

# The City of New York Automates Services for the City that Never Sleeps with NYC 311



City of New York  
New York, NY  
www.nyc.gov

#### Industry:

Public Sector

#### Annual Revenue:

\$48.3 billion

#### Employees:

350,000

#### Oracle Products & Services:

Siebel CRM  
Siebel Public Sector  
Oracle Database

#### Key Benefits:

- Put citizens in touch with city government and provided access to needed services
- Provided the city with real-time data on service requests and complaints
- Improved government efficiency and responsiveness due to automation and integration of systems
- Minimized busy signals and delays

*"We've changed people's lives. 311 is not just a citizen service hotline; it's the most powerful management tool ever developed for New York City's government. I can't imagine running a city without it!" – Michael Bloomberg, Mayor, City of New York*

The City of New York has more than 8 million residents and a government consisting of dozens of city departments and agencies. In the past, if a problem or need arose, it wasn't easy to know where to go, who to ask, or what to do. Mayor Michael Bloomberg made the call for 311 service in New York City, and now cities nationwide are doing the same.

Picture this. You've just moved into New York City, and you need some help. Perhaps it's 2:00 a.m. and a neighbor's dog has been barking for the past hour. Or, on your drive home, you hit a pothole that nearly knocked the steering wheel out of your hands. You open the phone book and your jaw drops when you find 14 pages of telephone listings for city departments and agencies.

Who do you call? Today, the answer is easy. You dial 311, a non-emergency hotline that gives New Yorkers quick, easy, and efficient access to the full spectrum of government services--from dealing with noise complaints to catching chickens running down apartment hallways. The City of New York turned to Siebel applications from Oracle to help make Mayor Bloomberg's vision for a city-wide 311 service a reality.

#### Campaign Promise Becomes Reality

When mayoral candidate Bloomberg was on the campaign trail, he spotted a leaking fire hydrant. Turning to his aides, he asked, "Whom would you call to get that fire hydrant fixed?" There was a moment of silence, and then one of the aides answered, "The Department of Environment Protection--DEP." Mayor Bloomberg was incredulous. "DEP? What citizen would guess that?" he said. "You see a fire hydrant and you associate that with the fire department, don't you?" Determined to report the problem, he returned to his office and opened the New York City phone book to find DEP's number. That's when he came face to face with the

daunting task of picking the right phone number out of 14 pages of city listings.

Mayor Bloomberg wondered why there was not a single, centralized number for callers to contact the City of New York and gain access to whatever services were needed. That brainstorm became a campaign promise, and the campaign promise became reality soon after he took office in January 2002.

### **Dialing into a Serious Problem**

Responsiveness has been a hot-button issue for some time for local and state governments across the United States. The prevailing wisdom has been that bureaucracy and red tape are the rule, not the exception.

In January 2002, when Mayor Bloomberg first took office, New York City had approximately 45 call centers staffed by almost 1,000 employees. These call centers relied on a variety of different systems--from voice response to automated call technologies--to take messages and direct calls for those who were lucky enough to avoid busy signals. In some of the centers, phone representatives squinted at old-fashioned green terminal screens; in others, PCs were the norm.

In the centers, service levels were extremely inconsistent. Uninformed and poorly trained operators often created frustrating runarounds for callers, transferring them from number to number, sometimes without ever finding what was needed.

Inspired by similar systems that were being piloted in a handful of cities nationwide, Mayor Bloomberg announced--as one of his first acts in office--plans for the creation of a 311 Service Center for New York City, where residents could make requests, lodge complaints, or simply get straightforward answers to questions about the city government and its services. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had laid the foundation for non-emergency 311 phone service in 1997 by directing telecommunications companies to make the 311 number available to local police departments and cities nationwide.

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Larry Knafo  
First Deputy  
Commissioner  
City of New York,  
Department of  
Information Technology  
and Telecommunications

“By introducing the 311 phone system, the city will end the frustrating bureaucracy New Yorkers encounter when they need help,” Mayor Bloomberg said at the time in a press release. “This Citizen Service initiative will allow city residents to obtain important non-emergency services through one central, all-purpose phone number quickly and effectively, and it reflects this administration’s commitment to bringing government to the people. I am confident that the new 311 system will vastly improve the way that the New York City government functions.”

