

The American Red Cross improves search for people in need and those helping them with the Google Search Appliance



At a Glance

What they wanted to do

- Provide faster, higher quality search functionality
- Help people find information on everything from CPR classes and disaster relief services to ways to volunteer and donate
- Reduce IT costs

What they did

- Integrated the Google Search Appliance (GSA) into two public websites and the organizational intranet
- Created three collections of content for each site and provided live feeds from content management system

What they accomplished

- Made emergency response information more "findable"
 - Improved the search experience across three sites
 - Cut costs by mobilizing the GSA versus extending licenses for the bundled search system
-

Organization

Since its founding in 1881 by visionary relief coordinator Clara Barton, the American Red Cross has been the nation's premier non-profit emergency response organization. Part of a worldwide movement that offers neutral humanitarian care for victims of war, the American Red Cross also distinguishes itself by aiding victims of devastating natural disasters.

Today, in addition to domestic disaster relief, the American Red Cross offers compassionate services in five other areas: community services that help the needy; support and comfort for military members and their families; the collection, processing and distribution of half the blood supply in the United States; educational programs such as lifeguard and CPR training that promote health and safety; and international relief and development programs.

Challenge

As one of the world's largest non-profits, the American Red Cross relies on its public-facing websites and its intranet to keep millions of people and tens of thousands of employees and volunteers informed about its activities. The main external website, www.redcross.org, receives significant traffic from people seeking everything from CPR class schedules and Blood Drive locations to information about disasters such as the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2011 U.S. tornadoes.

"Our websites underpin everything we do. On a normal day, we get up to 200,000 hits on our main website, redcross.org – but that number swells to millions during a national disaster," says Ivan Chou, Web Applications Engineer for the American Red Cross. "During a disaster, we may switch from our regular front page to an emergency template and immediately begin populating it with content such as ways to help or donate or get into contact with family members and friends."

With such a heavy reliance on the web for delivering information, the American Red Cross needed a faster search system that would deliver better results. The organization had been relying on a previously purchased search solution that also came bundled with its new content management system (CMS) implemented in 2009. That system used a meaning-based context model driven by questions, phrases, or sentences rather than keywords – but this approach often failed to deliver relevant results. "We found that most users search on keywords, not concepts," says Chou. "Even so, we brought in the vendor to help configure our former product to return keyword-relevant search results. After a lot of effort, it still didn't work out."

Chou reports that the connector linking the previous search engine to the CMS was slow. Due to the performance of the CMS product, it could take up to ten seconds for search results to be returned. Slow search performance and lack of relevant search results prompted the American Red Cross to investigate other search alternatives – an initiative that coincided with a redesign for

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 the 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

"We saw that we could save IT costs and achieve better results by setting up the Google Search Appliance."

*—Ivan Chou, Web Applications Engineer,
the American Red Cross*

"When we moved to the Google Search Appliance, search just started working, and working very well."

*—Abi Weaver, Senior Press Officer for
the International Services Department
of the American Red Cross*

www.redcross.org and creation of www.measlesinitiative.org, a new site supporting a multi-agency push to help halt the spread of measles worldwide.

"From a content standpoint, we were starting the Measles Initiative site over from scratch, and we planned to have a wealth of resources – photo galleries, videos, and other materials in multiple languages. We had to find a better way for people worldwide to search and find relevant information. It was key to the overall success of the initiative," says Abi Weaver, Senior Press Officer for the International Services Department of the American Red Cross.

At the same time as slow performance and low-quality search results were plaguing the two external sites, the same issues were prevalent on the organization's intranet site, Crossnet, which also used the older search engine. In addition to issues with search, employees first had to select a category for their line of business – community services, educational programs, international relief, and so on – before they could navigate to the appropriate intranet page. "Even after they chose a line-of-business category and started to drill down into content, users still struggled to make search work quickly and efficiently and get relevant results on our intranet," says Chou.

Solution

Working with Google's channel partner, Fig Leaf Software, the American Red Cross began evaluating its options and calculating the costs and benefits of deploying a new search solution. "We realized we were at a tipping point – we would have to pay more in licenses for our CMS to support the two external sites, and we saw that we could save IT costs and achieve better results by setting up two Google Search Appliance (GSA) systems," says Chou.

The organization's outsourced data center deployed two GSAs: one for production and the other as a hot backup. The Google Search Appliance systems were implemented over a single weekend, and they now power search across Crossnet as well as on the public redcross.org and measlesinitiative.org site. They also readily index multimedia content such as videos and photo galleries, which are especially prevalent on the measlesinitiative.org website.

The American Red Cross sites created three different "collections" of content – one for each site, and also implemented a live feed from its CMS, enabling the GSA to index new or updated content in real-time. According to Chou, these are two of the GSA's most well-received capabilities.

Results

According to Chou, the quality and speed of search improved immediately upon implementing Google's search solutions. "Out of the box, the search results from the GSA were excellent," he says. "We did almost no tweaking on our end, and our users comment on how pleased they are that the right search results come straight to the top. Now if you type in Haiti earthquake or CPR classes, you get back just what you are looking for in the first page – and results are returned in a few seconds versus ten."

The Google Search Appliance has been broadly adopted, and user feedback has been very positive. Visitors to the intranet as well as to the two public websites now have ready access to information through a powerful, intuitive and familiar search experience. "Search has been more popular after deploying the GSA, and has been driving a higher number of page views," says Chou. Weaver also notes, "When we moved to the Google Search Appliance, search just started working, and working very well."



