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Communicating with Constituents: Proven High-ROI Technology for Government Agencies

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Executive Overview

To be successful, any government technology initiative must possess two key attributes. First, it must have well-defined objectives. Web enablement, for example, should never become an end in itself. Instead, technologies (including the Web) should be applied to a primary agency challenge or "pain point." By targeting such a challenge, the agency ensures that its rewards will be well worth its investments.

Second, an initiative must be technically viable. It must use proven technologies that can be reliably applied to the specific challenges being targeted. Otherwise, there is a high risk of failure and waste.

Government agencies have reaped particularly high returns from technologies that improve communications with constituents. All agencies communicate with constituencies. These constituencies include individual citizens, businesses, other agencies, and even their own internal staffs. People have questions, and agencies have to give them answers.

People seek answers via several channels: the Web, e-mail, phone, snail mail, chat, and brick-and-mortar offices. Agencies must therefore be able to provide accurate, up-to-date information regardless of which channel someone happens to use at any given time. They must also closely monitor communications across all channels in order to keep response times down, pinpoint any process bottlenecks, and better understand their constituencies' top problems and concerns. And they have to do all this within the tight constraints of their existing budgets and staffing.

Introduction

Agencies at the federal, state, and local level have found that they can significantly improve the quality and efficiency of their communications by using technologies similar to those being utilized in the private sector for customer service. This proven customer service technology provides the following:

- A dynamic knowledgebase that makes accurate, up-to-date information available to people across all communication channels
- An easy-to-use system for tracking, reporting on, and analyzing interactions with constituents across all communication channels

With a multichannel knowledgebase and multichannel interaction management, agencies can communicate more effectively, support more services, and handle growing constituencies—without having to increase agency head count. In fact, with the right technology, many agencies have found that they can improve communications while actually reducing the number of staff members assigned to phone and e-mail tasks.

This white paper describes this technology and its benefits. It also includes real-world examples of agencies that have seen substantial improvements in the quality and efficiency of communications with their constituents.

Communicating with Constituents

Communication is a big part of any agency's job. Constituents are constantly asking questions, and agencies constantly have to answer them. People want to know if they're entitled to benefits. They need to get the right forms and fill them out properly. Sometimes they even need to know if they're dealing with the right agency!

Agencies handle communications with constituents in different ways. Often phone calls and e-mails are answered by staff members who have other responsibilities as well. Some larger agencies have created dedicated contact centers to service and support their constituencies. In many cases, the people who answer phone calls are an entirely different group from those who develop content for the agency Website. In others, the same people handle phone calls, Web content, and e-mail.

But regardless of which category an agency falls into, communication is very costly. Agencies with true call centers find them expensive to maintain. Call centers require a lot of expensive infrastructure and considerable staffing. As call volume rises, so do call center costs and call wait times. Call center staff members must also be trained to answer calls accurately and must constantly be kept up-to-date on changes in agency policies. If the staff members don't have the right information, constituents will get wrong answers and more problems will arise.

For agencies without such call centers, things can get even worse. Incoming calls can divert agency personnel from their primary jobs. Employees can soon become overloaded—creating communication backlogs and dissatisfied constituents.

To make matters worse, people often call with simple, repetitive questions. These questions consume the time and energy of agency staff members who should really be dealing with issues that truly warrant their personal attention.

As internet use has increased, agencies face the added challenge of coping with growing e-mail volume. E-mail also requires personal attention from agency employees. But e-mail interactions don't take place in real time as phone calls do, so e-mail messages often pile up in mailboxes—waiting days or even weeks for a reply. Many agencies are not able to track the status of these messages, so constituents may wait indefinitely for an answer.

The Web is another important communication channel for any agency. The good thing about the Web is that there is no incremental cost to the agency when a constituent uses it to find an answer to a question. Unfortunately, many agencies fail to use the Web effectively as a communication channel. Constituents may have difficulty finding the specific piece of information they're looking for on an agency's site, or that information may not even be there at all. So constituents stop using the Web and make use of more-costly phone and e-mail channels.

In addition to the separate challenges each of these communication channels poses to government agencies, these three channels—phone, e-mail, and Web—also pose a collective challenge. That's because many constituents use all three channels as they interact with the agency. After an extended e-mail exchange, for example, a constituent may call the agency to get clarification about some issue. If

the agency staff member taking that call has no knowledge of the previous e-mail exchange, the call probably won't go as well as it could. Agencies therefore need a way to effectively blend communication across all channels.

Finally, aside from the actual mechanics of the communication channels themselves, agencies face the challenge of ensuring that staff members who answer calls and e-mails know what they're talking about. No agency can afford to give incorrect or inadequate answers to constituents. They must therefore empower their people with ready access to accurate, up-to-date agency knowledge. This is especially true for agencies that are losing experienced staff members and having to replace them with less knowledgeable ones.