In April of 2002, the city began construction of a new 45,000-squarefoot facility in Lower Manhattan to house the telephone service representatives. Next, with the help of an outside consulting firm, Mayor Bloomberg and his staff conducted a thorough search for a technology platform and selected Siebel’s leading customer relationship management (CRM) software, which would allow the city not only to be more efficient in responding to caller needs, but also to begin proactively dealing with the situations that lead to the majority of complaints.

“Although the consolidation of city call centers was to be the first step in the process, that was just the beginning,” explained Larry Knafo, first deputy commissioner at New York City’s Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT). “What was really exciting was the potential we had--with the right solution--to make city government easier to navigate, and, ultimately, create a powerful tool to help manage ‘quality of life’ issues that confront our citizens daily.”

New York City’s 311 system assigns an identification number to every service request. Callers can use this number to follow up on the issue or complaint. In addition, the number serves as the basis for department managers and city executives to track the progress of the personnel working on the request.

### **Mining a Wealth of Information**

One of the things that makes New York’s 311 solution unique is that it uses sophisticated data-mining techniques that enable city administrators to gain fresh insight--in real time--into the challenges that confront the city. What are the hot-button issues that are generating the most complaints from New Yorkers?

Which neighborhoods are suffering from the highest rate of vandalism? Which departments are doing the best job of responding to citizens' needs, and which are doing the worst?

"The system enables us to focus on specific types of complaints and monitor the city's effectiveness in responding to them," said Dean Schloyer, executive director of New York's 311 service. "For example, citizens expect their government to be very responsive to public works requirements, such as potholes that need to be filled. We can use our Siebel CRM system to route, track, and effectively manage each of these projects through to completion."

The solution also makes it possible to monitor and analyze trends in order to address the specific causes. For example, shortly after the new system was in place, it became apparent that the 311 service representatives were being inundated with calls every Sunday morning complaining about parking violations--double parking, blocked driveways, and so on. In the past, because these calls were spread across the city's dozens of police precincts, the magnitude of the problem was not readily apparent. But after processing the data through the new computer system supporting the 311 service, it was clear that churchgoers were ignoring parking regulations. The city was able to initiate efforts to keep both the affected residents and church attendees happy.

### **The Service That Never Sleeps**

New York City often does things on a grand scale, and the implementation of the city's 311 phone system is no different. Once the service has reached its peak in popularity and staffing, city officials expect that the center will handle more than 12 million calls annually--three times the volume of the next largest U.S. government call center in Chicago.

In the "city that never sleeps," New York's 311 service also won't be caught napping. Service representatives are available to handle calls in more than 170 languages, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even as volume soars to more than 1 million calls a month, 311 is committed to answering more than 80 percent of calls within 30 seconds.

To ensure that call center operators have the information that they need at their fingertips, the city created a comprehensive and sophisticated knowledge base that contains information on more than 7,000 topics, and growing. In building that knowledge base, the DoITT staff had to work with more than 80 different entities within the city to fully understand their public-facing activities. “When a service request is being submitted, the service representative keys the caller’s address, which is validated and normalized, into the system,” Knafo said. “On non-emergency police matters, this information is automatically geo-coded to direct the call to one of 122 police precincts that will follow up on the matter until it is properly resolved. Calls that should have been made to the city’s 911 number due to their urgency are immediately transferred to a 911 operator.”

“What we’ve done in New York in terms of quality of life is pretty remarkable,” Knafo said. “The solution is running in all 122 police stations in the five boroughs. Complaints are automatically routed by the system to the appropriate station house. Once the police take care of the problem, they enter the final disposition of the problem into the system. The system then provides a summary report, which is used to ensure management accountability in dealing with non-emergency situations.”

Parking violations, public drinking, excessive noise, vandalism, and other quality of life issues are where New York City’s 311 solution has had perhaps its greatest impact. But the solution has also helped New York allocate its finite resources to meet the most pressing needs.

