

Case Study #17 – NEW YORK CITY 311

1. Background

In the summer of 2001, successful businessman and mayoral candidate Michael R. Bloomberg was on the campaign trail, walking through the streets of Brooklyn, New York with some of his key aides. He spotted a leaking fire hydrant, and turning to his aides, asked, “Whom would you call to get that fire hydrant fixed?”. There was a moment of silence, and then one of the aides answered, “The Department of Environmental Protection - DEP”.

Mayor Bloomberg was incredulous. “DEP? What citizen would guess that?” he said. “You see a fire hydrant-you kind of associate that with the fire department, don’t you?” Determined to report the problem, when Bloomberg returned to his office, he opened the NYC phone book to find DEP’s phone number. That’s when he came face to face with the daunting task of picking the right phone number out of 14 pages of city telephone listings.

Bloomberg wondered why there wasn’t a *single, centralized number* for callers to contact the City of New York and gain access to whatever services were needed. That brainstorm became a campaign promise, and the campaign promise became reality a little more than 1 year after he took office in January 2002. New York City 311 (NYC 311) was implemented on March 9, 2003, a relatively short time frame for such an ambitious goal.

During its evolution, 311 has focused on three core missions:

- *Provide the public with quick, easy access to all New York City government services and information while maintaining the highest possible level of customer service.*
- *Help agencies improve service delivery by allowing them to focus on their core missions and manage their workload efficiently.*
- *Provide insight into ways to improve City government through accurate, consistent measurement and analysis of service delivery Citywide.*

In merging over 40 City wide call centres into one single operation a number of changes have occurred, predominantly incorporating Call Centre industry best practices to ensure consistent operations and customer accessibility. Examples include investing in technology to support critical customer and employee applications for Customer Relationship Management; Content; Workforce Management; and Quality Assurance. Since inception, the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) has focused on picking the right application and dedicating resources to ensure these applications are designed and built to optimize the customer and city needs.

Evolutions have occurred in day-to-day operations as well, ranging from adding multiple shifts rather than just standard Day/Evening/Overnight, to allow for greater load-balancing and increasing retention. On the hiring side there has been a concerted effort to mix organic growth with external industry experience. Promotions from within prove to be valuable, due to the immediate contribution as well as increasing employee retention via career paths. Adding external candidates with industry, rather than government experience, has attracted new ideas and approaches. The customer experience has evolved as well, based on constant monitoring and assessment of what customers want and need. The content originally provided by 311 was less than 800 unique “services”. Today, there are over 3000 services, most added based on customer inquiries and partnership with City agencies to address gaps or unclear situations. Training evolved from teaching existing employees how to use an application system in 3 weeks, to a 12-week program for new hires designed to teach and reinforce customer service skills.

New York City 311 responded to the fact that the government’s responsiveness to customer requests had been a major issue in the City. The prevailing wisdom had been that bureaucracy and red tape were the rule, not the exception. With a huge government infrastructure designed to meet the needs of 8+ million people and businesses, New York City did not have the best track record in responding to complaints and requests made by its customers.

In January 2002, when Mayor Bloomberg took office, New York City had approximately 45 agency-run call centres staffed by almost 1,000 employees. These call centres relied on a variety of different systems and technologies –to take messages and direct calls for those who were fortunate enough to avoid busy signals. Throughout each of these call centres, service levels were extremely inconsistent. Uninformed and poorly trained operators often created frustrating runarounds for callers, transferring them from phone number to phone number, sometimes without ever helping the caller to find the service he or she had requested.

By introducing the concept of the 311 Customer Service Centre, the city was able to end the frustrating bureaucracy New Yorkers had encountered when they called for assistance from their City. Now, any time a resident needed to make a request for City services, they were able to reach the City by dialing one number – with their call answered by a live person every time – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, every day of the year. Not only did this initiative make City government more *accessible*, it also allowed for a City government that was easier to navigate than ever before. A customer no longer needed to know what City department handled their request – all they needed to know was one telephone number, 311 – and the request would be forwarded electronically to the appropriate City agency for resolution.

2. Organizational Design and Governance Arrangements

The 311 Customer Service Centre is a business unit of the DoITT. The agency is primarily responsible for oversight of the City's use of existing and emerging technologies in government operations, and its delivery of services to the public. DoITT

works to improve the government's efficiency through technology, and to make communication with the government straightforward and clear.

The agency is overseen by a department Commissioner (currently Paul J. Cosgrave), who is appointed by the Mayor of the City of New York and serves under the direction of the Deputy Mayor for Economic Development and Rebuilding (currently Robert C. Lieber).

