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Meeting Citizen Expectations in New Ways

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Introduction

Citizens are becoming connoisseurs of customer experiences.

Like food critics, whose job is to evaluate every nuance of restaurant dining, citizens are often invited to make instant judgments about their impressions of customer interactions. "Will you respond to a survey about your experience?" is often the opening question when they contact telecommunications firms and financial service companies or the closing question when they're completing a transaction with retail establishments, from pharmacies and coffee shops to department stores and restaurants.

For government contact centers, this "What's your opinion about our service?" environment translates into an atmosphere of elevated discernment. Sophisticated citizens' private sector experiences dictate their expectations of what level of service they want to receive in their public sector interactions.

Besides being acutely aware of how they are treated, citizens are now cognizant of the multiple ways they can access needed information. They might be more inclined to search for an online solution to their issue, rather than being led through a series of automated questions and waiting on the telephone. They might type a few commands into their smartphones, looking for instant e-guidance. Or they might search for chat functionality. Increasingly, citizens expect to get the information they want, when they want it, and in whatever way they want to access it.

This white paper provides an overview of what citizens want and expect in their customer service interactions with federal agencies and outlines eight steps for establishing an integrated multichannel contact center experience that meets citizens' needs efficiently.

What Americans Think About Federal Responsiveness

Meeting the needs of the American citizenry is daunting, because U.S. federal agencies offer services to more than 308 million Americans a day—making this country home to one of the largest contingents of citizen customers in the world.

So far, citizens have found their government contacts to be lacking in what they want. In fact, extrapolating from a survey of 1,000 Americans 18 or older who were asked to gauge their customer service expectations and perceptions of federal agencies' customer service, 83 percent of Americans say that federal agencies can improve on customer service.

Researchers in this study found that many Americans are willing to fund such an improvement: 42 percent indicated they would pay $10 more in taxes for a better customer experience.

Where Americans See Room for Improvement

Generally, citizens see a "need for speed" when it comes to getting their questions answered, whether it is in the public sector or the private sector. From the "Uncle Sam at Your Service: 2010 Federal Customer Experience Study," which queried 1,000 adults, the following needs emerged:

- **Faster responses** – 53 percent thought that federal agencies should reduce the time it takes to respond to requests and resolve issues.

- **More-consistent responses** – 33 percent indicated that information received as a result of their inquiries was not consistent.

- **More information, online** – 85 percent wanted federal agencies to provide more information and make it available online.

This dissatisfaction with inconsistent information and lack of sufficient multichannel contact options is a priority concern shared by the executive branch of the U.S. government.

In 2010 the Office of Management and Budget convened the White House Forum for Modernizing Government. The outcome was a call for agencies to form a "community of practice" that would elevate and professionalize customer service across federal agencies by focusing on customer service basics, including

- Providing consistent service across all communication channels

- Responding to inquiries as quickly as possible

- Remaining compassionate and respectful in response to all citizen requests

U.S. Government Executives Weigh In

Government executives themselves "feel the pain" described by constituents, both as leaders charged with meeting citizen demands and as consumers of information themselves.

In early 2011, a randomly selected sample of subscribers to *Government Executive* magazine was invited to complete an online survey about the current state of citizen engagement in the federal government. The results from the 204 federal civilian and defense agency employees who responded indicated

- **Frustration** – 57 percent described citizens' attitude toward government as frustrated.

- **A need for more responsiveness** – 45 percent view government as responsive today.

- **Increased demand** – 60 percent expect citizen interaction in agency work to increase in the future.

Meeting Multichannel Demands

As government executives encounter increasing demand for their services—because of a growing population and a more demanding citizenry—they must answer the question "How will we embrace multichannel interactions with our customers to meet their expectations and carry out our agency's mission?"

Most agencies are already engaged in the process of introducing new channels of communication and responsiveness, depending on their constituencies. Today you will find various government organizations employing the following channels to respond to constituent inquiries:

- Contact centers

- Live chat

- E-mail

- Webcasts

- Social media (such as Facebook and Twitter)

- Integration of live chat into Facebook

- Mobile devices

- NetFAX

- Websites, such as govloop.com

Although no one agency has been recognized as using all of these avenues for communicating with the public, more are testing the waters by adding new capabilities. For instance, the U.S. Army is providing mobile phones to more of its soldiers, so the Army Training Support Center is investigating how it can provide support for its online education programs on mobile devices.

