

FEATURES

The Community Communication Network: New Technology for Public Engagement

by Louis Bezich

The British are coming, and this time they're bringing a new communications technology to help local officials with an age-old problem: getting important information to constituents accurately and conveniently.

Newsletters, cable channels, and the Internet give local government officials a means of reaching their constituents. Still, residents continually complain about a lack of public information, and public engagement—particularly on key issues—remains a challenge. While the media are certainly available, they present their own set of issues that make most officials shiver.

Officials in both urban and rural areas face additional problems like the digital divide. Residents of some larger cities or rural localities may not have access to computers or cable television. Language barriers further complicate the seemingly easy goal of public communication.



This 42-inch plasma screen is found in a hospital in Doncaster, England.

Community Communication Network (CCN) was developed in the United Kingdom to address the same need as American officials have, namely, getting critical information to their constituents. Its success has been recognized by a number of leading British officials, including Prime Minister Tony Blair. Its creators are now bringing it to the United States.

Through plasma video screens placed in a variety of public and private venues, CCN helps local officials get their messages directly to the public in a relatively eye-catching manner. High-impact screens are installed throughout the local community at venues where people remain in place for a few minutes, becoming a "static viewing audience." The screens are situated in positions that have been identified as giving maximum exposure and gaining maximum attention from members of the public within each venue.

The broadcast program plays public-service announcements on a continuous 30-minute loop, interspersed with daily news, weather, and sports updates as well as interesting facts and information relevant to the locality. Content is updated every 12 weeks to keep it fresh for those who are watching, and to enable government or other agencies to ensure that any new initiatives or local news reaches their communities regularly.

Local leaders can tailor public-service announcements and promotional messages to a variety of constituents: seniors, parents, children, students, veterans, job seekers, or commuters. Through the networks technology, the information on any one screen can be changed over the course of the

day as the audience changes. A screen at a McDonald's, for example, can play senior-oriented messages in the early morning and switch to content aimed at teenagers after school. Each screen can be individually programmed to meet the needs of its venue. So, whether managers need to air a Spanish-language message at one location or to alter the playlist among locations, the technology is up to the task.



A 42-inch plasma screen, located in Peterlee, East Durham, England. The flow of traffic through this McDonald's is approximately 20,000 people per week.

The system also has the capability of broadcasting emergency information, such as "amber" or terrorist alerts, quickly on a local or regional basis. Emergency broadcast templates allow local officials to e-mail critical information, like photos, to the operations center to have alerts broadcast within minutes. Although content is typically silent to avoid fatigue for workers in the venues, CCN can remotely activate sound as and when required for emergency purposes.

Residents don't need to read a newsletter, punch in a cable channel, or hunt for a Web site. This system requires no effort on their part. Placing the video screens in convenient locations draws a captured audience to short, punchy, 30-second messages while people wait or are engaged in some short-term activity. Locations typically include public and private sector locations like waiting rooms, fast-food restaurants, recreation centers, shopping malls, and public buildings.

The system uses solid-state technology provided by a company that has given CCN worldwide exclusivity for government applications. The system has no spinning hard drives or mechanical disk engines. A dial-out mechanism ensures that units cannot be directly dialed into or attached by hackers. Currently, all networks are supported by a U.K.-based network operations center offering day-to-day, proactive monitoring and customer help-desk service. Plans call for a U.S. center as new networks are established.



A 42-inch plasma screen hangs in a community library center in Sandwell, Midlands, England. CCN grew out of a U.K. initiative called Public Safety Partnerships. In 1998, the Crime and Disorder Act required city councils, local police, and fire and emergency medical personnel to better coordinate their efforts to reduce crime in their constituencies. The initiative was successful and generated great results, but no one knew about it. Surveys showed that the fear of crime was rising while crime had actually fallen.

To combat this "information gap," local officials in Britain looked for a new way to convey their success stories and ensure future progress. The result was the Community Communication Network. Soon after the launching of the first few systems for the Public Safety Partnerships, other agencies

saw the value of this direct link to citizens. The scope of the CCN networks has grown exponentially, and these now carry messages for all sorts of public programs, like recreation, education, health, and environmental affairs. Today, these networks are becoming an integral part of local government in the United Kingdom; most recently, they were used effectively to communicate emergency messages in a number of towns after the terrorist attacks in London. Today, more than a dozen British communities use this technology.

The CCN system costs between \$13,000 and \$18,000 per screen, depending on the length of a community's commitment. The costs include all hardware and programming for a year. A minimum of 10 screens is required, with the number of screens appropriate for a community being determined through a survey and assessment of local needs.

Content is controlled by the municipality or appropriate government agency. While the system's own producers create broadcast-quality product, the subject material is selected by local officials. As owners of the content, local government can also play messages on their local cable stations and on the municipal or government Web site, stretching the usefulness of the product.



A 42-inch plasma screen is located in the Healthy Living Centre in Trafford, England.

In the United Kingdom, CCN is funded through a mixture of national government and local monies. To date, there has been no use of advertising to support program costs. To advance the concept in the United States, where there will not likely be federal or state funding (homeland security funding is being explored), company officials have begun a sponsorship model in which a business could sponsor a community's use of the technology, with recognition similar to that given on public television programming.

In addition to municipal governments, CCN-USA officials see widespread applications for county, state, and federal governments in the United States. Motor vehicle agencies, Social Security offices, rail-car installations, and intergovernmental partnerships that share a system are some of the possibilities under exploration.

Growing pressure to keep constituents informed, unprecedented public safety concerns, and an ever-increasing volume of public information have meant a demand for more extensive and diverse communications. New technology like CCN offers government leaders in U.S. communities a new means of getting accurate information directly to the public and meeting these critical needs.

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