



Best Practice: Call Center for Non-Emergency City Services

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CITY: NEW YORK CITY

POLICY AREA: TECHNOLOGY

BEST PRACTICE

NYC311 Customer Service (Mayor's Office of Operations) is an easy-to-remember phone number and online site for non-emergency City services. The service is accessible by dialing 311 in NYC, or 212-NEWYORK outside NYC; visiting 311 Online at www.nyc.gov/311; on Twitter at www.twitter.com/311nyc; or via SMS/text at 311-NYC (311-692).

ISSUE

311 consolidated disparate agency call centers and a dozen pages of telephone numbers, dramatically improving how the City managed and deployed its resources. In doing so, 311 has helped to increase agency productivity and responsiveness while reducing the frustration long associated with the delivery of City services.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The mission of 311 is to efficiently respond to inquiries and requests from residents, businesses, and visitors by providing reliable information and accurately processing requests for city services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. 311 provides New Yorkers with one easy-to-remember phone number to obtain all City services, including street repairs, illegally parked vehicle removals, tree pruning, and tax or tourist information. In addition, it allows the City to reduce operating costs, use resources more efficiently, measure accountability and feedback, and deliver timely, consistent, and personalized customer service. Following the launch of the 311 Call Center in March 2003, the service has been enhanced to provide access via internet, social media, and SMS/text messaging.

IMPLEMENTATION

The 311 Customer Service Center is lead by the Mayor's Office of Operations and supported by the Department of Information Technology & Telecommunications (DoITT), the technology agency for the City of New York. First announced by Mayor Bloomberg in his 2002 State of the City Address, 311 consolidated more than 40 separate call centers and hotlines and 12 pages of government listings in the phone book into one, easy-to-remember number. The new number enabled New Yorkers to access City government with only two phone numbers: 911 for emergencies and 311 for everything else. Since its launch on March 9, 2003, 311 has served as a clearinghouse for all things New York City government, routing the details of calls to the appropriate City agencies and providing callers with service request numbers they may use to track the status of their complaints.

311 has also helped the City manage and deploy city resources more efficiently. For instance, data culled from 311 calls about no heat or hot water was used by the New York City Office of Emergency Management during the winter of 2007 to site warming centers across the City. Since the launch of 311, calls to 911 have decreased by more than two million, allowing the City's emergency call takers to work more efficiently. In May, 2010 Mayor Bloomberg recognized the 311 Customer Service Center on the 100 millionth call since inception.

311 augments fulltime city employee staffing with additional resources to maintain better-than-industry standard accessibility rates. Additional staffing is provided by the City University of New York (CUNY) which provides part-time and internship programs; and contracts with Language Line, the industry leader in translation and interpretation services to provide access to 180 languages.



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In March 2009, 311 Online was deployed, (www.nyc.gov/311) making all of the information and 50% of the services accessible by call center representatives available to the public. In January, 2010 the next phase of 311 Online was deployed, expanding to 90% of all service request types and providing virtually the same access to information, assistance, and services that a representative has. As a corollary to 311 Online a 311 NYC Twitter presence was established in May 2009 and provides daily posts of topical and timely information on NYC government and services to over 15,000 followers daily. The 311 Text Program pilot was launched in May 2011, allowing customers to send inquiries via the 311-NYC (311-692) short code.

COST

Cost to launch (2002-2003): \$25 million

Cost to operate (2008): \$57 million

Cost to operate (2010): \$43 million.

Reduction vs. 2008 is the result of economic shift and citywide budget pressures. 311 reduced costs to operate in both headcount and expenses, while adhering to the Citywide effort to "do more with less," was able to maintain its accessibility objectives of answering 80% of calls in 30 seconds or less (84% in 2009, 82% in 2010).

