

CRM Improves Citizen Service In Fairfax County

Denise Souder

It all began when the county board of supervisors wanted to expand and improve citizen service. It wanted to streamline the whole process, making it faster, easier, and better. Sound familiar? It certainly should! Every local government desires to deliver excellent service to its citizens with every phone call, letter, fax transmission, e-mail message, or visit. The year 2000 brought about a much-needed change in Fairfax County, Virginia. The county went from wanting to improve citizen interaction to witnessing an explosion of success through a citizen relationship management (CRM) solution. Its effect has spread across departments, pleasing politicians and employees alike.

“Today, we have a better way to aggregate critical information in order to provide the best possible response in the shortest amount of time,” stated Phylis Salak, administrative assistant to Board Chairman Kate Hanley. “Serious issues arise in a very brief amount of time. We can now affect the quality of life in the moment.”

CRM is more than a product or a service. It's a way of doing business in which every customer is unique and every step of the process equally important. True, CRM is an enterprise-wide system used to manage individual citizen concerns. Government leaders, employees, businesses, and constituents all benefit by fully integrating and automating the requesting, distribution, resolution, and reporting of government services.

From Carlsbad, California, to Westfield, New Jersey, and from Seattle, Washington, to Washington, D.C., local governments are moving toward a unified CRM solution that is adaptable and flexible enough to meet the diverse and changing needs of their citizens.

Facing Facts

The first step for Fairfax was recognizing that its homegrown constituent services application was inadequate and becoming obsolete. "The old system was mostly Paradox-based, tailored differently for each supervisor's office, and so clumsy that only four of the 10 board members were still using it and, even then, each in a different way," reported Stephanie Neuman, IT project manager. "The aim of the project was to find a single system that all the supervisors could use to effectively capture communications with their constituents."

As part of the process of defining the requirements of the different offices, Fairfax used an unusual group-decision support center to gain consensus from end users up-front. "The entire board had its staff go through the process of identifying and prioritizing a variety of key issues needed to serve citizens better," said Salak. In the end, everyone agreed to a single off-the-shelf, browser-based CRM solution.

"There has been an enormous benefit to the IT department [in having] 10 elected offices come together and agree on one system," added Neuman. "CRM has changed the way the board conducts its business, not only in keeping track of hot issues and retrieving critical items faster but also in documenting how its members interface with one another."

A Time for Change

"The way we identify citizens has totally changed," agreed Salak. "For example, it used to be that you could only have one John Smith in the system. We used to make up middle names like John 'Oak

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Street' Smith. You can imagine how difficult it was to do a mailing with that kind of database."

In today's world of mass-issue campaigns, whether conducted by mail, phone, fax, or e-mail, the board now can populate its individual databases from more than one medium and can benefit from the new browser-based system to respond faster and more efficiently.

Without getting up from their desks, employees can respond to a charge from constituents that their community was promised, but never received, a new fire truck. In mere seconds, a scanned version of the letter sent to report the oversight can be located, along with the workflow assigned to it. Through the workflow documentation process, an employee can track the status of the workflow and answer the constituents' concerns. With CRM, every individual is important, and no issue is left unresolved.

While CRM does place a great deal of emphasis on cultivating individual relationships, it can also be used to respond to greater numbers of people who share a common concern about an issue. Recently, Fairfax County was inundated with more than 11,000 letters and faxes from all over the world concerning a controversial deer population-management issue. Through the contact database of the CRM system, board members handling this issue were able to pinpoint the areas most affected and respond accordingly, in an efficient and ultimately successful manner. Because the

county kept the lines of communication open, a harmonious solution was reached.

Maximizing Success

"When we saw that 10 diverse political offices were embracing CRM successfully, it naturally occurred to us that this system might be right for other offices in the county," said Neuman. Today, a single solution is being used to meet each office's individual needs.

The county executive's office now is tracking all internal matters; everything pertaining to a particular issue, from its inception to its resolution, has been captured and stored in a database. Aware of the fact that tens of thousands of contacts will likely deluge each board member's office about the intensely debated budget process, the executive office now uses the CRM system to track issues based on regional concerns. As a result of closely tracking every constituent interaction and analyzing this information to align government processes strategically and to predict public needs, local governments can follow a new paradigm, one in which citizens and local governments interact with ease and effectiveness.

Transforming Consumer Services

CRM processes are revolutionizing the county's ability to provide valuable services to its constituents. For instance, the department of consumer services uses the new browser-based system to track complaints from consumers against businesses, monitoring the number of complaints against a business as a means of evaluating the need to start a legal action. The department also uses the system to identify countywide trends in business practice.

"We can track data such as the amount recovered for consumers, the validity of complaints, the type of resolution, and business locations," stated Carolyn Quetsch, director of consumer services,

“all of which enables us to serve consumers *beyond* their expectations.” Future enhancements will allow consumers to go online and check out a particular business before making a purchase.

Additionally, the consumer services department has added a CRM module for licenses, permits, and the certification of taxicabs, which streamlines the issuance of licenses for hacks, solicitors, pawnbrokers, precious-metal and gem dealers, charitable organizations, promoters, massage businesses and technicians, and gun dealers. Images can be scanned and attached to licenses and permits, eliminating license fraud and abuse in the county. The department plans to link the taxicab-licensing database with the police department so that officers can check validity from their patrol cars, helping to improve public safety.

The ability to cross-reference data is a valuable tool for a countywide CRM system. As a result of the implementation of the CRM system, a new interdepartmental cooperation has been established. If consumers are complaining about a particular construction company, the consumer services department can forward this information to the planning and zoning department, which can then more knowledgeably reevaluate permits issued to that company.

Solving Legislative Challenges with CRM

The CRM vision also has been extended to the legislative liaison staff of the county executive’s office, whose primary function is to review any state legislation that might influence the county. As Neuman explains, “Before, we used to have to go out and hit all the desktops with a Paradox database for the new legislative session. Now, we don’t. Before, the legislative staff used to have to type every word of a bill. Now, they extract exactly what they need automatically from the Web server in Richmond. This saves them a tremendous amount of time, which is much better spent analyz-

ing how proposed legislation may affect the county.”

Today, Fairfax benefits from the automatic and simultaneous assignment of review responsibilities to as many as 33 agency leaders throughout the large county, as well as to Richmond, the state capital. Affected agency feedback is kept private and is structured to help form the consensus needed for decision making.

As a result, legislative staff are spending more time on critical issues and less time on distributing bills and tracking down county officials for input. The more reliable and efficient consensus information enables the board to be better informed on pending legislation and its import to the county.

It’s expected that the county’s investment in a comprehensive CRM application will likely be fully repaid if it serves to help Fairfax influence the direction of even one state legislative issue that could have significant impact on the county.

New Era of Governing

Putting the right information at the fingertips of the right people at the exact moment when they need it is at the heart of CRM. A rising intolerance for system failure or for unreliable data is driving many local governments to change the way they do business. Their publics are more demanding and less accepting of inefficiencies and antiquated processes than ever before.

By integrating a “people” module with a “workflow” module, caseloads are being streamlined and resolved in a fraction of the time. With new scanning capabilities, every detail is captured and easily sent electronically around the county to the appropriate contacts for resolution. Every action item is resolved, every constituent is heard, and every problem is answered. **DM**

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