

SeeClickFix Has National 311 Potential

Hilton Collins | October 28, 2011



In fall 2007, New Haven, Conn., resident Ben Berkowitz wasn't satisfied. Berkowitz saw problems in his neighborhood, but he was frustrated with the customer service experience when he contacted the city. "There was graffiti on my neighbor's building," he said. "I tried calling City Hall and left a bunch of voicemails, and I realized there was no centralized customer service system."

As a result of this experience, Berkowitz launched SeeClickFix, a Web-based tool citizens use to report complaints. It became the solution to his problems — and could ultimately become a platform for a national 311 system.

Solving One Problem at a Time

Around the same time Berkowitz launched SeeClickFix, New Haven deployed Cityworks, a content management system that integrated with the city's GIS to track work orders for utilities and public works jobs. That setup worked rather well internally, according to Robert Smuts, the city's chief administrative officer, but staff needed something new to facilitate citizen engagement.

In 2008, New Haven adopted SeeClickFix. By then, Berkowitz and his colleagues had refined their system.

“We built a simple site early on that allowed people to just mark problems in their neighborhoods on a Google map,” he said, “and then we allowed people to receive alerts based on the geography that they are interested in.”

Ultimately, however, Berkowitz envisioned a system in which residents could submit concerns to be quickly resolved. His goal was to create a Web-based tool for people anywhere in the world to report and track nonemergency issues. “We started looking at customer support for governments and for communities from that perspective,” Berkowitz said.

Today that vision is a reality.

The public can report issues via SeeClickFix on a conventional computer or mobile device. Users can create custom “watch areas” to monitor issues where they live, which could be convenient for neighborhood watch groups or news organizations monitoring their local beats. For example, both the New Haven Independent and the New Haven Register have SeeClickFix embedded on their websites.

New Haven’s Department of Public Works embedded the SeeClickFix application on its website via the “Report an Issue” link, which takes users to the SeeClickFix widget. There users can report an issue or create a watch area.

Those reporting an issue designate on a map where the problem is located as well as input details and upload photos related to the issue. The user can also opt to receive e-mail notifications when the issue has been resolved or when others comment on it.

Users can create a watch area by drawing a polygon on a map, representing an area they want to monitor. “Within that geographical boundary, you’ll get e-mailed notifications for either all issues or for the things that you specify,” said Smuts.

On the back end, data submitted through SeeClickFix is fed into New Haven’s Cityworks system and GIS database, and issues are e-mailed to the agency that can best handle the problem. City staff members receive geo-coded service requests that are used to create work orders. City officials can track these orders in an asset registry and analyze reporting history.

The integration between SeeClickFix, Cityworks and the GIS is a time-saver for city personnel. “That allows the issues that are being reported to the [department] to be processed more effectively in our work order system,” Smuts said.

Increased Response

New Haven’s SeeClickFix map uses orange, blue and green circles to mark locations where issues have been reported, and track their progress toward resolution. Clicking on the orange marker generates a box that displays details on an unresolved issue, how many people voted for it to be fixed, and when the issue was reported. Green circles mean the issue has been acknowledged by Public Works, and blue shapes mean it has been resolved.

Users can vote on what they want fixed, comment on each type of issue, flag comments they find inappropriate, and share the issue on social networking sites like Facebook,

Tumblr or Twitter. Cityworks prompts SeeClickFix to automatically e-mail whoever reported the issue when the complaint has been received.

“The public in New Haven really took to this product. It’s very user-friendly, very easy to use [and] much more intuitive,” Smuts said. “We’ve had something like 36,000 uses on it — either issues or comments on other people’s issues — which is significant for a city our size.” He estimated that 20,000 of the reported issues have been related to potholes and other road conditions.

On the whole, the volume of e-mails received has been much greater than the volume of calls received in the past, Smuts said, and loads of e-mails from people reporting problems are easier to deal with than loads of phone calls.

“SeeClickFix isn’t going out and making the potholes, it’s just making it much easier for people to let us know what potholes are out there, or graffiti or tree limbs that need to be trimmed,” Smuts said. “I think the increase in volume is somewhat inevitable with changes in technology.”

And there are options for adapting the system, including embedding the reporting form and display data on a Web page. The company also has created mobile applications, including one that allows people to photograph problems and receive the GPS location, Berkowitz said.

“You can save money by getting citizens to report issues to governments, as opposed to governments paying people to go out and inspect the public space,” Berkowitz said, adding that a government entity can also save money if the volume of phone calls goes down. “You can save money by having citizens report through the Web or mobile application as opposed to reporting issues over the phone.”

A National Platform?

Though its use is currently scattered, SeeClickFix has the potential to become a national 311 system. The platform already communicates with more governments than any other platform in the country, Berkowitz said, and there’s room to grow.

“Our goal is become an international 311 system,” he said. “We have a ways to go to that end, but on a national level, we get closer and closer with the signing of new cities every day.”

One component that helps give SeeClickFix the potential to go national is its use of the Open311 protocol, which expands the platform’s features. Open311 is an application development interface designed to give software developers standardized parameters through which they can design 311 applications and modules. Berkowitz and colleagues are implementing Open311-compliant applications as they work toward national deployment. By using the standards, SeeClickFix programmers can create tools that allow multiple people to exchange information related to a single issue in a many-to-many communication model.

“Through Open311, SeeClickFix connects to Washington, D.C., [and] Boston, and I know Toronto’s very interested in becoming involved,” Berkowitz said.

Development opportunities are plentiful because Open311 isn't hardware- or software-specific. "If you have a platform that connects to the Web, you can use the Open311 standard to pass data from that platform out to other applications," he said.

<http://www.govtech.com/e-government/SeeClickFix-Has-National-311-Potential.html>