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

ACCESSIBILITY

Due to its robust call-taking capacity, 311 has also enabled City agencies to launch several large-scale initiatives. For instance, 311 partnered with the Department of Consumer Affairs to facilitate the City's 2007 Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) campaign, the largest EITC effort in the City's history. New Yorkers were encouraged to call 311 to learn about the EITC, as well as eligibility requirements for the program, information about free tax filing locations citywide, and to request literature in 11 different languages. Also in 2007, for the first time, the Department of Finance mailed completed tax forms to approximately 95,000 EITC-eligible New Yorkers who filed returns in tax years 2003 and 2004, but did not claim the EITC. As a result, in what was the most successful campaign to date, 311 handled more than 38,000 EITC-related calls during the 2007 tax season. Continuing the successful program this year, between January and March, 311 received an additional 31,524 calls regarding EITC assistance sites, where individuals can find help in preparing their tax returns at little or no cost, and receive the EITC and other credits for which they are eligible.

Each spring, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DoHMH) also utilizes 311 to assist its annual Nicotine Patch and Gum Giveaway. Now in its seventh year overall, 2011 marked the sixth consecutive year DoHMH has partnered with 311 on the program, enabling callers to register for nicotine patch and gum kits simply by calling 311. Since the partnership began, 311 has received almost 300,000 calls about the program and DoHMH has distributed patches or gum to over 200,000 New York City smokers, enabling an estimated 70,000 to quit.

In 2008 the impact of the economic crisis reached many New Yorkers, and 311 became the "front door" to government services and information, providing a resource to many who previously had limited need or reliance on government services. 311 expanded content to meet the needs of New Yorkers calling about mortgages and foreclosures; unemployment eligibility and job search support; renters rights and homeless services; and financial and consumer affairs protection services. As a result, calls to 311 increased by 16% in 2009 vs. 2008, to a high of 18.7 million, and increased another 5% to 19.7 million in 2010.

In order to improve the transparency of services being provided to the public, the New York City Mayor's Office of Operations and the DoITT regularly report 311-generated information to the public through the NYC.gov website. To do so more effectively and comprehensively, DoITT developed and deployed a business intelligence tool able to compile data on all calls received, services selected, tickets opened, and dispositions of requests. While 311 does aggressively safeguard privacy information (information on caller telephone numbers is not shared and positive confirmation of a Service Request number must be provided before related information is shared with a caller), the business intelligence tool enables DoITT to capture robust datasets on all activities.



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Leveraging this tool, in February 2008, Mayor Bloomberg formally unveiled the Citywide Performance Reporting (CPR) system, which he first announced in his annual *State of the City Address* in January. CPR is a performance measurement application on NYC.gov that will help make the workings of government transparent to all customers and ensure that City agencies are accountable for their performance. Each year, the Mayor's Management Report (MMR) offers indicators from City agencies to gauge performance. CPR includes 500 hundred "critical" outcome measures, more than 200 of which are being reported for the first time, and all of which are updated monthly.

CPR uses a uniform, standardized reporting format across all agencies and all data types, and provides a single point of access for all users. Most notably, it aggregates data across agency into "citywide themes," which represent groups of related services such as infrastructure, education, or public safety. The system also provides easy downloading to help users analyze and present system data. It increases accountability by making it easier to monitor agency performance for the most important "outcome" measures—those directly reflecting how customers' lives are affected by government. Through NYC.gov, CPR offers a graphical representation of performance, including pie charts to make performance trends easy to identify; drill-down capability, allowing users to review comparative trends for up to a five year period; and monthly, quarterly or annual updates of each critical measure—depending on how often the statistic is produced.

In 2009-2010 the business intelligence tool was leveraged to build and maintain NYCStat Stimulus Tracker. With the Stimulus Tracker New Yorkers can track the City's use of federal stimulus/recover funds provided through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). The Stimulus Tracker provides a view of the City's use of ARRA funding being made available within eight main categories, ranging from Infrastructure to Safety to Neighborhood Stabilization.

CPR, the Mayor's Management Report (MMR) and Stimulus Tracker are all available as part of "NYCStat" launched in 2009 on the city's website (www.nyc.gov/nycstat).

Following the information tracking trend and along with NYC 311's continuous commitment to providing accessibility, new heights were reached in February 2011 by launching the 311 Service Request Map. Created in response to customer feedback and input from New York City Community Boards, the SR Map allows customers to view and track the Service Requests by location, category, and date. Service requests are requests, inquiries, complaints, and reports made by customers via the 311 phone line or 311 online. With this tool the customer can choose to see anything from the number of noise complaints to the amount of construction complaints in their community and other communities. This program is expected to facilitate communication and collaboration among constituents.