The communication challenges agencies face are therefore twofold:

- **The knowledge management challenge.** Accurate, up-to-date answers must be maintained and made easily available to external constituents as well as internal staff. These answers must be available across all communication channels. And they must be easy to revise and update as required by changes in agency policies and in constituency needs.

- **The interaction management challenge.** Agency staff members need to be able to handle questions quickly and easily across all communication channels. Agency managers, for their part, need to be able to track these interactions to ensure that answers are being given on a timely basis and that specific types of issues aren't creating a bottleneck.

By addressing these twin issues, agencies can answer constituents' questions quickly and accurately. They can also handle these communications with great efficiency—reducing operational costs even as the range of services or the size of the constituencies they are required to support grows over time. Every agency employee can become more productive, and the quality of service provided by the agency as a whole can be substantially enhanced.

Knowledgebases in Action

So how can government agencies effectively manage their institutional knowledge and make that knowledge easily available to constituents as well as agency staff members?

Today's knowledgebase management technology provides the answer. This proven technology meets government agencies' three primary knowledge management objectives:

- Provide a single repository for all relevant knowledge and make it easy to find specific knowledge items as needed.

- Enable knowledge to be continuously updated and driven by the actual changing needs of constituents.

- Make the knowledgebase available across all channels to ensure consistent answers.

By meeting these three requirements, an effective knowledgebase will significantly improve how quickly constituents get their answers and the cost-efficiency with which the agency delivers them.

Easy-to-Find Knowledge

An effective knowledgebase works something like the Web in miniature. All the information an agency needs to provide (policies, procedures, contact information, and so forth) resides in this knowledgebase. When constituents come to the agency's Website seeking some particular piece of information, they can search for it in much the same way they would with a Web search engine—by entering one or more search terms. However, because the knowledgebase is a closed universe of information, these searches can be much faster and more effective than the typical Web-wide search. In fact, with a variety of heuristic techniques, knowledgebase searches can be continually refined so that searches become increasingly precise and effective.

An intelligent knowledgebase will track which pieces of information are most commonly requested and place those on a sort of Top 10 list.

Another technique that can make knowledge searches faster and more effective is content ranking. Typically, constituents' questions revolve around a relatively small number of top issues. So, although a knowledgebase may contain thousands of answers, an overwhelming majority of constituents will want to view the same dozen or so pieces of information—such as a mailing address or an eligibility requirement. An intelligent knowledgebase will track which pieces of information are most commonly requested and place those on a sort of Top 10 list. This Top 10 should be the first thing constituents see when they come to the Website looking for answers. That way, a very significant percentage of them will find what they need on their first mouse-click.

A variety of other techniques can be used to make it easy to find specific answers in even the largest knowledgebase, and the knowledgebase itself can be extended to include information that already exists on the Website or in other electronic documents. The key overall benefit, however, is that constituents as well as agency staff can quickly zero in on the single piece of information they need at any given moment.

Relevant, Constituent-Driven Content

Another major challenge agencies face is to ensure that the content they make available to constituents is relevant to their needs. An agency's subject matter experts may do their best to figure out what constituents will need to know, but in the end, they can only make educated guesses. In fact, the only way to be sure that knowledgebase content is relevant to constituent needs is to have that content driven by the actual questions constituents ask every day.

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Here's how this principle works in the real world. A constituent asks a question that is not already covered in the knowledgebase. The agency staff member responding to the constituent notes this gap and, in the process of answering the constituent's question, actually creates a new potential answer for the knowledgebase. That answer is reviewed by the knowledgebase administrator, revised or edited as appropriate, and added to the knowledgebase. Thus, the next time any constituent has the same question, the answer will already be in place on the Web and that person can access that answer

without making a phone call or generating another e-mail that someone within the agency has to handle personally.

Note that with this approach, the creation of knowledgebase content is not a separate, time-consuming task. Instead, content is developed as an intrinsic part of the constituent service process. Thus, in addition to ensuring the relevance and completeness of the knowledgebase, this approach eliminates a lot of work for agency employees.

Leverage Knowledge Across All Channels

It's intuitively obvious that the same knowledgebase should be used across all communication channels. Yet surprisingly few organizations do so. Many agencies provide their staff with hard-copy reference binders while using a totally different process to create and publish their Web content. The result is tremendous duplication of effort—and sometimes even conflicting information.

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Instead, it is much more logical to have a common electronic knowledgebase for use on the Web and by agency staff. Usually some portion of the knowledgebase content that is available to internal staff will not be exposed to constituents. However, the superset of information in the knowledgebase will be the same. This way, consistent answers are given, regardless of the particular channel used. Plus, information has to be published only once to be available everywhere.

