Balancing System Updates Against Peak Season

As we approach November and December, technology team members are gearing up for what has historically been the busiest time of year for our network, thanks in large part to the holidays and other global events.

Operations Support and Network engineers understand how important this time of year is for everyone in the company, our customers and cardholders, so they take extra precautions to make sure our network is best positioned to handle the increased traffic.

Think of Operations Support, our network engineers, and our Change Management team as the air traffic controllers of MasterCard. Each day, they're coordinating the nearly 800 applications on the MasterCard core payment network, juggling literally tens of thousands of service requests, implementing program updates and managing system upgrades. Their challenge: Keep the network secure and running at peak efficiency at all times.

Not an easy job, right?

Adding to the complexity of the team's role is the fact that there are days and weeks throughout the year where system changes are restricted or prohibited. These "heightened awareness" and "freeze" dates are typically tied to high-transaction regional and global activities such as holiday shopping, large scale sporting events, and key MasterCard business dates such as Investor Days, product debuts and system rollouts.

A Flawless Performance
"During many of these key times, we see a significant increase in transactions, but other times we are simply trying to make sure there is no degradation of service on our network," says Scott Sinak, business leader, Network Operations. "Peak Season is an especially important time for us, as it encompasses Black Friday (the Friday after Thanksgiving) here in the United States, along with the holiday shopping season for much of the world. Transactionally, it's our busiest time of the year and we have to be extra vigilant to make sure everything functions flawlessly, even more so than the normal daily focus that is put on the network."

To put the work that the team does into perspective, Scott tells us that his group is projected to handle about 35,000 annual system changes via the Global Service Manager (GSM) application and 250,000 tasks and activities, overall. Changes vary from a simple database update to a large-scale application overhaul or shared infrastructure upgrade. "Some changes are more critical and riskier than others, but generally there's been a significant increase in the number of complex change requests based on our progressively changing environments. That's just a sample of the volume we deal with on an annual basis."

Positive User Experience
"We're strategic about our approach to these 'freeze' dates, so we can best protect MasterCard and our customers," says Michael Gutsche, group head of Operations and Core Services. "One of MasterCard's key strategic initiatives is safety and security. By taking steps to protect our core payments system, we can help ensure MasterCard customers have a safe and very positive user experience, 365 (or 366 on leap year) days a year."

People have a misconception that during Peak Season, things are slower in Network Operations. "That couldn't be further from the truth," Scott says. "There are plenty of platforms and products outside our core processing environments where changes can't wait, no matter what season we are in. Slow is not a word we ever use to describe our department. We're constantly managing risk. There is always plenty going on."