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Enhancing Communication: Closing the Loop

By David Jacobs, Project Manager, city of Garland, TX

The city of **Garland, TX (pop. 225,000)** has developed a Management Agenda that has five (5) priorities toward implementing positive change and improvements within the city government. With the agenda in place and priorities set, it will enhance communication between the city and its citizens.

The process began as part of the utility's 2003-2006 master automation plan and played an important role in communicating actions that have occurred in the field. "It assures our customers that we are here for them," stated Jack May, Managing Director of Water Services. "You just cannot put a value on this kind of communication."

Two of the five directives focus on utilizing technology to keep pace with rising citizen expectations and to ensure responsiveness to the City Council and citizens. In response to these directives, Garland Water Utilities has developed an automated information and resolution system (AIRS) that collects service request information from the department's SQL-server database and forwards the information to an auto-dialer for processing.

Upon processing, the system automatically calls citizen customers who have previously requested services and notifies them that service has been completed. The system uses a pre-recorded message with customized inserts based on the specific service requested to personalize the call. In addition, a portion of the pre-recorded message informs the customer of the option to use a reference number for obtaining additional information upon accessing the department's Internet Web site at www.garlandtx.com. Customers with Internet access may visit the Web site and use the number to retrieve information regarding the service request. The customer may also use the reference number for speed information retrieval when calling the department's Control Center. "It removes the guesswork and replaces it with accountability", added May.

How AIRS Works

The AIRS project is part of the utility's overall system of work management in the field. Completed work orders are stored in a SQL-database that is initially created by Control Center operators as they receive requests from customers by phone and receive emails and faxes from citizens, contractors and utility customers. The created work order is then sent wirelessly to field crews where the work is performed and the resulting events of the work activity is entered by the crew into a database located within their service vehicles.

At a pre-determined time each day all work orders that have been updated with a completion code are forwarded automatically to a phone system auto-dialer and processing activity.

Once processed the callbacks are then transmitted to the appropriate caller. If the call is not completed on the first attempt a second notification is attempted the following day.

In order to limit mistaken callbacks and to enhance accuracy a process has been created whereby additional phone numbers are purchased from a local phone system quarterly and routinely uploaded into the utility's database.

Why Develop this Kind of System

"The utility's mission in the AIRS project was to focus upon utilizing technology to keep rising citizen expectations and to ensure responsiveness to the City Council and citizens. The utility met these directives and as a result improved and expanded its ability to better communicate with its customers," said May.

In developing the AIRS system, a primary objective was to "close the loop" on service requests provided to its customers. Prior to system development a customer initiated their request with the utility in order to gain information as to the disposition of requested work.

In effect, prior to AIRS implementation there was no communication back to the customer. The system operator had taken the initial service call from the customer. Implementation of AIRS now "closes the loop" by changing past practices and provides an improved mechanism for two-way communication.

"Closing the loop should be a goal of all entities who care about customer service," said May.

The AIRS system gives customers more and better options of receiving information and communicating concerns back to the utility. If a customer is unsatisfied as to the resolution of their service request they now may either access the department's Web site and send an email to the utility that once certain guidelines are met reopens the work order and resends work order to the work site or the customer may continue use the more traditional method to communicate concerns by phone.

"We have made such a commitment to our customers," noted May, "and as a result our customers are responding positively to our new system."

AIRS Cost

The implementation cost has been minimal due to utilizing the city's existing phone system and the utilization of the utility's versatile database. The only reoccurring cost is quarterly number supplements purchased from a local phone company totaling approximately \$10,000 annually.

For more information please contact David Jacobs, Project Manager for the city of Garland, Texas at 972.205.3204 or email djacobs@ci.garland.tx.us.

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