In April 2008, Mayor Bloomberg, Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Linda Gibbs, DoITT, and the United Way of America announced expansion of 311 to provide information and referrals about social services. New Yorkers now have 24x7, single entry-point access to a team of 30 specially-trained operators dedicated to helping callers with social service-related requests in what has become the nation's largest social service information and referral call center. With this expansion, the City has created a unique model for social service information and referral, which in many other jurisdictions across the country is being developed through the "211" dialing code. The expanded social services enhancements were developed based upon the areas of priority as identified by the City's Center for Economic Opportunity, which Mayor Bloomberg created to develop and implement innovative ways to reduce poverty in New York City.

In February 2010 the national Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) recognized and accredited NYC311 as having successfully completed the consultation and on-site assessment phases required for Accreditation of its Health and Human Services programs.

In May 2011, a new form of accessibility was launched, the 311 Text Program pilot. By simply texting a question pertaining to New York City government to the short code 311NYC (311692), customers receive an immediate text response, no matter the hour or day. Customers now have 24 hour 7 days a week access to 311, and the choice of making a phone call, going online, or sending a text message.



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TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Delivery of consistent and quality service is sustainable due to the model adopted and organization design. The Content and Agency Relations team at 311 maintains strong relationships with City agencies to ensure that the correct information for inquiries, complaints, and referrals is available in the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool. The Training and Quality Assurance groups provide an education and development approach as well as a repeatable methodology to ensure that new employees are on-boarded and deliver quality service in relatively quick time periods. The hierarchical structure of the Operations department, from Call Center Representatives (CCRs) on the front lines through Call Center Managers, supports the successful deployment of staff and responses to emergencies whether there are 50 or 350 CCRs on duty.

The challenges to sustainability are the continued volume growth of 311 based on the reach and success, as well as the expansion of city services and programs. Enhancements using technology, combined with a "self-service" delivery mode, must be utilized to offload individual call transactions while providing the same level of consistent information.

Initiatives include:

- Shifting 311 service delivery from a "one-to-one" mode (one customer speaking with one call center representative on one phone conversation) to a "one-to-many" mode by deploying 311 information, services, and assistance through the internet, social media, and media and entertainment outlets. This includes 311 Online (www.nyc.gov/311); 311 on Twitter (311NYC@twitter); "The 311" Blog (<http://311nyc.wordpress.com/>); and a 311 iPhone app.
- Increasing Interactive Voice Response (IVR) usage for those callers who want to self-service through this method. Leveraging a DoITT built and maintained IVR platform, 311 increased the offerings and options available through the IVR, enabling over 50% of calls to be resolved via IVR messaging in less than two minutes. Most frequent inquiries resolved via IVR messaging include Alternate Side Parking status information; holiday schedules; school and government office closure information; weather-related information and impacts; and communication regarding street, bridge, and tunnel closures due to parades and events (NYC Marathon, 5 Boro Bike Tour). In Spring 2009 the IVR was used to relay status information on school opening and closures due to the H1N1 outbreak, and in January 2011 successfully processed almost 4 million calls in a month.
- Expanding Language Options for callers who have limited English proficiency, including providing IVR messaging in six additional languages: Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, Korean, and Haitian-Creole.
- Partnering with the City's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and DoITT to initiate outbound communications, such as "reverse 911" types of services, to push information to constituents via email, SMS text, or phone calls. 311 provides support ranging from promotion to enrolling customers with limited online access.

Each of these initiatives as well as efficiency enhancements within the current operation are required to sustain the level of service provided as the users of the service increase over time and with each successful transaction.

TIMELINE

Key Dates:

January 31, 2002	Mayor Michael Bloomberg announces plans for the creation of a new 311 phone system to enhance and facilitate constituent services.
October 2002	The first publicly-visible phase of the 311 Customer Service Center begins as the hotline staff of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development is transferred to the main 311 Call Center in Lower Manhattan.
December 2002	Call-takers are trained and prepared to respond to residents in preparation for a threatened illegal transit strike by bus and subway operators (strike does not occur).



