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BIZBUZ

San Diego business management trends, news and event coverage.

[Q&A with John Ohanian, CEO, 211 San Diego](#)

FRIDAY, 05 SEPTEMBER 2008

bizSD: What does 211 do?

Ohanian: You've heard of 411 and 911, we're kind of in between. We're a connection point for the community during a time of personal crisis or a widespread disaster. And what that really means is there are thousands of organizations in San Diego that provide help to people, but how do you know about them? They're not advertised, and if you're looking in the Yellow Pages or White Pages, good luck. So what we do is have trained call specialists listen to your situation. Maybe you're in need of food, or utility assistance, or job training, or health insurance; we have trained specialists that put you in touch with the resources in the community that can help you.

bizSD: Where did this idea come from?

Ohanian: Well, I didn't come up with this idea; it was my predecessors. There was an information line in San Diego for the past 20 years, but it was a hard number to remember and people didn't know about it. So we were designated by the public utilities commission to use the number 211 for health and human services.

In 2007 when the wildfires hit San Diego, half a million people were evacuated and the one number that was given out to the public from the county of San Diego was 211. We received over 120,000 calls to help people during that personal crisis.

bizSD: Would you say that the wildfires played a large role in putting you on the map here in San Diego?

Ohanian: Absolutely. No one really knew about 211 before that. I didn't know about it. It's a growing moment to provide this type of access.

bizSD: Where were you at before this?

Ohanian: Formerly I was with the Alzheimer's association in town, and before that the Jewish Community Center. So I've been in non-profit for about 15 years.

bizSD: What drives you to non-profit? Why do you like non-profit so much?

Ohanian: Having a purpose. I think I could probably do a lot of different things, but coming to work and knowing the people we help everyday need a place like 211. So it's my goal to make it as easy as possible for more and more people to get that help that they need.

bizSD: How have you helped organizations in the past?

Ohanian: A misconception is that 211 is a government organization. We're a non-profit. We're privately funded. We do have contracts with the county and provide services for them, as well as other non-profits. When you talk about non-profits in the community we help them as well. Because if you think about it, they get inundated with calls from people who are in need but they don't provide the right service - either the person who calls doesn't make enough money, doesn't live in the right zip code or what not. Instead of non-profits having to advertise their organization, if we direct them from 211, we get them to the right place the first time they call.

bizSD: How are you helping with hurricane relief?

Ohanian: Last October we were hit with the wildfires and were kind of caught off-guard. During that time we had a lot of problems. Our website went offline and our database was not sufficient. Because of that we actually reached out to the community and friends in the County of San Diego. Greg Cox was in here. Paul Jacobs from Qualcomm said to me on the phone, "whatever Qualcomm resources you need, you have it to do what you need to do to get it done." So it's been a tremendous effort and Qualcomm's been involved for the last 9 months just getting us up to speed, as well as a lot of different players. When I head what was going on in Louisiana I reached out to my counterparts at 211 in Louisiana and they were overwhelmed. Again, those people who work in those call centers were being evacuated or flooded. So



John Ohanian, CEO, 211 San Diego

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their call center was overwhelmed with calls and we offered to be the overflow center. So whatever calls they couldn't handle we would actually be it.

We supplied them with our online database that was developed during the firestorm, and now we're using a seamless integration of systems. So for us it's a great win because we are able to take resources that were giving in the San Diego community and help our fellow 211's across the country.

bizSD: What's been the hardest part of running 211?

Ohanian: The sustainable funding. On the serious side of things, we had 35 staff when I started here and unfortunately, due to a lot of the funding issues that go on in our community, we're down to 25 people. So we're down 10 staff. The demand for 211 services is up 60 percent. So you can see how that provides a problem. Instead of having people who answer the call in 30 seconds, they're waiting 5 to 6 minutes.

My concern is, if people are calling 211, and they are not patient enough to wait on hold, are they not going to call back? Are they not going to get the help they need? The hardest part is getting the word out to the public that this is a service that is a necessity. That these people who do not get the service will end up falling in the safety net of our society.

bizSD: What can businesses or people do to help?

Ohanian: One is, a lot of companies like their employees volunteering. We have a volunteer program here for disasters like this. During the firestorms we actually had 1,200 volunteers come through and answer the call. Right now we're having difficulty getting volunteers because they are all at work and they've got busy lives. So volunteering programs would be great. And also financial support, we're a non profit, we provide a great service, I think we provide a great service to a lot of companies who have employees who have needs and are actually using our services. So we'd like to see companies step up and help us out.

[Watch the video interview featuring John Ohanian, CEO, 211.](#)

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