



Cloud-based tool helps Wilmington recover lost revenue

Municipal water utility uses innovative communication solution to reach and engage customers.

In 2020, the city of Wilmington, Delaware, had a problem that many municipalities and authorities face — a mountain of unpaid water bills. The total gap in revenue was around \$24 million. For comparison, Wilmington’s entire water and sewer budget that year was about \$78 million.

The city needed to recoup its revenue, but also wanted to be intentional in doing so. After all, people end up with past-due bills when they’re struggling to make ends meet. Wilmington had payment-assistance programs, including grants, that could pay off people’s bills entirely. City officials just needed a way to let residents know.

Unfortunately, the usual communication methods — postcards, billboards, and invoices marked “past due” — produced minimal results.

“We weren’t getting the rate of engagement from customers that we would have liked,” says Brett Taylor, director of finance for Wilmington. “People socially interact and financially transact on their phones and computers. I wanted to

Using targeted digital advertisements to reach customers with past-due utility bills, the city of Wilmington recovered \$1.12 million in uncollected revenue in the first 90 days.

reach our customers on their terms, the way they are most comfortable.”

Officials sought a cloud-based digital solution to better reach and engage their customers. They found it in Voice 4 Impact (V4I), a woman-owned, certified B Corp that specializes in digital communications and advanced analytics. V4I’s technology, hosted in the Amazon Web Services (AWS) Cloud, resulted in the recovery of \$1.12 million in uncollected revenue in the first 90 days.

A well-aimed campaign

Wilmington focused the recovery initiative on targeted digital ads aimed

at helping customers who were late with their water bill payments. The messages, displayed on Facebook, Twitter and other web pages, incentivized customers to click and receive assistance. To encourage participation, the city created a utility assistance program with funding from the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan Act to provide up to \$3,000 per customer to resolve delinquent utility bills. The city also lowered the interest rate and decreased penalties on delinquent accounts and set up a new payment agreement program.

“It is all about making that first connection with those who are in need,” Taylor says. “Once the connection is established, the city can help provide the appropriate support.”

In its first campaign, the city needed to reach customers in four ZIP codes where residents were likely to qualify for assistance programs. V4I’s Geoframing™ technology identified those customers and sent them ads through their mobile devices or computers. By directing them to programs that would help them pay their bills, this campaign yielded over \$502,000 in utility payments.

A second round of messages in 2021 took more specific aim. “We could take our information, boil it down to the 4,500 customers that had delinquencies, and specifically reach out to them,” Taylor says. Together, the ads and the programs helped return over \$654,000.

Privacy measures

To protect customers’ privacy, Wilmington did not give V4I access to any information that wasn’t already publicly available. “All we had to provide was ZIP codes or physical addresses,” Taylor says.

The “opt-in” quality of the engagement safeguarded customers’ privacy as well. “The customer has a choice whether to click on the ad or not,” Taylor says.

“We spent a good bit of time vetting the privacy issue about governments reaching out to clients through digital marketing,” he says. “Ads intended to better serve our communities are being very well-received; no one has expressed any complaints with respect to our outreach.”

Massive measurable ROI

It only cost about \$22,000 to recoup \$1.12 million — a return on investment of \$54 per dollar in the first campaign and \$60 per dollar in the second. In comparison, Wilmington’s traditional postcards cost \$1.20 each and only reached 2% of targeted customers.

“With traditional mailers, you don’t get the same kind of accuracy, repeatability, and scalability,” Taylor says. “And for the first time, we have direct measurable reporting of ROI.”

The advantages of the cloud

Besides producing strong financial results, the campaign was easy to implement. “Using the cloud to easily scale the number of ads we wanted to send literally took a few minutes. The cloud also enabled us to create a one-click, frictionless experience directing the customer to a simple landing page, creating a positive and direct connection with those we serve,” Taylor says. “We didn’t have to configure hardware or implement any software. No modifications or development work needed to happen to achieve our goal.”

Hosting the application in the cloud also makes it easy and inexpensive to extend a communications campaign as often as needed, with campaign set up and launch taking as little as three to seven business days. This is critical when agencies need to get constituents’ attention at a specific point in time.

“If we can engage with a customer between when they become delinquent — at 30 days — to 90 to 120 days after that delinquency, that’s the sweet spot,” Taylor says. “It’s the spot when people are most informed about what their bill looks like and are maybe more interested in having that rectified before their delinquencies begin to build.”

Looking to the future

Wilmington officials are now looking at other ways to use their new digital communications service. The city has already worked on an awareness campaign that encouraged residents to use a new 311 call center to request services or report problems. By

channeling all those resident requests to a single help desk, the city could more easily track calls and measure the demand for various services. As a result, call times were reduced.

“We attracted 19,000 new, unique page views through that campaign and gained insights on how our customers preferred to communicate with the mayor’s office — all while creating greater awareness,” Taylor says.

Wilmington can also use V4I’s tech to engage residents with information about a host of other services, from public safety and social services to trash collection. “Anything you would send out in a mailer, put on a billboard, or post on social media can be converted into a digital community outreach campaign,” Taylor says.

“You can measure success at every stage, view just how many people are clicking on the ads and those who actually converted and are participating in these programs,” he adds.

Wilmington also plans to repeat its utility assistance campaign. Thanks to the scalability and flexibility of technology hosted in the cloud, that fresh effort will be simple to implement.

“We’re all set to go,” Taylor concludes. “Going digital is a win-win for the city and the people we serve.”

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