

THREE STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE

IN THE WAKE OF TWO HIGH-PROFILE SCANDALS, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS PREPARING TO MODERNIZE ITS CUSTOMER SERVICE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE DIGITAL AGE. HOWEVER, TO TRULY REVOLUTIONIZE THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE, AGENCIES WILL NEED TO DRIVE CULTURAL SHIFTS IN ADDITION TO TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION.

2014 was a tough year for the federal government's customer service programs. At a time when controversies surrounding the rollout of Healthcare.gov and accusations of poor service at the Department of Veterans Affairs dominated the 24-hour news cycle, attitudes toward government services reached near all-time lows among the general public as well as the federal workforce.¹

In response, federal agencies are gearing up for a revolution in customer service. But to date, most reforms have emphasized technological modernization rather than shifts in the way agencies perform customer service. To deliver a more efficient and satisfying citizen experience (CX), agencies can supplement current initiatives with three citizen-centric strategies:

1. Improve accountability through effective performance management,
2. Integrate channels of communication within and across agencies, and
3. Build public trust through engagement.



The State of Federal Customer Service

The key premise underpinning federal customer service reform is that agencies should strive to deliver a customer experience comparable in quality to the service one would expect to receive from the private sector. In a 2011 Executive Order, President Obama declared that executive departments that “provide significant services directly to the public shall provide those services in a manner that seeks to meet the customer service standard established...equal to the best in business.”²

In conjunction with the mandate, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) elevated customer service to the status of a Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goal and united a diverse array of senior-level federal executives in devising common strategies and best practices. Upon announcing its renewed focus on customer service, OMB charted a strategy around three goals: streamlining transactions to promote a positive user experience, developing standards for high-impact services, and utilizing technology to adapt public services for more convenient use in the Internet Age.³

Despite current efforts, the quality of public sector customer service continues to lag behind the private sector. In January 2015, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), a yearly cross-industry consumer survey, reported that federal agencies received a 64.4 citizen satisfaction rating – the lowest score recorded since ACSI began polling in 2007. To put that in perspective, of the 40 industries included in the study, federal customer service ranked second to last, well behind industries like healthcare (78), finance (75), and information technology (71).⁴

Three Strategies to Improve the Citizen Experience

Improving Accountability through Effective Performance Management

Effective performance management (PM) can be the hallmark of successful customer service programs in the public and private sectors alike. Major online retailers, for instance, often monitor more than a dozen customer service metrics like “order defect rate” and “negative feedback rate” to better understand their performance against historical trends, as well as to identify and address problems before they do damage to the brand.

In the public sector, the Government Performance Results and Modernization Act (GPRAMA) requires agencies to set customer service standards and performance metrics, track them against targets or goals, and ensure they are easily available to the public.⁵ Nevertheless, recent

“IT IS CRITICAL FOR AGENCIES TO GAUGE HOW SERVICES ARE MEETING THEIR CUSTOMERS’ NEEDS, WHILE ALSO SUSTAINING AND FOCUSING AGENCY EFFORTS ON CONTINUING IMPROVEMENTS IN SERVICE DELIVERY.”

- GAO, OCTOBER 2014

evidence from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) indicates that most agencies are yet to leverage PM effectively. Most tellingly, an October 2014 report found that of six agencies studied for compliance with GPRAMA performance and transparency mandates, none received a passing score.⁶

GAO did award favorable marks to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) for its customer service related to veterans’ disability compensation and the Veterans Group Life Insurance (VGLI) program. For example, VBA set PM targets such as “increase compensation claims processing quality to 89 percent accuracy,” while working to increase the rate of disability claims received online from a baseline of 2 percent in 2013 to 20 percent in 2015.⁷ Further, VBA assesses its progress yearly and uses its findings to determine targets for the following year.

Although this should provide federal agencies with hope, these reforms have yet to be fully implemented government-wide. GAO was quick to note that since its first study on customer service in 1997, the proportion of federal managers using PM tools correctly has risen only from 32 percent to 40 percent.⁸

Integrating Channels of Communication Within and Across Agencies

OMB’s stated emphasis on shifting customer service interactions to online platforms represents an important step in helping federal agencies close the gap with the private sector. 77 percent of consumers expect to use multiple channels of communication when interacting with a service provider.⁹ Citizens should, no doubt, have similar expectations when interacting with federal agencies.

Still, complications can arise if the information citizens receive from one channel – whether on a government website, over the phone, or on social media – is out of sync with the others. Integrating

channels of communication can be one of the most difficult challenges facing customer service reform. It requires substantial coordination of IT capabilities to enable seamless portability of user data across multiple platforms, as well as rigorous staff training to ensure that citizens receive a clear and consistent message, both within and across agencies.

