

Minnesota's GovDocs Works to Make Government More Communicative

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By John Katsantonis

ST. PAUL, Minn. – Dodging the “third rail” question as to why no Chicago or Illinois company won the contract, St. Paul, Minn.-based GovDocs has sold to the CTA an e-mail system that will send its 1.5 million passengers instant messages to their cell phones and other devices when delays, accidents and other important anomalies occur.

For the fairly reasonable price of \$89,000, GovDocs has contracted with the City of Chicago's transportation agency to implement its GovDelivery e-mail alert system early in 2006 after a pilot period of testing the system to CTA employees and train riders only.

GovDelivery is an out-of-the-box, automated and Web hosted *e-mail subscription management* (ESM) system that has been implemented at various city, county, state and federal government agencies throughout the U.S. and the world. The product's subscriber base has more than doubled annually since its release to the market in 2000.

Current clients include the U.S. Departments of Labor, State, Agriculture and Commerce, both houses of Britain's parliament, the Norwich City Council in the U.K., the office of the governor of Texas, the California Department of Insurance, the Oregon Department of Human Services and the cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

GovDocs began life as a poster child for the U.S. Department of Labor. It began operations in June 1999 by helping U.S. employers stay compliant with regulations. The Internet-based application at HRDocs.com enabled the selection and delivery of these required documents to HR departments throughout the U.S. The company continues to fulfill thousands of poster orders per month.

It also provided the company a fundamental expertise on how employers wanted to hear from the government and how government can better communicate to the public.

Following is an interview with GovDocs co-founder and CEO Scott Burns, a former McKinsey & Company analyst in Minneapolis who was involved in SafeRent, a Web-based tenant screening service for apartment managers. Burns discusses the company's mission, methods and client base.

John Katsantonis: Who was the first GovDelivery customer?

⇒ **Scott Burns:** The City of St. Paul used it for more than 300 discreet tasks including city council information as well as parks and recreation announcements of events, classes, park hours and so forth. The city also used the system for snow emergency information. It helped them communicate instantly and more efficiently.

JK: What are you doing for the U.S. State Department?

⇒ **SB:** They're using our product to recruit potential foreign services professionals. Previously, they had fewer than 6,000 applicants signed up. Now they have 90,000 subscribers.

GovDocs (Continued)

JK: Is this dramatic increase a typical result?

- ⇒ **SB:** Governments are currently experiencing 300 percent to 1,100 percent increase in signups to receive information they post on their Web sites.

If you think about it, every government agency – whether regulatory or not – has information to impart to the public. What they need is a strategy for communicating that information. The problem for government Web sites has been “hoping people will look it up”. Our expertise helps make agencies proactive.

JK: How do you see the benefits of your ESM systems working?

- ⇒ **SB:** People and businesses are intimidated by government and anything we can do to improve that will improve people’s lives. In the private sector, “e-mail” means “marketing”. In the public sector, it’s about telling citizens what they need to know in a timely manner.

JK: How would you characterize the differences in the processes between federal, state, county and/or municipal-level contracts, RFQs and opportunities?

- ⇒ **SB:** There is much more consistency within the federal government, which makes them easier to work with on a regular basis. With city, county and state governments, you have to work with each one individually, which requires time and patience.

JK: How did you learn about the CTA contract? Have you done this before? Do you see it as something that “everybody” can use?

- ⇒ **SB:** We see it as a real time saver for CTA passengers. Right now, we’re on a three-year contract. Folks will be able to sign up at the CTA Web site. The system can be used by thousands or tens of thousands of citizens. We’ve implemented this system in Portland, Ore. More than 1,000 people have signed up there. In Seattle, there are between 5,000 and 10,000 subscribers.

JK: Are there other applications for the technology such as crime detection or alerts?

- ⇒ **SB:** The system in Grand Prairie, Texas notes sex offender information. Our system also is much more effective for neighborhood police officers who sometimes forget to pass out their outlook beat report.

JK: Will your system be in place in Minneapolis as part of the city’s Wi-Fi implementation?

- ⇒ **SB:** Only inasmuch as it will serve as a communications method. The city has been offering our service for a few years. The Wi-Fi implementation will help more people use it.