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SAFE's Software a hit with managers, other institutions

Some people still look for the clipboard when they walk into SAFE Credit Union branches.

The clipboard was the place where customers would sign in if they wanted to ask about a loan or open a new account. Then the customers would sit in the waiting area until someone on staff noticed them.

Now: SAFE has replaced the clipboards with a computer-based system that cuts down waiting time and gives the customer an active role in exploring SAFE's products and services.

For the credit union the new system has not only boosted sales but given management another tool for tracking employee performance. Now that the system has been tested and perfected, SAFE is marketing the software to other financial institutions.

Paper shuffle: The spur for change was a problem familiar to anyone who has been forced to make work habits conform to a computer program.

The old system was very cumbersome. You had to remember a bunch of commands," said Mary Lou Larkin, manager of SAFE's branch at 29th and K streets in midtown Sacramento. When independent systems can't talk with one another, information must be keyed in more than once. Aside from taking extra time, it increased the odds of errors. The old system didn't offer any prompting either. "You'd get a green-and-white screen with hundreds of fields, and you had to know which fields to fill in," she said.

The customer, of course, had to sit quietly while the service representative typed everything into the computer.

When upper management tried to create a flow chart showing the steps a service rep had to go through to open two new accounts, they ended up with sheets of paper spread all over the board room, said Richard Healy, SAFE's vice president of operations.

Sacramento-based SAFE decided to design an integrated system from scratch, based on what the customer and the credit union were trying to accomplish. All the steps fall into one of four phases, said Healy:

- Identify the customers, including what products and services they qualify for.
- Find out what they want and how SAFE can deliver it.
- Sign the customer up for the products that match their needs.
- Follow up at a later date.

It sounds relatively simple, said Healy, but the old systems involved so many steps that there was no time left for following up.



After an investment of about \$1 million, SAFE's lobby-management tool and New Account Opening Process were rolled out in May 2003, and were in all the branches by February 2004.

Account and loan 'shopping': Now a live person greets the customer near the front door at SAFE Credit Union branches.

"It takes maybe a minute to get basic information. If you are here for credit, we use a PIN pad and just ask for your Social Security number," Healy said. For an existing SAFE customer, information can be gathered with the swipe of a debit card. SAFE is working on an upgrade that would get information with a swipe of a driver's license.

That information goes up on the computer screens of the service reps, who can run a credit check before greeting the person by name. If SAFE has dealt with the person before, that information will come up as well.

Minor credit problems are highlighted in yellow, major credit problems in red. Credit problems won't prevent someone from joining SAFE, but it could be a factor in securing a loan, said Larkin. If the customer is left waiting more than 10 minutes, the alert on the computer monitor turns red.

Once they sit down together, the service rep and the customer can start going over various product offerings, using a single computer screen visible to both. The view on the screen looks much like a retailer's Web site, right down to the electronic shopping cart to keep track of what kinds of accounts or loans the person chooses.

There is a screen up there with your name on it, and a scripted presentation that's tailored for you based on what you came in for," Healy said.

The program is tied into the employee handbook, Larkin said. As the rep discusses each product, the handbook entry pops up as a reminder of what should be covered. The program also keeps a running tally of which products have been selected, declined or put on hold for future discussion. Items on the screen turn from red to green as they are dealt with -- blue if they are postponed. The system automatically prints out disclosure documents for each product the customer selects. For SAFE there is no paperwork to file because everything is stored electronically -- including the customer's signature.

Finally, the system prompts the customer and rep to agree on a date for a follow-up call to see if everything is going as planned. It's really hard to mess up this system," Larkin said.

Customer enrollment and tracking systems such as SAFE's are a rarity. The California Credit Union League said it hasn't tracked the adoption of such computer-based traffic-management systems and sales consultation tools, but "we don't think it's a very common thing for credit unions to do," said spokesman Mark Lowe.



Measuring success: Aside from giving the customer an active role and helping to build rapport, the lobby-management program and the New Account Opening Process give Larkin and other managers a measurement tool.

Larkin can call up aggregate statistics for any given period, showing, for example, that the average wait in her branch for the prior two months has been eight minutes, and that the average time a rep spends with a customer is 14 minutes. If a customer can't remember who he talked to earlier about a loan or account, the system can produce the answer.

For the individual service reps there is extra incentive to deal with customers quickly and thoroughly. Statistics from the program are factored into performance reviews. Upper management also has access to the statistics, such as the marketing department being able to track which competitors are losing the most customers to SAFE.

The speed and thoroughness also have translated into more sales. SAFE tracks the 90-day average for the number of deposit and loan products a customer buys. When the new system went online, the average for new customers was 2.1 products, he said. Now it's up to 2.3, and in March one branch averaged 2.89.

"That may not sound like a big jump, but in our business that is a quantum leap," Healy said. "We are starting to get a lift also in the products and services our existing members are using."

Looking outward: Now SAFE is hoping to reap extra benefits by selling the system to other institutions.

SAFE is a minority partner in Better Branches, a limited-liability company set up in 2003 with consultant Rick Poulton and applications developer Grant Parry in San Francisco. Components are being sold a la carte as Better Lobby, Better Identity, Better Consultation and Better Fulfillment.

"The only reason people go with buying the technology and forcing people to use it is that you can take an incremental approach," said Jim Allen, SAFE's assistant vice president of information technology. Better Branches offers the products either as licensed software or as a monthly subscription service over a secure Internet connection.

Institutions get a free trial lasting several months, and so far only one has decided not to buy at least one component, Poulton said. Customers have included community banks as well as credit unions, he said, though he would not release any sales figures. One customer is MacDill Federal Credit Union a \$1.4 billion institution based in Tampa, Fla. It tested the lobby-management program for several months in its main office, and plans to have it in all 17 branches by the end of May, said Ken Cameron, assistant vice president of operations. He said he likes the ability to see what customers are waiting for.

"Sometimes you can't serve the next person -- it might be out of your area of expertise -- so you take the next person you can serve," Cameron said.



Like SAFE, MacDill is also using the software to track employee performance. The credit union is considering a future upgrade to a system that uses a kiosk rather than a live receptionist, allowing customers to check themselves in. Upgrades have been constant. Each SAFE branch has one person who serves on a group that meets monthly to discuss problems and suggest improvements, Larkin said.

"The folks at SAFE are a very forward-looking bunch," said Poulton of Better Branches. "We actually took a bigger step than I thought would be possible. When you re-engineer a process, you don't take it to perfection in one step. People and equipment can only handle so much," he said. "But with SAFE, because they were all pulling on the same oar, we were able to take a bigger step."

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