One of the most important steps the federal government has taken to achieve greater channel integration is the OMB's establishment of the Customer Service Community of Practice (CoP), tasked with driving interagency collaboration on CAP goals. Over the next several months, the CoP will meet with stakeholders ranging from Members of Congress to frontline customer service staff, share best practices, and create a set of common metrics that can be used to benchmark cross-agency performance.¹⁰

Building Public Trust through Engagement

But perhaps most importantly for federal agencies, winning the trust of the customers they serve isn't simply about providing high quality public services. It's also about giving them a voice in the process. One way is through citizen feedback tools like customer surveys or comment boxes. The CoP has proposed implementing a cross-agency customer feedback tool and is currently soliciting feedback by independent

experts in preparation for pilot testing. Since instituting a customer satisfaction survey in 2010, citizens have helped VBA identify 97 process improvements and 55 have already been implemented.¹¹

Federal agencies can also leverage new digital channels that build engagement in more proactive ways. Across the federal government, agencies are using crowdsourcing and public competitions on sites like Challenge.gov to encourage citizens to participate in solving the country's most difficult social and technological problems.¹² Agencies are also taking to social media to answer users' questions and engage in meaningful discussion. By tuning in to their customers and citizens through a diverse array of channels, agencies can reach greater numbers of the American public than ever before, better anticipate the needs their citizens, and tailor their services accordingly.

By approaching each and every interaction with citizens as an opportunity to improve performance and engage with the citizens they serve, federal agencies can become more efficient, deliver a more satisfying customer experience, and perhaps change Americans' perceptions of the public institutions that serve them.

About GBC

Government Business Council (GBC), the research arm of Government Executive Media Group, is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis and insight. GBC partners with industry to share best practices with top government decision makers, understanding the deep value inherent in industry's experience engaging and supporting federal agencies.

About HighPoint Global

HighPoint Global® is a nationally recognized management solutions company specializing in improving the Citizen Experience (CX) through improved constituent services – that unique intersection of where the government meets the citizen in providing valuable public services. Currently, we have more than 110,000 multi-channel touchpoints every day for U.S. government agencies to better serve and communicate across all channels with citizens effectively and efficiently. The result is better 'customer experience' for citizens.

Sources

1. ACSI Federal Government Report 2014, “Citizen Satisfaction with Federal Government Services Declines for Second Year”. American Customer Satisfaction Index: January 27, 2015 <http://www.theacsi.org/news-and-resources/customer-satisfaction-reports/reports-2014/acsi-federal-government-report-2014>; See also: “2014 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey Results: Employees Influencing Change”. Office of Personnel Management: October 2014 http://www.fedview.opm.gov/2014files/2014_Governmentwide_Management_Report.PDF
2. President Barack Obama, “Executive Order 13571: *Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service*” Executive Office of the President: April 27, 2011 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/27/executive-order-streamlining-service-delivery-and-improving-customer-ser>
3. Office of Management and Budget, “Cross-Agency Priority Goal, Customer Service: Overview”. Performance.gov: <http://www.performance.gov/node/3400/view?view=public#overview>; See also: OMB Deputy Director Beth Cobert, “Testimony Before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee”. March 12, 2014: <http://www.federalnewsradio.com/513/3580945/Beth-Cobert-Deputy-Director-for-Management-OMB>
4. ACSI Federal Government Report 2014, “Citizen Satisfaction with Federal Government Services Declines for Second Year”. American Customer Satisfaction Index: January 27, 2015 <http://www.theacsi.org/news-and-resources/customer-satisfaction-reports/reports-2014/acsi-federal-government-report-2014>
5. Clinton T. Brass, “Changes to the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA): Overview of the New Framework of Products and Processes”. Congressional Research Service: February 29, 2012 <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R42379.pdf>
6. Government Accountability Office, “Managing for Results: Selected Agencies Need to Take Additional Efforts to Improve Customer Service”. GAO-15-84: October 2014 p. 1 <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/666652.pdf>
7. GAO-15-84, p. 24-28
8. GAO-15-84, p. 13
9. Drew Kraus, Steve Blood, and Sorell Slaymaker, “Magic Quadrant for Contact Center Infrastructure”. Gartner Research: May 22, 2014 <https://www.gartner.com/doc/2747817/magic-quadrant-contact-center-infrastructure>
10. Office of Management and Budget, “Cross-Agency Priority Goal, Customer Service: Q4 2014 Progress Update”. Performance.gov: <http://www.performance.gov/node/3400/view?view=public#progress-update>
11. GAO-15-84, p. 33
12. Jenn Gustetic, Lea Shanley, Jay Benforado, and Arianne Miller, “Designing a Citizen Science and Crowdsourcing Toolkit for the Federal Government”. White House Open Gov Blog: December 2, 2014 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/12/02/designing-citizen-science-and-crowdsourcing-toolkit-federal-government>

Image: *Courtesy of Shutterstock*