Arkansas System Develops Its Own Intranet

BY RHODA WEISS

B efore the Internet became a major communications medium, many health care organizations focused their activities on developing intranets to improve internal communications. Intranets—which are mostly homegrown computer networks that use Internet protocols and technologies to connect people, departments, and facilities across an organization—were relatively inexpensive to develop and maintain, compared to the much higher-priced external Internet.

But although they were the rage in the mid-to-late 1990s, intranets were soon eclipsed by the Internet and its ability to reach outside customers. In the late '90s, health care organizations began to spend hundreds of thousands and even millions of dollars to develop and maintain websites. They did this in the hope of luring customers and increasing market share with whiz-bang technology and applications, always trying to keep one step ahead of the competition.

But while the Internet strategy still ranks near the top of marketing and communications activities, more and more Catholic health care organizations are turning to intranets as a means to better connect with their employees, physicians, programs, and services. The goals are to improve access to internal communications, help with resource management, and promote information sharing—right on the employee's desktop.

THE ST. VINCENT STORY

One organization that has been successful in its employee intranet efforts is St. Vincent Health System, Little Rock, AR. Founded by the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in 1888, the system today comprises four hospitals and eight primary care clinics, a home health agency, and multiple joint venture health care entities in central Arkansas.

Like many other organizations, St. Vincent used to be totally dependent on print communications, including print forms, policies, and procedures. "Access to information was limited and communications less than timely for our employees,"

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explains Dan McFadden, St. Vincent's special media manager. "Our research revealed that three out of four of our employees did not have e-mail or Internet access, although at least 70 percent had access to a personal computer (PC) with an Internet browser, the software program that allows for interface with the Web."

So in late 2001, St. Vincent set out to add an intranet as an additional means of employee communications. "Our objective was to have at least 30 percent of our employees able to access electronic news and information daily during the first 30 days of launch," McFadden says. "Within six months, St. Vincent's forms, policies, and procedures, and other requested information would be available on employee desktops."

To achieve this, St. Vincent developed what it called an Employee Council, designed specifically to promote and improve the flow of information and access to resources via an intranet. The 16 members of the council, called "i-administrators," were clinical and nonclinical staff members selected from throughout the organization to represent their departments in the development and implementation of the intranet. The council was responsible for conducting employee research during the project development (and both before and after its launching); developing employee-friendly policies and procedures to ensure timely responses to posting content; and seeking employee input on all facets of employee "e-communications."

The Employee Council also teamed with St. Vincent's Information Technology Team to negotiate for and purchase the hardware and servers needed to support an intranet, all the while providing frequent status reports to the system's senior leaders.

The council's first task was to survey department employees to determine appropriate intranet content, review content requests, develop intranet policies and procedures, and develop a first draft of the intranet's architecture. The team also reviewed the content delivery process, home page and back page parameters, and worked with in-house designers.

To keep employees involved and interested in the

project, a "Name the St. Vincent Intranet" contest was conducted. More than 300 suggestions were submitted. "SV Insider" was the name selected.

During the first week of 2002, the servers and related hardware and software for the intranet arrived at St. Vincent. Within two weeks, the "i-administrators" were testing the intranet. Although all St. Vincent computers (including desktop models in nurses' stations) were equipped with a quick-link to the intranet, not all employees had easy access to a computer at first. To remedy this, the system's information services department agreed to provide "employee communication stations" (PCs with Intranet access) to each hospital, placing them in medical libraries, employee and surgery break rooms, and similar locations.

St. Vincent initiated a "soft" launch of the intranet in February and March 2002. Senior managers and employees gathered in focus groups tested it to identify kinks and prioritize various additions and revisions. A Web-based visitor tracking and evaluation tool was purchased to monitor and measure visitor trends.

Through primary research and focus groups, St. Vincent discovered that employees initially wanted online access to a phone directory, lunch menus, calendars, nursing and education pages, forms, policies, and procedures. "We created the 'e-phone directory,' updated on a daily basis, and lunch menus for each hospital," says McFadden. "Forms and policies and procedures consistently fall into the 'Top 5 Pages' hit status," he adds. Extensive nursing and education pages with interactive calendars were created to improve access to this information.

Timely news and information is posted multiple times daily to generate additional hits and site usage. E-mail blasts provide links to new areas in the guise of "Did You Know?" teasers. Other information found on the intranet includes hospital and clinic updates, news concerning the Hospital Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, quality management reports, site maps, foundation activities, education materials, a systemwide calendar of events, and conference room schedules.

A Successful Launch

In late March, St. Vincent's intranet was launched formally. "We were so proud that this was truly a homegrown project," says McFadden. "It is truly an employee-named, -designed, -researched, and -developed intranet." To generate employee interest, St. Vincent's leaders included in the launch day activities an intranet-based scavenger hunt that encouraged employees to become familiar with the intranet and the information on it.

"We registered 23,225 hits on launch day, with 70 individually created and designed pages of information," says McFadden. In April, St. Vin-

St. Vincent, which used to spend a great deal of money creating forms, is increasingly "paperless."

cent tracked 654 "unique" visitors (a unique visitor is identified by his or her Internet protocol address, domain name, or "cookie"). "While that is 21 percent of the work force, it does not account for nurses' stations,"

McFadden says. "Each nurses' station is tracked as one user, although as many as 10 nurses share the same PC over a month's time. We estimate that, at that time, we were reaching approximately 70 percent of the workforce." By early 2003, St. Vincent had tracked 729 unique visitors, an increase of 11 percent in 10 months.

In May 2002, the "i-administrators" launched what they called a "Test Drive the St. Vincent Intranet" booth at the system's Employee Wellness Fair. At the fair, 60 percent of the participants were able to correctly identify their "i-administrators." In addition, *Spirit Extra*, a special edition of the St. Vincent employee newsletter, was devoted entirely to informing employees about the benefits of the intranet.

The total cost of the project was less than $98,000, $5,000 under the amount budgeted for it. More than 85 percent of the budget was spent on servers, processors, memory, storage space, and software. Having the intranet designed in-house saved the system $65,000. Now that it is up and running, the intranet is expected to reap net savings of more than $1,000,000 annually in staff productivity.

St. Vincent used to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars creating database-driven forms; now it has become "paperless" in those areas. The expense was eliminated with the help of an educational collaboration with the University of Arkansas at Little Rock's CyberCollege. In June 2002, St. Vincent's "i-administrator" met with faculty advisers from CyberCollege to discuss a unique partnership whereby senior students would (under the supervision of St. Vincent Information Services) conduct an intranet needs assessment and create interactive forms using pre-existing employee databases, all at no cost to St. Vincent. The CyberCollege seniors adopted a business name (NeXus Group) and continue to develop interaction forms and perform other database activities on a volunteer basis.

St. Vincent's homegrown venture continues to be successful. In August 2002, the intranet registered a record-high 831 unique visitors, an increase of 59 percent (489) over its first full week of service. The intranet has also received national recognition. This summer St. Vincent was honored with the Public Relations Society of America's Bronze Anvil Award of Commendation. □

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