Moving to the Cloud for Solutions

As more federal response to citizens moves online, many government executives are facing decisions about how their agency will afford the programming to support this expansion of service.

In September 2009, the Obama administration announced its Federal Cloud Computing Initiative to greatly reduce waste and lower operating costs. The government's "cloud-first" policy, introduced in December 2010, mandates that each agency CIO identify three "must move" services.

Identifying key channel services for constituent response that can be moved to the cloud meets the requirements of this policy and will contribute to the savings projected by the initiative. For instance, solutions such as adding chat capability or establishing a Web community can be moved to the cloud.

How One Office Meets Escalating Demand

Anyone who has ever filled out the Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form knows that it is a challenge. In 2010 the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Student Aid was contacted 10 million times about this form—and other aspects of student aid—via e-mail, live chat, and telephone.

Organizing around its customers, the office's Student Experience Group has handled a large spike in inquiries recently, as more people are seeking additional education and the funding to pursue it. When the office upgraded its live chat platform, the increase in functionality caused a 3,000 percent increase in use of that channel.

Contact center agents handle three chats at the same time, using standardized scripting so they can copy and paste from the knowledgebase. The goal is to meet students' needs online, so the students do not have to phone in. Chat is now the second-most-used feature (behind the telephone) for students contacting the office.

Preferences for How to Interact with the Government

The student aid office experience underscores the importance of demographics in how citizens want to engage with their government. One study showed that 85 percent of adults want to make phone contact and 77 percent also want online access, including e-mail, forums and communities, chat, and social networking. Among adults 18 to 34 years old, 92 percent expect to make contact online, 87 percent by phone, and 79 percent in person.

Here's the bottom line: when they are online, 86 percent of citizens want to connect when it is convenient for them, not solely when government offices are open. They want to get faster answers to their questions (80 percent) or more-detailed information (72 percent) by inquiring online.

Benefits of Multichannel Integration

Multichannel integration gives citizens what they want and expect. Because it can reduce the volume of calls into contact centers, adding channels can save taxpayers significant amounts of money. Finally, a well-designed and -operated online channel can make answering questions and resolving issues for citizens faster.

Eight Steps to a Fully Integrated Multichannel Contact Center Experience

To meet the demands of the discerning public, it takes a well-established protocol to help prioritize the importance of each advance toward full integration. Consider these eight steps for a successful launch:

1. Start by Establishing Your Organization's Knowledgebase

Ensure that everyone who asks a question will receive the same answer, by preparing a knowledgebase with scripted answers to the most frequently asked questions.

- Organize the pertinent data according to "what citizens want to know," rather than "how our agency is organized."

- Make responses digestible. Short, simple, and direct sentences are better than complex ones for responses that might be accessed on a smartphone, for instance.

- Information can be coded by importance, should be updated frequently as new information is acquired, and should be reviewed periodically for its continuing relevance.

2. Empower Your Customers

Most customers don't really want to get to know you better. They just want answers. If they can manage a self-service way to take care of their needs on your Website, many of them will be happy.

An achievable goal is to handle at least 90 percent of inquiries online. Medicare and Medicaid are hitting that mark after a recent revamp of the system serving their 80 million eligible constituents.

The payoff of moving to self-service can be substantial. Agencies that implement self-service have experienced reductions in their e-mail workloads of 30 percent to 50 percent and reductions in their contact center workloads of 10 percent to 30 percent. You can start by providing a "Top Answers" section on your Website, if you do not have this in place already.

3. Empower Your Frontline Employees

Your frontline employees need access to the same information the public reads online. At the same time, these employees should be able to follow the chain of an interaction with a citizen, whether that person has called in, e-mailed, or chatted with others in your organization, so the citizen does not need to start anew with any contact to resolve an issue.

4. Offer a Multichannel Choice

Customers today are agile. They can—and will—use multiple ways to contact you. If they encounter a complicated or lengthy automated voice message, they are likely to hang up and log onto their computer for a faster response. Or they might try to get answers from a Facebook page.