Local Law 47 of 2005 requires the DoITT to issue monthly reports to the City Council, the Public Advocate, Community Boards and the public regarding data collected on calls made to the 311 Customer Service Centre. Signed by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in May 2005, Local Law 47 is the result of DoITT's work with the City Council. Making agency performance data available is an important way to ensure open government, and this law provides the public with valuable information while protecting the privacy and confidentiality of callers to 311.

The 311 Customer Service Centre is a unit of DoITT which is a mayoral agency. Ultimate control of the agency is delegated to the Mayor via oversight by a Deputy Mayor. The agency is governed by an agency Commissioner. The Commissioner, in turn, appoints a Deputy Commissioner whose primary responsibility is effective operation of the 311 Customer Service Centre.

The 311 Customer Service Centre uses a traditional tiered management structure, with day-to-day operation overseen by the 311 Call Centre Director, and organized into the following management and staff levels:

- Senior Call Centre Manager
- Call Centre Manager
- Call Centre Supervisor
- Call Centre Team Leader
- Call Centre Representative

3. Business Model

The business model of the 311 Customer Service Centre is based on three core principles of the Bloomberg administration – accessibility, accountability, and transparency of City government and the services it provides.

- **Accessibility** – The 311 Customer Service Centre provides residents, visitors, and inhabitants of the City with one number to call to access all New York City government information and services while, at the same time, providing a superior level of customer service. Open 24 hours per day, every day of the year, and available in any one of 179 languages, the 311 service connects constituents with the appropriate city services and information they have requested – they do not need to know what agency handles their request – they just need to know what issue or question they have, and 311 will direct their inquiry or request to the appropriate party for a response.

- **Accountability** – The 311 Customer Service Centre helps City agencies improve their delivery of services by handling the customer service and call centre functions of the service delivery process. In this way, each Agency is able to focus on its core mission and area of responsibility and manage its workload efficiently.
- **Transparency** – Through accurate and consistent measurement and analysis of service delivery, the 311 Customer Service Centre provides insight into ways in which City government can be improved and made more efficient. The city uses data from the 311 Customer Service Centre along with Business Intelligence tools and technologies to provide increased visibility into its operations. Whether it's a scorecard indicating an agency's performance, or easily obtained information on a service request made through the 311 centre, this information is conveniently available to all constituents.

3(a) Activities and Channels

A number of alternate delivery and self-service approaches have been deployed to broaden the reach and accessibility of 311. Several examples include:

- Increased utilization of self-service Integrated Voice Response (IVR) messaging. While not interactive at this point, IVR messaging offers some callers options to obtain information via recording rather than engaging a customer care representative; or be directly routed to a supporting department or agency rather than engaging a customer care representative. Significant increases have been realized with IVR messaging since inception, with a 24% increase in utilization of IVR in 2007 vs. 2006.
- As of December, 2007 customers have an option of checking their Service Request (SR) status on the web, via a "311 On The Web" initiative. Customers calling 311 to report or file a complaint receive a Service Request number, if they provide an email address the SR number is emailed to them with a link that allows them to check status. In January, 2008, 311 deployed a new module on NYC.gov, the City's primary customer facing website, to offer the same option.
- A Mayoral program has created "street presence" that enables city workers to identify quality of life conditions across all city streets and through technology report those conditions (potholes, graffiti, broken sidewalks, etc) into the 311 system for action. This alternate delivery method leverages the 311 infrastructure and allows more comprehensive and programmatic coverage of public-facing issues and problems, rather than waiting for citizens to contact 311.

3(b) Funding

DoITT is a mayoral agency and funding is realized through City Budget.

3(c) Human Resources Issues

Recruiting: Identifying and attracting candidates focused on customer service and willing to work in a fast-paced, 24x7 environment is a challenge even in a city the size of New York City. DoITT enjoys a positive reputation as a good Agency to work for and grow within, offering internal promotion opportunities for entry level employees. Location is critical to recruiting and staffing, and the 311 Centre is ideally situated near train, bus, and ferry stops to allow access from anywhere in the five boroughs. Competitive wages and benefits help attract candidates interested in short or long term careers. And one final element helps draw employees willing to work in a customer service environment: the concept of public service. In the 2007 Survey 93% of employees who surveyed responded in the positive to the statement: I believe my position adds value to the City.