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February 27, 2003	The New York Police Department (NYPD) phased into 311 when it transfers various quality-of-life hotlines to the call center.
March 9, 2003	The 311 phone line is activated.
2003 – 2006	Volume increases on a quarterly basis, and 311 becomes a primary source for information during crises in the City including: the 2003 Blackout, the Staten Island Ferry crash, the NYC Transit Strike in December, 2005, and during multiple rain/flood/snow conditions that impact the daily lives and movement of New Yorkers.
June 20, 2007	The 311 Customer Service Center receives its 50 millionth call.
December 5, 2007	311 achieves 100 consecutive days of 90%+ Service Level (90% or more of calls answered within 30 seconds).
December 24, 2007	311 Call Center receives its 15 millionth call of the year; receives 15.3 million total calls for 2007, eclipsing its previous annual high of 14.4 million (2005).
January 22, 2008	311 Service Request (SR) Lookup functionality is launched as part of overall "311 on the Web" initiative, enabling customers to check the status of previously-filed SRs (complaints) on NYC.gov.
March 11, 2008	311 celebrates its fifth anniversary
April 21, 2008	Mayor Bloomberg announces expansion of the 311 Customer Service Center to provide information and referrals about social services.
November 2008	311 receives over 250,000 calls in three days and over 500,000 in total regarding the General Election, providing customers with information on poll site location and hours, voter registration status and eligibility requirements.
March 2009	311 Online – phase one is deployed, and subsequently announced by the Mayor in June, 2009.
May 2009	311 launches Twitter site, providing daily information pushes on topical and timely City government services and information. Within a year 311 has over 4,500 followers, and 15,000 followers by May, 2011.
December 2009	311 receives 18.7 million total calls, an annual record and 16% increase vs. 2008.
February 25, 2010	311 receives 269,000 calls in single day, setting the record for calls in a day. Winter weather and closing of schools and offices drove record setting volumes.
May 9, 2010	311 receives 100 millionth call since inception in 2003.
August 2010	NYC311 Blog is launched. The blog features 311 employees sharing behind the scenes and insights and interesting tidbits of information they have encountered through their work at 311 with the general public, who can in turn, comment. Accessibility in action.
December 2010	311 received 20 million calls and over a million visits to 311 online in 2010.



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January 27, 2011	311 set a new record for the total calls in a single day with 276,827 calls during a winter storm.
February 2011	Service Request Map is launched, a tool which allows customers to view and sort 311 service requests by location, date and category.
May 2011	311Text Program pilot is launched, which gives customers the ability to text their questions about New York City government to 311NYC (311692) and receive an immediate text response. The service is free of charge and since its launch has answered two hundred texts daily.
June 2011	311 has received 123 million calls to date.

LEGISLATION

Local Law 47 of 2005 requires DoITT to issue monthly reports to the City Council, the Public Advocate, Community Boards, and the public regarding data collected on calls made to the 311 Customer Service Center. Signed by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg in May 2005, Local Law 47 is the result of DoITT's work with the New York City Council. The prime sponsor of the legislation was Council Member Gale A. Brewer, then Chairperson of the Council's Committee on Technology in Government. Making agency performance data available is an important way to ensure open government, and this law provides the public with valuable information while protecting the privacy and confidentiality of callers to 311.

LESSONS LEARNED

Identifying and attracting candidates focused on customer service and willing to work in a fast-paced, 24x7 environment is a challenge, even in a city the size of New York. 311 enjoys a positive reputation as a fine agency to work for and grow within, offering internal promotion opportunities for entry level employees. Location is critical to recruiting and staffing, and 311 is ideally situated near train, bus, and ferry stops to allow access from anywhere in the five boroughs. Competitive wages and benefits help attract candidates interested in short or long term careers. And one final element helps draw employees willing to work in a customer service environment: the concept of public service. In the 2007-2009 Employee Satisfaction surveys 88% - 93% of employees surveyed responded in the positive to the statement: I believe my position adds value to the City.