The more "channel bases" you can cover with accurate and speedy information, the better your customers will feel about their interactions with your organization. Direct customers to the best way they can meet their needs, as suggested by the following examples:

- In your "on hold" telephone message, notify customers that they might want to look up the Top Answers FAQ on your Website.

- Notify customers of chat availability.

- Provide telephone numbers—and hours of availability—on chat screens.

5. Listen to Your Customers

Customers are accustomed to being asked for their opinions about whether a service provider has met their needs. So ask.

- If the issue is likely to be resolved immediately, offer a brief survey at the moment of service.

- If the customer will need to take steps to resolve the issue, send a follow-up e-mail within 24 hours of answering that person's inquiry.

- Ask open-ended questions, which can sometimes provide responses that are the most meaningful and actionable.

6. Design Seamless Experiences

Silos within organizations can make a customer feel like a pinball bouncing around, trying to get answers from different departments or offices.

If your agency utilizes a single customer record, that will go a long way toward unifying the experience for the customer. Workflow design and automation mean that customer files can advance to the next department without the customer's lifting a finger. When the U.S. Department of Education Office of Student Aid realized that its live chat platform did not work properly with Firefox and Safari, it took steps to upgrade it so that Macintosh users would have the same experience as PC users.

All customers should have the same experience in seeking answers from your organization.

7. Engage Customers Proactively

Handling incoming contacts occupies most of the time and effort in federal agencies' interactions with the public. Taking the initiative and reaching out to citizens is another way to engage them. Communicating with customers in this way requires you to have the ability to segment groups of customers, based on what types of information they want to receive.

"Pushing" information requires sensitivity to the timeliness of the information and how frequently you reach out with it. One solution is to offer information by subscription, whether via e-mail, Facebook, or Twitter updates. For instance, the National Cancer Institute tweets about pertinent newsletter articles, clinical trials, and other matters of interest to its patients, physicians, and researchers who have subscribed.

8. Measure and Improve Continuously

Measuring results depends on your organization's mission. For the Transportation Security Administration, it might be reducing negative interactions. For the Department of Commerce, it is more likely job growth. By what yardstick are you measuring success?

Once you've decided what key performance indicators to monitor for multichannel interactions, it is essential to establish a baseline for those analytics. Communicate the measures—and the baseline—to frontline employees and all personnel, so they understand what is critical to success and why. Find a way to make those goals visible and vital to the people who will help you meet them.

Conclusion

Analytics help drive decisions about how to handle citizen responses, where to make organizational improvements, and how to make inroads toward those improvements.

Customers predictably want five-star experiences the first time and every time in contacts they have with an organization, but the reality is that it can take some time to make your organization agile and aligned enough to score perfectly on every response.

To see where you are on the continuum, take the following baseline survey to help determine how effectively you believe your organization is delivering on customer experiences.

Yes, it is possible to deliver a feast of customer satisfaction to the citizenry every day and to receive rave reviews for your efforts. Ironically, it is not as difficult or costly to accomplish as you might expect. More than anything, it requires a commitment to delighting your customers and making that a priority, using the right channels. The time to start is right now.

Appendix A: Customer Experience Assessment

Baseline your customer experience delivery by assessing how easily your citizens can communicate with your agency or department.

	STRONGLY AGREE *5 POINTS*	AGREE *4 POINTS*	NEUTRAL *3 POINTS*	DISAGREE *2 POINTS*	STRONGLY DISAGREE *1 POINT*	SCORE
Citizens are empowered to help themselves when they need information from us.						
Citizens can easily contact us via the channel of their choice (voice, e-mail, online, chat).						
Regardless of how citizens contact us, they will receive the same answer to the same question.						
When a citizen calls, we know that that person also just received an informational e-mail from us.						
Citizens have the ability to track and view their interactions, such as requests for information, service incidents, and form completion.						
Our employees have a single view of all citizen interactions, regardless of type.						
When we engage citizens, we provide them relevant, personalized information.						
We capture the voice of the citizen by proactively seeking feedback and follow-up.						
We continually exceed our service goals, such as for our first-call resolution rate and service level agreements.						
We help connect citizens with each other (via communities, forums, social networks).						
					TOTAL	
Score Assessment: 40–50 Superstar	30–39 Targeted improvements required			0–29 Broad improvements required		

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