

Agora

Client



Agora Inc. is an international holding company based in Baltimore with more than 60 subsidiary companies worldwide that span a variety of industries – from information services to international land holdings. The company is a modern marketplace for opinions and breakthrough ideas, and today publishes more than 300 books and 40 newsletters, reaching millions of readers from around the globe. As one of the largest and most

successful consumer newsletter publishers in the world, Agora has many of their titles also available in French, Spanish, German and Italian.

Situation

After years of handling all of their mail order processing and customer service operations in-house, Agora's business and mail transaction volumes eventually grew to the point that outsourcing many of these functions became necessary in order to maintain their high level of customer service. Agora conducted a search for a mail processing vendor and selected Merkle Response based on their advanced technology and specialized experience providing similar services to other organizations.

Approach

For over 20 years, Merkle Response has worked closely with Agora anticipating and serving their changing needs and building a trusted and strong standing partnership.

Merkle Response's approach to providing innovative mail processing and customer service solutions, as well as their ability to keep up with current technology and trends in the industry, has proved to be of great value to Agora.

In 2008, like many other businesses, Agora was affected by the economic downturn, and as a result, had to make a significant reduction in their staff. Despite losing roughly one third of their company's employees, having Merkle Response as a partner helped Agora adapt to those changes – allowing for a seamless transition with little to no interruption to their business workflow.

For example, until then, Agora's customer service operations handled the many exceptions that Merkle Response encountered while processing Agora's mail, including rejects that needed to go back to the customer and white mail responses without account IDs requiring look-up in the database. Merkle Response quickly took on these additional duties for Agora through its dedicated Exception Services department. This enabled Agora to reduce overhead by paying for this service only on an as-needed basis.



“Merkle really cares about Agora and understands it well. And the company has always been both responsive and proactive when it comes to understanding and improving Agora's business operations.”

Brandt Huseman
VP of Client Services,
Agora Publishing

“It’s always a real pleasure working with Merkle Response,” said Brandt Huseman, Agora’s VP of Client Services. “Working with a partner like Merkle Response really helps us reduce costs and keep them low. And anytime we hit a roadblock in our processing operations, they work proactively to find the problem and develop a solution. That’s a relationship we’ve trusted in the past and will continue to trust in the years ahead.”

Results

In 2012, Merkle Response processed more than \$8.4 million worth of deposits and handled over 378,000 transactions for Agora. Because a significant percentage of its sales are done through the mail, these services are critical to Agora’s business. Over the years, Merkle Response has:

- Conducted a study of how long it took mail responses to get to different Post Office box locations and determined which location received the mail fastest, allowing receipts to be deposited more quickly and improving overall cash flow.
- Analyzed how different affiliate replies came back to the company and recommended changes including the addition and standardization of scanlines that reduced manual keying and overall data capture costs by 20 percent.
- Established different P.O. Boxes for renewal responses with scanlines that separates the mail from other responses requiring more handling, resulting in a two day reduction in the time required to process renewals.

“In the mail caging business, Merkle Response has always been ahead of the game,” said Brandt Huseman, Agora’s VP of Client Services. “Their workflow is efficient, and they’ve invested in state-of-the-art tracking and other technologies and resources to make processing our responses faster. But that’s just the beginning of what Merkle offers us. We also have a partner that looks out for our business as if it was their own.”

Today, Agora relies on Merkle Response to handle all mail processing operations and related customer service support. These services include electronic deposits, PCI-compliant credit card processing, scan and manual data capture, along with handling of exceptions such as white mail and rejects, which represent a significant amount of Agora’s revenue.

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