311 delivers over 4,000 unique services and no one person can know everything. New hire candidates must be trained on customer service and policies as well as applications and navigation of systems. Experienced employees must constantly receive refresher training, learn about new programs and projects, and keep up with system enhancements. A three-pronged approach enables DoITT to deliver in this area:

- A professional training staff with experience in instructional design, platform development, and delivery, mixed with "home-grown" personnel with a training career path, combined with selective external hire candidates with proven records of Training in similar environments.
 - The 311 Training department was instrumental in supporting the Mayor's Office Customer Service initiative: "Great Service. Great City" in 2009 by developing a standardized customer service package, creating and delivering train-the-trainer modules, and conducting training sessions that led to training over 25,000 city employees on customer service guidelines.
- Quality Assurance focus and structure to ensure consistent and accurate information is delivered. Quality Assurance and Quality Control functions are performed by line supervisors, by a separate department dedicated Quality

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Assurance, and through a call-research function. Each of these functional areas contributes to call monitoring and evaluation, as well as employee coaching and development and content validation.

- Current and accurate agency content. The Content and Agency Relations team works directly with City agencies to define and document agency policies, procedures, and practices, and then converts this content into readable, consistent messaging for all CCRs to use.
- Maintaining an optimum staff level to handle normal predictable periods while being able to immediately respond to events that cause volume spikes requires several steps. Strong historical forecasting with seasonal overlays is the starting point. A multi-tiered approach to handling events and volume spikes includes:
 - Constant vigilance in managing “the queue” -- the volume and trend of calls waiting to be answered at any one time
 - Utilizing supervisory and management personnel to deploy quickly when initial spikes occur
 - Increasing capacity through an outsourced overflow vendor (within NYC) to handle peak periods
- Training and maintaining “call taker skills” in all other departments including: Training, Quality, Content, Budget, HR, Finance, and Systems, and leverage these groups on short notice when volume spikes occur.
- Pushing approved “Alerts” to all CCRs and staff in near-real time. When an event or activity occurs in the City, DoITT is connected with the Office of Emergency Management and the Police Department to get up-to-date, official information on a situation. That information is transformed into Alerts distributed to all users. As a result, a consistent, clear, and approved message is delivered to callers focusing on that issue (police emergency, weather situation, train or subway impacts, etc).
- Developing and deploying “Messaging” on the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) application. This enables 311 to “push” approved messages to all callers through a recorded announcement, to reduce call volume and talk time associated with CCR-handled calls. Examples include notification of blackouts, information on school closings, and pre-programmed announcements about events such as fireworks or the annual New York City Marathon.
- In keeping with 311’s mission to provide quick and direct access to information while maintaining accessibility, 311 manages to meet aggressive Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Most challenging are a Service Level objective of 80% of calls answered within 30 seconds or less (industry best practice is 80%/30); and an Average Speed of Answer of 30 seconds or less. These metrics are designed to reinforce DoITT’s and New York City’s commitment to provide quick access to information and services for all its customers, and requires constant management to ensure that information, staffing, tools, technology, and personnel are all geared toward delivering upon this goal daily.

TRANSFERABILITY

In 1996, the U.S Department of Justice announced the creation of a nationwide non-emergency phone system to serve as an alternative to 911. 311 was first implemented locally by the Baltimore, Maryland Police Department on Oct. 2, 1996 to handle non-emergency police calls. In 1997, the Federal Communications Commission directed the telecommunications industry to make 311 available for any police department to use for non-emergency calls.

New York City’s 311 system, the largest and most used 311 system built to date in the United States, is particularly instructive on how such a system is used for large cities. The New York City 311 Customer Service Center has become a model for non-emergency numbers around the world. Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom abroad, along with cities such as San Francisco and Philadelphia domestically, have established or are planning innovative non-emergency service numbers based on the 311 model.



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New York City 311 has also become a destination for municipal delegations from around the country and world seeking advice on best practices of call center operation, hosting scores of groups and hundreds of visitors annually. In its eight years of existence, 311 has had visitors from more than 30 countries across six continents.

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