

NHS Direct Retunes its Multichannel Health Information Service Model for a Proactive Approach to Healthy Living

Executive Summary

CUSTOMER NAME

NHS Direct, United Kingdom

INDUSTRY

Healthcare/Public Service

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

- Develop a fully integrated approach to telephone, online, and digital TV channels
- Reroute users from call centers to more appropriate channels, such as the Internet
- Integrate NHS Direct with a broader range of online health resources

SOLUTIONS

- Develop a multichannel strategy for 2005–2008 with help from Cisco® IBSG
- Add new links between call centers and the NHS Website, making transitions easier and faster
- Realize a strategic shift from information provisioning to greater patient choice

BUSINESS RESULTS

- Better access to a range of interlocking patient services across channels
- Informed patient choices, supporting greater personal responsibility for health
- Improved financial efficiency as Website usage doubles in under two years

Since 1998, NHS Direct has grown from a simple telephone health information service into a sophisticated tool of patient empowerment. With call centers, an Internet channel, a digital TV service, and print media, NHS is developing an integrated multichannel model linked to other NHS online resources. NHS also plans to launch Health Direct in late 2007, using a different mix of channels to support a proactive approach to healthy living.

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

NHS Direct is a multichannel public health information service that uses call centers, the Internet, interactive digital television, and print media to convey information and medical advice to patients. The NHS Direct service was piloted in 1998, achieving national coverage by the end of 2000.

The service worked by telephone initially. Patients called a local rate number to contact trained operators who would arrange, if appropriate, a callback from a nurse. An online service was launched in parallel with the phone service from December 1999. In addition, a patient self-help guide, based on the 20 top symptoms raised by callers, was distributed to the public in hard copy through a cofunding deal with Thomson, a directories publisher, and replicated online. The NHS Direct digital television (DTV) channel launched in late 2004 on the Sky Interactive digital satellite TV network.



Prepared by Cisco Systems, Inc.
Internet Business Solutions Group

This rapid increase in NHS Direct channels—including initiatives that were evaluated but did not become core services, such as touch-screen kiosks—was at first seen as a means to extend the reach of NHS Direct. In the last two years, however, NHS Direct has focused on a strategically integrated approach, fine-tuning the channels to make sure that each will play the most efficient and synergistic role within the entire multichannel network. Subject always to safe clinical parameters, NHS Direct wants to divert users to the most appropriate channel for their inquiries and reduce costs at the same time.

Paul Jenkins, director of service development for NHS Direct, comments: “The thinking on channel integration is driven by the need to go beyond having a multichannel strategy to having a *channels* strategy, in the sense of which bit of business do we want to transact in which channel?”

An integrated approach will also inform the development of a new service, Health Direct—due to launch at the end of 2007 in support of a more proactive approach among citizens toward healthier lifestyles—initially using the Web, DTV, and mobile text.

“The thinking on channel integration is driven by the need to go beyond having a multichannel strategy to having a *channels* strategy, in the sense of which bit of business do we want to transact in which channel?”

Paul Jenkins, director of service development, NHS Direct

SOLUTIONS

Around the time when the NHS Direct DTV service went live in late 2004, NHS Direct formed a new media committee composed of communications experts and stakeholders—government-backed bodies, such as [NHS Connecting for Health](#), as well as voluntary care groups with an insight into groups with special needs. The [Cisco Systems® Internet Business Solutions Group \(IBSG\)](#), having engaged with the organization as a trusted adviser from 2002, was invited to join. The committee played a significant role in helping NHS Direct draft its 2005–2008 multichannel strategy, defining strategic goals and service development priorities.

These strategic goals signalled a drive to move NHS Direct’s focus from providing information to empowering patient decisions by means of personalized information and advice, thus relieving pressure on telephone and face-to-face services. The organization is working toward full integration between channels, allowing users to move seamlessly between them during a single transaction, with more localization and personalization to better align new media resources with local community needs and initiatives.

The emphasis on integration was reflected across a dozen service development priorities. While some targeted improvement or expansion of individual channels, others sought integration with broader online resources, such as the National Care Record and other knowledge-based programs run by NHS Connecting for Health. (The latter organization manages a large, 10-year National Program for IT which is modernizing NHS computer systems. The program will connect over 30,000 general practitioners in England to almost 300 hospitals and give patients better access to their personal health and personal care information.)

