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Radical Rotherham

transforms its e-customer service

FORWARD THINKING LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE DOING SOME TRAIL BLAZING WORK, TRANSFORMING THE WAY THEY DEAL WITH THEIR 'CUSTOMERS'. STEVE HURST LOOKS AT HOW ONE BOROUGH COUNCIL IS LOOKING TO THE WEB TO IMPROVE ITS SERVICE OFFERING TO THE PUBLIC

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STRATEGY AND PRACTICE FOR THE CUSTOMER-DRIVEN ENTERPRISE

R A D I C A L R O T H E R H A M TRANSFORMS ITS E-CUSTOMER SERVICE

Forward thinking local authorities are doing some trail blazing work, transforming the way they deal with their 'customers'. Steve Hurst looks at how one borough council is looking to the Web to improve its service offering to the public

When Jonathan Prew, business and corporate IS manager of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council talks about most customer relationship management solutions as 'all sizzle and no sausage' you realise that - in true Yorkshire tradition - he is not a man who is easily taken in by promises.

All the more surprising then that the borough has chosen to launch its entire information strategy based on a simple, but highly effective eCRM solution. According to Jonathan, this solution has "shaped the way we interact with the public and the way our departments work".

The technology is based on a self-learning knowledge base which can be accessed by anyone visiting the council's Web site or by staff at all council establishments. It forms the heart of RotherhamConnect, a radical initiative by the council to make public access to information easier.

As part of this plan, RotherhamConnect's offices are to open longer than normal council hours (initially from 8 am to 8pm), help-line telephone numbers will be widely circulated, and staff at all council establishments will use RightNow Web eService Centre to answer all frequently asked questions, aiming to answer 80 per cent of enquiries on the first call. Jonathan explains, the initiative really puts the Web site at the hub of the local communi-

ty. "We discovered that there was so much information on the Web site that nobody even knew was there. We've opened it all up and made it easier for anyone to use."

Says Ged Fitzgerald, chief executive of Rotherham: "RotherhamConnect will dramatically improve the service we can offer our customers. By accessing the Web themselves or by using the skills of specially-trained council staff, it will be easier than ever for people to find the information they want, down to the finest detail."

Rotherham's achievements have been recognised at government level, with the award of a share in £3million worth of funding to further develop a CRM approach to licences and permissions as part of the Invest to Save initiative. RotherhamConnect was also voted Best Customer Contact Centre led CRM project at the 2002 CRM Industry Awards.

From old industry to new technology

Local government until now hasn't perhaps been associated with a willingness to take on new technologies. However, recent government directives about making services accessible online by the year 2005 have made councils concentrate their efforts.

Jonathan is quick to point out that these are not

RADICAL ROTHERHAM: PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Anyone still with any doubt about inventive qualities of local governments should hear the plans Rotherham holds for the future. Imminent plans include announcement of a Strategic Partnership with the private sector to help the council realise its vision of the provision of convenient online facilities in places such as libraries, sports centres, schools, and other establishments. Later stages will address the need to provide access via mobile phones and other handheld devices thanks to the council's partnership agreements with companies such as Vodaphone.

As part of the commitment to improve services the council is to develop its Web site to provide a 'cradle to the

grave' information service for the people of Rotherham. Although it already holds the comprehensive knowledge base on council services, it plans to extend this to include information and links on other local agencies and amenities such as theatres and youth information.

This, suggests Jonathan, could all be supported by a text messaging service that would inform residents, for example, of special offers at the local swimming pool or ticket prices at the theatre.

He is the first to admit that the authority still has a way to go: "We have committed to an agenda of major change, backed by the politicians and the chief executive. Importantly, it is also backed

by the staff themselves. As one of the switchboard team remarked: 'This is great, because it really helps us help people.'"

Which all goes to show how far the council has come on the new technology route - and how far it is likely to go. However, a story told by Jonathan shows that this is going to take some getting used to.

"On the day RNW eService Centre went live the 'techies' came down asking 'can we have a look at the new box running this system?'," he says. "They thought I was having them on when I told them they couldn't as it was actually hosted in California."

the only reasons why Rotherham has shown itself to be more than willing to embrace an online philosophy.

The South Yorkshire borough was once a centre for coal mining and other heavy industries, but with pit closures and the demise of manufacturing, the town has experienced considerable changes. Because of this, part of the borough was selected to be one of six areas in England to get 'wired-up community' status, a £10 million government programme to encourage Internet use.