Training: 311 delivers over 3,000 unique services and no one person can know everything. New Hire candidates must be trained on customer service and policies, as well as applications and navigation of systems. Experienced employees must constantly receive refresher training, learn about new programs and projects, and keep up with system enhancements. A three-pronged approach enables DoITT to deliver in this area.

1. A professional training staff with experience in instructional design, platform development, and delivery; and a mix of “home-grown” personnel with a training career path combined with selective external hire candidates with a proven record of training in similar environments.
2. Quality Assurance focus and structure to ensure consistent and accurate information is delivered. Quality Assurance and Quality Control functions are performed by line supervisors; by a separate Department dedicated to Quality Assurance; and through a Call-Research function. Each of these functional areas contributes to call monitoring and evaluation, in addition to employee coaching and development and content validation.
3. Current and accurate Agency content. The Content and Agency Relations team works directly with City Agencies to define and document Agency policies, procedures, and practices, and then converts that into readable, consistent messaging for all Call Centre Representatives to use.

Staffing: Maintaining an optimum staff level to handle normal predictable periods while being able to immediately respond to events that cause volume spikes requires several steps. Strong historical forecasting with seasonal overlays is the starting point. A multi-tiered approach to handling events and volume spikes includes:

- Constant vigilance in managing “the queue”, the volume and trend of calls waiting to be answered at any one time
- Utilizing supervisory and management personnel to deploy quickly when initial spikes occur

- Increasing capacity through an outsourced overflow vendor (within NYC) to handle peak periods
- Training and maintaining “call taker skills” in all other departments including: Training, Quality, Content, Budget, HR, Finance, and Systems, and leverage these groups on short notice when volume spikes occur.
- Pushing approved “Alerts” to all CCRs and staff in near-real time. When an event or activity occurs in the City, DoITT is connected with the Office of Emergency Management and the NYPD to get up- to-date, official information on a situation. That information is transformed into Alerts distributed to all users. As a result, a consistent, clear, and approved message is delivered to callers focusing on that issue (police emergency, weather situation, train or subway impacts, etc).
- Developing and deploying “Messaging” on the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) application. This enables 311 to “push” approved messages to all callers through a recorded announcement, to reduce call volume and talk time associated with CCR handled calls. Examples include notification of blackouts, information on School closings, and pre-programmed announcements about special events.

3(d) Performance Measurement

DoITT developed and deployed a Business Intelligence tool which is able to compile data on all calls received, services selected, tickets opened, and dispositions of requests. While 311 does aggressively safeguard privacy information (information on caller telephone numbers is not shared, and positive confirmation of a Service Request number must be provided before related information is shared with a caller), the Business Intelligence tool enables DoITT to capture robust datasets on all activities.

Through an analysis, design, and development approach the BI tool has been created to provide multiple layers of information for many users. It delivers required information to fulfill on Local Law mandates for information and produces Citywide Performance Reports on monthly basis. The tool is also used for operational analysis, trending, and decision-making.

3(e) Use of Information Technology/Web 2.0

DoITT will be expanding the reach and accessibility of 311 and 311 services via web and other means such as chat, email and text within the next two years. Currently the major focus is the convergence of 311 and NYC.gov, to allow citizens and users multiple entrée points to reach City government services and information.

3(f) Partnerships

The 311 Call Centre contracts with several vendors to augment service delivery. An outsource vendor handles overflow call volume while adhering to strict 311

operational and service guidelines. DoITT contracts with Language Line, the industry leader in translation and interpretation services, to provide access to information in up to 179 languages. DoITT also works closely with City University of New York (CUNY) to provide part-time and internship programs for over 135 active undergraduate and graduate college students in the Call Centre.

4. Community Engagement

In New York City, there are 59 local representative bodies known as Community Boards that represent specific geographical areas throughout the 5 boroughs of New York City. Board members are appointed by Borough Presidents in consultation with the City Council members of the Board district.

Community Boards play an important advisory role in matters dealing with land use and zoning, the City budget, municipal service delivery and other matters relating to the welfare of the community they represent. Any problem affecting all or part of a community, from traffic issues to deteriorating housing, falls within the purview of a Community Board.

New York City 311 works very closely with the Community Boards to ensure that constituent complaints are directed to the proper City agency to be addressed. Both DoITT and 311 are active participants in Community Board and Borough President meetings, and in many cases act as liaisons between the Community Boards and City agencies to ensure timely service delivery to each community.

A good example of a partnership with not-for-profits to support service delivery at the community level is the Enhanced 311 Initiative. This Initiative, originally announced by Mayor Bloomberg in November 2005, involves expanding 311's current role to include access to comprehensive human services information and referral (I&R).