The next step is to be able to use the system’s database to begin to predict when and where problems may develop in order to have the proper resources available. “We’ll soon be able to query the system and ask, ‘What are the key quality of life calls in this precinct between 11:00 p.m. and 12:00 midnight on Tuesdays?’” Knafo explained. “Cities are just now realizing that 311 service has the potential to be much more than just the non-emergency equivalent of 911. There’s tremendous value in the performance

metrics that can ultimately transform the actual service delivery itself. The 311 service really has two customers. First, there is the public, which gains better access to city services. Second, there are the city's departments and agencies, which gain a better view of where our most pressing problems are. All the information that we get from the public is automatically translated into real management accountability.”

### **Success by Any Measure**

Even though the system is still relatively young, there have been some very interesting calls. One was from a woman calling to complain that she had no heat in her apartment building. She had tried to talk to the landlord about it, but he'd responded by placing a rather scary chicken in the hallway, which kept the woman at bay. The 311 operator typed “chicken on stoop” into the computer. The result? The system classified the complaint as a livestock issue and referred it to the Department of Health. The situation was resolved and the woman had a warm place to sleep.

A more common example of the solution's success is an experience that Knafo had personally one night. The revving of engines and screeching of tires signaled that a drag race was in progress in the street in front of his Bronx home. Knafo picked up the phone and called 311. The next day, he placed a follow-up call and used the tracking number he had been provided to check the status of his complaint. The information was all at the operator's fingertips. Police had responded, a citation was given, and the case was closed.

The statistics compiled by the system are even being used to fine-tune the 311 service itself. Soon after the service was introduced, a manager noticed that the statistics showed that a large number of service representatives were acting like traditional telephone operators--providing phone numbers for the callers to dial for assistance, rather than finding the needed information or transferring the calls personally. Once DoITT officials recognized this issue, steps were taken to retrain the representatives to improve the quality of service.

### **Thank You for Calling the City of New York!**

Mayor Bloomberg launched the 311 service to make the city highly accessible and responsive to its 8 million residents, the people that the government is supposed serve. For the first time in many years, the city has a presence--a single number that

someone can call to ask a question, make a complaint, or request a service from the city in which he or she resides. Living in a large city like New York can be an impersonal experience. This is New York's way of trying to personalize government again.

### **Implementation Process**

Not surprisingly, implementing 311 service in New York City has been a major undertaking. "Nothing of this size or scope has ever been attempted before," said DoITT Commissioner Gino P. Menchini, a few months after the service was launched. Under the guidance of Accenture as its lead consulting firm, DoITT installed Oracle's Siebel Public Sector CRM software, Interwoven for content management, Oracle database software, a Nortel phone system, Sun servers, Genesys CTI with Audiolog, and numerous Dell PCs. In addition to building a new data center, the city also made a major investment in upgrading the city's telephony infrastructure to handle the huge volume of calls.

What's more, plans were developed to link the 311 solution with New York's innovative Web site so that information could be more effectively shared between the two entities.

Project development required eight months, with the 311 service put into operation in January 2003. Promotion of the service to New Yorkers was delayed until March 2003 because Mayor Bloomberg wanted things right from day one. "We decided on a 'soft launch,' so that there wouldn't be any surprises for the public," Schloyer said. "We weren't sure how quickly the volume would build, and we wanted to ensure that we could avoid problems that would compromise service quality."

The city also conducted an extensive training program for the call center's service representatives. This was a critical component of the service's success. In the past, operators at the various help line centers for New York City departments and agencies had been relatively lower-paid employees. As part of the effort to launch the 311 service, the city created a new position of "call center representative," with better pay and an established career path.

It didn't take long for the 311 service to catch on with New Yorkers. By mid-June of 2003 -- after only three months of

operation--the city's service representatives had answered 1 million calls. By mid-September, the center had responded to more than 2.5 million calls. The city projects that the center will handle more than 12 million calls annually within the next several years.

*The City of New York has more than 8 million residents, and its 311 service provides a single point of contact for all non-emergency city services. The 311 call center is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year and provides services in more than 170 languages.*