

City of Calgary expands services, conserves resources with search-centric website and Google Search Appliance



At a Glance

What they wanted to do:

- Enhance and expand services, without increasing costs
- Interact with citizens in their preferred manner
- Streamline online services with the city, from permits to recycling
- Reserve phone and in-person resources for more complex requests
- Upgrade to current technology

What they did:

- Implemented the GSA as a centerpiece of a new search-centric website

What they accomplished:

- Expanded services while conserving resources
- Made information more accessible to citizens
- Delivered services via preferred online interactions
- Enhanced service quality and customer service
- Upgraded technology infrastructure

Organization

With just over one million citizens, Calgary is one of Canada's largest cities. Like most municipalities, it seeks to provide better, cost-effective services and deliver them the way people want. The City therefore sponsored a sweeping program to boost operational efficiencies and provide enhanced and broader services.

Extensive research produced telling results. Over 93 percent of Calgarians said they used the Internet. More than 40 percent wanted more city services online, instead of interacting by phone or in-person. Sixty percent said their preferences were based on convenience, such as not having to go to a City facility; others cited the need for speed and around-the-clock availability. Only 18 percent of visitors to Calgary.ca came directly to the home page, however, while 55 percent arrived from search engines, primarily Google. Everything pointed to the need for better web-based services.

Challenge

Calgary's public website had 16,000 pages of content across 28 business units, and offered a wide variety of applications, functionality, documents, and information. The site handled 9 million visits in 2010 alone. The major drawback was that information was difficult to find.

Forty-seven percent of Calgary citizens surveyed said the current search engine on Calgary.ca didn't work well. It used city acronyms and terminology that many people didn't understand. The site was cluttered, out-of-date, and difficult to sift through. The staff struggled with maintenance as individual business units continued adding to an already packed site.

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Responding to these compelling findings, the city formed the Web Leadership and Renewal Program in 2007. "Our research showed that search is our citizens' primary means of finding information," says David Watson, executive project sponsor and general manager, Planning, Development and Assessment.

Solution

At the heart of Calgary's efforts to improve services and programs is a search-centric website, powered by the Google Search Appliance (GSA). "Among our chief goals was to provide citizens with easy-to-use search and better access to city programs and services," Watson says. "This led us to create an entirely new, search-centric site that was designed in 2009 and, after significant testing, launched in August 2011."

About the Google Search Appliance

The Google Search Appliance is an integrated hardware and software search solution that extends Google's award-winning search technology to websites of all kinds, including corporate sites and intranets. Organizations can use Google Search Appliance to make data on servers, content management systems, databases, and business applications instantly and securely available from a single, familiar UI search box. More than 35,000 companies worldwide use Google Enterprise search solutions.

For more information visit:

www.google.com/gsa

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As part of the solution, the City also optimized all existing content on calgary.ca to make it more effective for the GSA to provide accurate results. The GSA is linked to a content management system, ESRI, for interactive mapping, and websites such as calgarymayor.ca to provide holistic, integrated search.

Results

Using Calgary.ca is as easy and effective as searching on Google.com. Citizens can now search for everything from YouTube videos on saving water to animal services and permit information. They can easily serve themselves by finding answers to questions about their municipality. The search-based concept lets Calgarians type in common keywords or phrases to find what they need, without specific knowledge of city acronyms or terminology.

"With the GSA, we can conserve phone and in-person resources for more complex requests and apply valuable government resources more strategically," Watson says. "Citizens benefit from the convenience of finding most of what they need online. They can avoid unnecessary driving and parking fees and have 24/7 access to the bulk of our services."

Certain GSA search features were very important to the Calgary City team. Topping the list were best bets, synonyms, and spelling correction. Related searches and content rating were also vital, as was the ability to easily promote relevance of search results based on popularity. The Google Search Appliance had all of these capabilities, plus a reputation for being very easy to install and maintain. All these features paid off for Calgary.

Citizens are rapidly adopting search. Only 4 percent of visitors to the old calgary.ca used the internal search engine. Now, 65 percent have performed a search using the GSA. Search Results is the second-most-visited page on the site, after the home page.

"Ultimately, our job is to provide city services as efficiently as possible. We strive to do more with less," Watson says. "By making the right content easy to retrieve with the GSA, we provide the convenience citizens seek. We also reduce unnecessary overhead and increase the value and variety of our services and programs."