By leveraging the infrastructure of the 311 environment, the City will be able to apprise callers of an even wider array of services than are typically provided by government agencies and community-based organizations. Services will be provided in 170 languages to ensure that callers' needs are met, and specialists will be trained and certified to match callers' requests and needs with the appropriate information or referral to various social-service agencies. The first phase of E-311 included the consolidation of the New York City Department for the Aging Information & Referral Unit in November 2006.

One of the key advantages of establishing relationships with stakeholders representing various business lines is buy-in. NYC 311's success is largely built on the strong and determined effort by the 311 team to partner with other City Agencies and develop workable and meaningful solutions to conveying Agency policies in language that citizens and customer care reps can use and understand. The effort extended to build partnerships, maintain and constantly communicate with stakeholders is one of the single most valuable investments made by the Agency in launching 311.

Challenges are primarily routed in developing and reporting Service Level Agreements. As part of the 311 mission, Agencies would be able to focus on their core competencies rather, and 311 would be able to gather and analyze data. Publishing the data – part of

the Mayor's objective of Transparency – becomes the key challenge with stakeholders given the impact and reaction to published results.

5. Issues Encountered/Challenges

See section 3(c) for issues and challenges relating to recruiting candidates, training processes, and maintaining appropriate staffing levels.

Among other challenges are managing to aggressive Key Performance Indicators. In keeping with 311's mission to provide quick, direct access to information, and at the same time maintaining accessibility, 311 manages aggressive Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Most challenging are a Service Level objective of 90% of calls answered within 30 seconds or less (industry best practice is 80%/30 seconds); an Average Speed of Answer of 30 seconds or less; and a Maximum Answer Delay of 3 minutes. The last KPI is a particular challenge given the volume spikes that can occur due to outside forces (weather, news media, accidents, etc). It is designed to reinforce New York City's commitment to provide quick access and accessibility. It requires constant management to ensure information, staffing, tools, technology, and personnel are all geared towards delivering on the goal.

6. Critical Success Factors

The major factor contributing to the success of the 311 Customer Service Centre has been the strong executive leadership provided by Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The Mayor insisted that the implementation of the 311 Customer Service Centre occur within a one-year timeframe, and this initiative had the full support, attention, and focus of the administration – key in a project of this magnitude.

The Mayor also determined that this project of “re-inventing government customer service” was the way in which the City was going to conduct its business going forward. He mandated support from each of the City's agency Commissioners – there was no such thing as an agency “opting-out” of having its agency information and services handled by the 311 Customer Service Centre.

7. Next Steps

During the past six years, the Bloomberg administration has worked tirelessly to meet New Yorkers' expectations of responsive and effective customer service. Part of this effort has been the development of a NYC Technology Plan – PlanIT – that will allow NYC government to prepare for the next big step in the administration's efforts to provide all New Yorkers with the high-quality government services they deserve. Many of the initiatives outlined in the technology plan are being driven by the 311 Customer Service Centre. Some of these include:

- *Enhanced 311*

New York City, in partnership with State and community-based 211 providers, will offer comprehensive and simplified access to Health and Human Services information and referrals through its well-established 311 call centre. Call takers will provide these services in more than 170 languages to ensure that callers' needs are met. Call takers will be trained and certified to match callers' needs with the appropriate information or referral.

- *311 Customer Satisfaction Survey*
Within the next year, 311 will be conducting its first-ever Customer Satisfaction Survey to gauge caller satisfaction with the services that are provided by 311. Anecdotal evidence and caller comments suggest that customers are pleased with the service that is provided by 311 – this survey will allow New York City to gather concrete data and feedback that hopefully will align with those sentiments.
- *311 on the Web*
The vision is to provide on the Internet, through *NYC.gov*, the same information and services that are available by calling 311.
- *Closing the Loop on Service Requests*
Today, when a caller requests a service through 311, the request is passed on to the servicing agency, with limited visibility by 311 into the status of the request. The goal is to integrate agency systems with the 311 Customer Service Management System (CSMS) system so that information is more seamless, and callers can easily check the status of their request.
- *Automated Escalations and Rapid Notification*
There are times when non-emergency, but critical conditions become apparent through increased calls to 311. Automated triggers will be developed to escalate these issues to the appropriate agencies to ensure rapid notification regarding the condition.
- *Acceptance of Digital Images and Video*
The City will be piloting the ability to allow New Yorkers to submit photos or video associated with their 311 service request, providing additional useful information to the agencies that are responding to the request.

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