

MASS 211

Business Needs

People need all kinds of help.

Some need psychological counseling. Some need financial assistance. Others need access to healthcare. And the range of nonprofit agencies established to provide that help can be extensive. In Massachusetts, for example, there are more than 800 toll-free phone numbers providing information on everything from early childhood services to geriatric care. And that was the problem.

Like residents in most parts of the United States, those in Massachusetts had no single, comprehensive source to go to in order to identify the assistance offerings available to them. There were referral services, but they varied from area to area. Some parts of the state had had sophisticated services in place for 30 years; other parts of the state were not served by any referral service at all.

At least nine comprehensive information and referral regional call centers provided referrals to assistance agencies. But each call center maintained its own database, meaning information was inconsistent from one call center to another and frequently out-of-date. With each call center operating on its own technology, there was no easy way to coordinate and unify them.

Many of the agencies providing assistance in Massachusetts were funded in part by the United Ways of Massachusetts. So it was natural that the United Ways would want to maximize the value of their support by helping agencies to connect with people who needed their services.

The United Ways envisioned a single, comprehensive, statewide referral system, with a call center operating a single, up-to-date database that would deliver geographically appropriate results for callers wherever they were in the state. When the United Ways learned that the Massachusetts Department of Health and Human Services was interested in a similar effort, they combined forces with the state to turn that vision into a reality.

Solution

The result of that partnership is “Mass211,” a statewide referral service that operates both over the phone and over the Web. Callers within Massachusetts dial “2-1-1” to be connected to referral specialists working from the call center. The specialists ask the callers for the types of services they’re seeking and their location—and then provide names and contact information for appropriate agencies.

The specialists can identify appropriate agencies within a caller’s town or within a given proximity—1 mile, 5 miles, 10 miles, and so on—which helps them ensure that they don’t miss a nearby agency that just happens to be over the town line.

Although that’s an improvement over the phone-based referral services previously available to people in Massachusetts, it’s only the beginning. Mass211 also has a new, Web-based component, available at www.mass211help.org.

Designed to be extremely simple to use so that every state resident, regardless of his or her technology savvy, can take advantage of it, the Web site has just a few drop-down boxes and text boxes. A visitor to the site enters one or more keywords to describe the requested service and to identify the town, towns, or geographic radius for the search. Mass211 then returns a list of agencies and contact information.

The deceptively simple site masks a sophisticated solution created for Mass211 by Systems Engineering, now part of NWN Corporation, a Microsoft®Gold Certified Partner based in Waltham, Massachusetts.

The NWN team tailored its Smart Locator product to create the solution, which, in addition to the public-facing Web site, also includes a version for call center agents and an interface through which agencies can update their profile information and have that data populated throughout the solution.

Smart Locator is based on a range of Microsoft technologies, including Microsoft SQL Server™2005 database software and the Microsoft .NET Framework, software for connecting people, information, systems, and devices.

Benefits

“Smart Locator was ideal for Mass211 because it’s so straightforward and results in a system that’s so easy to use,” says Jean Strock, the United Way representative on the Mass211 board of directors. “It masks all the complexity behind the solution so that when people call or visit the Web site for information, they can get what they need quickly and easily.”

Because the solution is built on SQL Server 2005, it can generate reports on the fly through SQL Server 2005 Reporting Services.

“Virtually any combination of data we want, we can get,” says Strock. “That’s an immensely important capability to us, and Smart Locator and SQL Server make it possible.”

For example, as funders of many of the agencies in the system, the United Ways need to know whether funded agencies are receiving referrals and what the trends are related to those referrals. Both the United Ways and the State of Massachusetts want to know where calls are coming from, whether the number of calls is increasing or decreasing, what services are being requested, and what types of people (e.g., by age, gender, and other demographic factors) are requesting those services. The nonprofit agencies also have an interest in this type of data because it can help them refine the types of services they provide and the types of people they target for assistance.

Smart Locator and SQL Server make it possible for authorized users at the agencies to select the parameters of interest to them and create reports on their own in real time, rather than wait hours, days, or longer for an IT department to run the reports for them.

“We had no easy way to generate this information before Smart Locator,” says Strock. “Now we do. It will be the basis for better decisions about where money should go to provide the most good for the most people. But the most important benefit of our database and Smart Locator is our confidence that we are referring thousands of people in need of critical services to the programs that can help.”

For more information, contact Alan Day at NWN Corporation, 781-472-3430 or aday@nwnit.com