company.

"We're always accepting applications," Brooks said. "We're pretty well staffed because it's the summer, but people can come here and apply on site."

People can also apply for work at Research Data Design, which is at 1140 Commerce Drive, said a woman who answered the phone there.

Davin Lopez, president and CEO with the Mesilla Valley Economic Development Alliance, said the Las Cruces area benefits in the eyes of customer support companies because of its bilingual worker base.

"The Hispanic market is growing throughout the U.S. So there will be a need for, not just bilingual people, but Spanish-speaking workers," he said.

Because of the addition of facilities in the past several years that employ hundreds of workers, the Las Cruces area might be seen by many in the industry as close to its saturation point for call center employment. Still, it is not out of the question that more companies might open customer support locations in the area.

"We have the opportunity to attract more high-tech centers," Lopez said. "If you look at where the trend is, it's actually placing workers into the household. The more creative call centers are looking at these models."

Interested in call centers?

There are a variety of customer support facilities and call centers in Las Cruces. Those interested in employment can visit the Workforce Connection office in Las Cruces at 226 S Alameda Blvd. Here are some of the locations that said they are accepting applications:

--Sitel, 2100 Summit Court, (575) 522-9600

--CyraCom, 2203 Divot Ave., (575) 525-4740

--Convergys Corp., 4201 N. Del Rey Blvd, (575) 382-4701

--Empereon Marketing, 2255 S. Main St., (575) 541-5550

--Research Data Design, 1140 Commerce Drive, (575) 522-2931

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