There are other ways to leverage this commonality of information. For example, instead of giving constituents a regular e-mail address to send their questions to, they can be provided with a Web form on the site. The fields in the form will ensure that constituents fill out all the information needed to answer their question properly on the first try. In addition, even before the e-mail message is sent to the contact center, it can be "scanned" for keywords. Based on those keywords, existing knowledgebase answers can be offered to the constituent. If one of those items proves to be the answer the constituent was looking for, *the need to reply manually to the e-mail is eliminated altogether.* This technique has proven to be very effective in reducing e-mail workloads and speeding the delivery of answers to constituents.

Managing Interactions

In addition to excelling at knowledge management, successful agencies must also be able to effectively manage their interactions with constituents. Staff members, for example, need a variety of capabilities in order to be productive and effective. As noted earlier, access to relevant agency information is essential. However, staffers also need incident-specific information in order to resolve issues quickly and appropriately. In particular, they need to see if the constituent they are helping has already contacted the agency about the issue at hand and, if so, what transpired during those earlier interactions. In some cases, they may require access to specific information about the constituent's account or previous service history. Regardless of what type of information they are provided with, that information should be available for handling phone calls in addition to e-mail responses.

Agency managers have their own particular needs as well, because they need to ensure both staff productivity and overall service quality. Queue management is particularly important, in that it enables managers to track response times and take corrective action if those response times exceed pre-established limits. Ideally, phone and e-mail queues should be managed from the same interface, so the manager can reallocate resources to whichever channel needs them.

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In addition to monitoring real-time incident and queue status, managers need a variety of historical reports in order to proactively address process bottlenecks and make necessary improvements. These reports include response time trends, individual employee productivity, and query volume patterns.

Successful managers also track a variety of knowledgebase statistics. For example, it's important to monitor the keywords constituents are using for their knowledgebase searches. Often, constituents use unexpected terms in their hunt for answers. By discovering these search terms, managers can make better decisions about the language to use in the knowledgebase. It's also a good idea to track the number of suggested answers being returned for each keyword. Offering too many answers only serves to confuse constituents. If no answers are being returned, on the other hand, the constituent obviously isn't being helped. Both of these types of situations can be easily remedied if the manager has the necessary information.

Explicit Feedback

One great way to monitor and improve service quality is to explicitly ask constituents what they think. This can be done with one-click surveys sent to constituents after an incident is resolved. Constituents can be asked to rank the agency's performance on a numeric scale. These rankings can be used in three ways. First, they can be used to track overall trends in constituent satisfaction. As improvements are made in communications processes, these scores can be used to measure changes in constituent perception and thereby validate investments made in service technologies. Second, they can be used to pinpoint specific problems in service delivery. If incidents handled by a particular agent get ratings below the norm, corrective action is obviously necessary. Third, surveys can be used to discover and address specific constituent grievances. Very low scores accompanied by strong comments may warrant the personal attention of an agency manager. Such attention can lead to a successful turnaround in which an especially dissatisfied constituent is transformed into an especially pleased one because of the agency's quick, personal response to the problem.

Installing Versus Hosting

Knowledge and communication management technologies are clearly enabling agencies to score big wins in terms of service quality and cost-efficiency. However, one more question must be asked before moving ahead with initiatives to adopt these technologies: Is it better to acquire, install, and manage those technologies internally or source them as hosted services?

Increasingly, the evidence is pointing toward the advantages of going with hosting. Agencies that deploy new technologies internally have to bear significant cost and risk. Their costs include expensive software and database licenses, the acquisition and installation of server hardware and storage, and intensive ongoing systems administration. Risks include project delays, faulty installation, and periodic downtime. In many cases, the agency's internal IT organization is already stretched to the limit and can therefore provide only limited support to the new technology implementation.

With hosting, all these issues are eliminated. Knowledgebase content and enabling applications reside on hardware located at a hosting facility that is fully managed by the hosting provider. Users—constituents, agency staff members, or managers—access content and applications with their desktop browsers. There's no hardware or software to install or manage. Everything is managed by the host.

Because the host's technical staff specializes in managing the host's communication technologies, it can typically deliver uptime superior to what an internal agency IT staff, which must juggle multiple responsibilities, can deliver. Economies of scale also enable the host to provision more redundancy to the infrastructure that supports the application than an individual agency can.

Key benefits of hosting include

- Elimination of up-front costs, such as hardware acquisition and software licenses

- Elimination of ongoing systems and software management costs

- Rapid deployment and shorter time to benefit

- Greater application reliability

- Greater long-term scalability

- No hidden administrative or support costs

There are many other advantages that come with a Web-based hosted application. System functionality can easily be provided to other Websites, outside contractors, and telecommuters as required. In fact, if the agency moves, it won't have to worry about relocating servers and other hardware. Users can simply access the system from their browsers wherever they are.

