



## Client

Apple Computer

## Industry

Technology

## Country

Europe

## Challenge

Apple planned to consolidate its response centres for the EMEA region into a single state of the art facility. It urgently needed help to qualify, recruit, relocate, train and, initially, manage a multilingual staff of 200-plus call centre agents.

## Solution

Merchants recruited throughout Europe, dealt with all HR issues, and worked with Apple to build and deliver in-house training

## Apple Europe Team Hits the Ground Running

With consumer interest in its iMac range peaking, Apple needed a pan-European response centre up and running in a hurry. Merchants stepped in to recruit and train the team.

### Client Overview

One of the world's most iconic and well-known brands, Apple Computer was incorporated in California in 1977. Today, Apple's innovations in design and technology have made it a global leader in consumer and personal computing technology. Its global business sells hardware, software and Internet products to students, educators, creative professionals and consumers all over the world. The famed Apple emblem has come to express a very particular set of values to its customers. Over the years, Apple has leveraged its unique market position with skill and determination – and its brand management skills are renowned in the technology industry.

### Business Challenge

The stakes were high when Apple asked Merchants to help create a new pan-European response centre in Cork, south-west Ireland. The brief was to qualify and recruit a multilingual staff of over 200 call centre agents from all over Europe, train them to a high level of customer care and expertise, and manage the entire human relations process of staff induction and relocation. "Apple chose Merchants to assist us with the development of our first in-house European contact centre on the basis of its proven quality and ability in the field," explains John Measey, European Director, Apple Customer Services.

"One of our key objectives was to get the job done within tight deadlines – we could not afford any slippage in our timetable for rollout."

### Solution Provided

With its innovative and appealing iMac consumer model breaking all sales records, Apple needed to accelerate support for its new customers and extend the same seamless, outstanding quality of service that differentiated its brand in the computing market. At the same time as welcoming the flood of new consumers to the Apple fold, the call centre would also have to support Apple's savvy long-term Mac users, who often demanded a high level of expert troubleshooting when they called in.

Merchants had three months to make it happen.

"For Apple, time to market was really the most important issue," said Merchants Account Manager.

Apple already had floor space for the new call centre at its Cork manufacturing site – it has been a long-term investor in Ireland. It also had clear ideas about the technology solutions required. Merchants' task was to find the staff and weld them into functional support teams of a high standard.

**“Apple chose Merchants based on our proven quality and ability in the field. We are used to working with clients who expect the very best”**

## Results

- ▲ Speed to market: 200-strong team recruited and in service within three months
- ▲ Innovative pan-European recruitment campaign meant all languages were represented
- ▲ Careful selection resulted in the calibre of new agents exceeding expectations
- ▲ Ongoing support for all HR issues, including relocation - two Merchants representatives permanently on-site
- ▲ Team pay rolled by Merchants for six months before successful handover to Apple
- ▲ Smooth, progressive handover of agents from Merchants to Apple
- ▲ Excellent ‘culture fit’ of new call centre team with Apple

“Merchants was able to show that it is a very good cultural fit with Apple – we share many of the same corporate values of quality, innovation, commitment and passion for excellence,” commented Apple’s John Measey.

## How We Delivered

“Merchants worked closely with the client to fit our teams to their profile, and we are used to working with clients who expect the very best,” explained the Merchants account manager.

“We had to be flexible here. We had no involvement with the layout of the call centre or the IT design, but were entirely responsible for recruiting and training the teams, dealing with all the human relations issues – and for the payroll! Merchants paid the salaries of the new agents, though the day-to-day management of the teams was in the hands of the Apple managers.”

Merchants adopted a twin-track approach to recruitment, using direct press advertisements and third party recruiters. Apple wanted a wide spread of language capability, so recruiting was carried out in Norway, France, Finland, Sweden, Italy, Holland and Germany, as well as Ireland and the UK.

Agents were recruited for a specific country team and had to speak that country’s language as their mother tongue. English was a requirement for all agents, as it is the common language for training. Merchants also saw this as an essential factor for the agents’ social integration into their new life and communities.

In essence, what Merchants had to do was ‘sell’ a new lifestyle as well as a new career. For although the posts on offer were well paid and enjoyed good benefits, qualified applicants had to be sure they wanted to uproot from their homes on the European continent and relocate to the ‘Celtic Tiger’ on the Atlantic edge of the European Union.

Happily, this rarely proved an issue. The prospect of working for Apple was an incredible incentive – Merchants was allowed to cite the client in its advertising, which helped pre-qualify applicants. Cork’s lifestyle potential, with its clean environment and proximity to the country and ocean of south-west Ireland, attracted many people, from Scandinavia to Italy. On the whole, the applicant profile was youthful, but age was no barrier and many older people were open to the prospect of change.

Merchants’ workload in qualifying the applicants was daunting. It set up a travelling assessment centre to visit the European countries, working in conjunction with local recruitment agents. Applicants were tested to assess their language skills, technical knowledge, typing proficiency and customer service skills. Merchants’ assessment of the applicants’ caliber was so stringent and exacting, that Apple was able to upgrade many new recruits to a higher technical grade shortly after they started work!

But before the new recruits started work, Merchants gave each group a week of intensive training, followed by two weeks training from Apple. Merchants collaborated closely with Apple to design and deliver training tools and courses that would optimally equip the agents to deliver outstanding support and service. Topics covered included communication and customer service skills, sales, performance management and team management.

The coursework was extremely intensive. It was as interactive as possible and included lots of role-play.

# merchants

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By the end of the year, only three months after being briefed, Merchants had fulfilled its mandate. It had successfully recruited, trained and brought into service the planned complement of 211 agents and team leaders, 147 of who had relocated from continental Europe with the support and assistance of Merchants. It had also generated a special kind of alchemy that transformed a disparate collection of new employees into Apple team members.

During the initial period, Merchants worked closely with Apple's on-site managers to ensure that individuals' compensation, including bonuses, was finalised. Two HR representatives were permanently on call to help resolve any issues and offer informal help with relocation.

By the end of the trial period, Merchants had progressively transferred the teams to the Apple payroll in batches of twenty. Eventually only three were rejected – and these were on medical grounds. Apple took ownership of its pan-European call centre – a remarkable feat. The success of this project shows that building a customer call centre means, above all, getting inside the skin of the client company's culture. Experience, focus on the essentials and unremitting attention to detail flow from this first principle.