

SERVICES



Public Service Futures

Hanging on the telephone?

In the second of his series of articles sharing insights from around the world, Robin Hambleton describes Chicago's ultra-responsive service



With Robin Hambleton

Private sector companies are way behind the best public service providers when it comes to greeting and assisting people with their enquiries. Let's consider telephone access. A top quality service provider would offer one short, three digit number for all callers and put them straight through to a knowledgeable person who will help them immediately with their enquiry.

No private sector company comes close to the service responsiveness of a 999 call made in the UK. Forget about punching in long numbers, forget about automated voices saying 'Now you have three choices. Please select from the following options', and forget about 'All lines to our customer advisers are busy, please hold.'

Some will say: 'Fair enough. The private sector is way off the pace when compared to 999 but this is our national emergency service. A local council can't possibly deliver this quality'. Wrong answer.

In the USA the national emergency number is 911 (covering ambulance, fire and police, as does 999 in the UK). The City of Chicago has won a national prize for public service quality by introducing a 311 number that operates alongside the respected 911 emergency service.

What is 311?

If you live in Chicago all you do is dial 311 to request any non-emergency city service or to get any information you need from the City. Dial any time night or day. You will speak straight away to someone who can help you. That's it.

Behind this breathtaking simplicity is a prize winning combination of well-trained people and up to date technology. First, there is a superb team of 65 operators who have undergone extensive training to ensure that every caller gets a prompt, courteous and professional response. Headed by the energetic Ted O'Keefe, the 311 City Services team works in a well designed and spacious call center and staff bring a high level enthusiasm to the job.

Second, the 311 staff are supported by a sophisticated computer system that routes requests electronically to the proper department to take the necessary action. More than that, this new system enables supervisors to monitor the progress of any given job and deal quickly with any problems that might be causing a delay.

What does the 311 service do?

In 2003 the 311 service dealt with over 3.8 million calls. More than half of these – around two million – were requests for information and were dealt with there and then. When is the date and time of the next community safety meeting in my neighborhood? What after school programs are available at my children's school?

What's this I hear about the whole of Lake Shore Drive being closed to vehicles one coming Sunday so that cyclists can 'Bike the drive'?

These are the kinds of information-seeking questions that will be answered within seconds by the 311

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staff as the information is only a key-stroke away. It is stored in the well-designed, computerized information directory.

In an area as ethnically diverse as Chicago the staggering number of languages used by callers is a big challenge. The 311 operators have studied key phrases in 25 languages – enough to access a language bank and request the services of a qualified translator in some 40 languages.

So, on information requests, there is



no doubt that the 24 hour service quality to citizens is very high indeed. What about the other calls – the 1.8 million service requests? For example, can you do something about the abandoned car just down the street? Do you know about the awful graffiti scribbled on the underpass? I'm worried about the kid who lives a couple of doors away – he seems to have a lot of bruises. Can you investigate please?

Calls seeking action trigger a series of tasks:

- A service request is created and routed automatically to the proper department;
- The caller receives a service request number to simplify follow up;
- A checklist of steps to resolve the problem is generated;
- The checklist is translated into work orders or other appropriate action;
- City staff respond;
- The response is monitored and any additional activities are assigned as needed.

What about those citizens who don't call the 311 number, but instead call a local authority department directly? Is there a risk their request will fall through the cracks? Whoever answers the phone in any department simply enters the request in the system and it is handled in the same way as requests made to the 311 number. Citizens

can also make service requests via the Web.

Benefits of the approach

Strengths of this system are not just that it is citizen friendly and that tasks are addressed very quickly, it is also that service managers know when tasks have been completed. The Motorola Customer Service Request System – the computerized information system underpinning 311 – makes it easy to trace the progress of any request. This is good for managers, good for those on the front line taking calls from citizens as well as good for those making requests.

The 311 rapid response service is not limited to Chicago. Baltimore Police Department can claim some recognition for pioneering the idea of a simple non-emergency 311 help line in the early 1990s. When President Bill Clinton endorsed the approach in a campaign speech in 1996 a number of elected mayors picked up on the model and 311 is now in operation in numerous cities – from Los Angeles to New York City and from Houston to Detroit.

It is fair to say, however, that the City of Chicago provides a particularly good example. First, it is probably one of the largest 311 systems in the country. The system receives over 8,000 service requests on each weekday and tracks more than 500 different types of service request.

Second, the system serves as an effective management tool by generating call statistics and real-time reports on response times for

specific types of request. This data enables departmental managers to highlight outstanding performance and take action where standards are not as they should be.

Another benefit is that departments can coordinate work more efficiently. Any department can discover what work another department is doing in a given location. Crews from different departments can work more efficiently by generating follow-on requests when one crew's work is completed and another crew's work needs to begin.

In Chicago the 311 team works very closely with the 911 team. They are all in the same building and this is good for collaboration. It is still the case, of course, that some citizens misuse the 911 emergency line by calling in messages that should be going to 311. However, over time, the 311 service is gaining more visibility with the result that the 911 service should receive fewer distracting non-emergency calls. The guidance aimed at getting this message out is: 'Burning building – call 911', 'Burning question – call 311'.

As UK local authorities strive to improve their approaches to non-emergency service responsiveness they just might want to consider what's really impressive about 999.

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