These benefits have motivated many government agencies to go the hosting route for their contact center deployments. By doing so, these agencies have dramatically increased their near-term project ROI while ensuring the long-term cost-efficiency of their service operations.

Better Government

Ultimately, the purpose of any agency's technology implementation is to improve government itself. That means making the government more responsive to the needs of its constituencies within existing resource constraints.

For agency managers, the automation of constituent communications is a high-ROI, low-risk technology decision that can have significant positive impact on agency performance in the near and long term.

For government agencies of all kinds, technology enablement of communication with constituents has proven to be a winning strategy for improving services while controlling costs. The primary benefits realized by these agencies through the use of today's knowledge management and communication management technologies are detailed below:

Fast, Accurate Answers to Constituent's Questions

Getting the right answer from a government agency right away can make a big difference to an individual or a business. By ensuring its ability to quickly deliver those answers, an agency significantly improves the quality of the services it provides.

Reduced Operational Costs

Government agencies have been able to move a larger percentage of constituent interactions away from expensive phone and e-mail channels to the Web. In doing so, they reduce costs substantially.

Increased Service Capabilities with Existing Head Count

For many agencies, the challenge is not to reduce costs as much as it is to support more constituents and more constituent services without increasing staff head count. Appropriate technologies enable agencies to achieve this critical goal by moving high volumes of routine, easy-to-answer queries to the Web, thereby enabling agency staff to devote their time and energy to issues that truly warrant their personal attention.

Consistent Answers Across All Channels

When agencies don't provide consistent answers to questions, they can confuse constituents and even expose themselves to legal liability. Effective knowledgebase management eliminates such exposure and ensures that identical inquiries receive identical answers.

Improved Long-Term Knowledge Retention

Agencies that don't employ some sort of knowledge management strategy can see critical institutional knowledge leave when their most experienced employees retire. The technologies described in this white paper ensure that such knowledge is captured, retained, and effectively used by all employees.

Improved Interagency Cooperation

When agency knowledge is put into useful electronic formats, it can more easily be shared and made available to other related agencies. This can keep constituents from feeling that they're getting the runaround and help allied agencies work more closely together.

A Better Work Experience for Agency Personnel

No one likes to spend their time answering the same questions over and over. No one feels successful if, despite countless hours of hard work, there's still a huge backlog of unresolved questions at the end of the day. No one wants to deal with constituents who are already frustrated because they've been waiting hours or days for the help they need. By transforming the way agencies communicate with their constituencies, new communication and knowledge management technologies also transform the agency itself—making it a far more rewarding and enjoyable place to work.

A Government Agency in Action

With more than 12 online transactions available today—including ordering custom plates, replacing driver's licenses and car registrations, and renewing vehicle registrations—the Internet Office of the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) averages 19,000 visitors a day. DMV Internet Customer Relations Manager George Filieau set a modest goal for his constituent communication initiative. If the agency could increase the percentage of customers who got answers instantly online by 50 percent and reduce the volume of e-mails being generated from the DMV Website by 30 percent, the initiative would be worthwhile. The results would be faster answers for constituents, reduced workloads for service representatives, and the elimination of the agency's backlog of customer queries.

The results surpassed Filieau's wildest dreams. In the first week of deployment, 94 percent of the customers were finding their answers online and e-mail volume dropped 33.5 percent. With refinements, the DMV soon experienced an additional 18 percent reduction in e-mail volume. All told, the DMV estimates that 97 percent of the people who use its Website now locate their answers right then and there. The agency has also reduced by an astounding 88 percent the volume of e-mail that customer service representatives answer manually.

This is the kind of help-yourself service we wanted for our Web customers, and we're very pleased with the eye-opening results. We've found that the more you help your customers, the more you help yourself.

Commissioner Raymond P. Martinez, New York Department of Motor Vehicles

Conclusion

Government agencies must improve and streamline their communication with constituents to meet service-level objectives within increasingly tight budget constraints. Service technologies have already proven to be extraordinarily effective in addressing this growing challenge. With multichannel knowledge and communication management technologies, agencies can communicate more effectively, support more services, and handle growing constituencies at a reduced operational cost.

Many government agencies choose to use hosting services (rather than managing these technologies internally) due to the cost efficiencies, greater reliability and scalability, and more rapid deployment capability. For agency managers, the automation of constituent communications is a high-ROI, low-risk technology decision that can have significant positive impact on agency performance in the near and long term.

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Oracle Corporation
World Headquarters
500 Oracle Parkway
Redwood Shores, CA 94065
U.S.A.

Worldwide Inquiries:
Phone: +1.650.506.7000
Fax: +1.650.506.7200

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