“We’re developing a much more technically integrated approach. I think we’re on the cusp between the multichannel, choose-which-to-use approach and the integrated approach.”

Bob Gann, director of new media, NHS Direct

The online inquiry service, which provides an opportunity to obtain one-to-one responses to questions left unanswered by the NHS Direct Online Website, will be fully integrated into national health information provision. A link on the Website may in the future enable patients to book a callback from NHS Direct, improving both patient convenience and enhancing the efficient management of call-center resources. Patient details filled out on the Website will come up on screen at the call centers at the same time as the patient receives the prebooked callback, saving users the trouble of repeating personal information already supplied online and helping cut down call times.

In the future, patients will be able to view their care records and link to further information on their condition, treatment, and choices through the Website’s personal zone, HealthSpace. HealthSpace will also provide the opportunity for people to store personal health and fitness assessments through NHS LifeCheck—an overall assessment that will be formatted into a personal wellness record and kept in a personal file online.

According to Bob Gann, NHS Direct’s director of new media, most of the organization’s strategic goals have been achieved or are in the advanced stages. “Over the year ahead, we’re developing a much more technically integrated approach, where people can come in via the Website, do some of the interaction online, and then, if necessary, set up an interaction with the telephone service still within that space,” says Gann. “I think we’re on the cusp, at the moment, between the multi-channel choose-which-to-use approach and the integrated approach.”

NHS Direct’s service planners have thought carefully about the extent and nature of the integration required across its channels and seeks to tailor all content closely to the distinctive strengths of each channel and to the demographic profile of that channel’s users. For example, there is not much overlap between users of the NHS Direct Interactive DTV service and those of the NHS Direct Online PC/Internet service. To the extent that different channels address different constituencies, NHS Direct is happy to allow these channels to continue working in parallel or offering a simple choice of platform.

BUSINESS RESULTS

The steep rise in online usage is the most striking indicator of success for NHS Direct’s integrated approach. Roughly two years ago, NHS Direct call centers were taking 500,000 calls to 600,000 calls a month, while NHS Direct Online was receiving 600,000 unique user visits to 700,000 unique user visits in the same period. Since mid-2004, compared with modest growth in call-center traffic, the Website has more than doubled to 1.5 million users a month.

The DTV service, NHS Direct Interactive, is available in more than 16 million homes via the Sky Interactive digital satellite pay-TV platform, with plans to extend to the UK’s digital terrestrial platform, Freeview. NHS Direct Interactive is thought to be the most extensive public-service

interactive digital TV channel in the world. Further integration of the channel with the Website and the telephone service will, therefore, be essential to improve access for the mass audience that can be reached through the television.

NHS Direct is now moving from a basic use of messaging to redirect telephone callers at peak times, encouraging them to pursue their inquiry online if possible, to a smoother, more user-friendly integration of the two channels. Since NHS Direct estimates the operational cost of one patient dealing with a health inquiry by phone at 100 times that of the same patient going online, this also holds out the prospect of major cost savings.

Bob Gann notes: “Around a quarter of telephone contacts with NHS Direct are requests for straightforward health information, rather like a directory inquiry service. Most could probably be done online—so up to 25 percent of our activity, potentially, could be handled in another channel at one-hundredth of the cost.”

The NHS Direct telephone service consumes four-fifths of the organization’s £120 million (\$223 million), and the latest figures show that 11 million, or 45 percent, of UK homes are now online. The potential savings gained simply by shifting these calls from call centers to the Internet could amount to more than £10 million (\$18.6 million).

In the Internet channel, a populist approach has made the service more attractive by deploying interactive features such as quiz formats. One example was an item on sexual health, linked to Valentine’s Day, which generated wide publicity in national newspapers and even evoked parliamentary questions.

The Website also provides topical information on issues of common concern, such as the UK summer heatwave of 2006, satisfying the demand for information while steering callers toward the information by way of a recorded message. At such times, NHS Direct is now recommended as an information source by the national weather bulletins.

