CITY OF Independence MISSOURI

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Technology and Tools
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Synopsis

The City of Independence's Action Center is a web-based tool which was developed to centralize citizen communications with the City, and document the resolution of issues and requests. It may be most accurately described as a kind of specialized customer relationship management (CRM) tool, focused primarily on improving customer service efficiency and accountability.

Citizens have the ability to register on the City's website and submit their request for service, or call a City employee to have them submit the request on the citizens' behalf. Tracking information is available for requests submitted online, giving the requester real-time status updates and the ability to communicate directly with the City employees handling their request.

Background

The City of Independence was founded in 1827, and serves as the county seat for Jackson County. It is the fourth largest city in the state of Missouri, and part of the Kansas City Metropolitan Area. The current population of Independence is estimated at 116,830.

The City previously operated a Customer Information Center (CIC), which consisted of a manned telephone hotline and an information desk for walk-ins. This system was replaced in 2004 with an automated speech recognition system and a simple 'Contact Us' web form on the City's website, giving citizens the ability to submit their requests outside the City's hours of operation. All web form submissions were funneled through the City Manager's office, which became problematic as the staff became responsible for determining the nature of each request and delegating to the appropriate department.

Solution

The automated telephone system remained in place, but a more sophisticated system was desperately needed to handle web requests. Through careful analysis and deliberation by Technology Services staff and the involvement of every City department, the framework for the Action Center was conceived.

One of the major goals for the new Action Center would be to identify the nature of a request, and to automatically route it to the proper City employees. A second goal would be to make activities and changes in the status of a request immediately available to the requester, eliminating the need for direct contact via telephone in most cases, and establishing an audit trail to ensure that every request is handled.

The Action Center was developed in-house by the City's Technology Services department. Technology Services developers met with supervisors from each City department to identify the most commonly requested services, the parties responsible for handling them, and the crucial information required to satisfy each request. A database was then developed to establish user groups, and the services they would be responsible for handling.

Analysis

The Action Center straddles both the City's internal and external websites. A service request is submitted either by the citizen via the City's public website, or by a City employee via the City's intranet website. Public site users are required to register an account, which collects some basic contact information and preferences for how they would like to be contacted, if a follow-up is necessary. Registered users have the added benefit of being able to not only track their request, but also contact the City employee(s) assigned to it.

When a user wishes to submit a new request for service, they must choose from a categorized menu of pre-defined services offered by the City, making it very easy to identify the desired service. The request is then assigned to the appropriate user group, and e-mail notifications are automatically sent to the assigned group members. If a relevant service is not listed, the user may submit a general request, which is then manually assigned to the appropriate party after being reviewed by a City employee.

From the City's intranet website, employees are able to log in and manage their assigned requests. Activities related to each request may be documented, internal notes may be left for other assigned users, and requests may be put on hold, closed, or forwarded to other user groups. Supervisors were given the ability to oversee user groups in their departments, and reminder e-mails are sent for idle requests, to ensure that no request goes unresolved. A second intranet tool was developed to assist Technology Services in maintaining an up-to-date database of user groups, and the services for which they are responsible.

Results

The Action Center was launched in June 2009, and was immediately popular with citizens. Within six months, more than 800 requested had been received. Some of the most popular services include reporting street light outages and chronic traffic issues, and requesting pothole repairs and graffiti removal.

After some initial adjustment to the new system, it became popular with City departments as well. A graffiti reporting system that had previously been developed for the Parks and Recreation department was eventually merged with the Action Center, and all cases were imported to the new system.

In the weeks following the blizzard that occurred in early 2011, more than 250 requests for snow removal were handled through the City's Action Center. The information gathered in the request form assisted the Public Works department in determining where snow plows were most needed during the cleanup. Indeed, since the system's launch, the Public Works department recognized the benefits of the Action Center, and has gone to great lengths to log all telephone and walk-in customer issues to the system.

To date, the Action Center has received more than 4000 requests for service, and the response time between a request's receipt and completion has decreased by more than 27 percent.

Conclusion

From every standpoint, the Action Center has been a success. In conjunction with the automated telephone system, the Action Center has effectively eliminated the need for the City to fund a dedicated call center staff. More importantly, the system has created a centralized customer service infrastructure that all City departments are familiar with and can coordinate through. The Action Center has served to enhance both accountability and communications between the City and the citizens that it serves.

An effective government is one which acknowledges the concerns of its citizens; however, too often there is a presumption of futility associated with citizen-government interaction. The Action Center represents a new channel of communication between citizen and government, one which is always open, and through which the City of Independence feels has not only enhanced accountability, but has begun to unravel the preconceived notions a concerned citizen often has regarding the competence of their local government.

Innovation/Creativity

The Action Center has enhanced the accountability of the City's employees to its citizens, and has created an audit trail of every request for service or information that is submitted through it.

Outcomes Achieved

The Action Center saw a 15 percent increase in the number of service requests submitted following its first year of use. Now in its third year of production, the system has already seen the number of requests increase by more than 25 percent, relative to the same period in the previous year. The response time between a request's receipt and completion has decreased by more than 27 percent since its implementation.

Citizen access to local government has improved tremendously. Not only can the citizens of Independence submit a service request outside of normal City hours, but their request is now delivered directly to the group of City employees who will be handling their request.

Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

The Action Center was conceived and developed wholly in-house, and incurred no additional costs to implement. As noted in 'Outcomes Achieved', the City's Action Center has consistently seen an increase in use and efficiency since it was implemented more than two years ago.

In comparison to previous efforts, the Action Center, in conjunction with the existing speech recognition system, is the most effective customer service system the City has implemented to date. These tools have given the citizens of Independence the ability to connect with their local government at their own convenience, and are no longer subject to the City's hours of operation.

Innovation Study Presentation

The City's presentation will consist of a live demonstration, highlighting the process of submitting a service request through the Action Center, and the completion of the request using the internal tools developed for City employees.