Initiatives stemming from this have been ambitious - such as supplying digital TVs to every home in one former mining village to ensure they have Internet access, and creating a Web site - Pit2net.com to encourage its use.

Jonathan explains that the council realised that it needed some kind of knowledge base solution to help improve its service to the public. It was receiving around 215,000 calls a month, which all got routed through the switchboard to specialist staff.

Often highly-trained employees were spending a good portion of their time answering very routine questions. The situation wasn't very satisfactory

for the public either - the council is a large one with 13,500 staff and often callers went 'from pillar to post' to try and get an answer to a simple enquiry or were not automatically going through beyond an 'engaged' tone.

There was also the question of 24-hour a day cover. Jonathan explains that the Rotherham Online Web site was receiving up to 18,500 hits a month - and 33 per cent of these came outside office hours. "Obviously our first priority was the people of Rotherham, but we also have many enquiries about investment in the area. Although the majority of the Web hits were from the UK, there were also a high number from the US, Taiwan, Germany, France, Sweden, and Denmark who may be looking to invest in the UK. We realised that if our solution resulted in one positive investment in Rotherham it would have been well worth our while," he says.

The choices for Rotherham

Rotherham decided against a CRM solution that incorporated the full works such as sales force automation, marketing automation, and enterprise

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resource planning (ERP). "It would have been far too expensive and unnecessarily complicated," says Jonathan. It also needed something that could be easily integrated into its legacy telephone system that would continue to provide the basis of the council's helpdesk.

Siemens, which had supplied the council's telephony system and is one of RightNow's partners, suggested that RightNow Web eService Centre could provide the solution. Coincidentally, Jonathan, who was doing his own research via the press and the Web, had also come to the same conclusion.

"We eventually had a shortlist of three, but RightNow's solution met all the criteria. It would allow multi-channel access and would integrate with our existing telephony system. It offered low maintenance, and promised quick return on investment." Jonathan confirms that once the decision was made, implementation was relatively simple and took only three weeks.

In the frontline

Most would agree RotherhamConnect is an ambitious and far-reaching project with many stages and considerable future potential. But already, within a relatively short space of time, the council is able to offer a greatly enhanced service, which provides the public with a 'one-stop shop' for easy access to information.

It reports considerable success in working towards its aims of dealing with 80 per cent of enquiries on first call, or responding 100 per cent to public emails and allocating 20 per cent of unresolved enquiries to a named officer.

It has compiled a knowledge base of around 360 FAQs. RNW eService Centre organises these questions, tracking and filtering the most useful answers according to current concerns.

Visitors to the Rotherham Online site

(www.rotherham.gov.uk) can click the RotherhamConnect icon to reach the support home page. They can then access the constantly reviewed and updated solutions database, searching by council service, keywords, or phrases.

Rotherham is also just installing an automatic email contact to enable users to submit their questions, which will be automatically routed to the appropriate department. More basic reports such as potholes can also be reported 24x7 without requiring knowledge of the council's structure.

The software can even pick out key words from emails, assessing their level of urgency and sending them to the relevant department first time.

This knowledge base will be constantly extended, helped by the creation of editors in each of the council departments with the job of compiling the standard answers to these common enquiries. As part of the ongoing commitment to improve, all work on the Web, the council's intranet and RotherhamConnect will be brought within one team, again with the aim of reducing potential duplication and 'fast tracking' information provisions.

While many of RightNow's customers see a reduction in the number of incoming phone calls - this isn't necessarily Rotherham's aim. "There will always be customers who prefer the more traditional methods of asking questions, either by calling by phone or by coming into the council office," explains Jonathan, "so we also needed a method by which our staff could get the information to them as quickly as possible."

When someone either telephones or goes into the council offices, any staff member can access the knowledge base and answer questions straight away. This means that callers are no longer kept waiting or transferred from department to department. If an enquiry can not be resolved it will be logged and the department's performance assessed as to how they eventually answer.

Also, Jonathan says that from his point of view, the statistical analysis the solution provides has also helped implementation run smoothly. "It's very satisfying to be able to analyse the enquiries to see what people are looking for and how useful they have found the information we provide. The system logs level of satisfaction, so we know how well we are performing and where we can improve."



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"When people interact with government they want to do so on their own terms. They want high quality services which are accessible and convenient. People shouldn't need to understand how government is organised, or to know which department or agency does what, or whether the function is exercised by central or local government."

Source: Document on eGovernment, the Cabinet Office, February 2000