NHS Direct has interactive content on Sky Interactive, controlled by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. On the rival Freeview platform, which offers about 30 digital channels including those of BBC International Television at no extra charge, opportunities for interactive functionality will be much more limited because there is no return path. This means viewers at home cannot send information, instructions, or responses back to the channel. However, NHS Direct is currently investigating alternatives using SMS text messaging as a return path.

On the NHS Direct service on Sky Interactive, there are also 16 links to health-related videos, albeit shown in rotation on a carousel system rather than selected from a menu. The DTV service can be accessed from the Sky IMM electronic program guide and has links from Sky portals, such as Sky News and Sky Sports.

NEXT STEPS

One of NHS Direct’s key service development priorities is to develop compelling, interactive healthy-living content for use in the online and interactive services. Some of this content may be usable across both platforms, such as the 2005 DTV feature *Twelve Days of Christmas*, humorously highlighting the perils of seasonal overindulgence.

“I believe DTV will have major synergies with Health Direct, because I think the campaigning style of TV and its ability to use video are well suited to the aims of the new service.”

Paul Jenkins, director of service development, NHS Direct

The Health Direct service will target 16- to 55-year-olds, with content and interactive tools to inform, engage, and motivate users toward healthier lifestyles. Launching initially on three channels—online, DTV, and mobile text, with integration across all three—the service is expected to be well suited to DTV. “I believe DTV will have major synergies with Health Direct, because I think the campaigning style of TV and its ability to use video are well suited to the aims of the new service,” says Paul Jenkins, director of service development for NHS Direct.

MORE INFORMATION

The Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), the global strategic consulting arm of Cisco Systems, helps Global 500 companies and public organizations transform the way they do business—first designing innovative business processes and then by integrating advanced technologies into visionary roadmaps that improve customer experience and revenue growth.

For further information about IBSG, visit <http://www.cisco.com/go/ibsg>



Corporate Headquarters

Cisco Systems, Inc.
170 West Tasman Drive
San Jose, CA 95134-1706
USA
www.cisco.com

Tel: 408 526-4000
800 553-NETS (6387)
Fax: 408 526-4100

European Headquarters

Cisco Systems International BV
Haarlerbergpark
Haarlerbergweg 13-19
1101 CH Amsterdam
The Netherlands
www-europe.cisco.com

Tel: 31 0 20 357 1000
Fax: 31 0 20 357 1100

Americas Headquarters

Cisco Systems, Inc.
170 West Tasman Drive
San Jose, CA 95134-1706
USA
www.cisco.com

Tel: 408 526-7660
Fax: 408 527-0883

Asia Pacific Headquarters

Cisco Systems, Inc.
168 Robinson Road
#28-01 Capital Tower
Singapore 068912
www.cisco.com

Tel: +65 6317 7777
Fax: +65 6317 7799

Cisco Systems has more than 200 offices in the following countries and regions. Addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers are listed on the **Cisco Website at www.cisco.com/go/offices.**

Argentina · Australia · Austria · Belgium · Brazil · Bulgaria · Canada · Chile · China PRC · Colombia · Costa Rica · Croatia · Cyprus · Czech Republic · Denmark · Dubai, UAE
Finland · France · Germany · Greece · Hong Kong SAR · Hungary · India · Indonesia · Ireland · Israel · Italy · Japan · Korea · Luxembourg · Malaysia · Mexico
The Netherlands · New Zealand · Norway · Peru · Philippines · Poland · Portugal · Puerto Rico · Romania · Russia · Saudi Arabia · Scotland · Singapore · Slovakia
Slovenia · South Africa · Spain · Sweden · Switzerland · Taiwan · Thailand · Turkey · Ukraine · United Kingdom · United States · Venezuela · Vietnam · Zimbabwe

Copyright © 2006 Cisco Systems, Inc. All rights reserved. Cisco, Cisco Systems, and the Cisco Systems logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of Cisco Systems, Inc., and/or its affiliates in the United States and certain other countries.

All other trademarks mentioned in this document or Website are the property of their respective owners. The use of the word partner does not imply a partnership relationship between Cisco and any other company. This customer story is based on information provided by NHS Direct, United Kingdom and describes how that particular organization benefits from the deployment of Cisco products and/or IBSG expertise. Many factors may have contributed to the results and benefits described; Cisco does not guarantee comparable results elsewhere.

C36-365021-00 09/06