BY LISA A. YORGEY

Nonprofit CRM

HOW THE INTERNET IS HELPING EASTER SEALS BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONSTITUENTS

Constituent relationship management (CRM) is a familiar concept to Easter Seals.

The nonprofit organization brings in $30 million annually, much of which comes from repeat donors, in its efforts to help more than 1 million children and adults with disabilities. Until now, it has been cultivating a relationship with its constituents primarily through its direct mail efforts. No formal program is in place, however, to integrate these direct mail efforts with its other marketing channels.

Until recently, Easter Seals hadn't heavily invested in its Internet presence. The organization, however, understood that it needed to build ongoing relationships with its donors to increase their lifetime value. The Internet, says Easter Seals' director of Internet marketing Shirley Sexton, was the logical next step in building a dialogue with its constituents. So, last fall Easter Seals hammered out an Internet plan—CRM was at its core.

Easter Seals quickly realized that such an endeavor needed to include its affiliates, as well as the national organization. There are more than 90 Easter Seals affiliates that manage more than 400 locally based services. Each of these affiliates has its own Web site and silos of information that are not linked to the national organization. As such, there's no consistent content, privacy policy or brand across Easter Seals' Web properties, explains Sexton.

Clearly, the organization needed to invest in a technology solution that would allow it to share content and a 360-degree view of its constituents with its affiliates. After some preliminary consultation, Easter Seals concluded it would cost too much and take too long to build its own proprietary platform. So, it began to look for an outsourced solution.

For Nonprofits Only

Easter Seals opted for a software solution developed by Convio, an Austin, TX-based company exclusively devoted to creating Internet-based CRM solutions for nonprofits.

The interaction between a nonprofit organization and its constituents is different from a for-profit company and its customers because no sale

is involved, explains Convio's Founder and CEO Vinay Bhagat. Nonprofits not only want constituents to contribute, but also to help further the causes they support. However, they "still need to communicate through many of the same channels" as for-profit companies, Bhagat says.

An integrated platform also will allow Easter Seals to cross-market, for example, to those constituents who act as advocates but don't necessarily give, and to reinforce the loyalty of donors who give but don't necessarily engage in activities.

"The Internet is a low-cost channel that allows [nonprofits] to communicate with donors in ways other than strict appeals for donations," says Bhagat.

Convio's software also integrates online activities with offline communications. If someone donates or changes an address online, the information also will appear in offline communications. This is important because donors recognize they have relationships with nonprofits that aren't necessarily channel-specific. Activities across all channels need to reflect that perception and be consistent.

Ready to Roll

Easter Seals will re-launch its national site using Convio's software this September. At that time, 10 affiliates will be integrated with Easter Seals' Internet infrastructure. The organization plans to integrate 10 additional affiliates every two months until the entire organization is running on the new system. This will allow the organization not only to raise funds online, but also to collect data about constituents' interests into a single database that will build its relationships with non-donor advocates.

The next step will be the integration of Easter Seals' databases. Internet data will be integrated with direct mail and donor databases, which total 16 million records.

Along with the launch of its Internet-based CRM system, there will be a heavy call to action on all Easter Seals Web sites. Front and center will be its e-mail newsletter, according to Sexton, for which Web site visitors will be asked to register.

At this juncture, Sexton admits it's tempting to ask for a good deal of information up front. However, she firmly believes in permission marketing and asking for minimal information to begin a dialogue with constituents. Web site visitors will be asked only for their e-mail addresses and ZIP codes at the time of registration. The organization, however, can get good mileage out of this information. The nonprofit will use a registrant's ZIP code to locate its local affiliate and include information on its activities in the content of the e-mail.

All newsletters will include a call to action, whether it's subscribing to the advocacy newsletter or making a donation. For each call to action, constituents will be asked to give more information. For example, constituents who write letters to their representatives in Congress would need to supply their addresses.

Just the Beginning

Establishing a dialogue with its constituents is only the beginning of Easter Seals' online plans. According to Sexton, the organization will do some testing with segments of its direct mail base to see if it can convert these constituents to the Web, which will save money by replacing some direct mail communication.

"As direct mail becomes more expensive and constituent relationships harder to manage, nonprofit organizations are realizing that the Internet constitutes a powerful new channel," Bhagat says. "Online constituent relationship management is about the cycle of attracting supporters, engaging them to contribute or take action and fostering an enduring relationship."