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### Connecting Businesses, Customers and the Community: The CenterState Connect Mobile App

By Elle Hanna, CenterState Corporation for Economic Opportunity



How do you connect 2,000 member businesses, plus information about cultural and natural amenities, events and news, with a region's residents and visitors?

That was the question we faced at Syracuse, N.Y.-based CenterState CEO, a 12-county business leadership and economic development organization, in 2010. (At the time, CenterState CEO was a new organization formed by the merger of the regional chamber of commerce and economic development association. The merger also brought the Downtown Syracuse Business Improvement District and the county Convention and Visitors Bureau under one roof.)

When we considered that 78 percent of the U.S. population ages 15-64 uses an Android or Apple iOS device - and that more than half of all local searches are done via mobile device - the answer became obvious.

#### Developing a "native" app

In a region with 12 million annual visitors, 1.5 million residents and 140,000 college students, a native app (designed to be installed on a mobile device) made perfect sense. It would put information about member businesses and the community directly in the pockets of visitors and those who live here, thereby meeting our member businesses' expressed need for visibility and connections - in other words, 21st century access to customers.

The first phase in developing the CenterState Connect app was to partner with the iSchool at Syracuse University to develop a prototype that could gauge member and user interest. The prototype was exceptionally well received; more than 500 businesses signed up to be listed during this phase of development.

Once the student prototype was developed, we partnered with a member business (Rounded Development) for full-scale design and development. We launched version 1.0 of the app in 2011 and version 2.0 in March of 2012.

Businesses are offered a free basic listing that includes the business name, phone number, website and chamber affiliations. The app also includes events and news from CenterState CEO, SyracuseFirst (a buy-local group), the Downtown Committee of Syracuse and the Syracuse Convention and Visitors Bureau. The app provides users with regularly changing content so they have a reason to use it frequently.

Currently, CenterState Connect lists more than 3,700 companies and attractions across the 12-county region. Users can download the app for free and search for a business by keyword, category or chamber membership. Each business has a profile page which offers one-click calling or website options and directions. Additionally, the app provides a feed to news and events and the ability to share information via social media. The app currently has 4,500 users across all platforms.

## Generating revenue

By tapping into this technology, CenterState CEO not only fulfills its mission to facilitate connections but created a new form of non-dues revenue. This is enabled through the sale of enhanced listings, ads and offers. More than 400 businesses have enhanced their listing or added an offer. Additionally, this tangible membership benefit aids in member retention for CenterState CEO.

While all of this is a direct benefit to CenterState CEO, the app also can be replicated by other chambers and business organizations. They can license the technology, rebrand the app and collect revenue generated by ads, enhancements and offers. (CenterState CEO collects a subscription cost of \$2/member for the license.) CenterState CEO currently is developing a rebranded version of the app for the North Country Chamber of Commerce in Plattsburgh, N.Y. Developing a native app is often too expensive and therefore beyond reach for most organizations, but because we have taken the initial step to develop and test the technology, other communities can benefit as we have from this tool.

## Smart in a number of ways

The app is an ideal complement to our traditional chamber member directory because it offers greater visibility and enhanced content with the delivery of news, events and social elements. The creation of a native mobile app (as opposed to an HTML5 site) also enables users to better interact with the businesses and information in the app. In addition, the branding opportunities are also better for a native app. Our marketing plan to promote the app within the community includes window stickers, information cards, and advertisements.

Long term, the app will continue to evolve as the technology evolves. And as smart phone usage continues to trend upward, we project that CenterState Connect will become even more widely used and more valuable to both member businesses and users. *To learn more about CenterState Connect, contact Elle Hanna at (315) 470-1800 or [ehanna@centerstateceo.com](mailto:ehanna@centerstateceo.com)*

### CenterState Connect users can:

- Download the app, free, for iPhone, iPad, BlackBerry and Android devices
- Search for businesses and get information such as website, phone number, affiliations and special offers
- Get walking or driving directions
- Stay connected to local news and events
- Share a listing, news article, or event on Facebook or Twitter