Transforming the citizen experience

Strategies for building a customer-centric government culture
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BY RUTRELL YASIN

Efforts by the Obama administration over the past few years to raise the bar on how agencies engage and deliver services to citizens could make 2015 a transformative year for the “citizen experience” in federal government.

Challenges with a number of the administration’s high visibility programs such as Healthcare.gov and the scandal over long patient wait times for veterans seeking health care have driven home the message that the federal government has to step up its game dramatically when it comes to customer engagement.

In fact, citizen satisfaction with federal government services has declined for the second year in a row, according to the latest American Customer Satisfaction Index report released in January. Citizen satisfaction dipped 2.6 percent to an ACSI score of 64.4, on a scale from 0 to 100. “Satisfaction with federal services overall now dips below the score of 65.4 in 2010 when this measure showed similar erosion,” according to the ACSI Federal Government Report 2014.

“Overall, the services of the federal government continue to deliver a level of customer satisfaction below the private sector, and the downturn this year exacerbates the difference,” the report states. “Among more than 40 industries covered by the ACSI, only Internet service providers have a lower score.”

According to a 2011 Meritalk study, called “Uncle Sam at Your Service: Federal Customer Experience Study,” 83 percent of the citizens surveyed wanted to see government citizen experience improved. Forty-two percent said they would be willing to pay more in taxes if they could get better customer service.

Experts say that improving the federal customer — or citizen — experience (also known as CX) is important to how Americans view their country. “Data shows the worse a federal customer’s experience is, the less likely that person is to say that they are proud of our country and optimistic about our country’s future,” said Rick Parrish, senior analyst serving customer experience professionals with Forrester Research.

Laying the foundation for an enhanced citizen experience

To help agencies move into the new era of digital services, the President’s 2015 Management Agenda, entitled “Creating a 21st Century Government,” focuses on improving citizen service through smarter IT delivery, better use of shared services, more innovation through better use of data and partnerships, and culture change.

The White House promoted the goal of delivering “a world-class customer service experience for citizens and businesses” by making customer service one of its cross-agency priority (CAP) goals. To support this, the General Services Administration created a training and services catalogue to support the Customer Experience initiative. GSA also created a CX index so agencies can measure their progress by quantifying their level of citizen engagement. Similarly, in the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010, Congress directed agencies to establish a balanced set of performance indicators to be used in measuring progress toward performance goals, including customer service.

Last year, the Obama administration also formally launched the U.S. Digital Service, a small team of IT experts charged with helping agencies create exceptional service delivery platforms.

The Digital Service team, helmed by Mikey Dickerson, the former Google executive who was part of the team that helped fix Healthcare.gov, will take private- and public-sector best practices and help scale them across agencies with a focus on the...
customer experience in mind. Additionally, the administration released an initial version of a Digital Services Playbook that lays out best practices for building effective digital services like Web and mobile applications and will serve as a guide for agencies across government.

Focused attention on funding, people and resources, which is really what the CAP goals represent, will help move the customer experience forward, said Herb Strauss, assistant deputy commissioner for systems and deputy chief information officer with SSA.

High-profile public-facing agencies, such as the IRS, GSA, SSA and VA have begun exploring organizational changes to improve the citizen experience.

“SSA is focused on the future, on 2025 and the path to 2025,” said Strauss of the SSA at the ELC Summit. SSA spends a lot of money in different areas. “We are rationalizing how we spend that money so we can address citizen service more effectively, customer service more fully and customer experience in ways that allow our citizens to transact business with their federal government,” Strauss said.

On the customer-service continuum, most agencies have far to go

Currently, each agency is on its own journey when it comes to moving to an improved citizen experience, said Abby Herriman, senior vice president of delivery and innovation with HighPoint Global, a consulting company that helps government agencies improve their citizen experience.

Just where are most agencies on this continuum? “I would say that this hobbit has not left the shire, yet,” Herriman said.

The first step is moving toward a transformational approach to citizen experience.

“We recognize that there is a problem, and that is a good place to be,” Herriman said. In 2011, President Obama issued Executive Order 1357, which was all about trying to provide better service across government. The President’s 2015 Management Agenda broadened the mandate to use technology and meet the citizens where they are.

The U.S. Postal Service is probably further along than many agencies, Herriman noted. It is immediately apparent that the Postal Service has taken a true citizen experience approach to reinventing itself when you visit the agency’s website, Herriman said.

“When you look at what they are providing, there are Web tools available on the website so you don’t have to call anybody to calculate how much it is going to cost to mail something,” she said.

Customized, personalized products are on the website. Citizens can get stamps with pictures of their children or dog on them. So that meets the individual’s need for customization that people expect from the private sector, Herriman explained.

Plus, the Postal Service is partnering with businesses in the private sector to offer these components.

“That is going to be the key for a lot of other agencies, finding those right private-public sector partnerships that can provide the level of services citizens are expecting,” Herriman said.

The Postal Service is at the far end of the continuum where other agencies need to be soon. However, competitive pressure forced the Postal Service to make that transition happen quickly. The agency did not have a choice. Although it is heavily regulated by law, the agency is up against heavy private competition such as Federal Express and UPS.

The agency had to up its game or it would not exist anymore. That isn’t the case with other federal agencies. “We don’t, as citizens, have another choice. We are forced into this interaction. So in order to make a
change there isn’t a burning platform like the Postal Service had,” Herriman said.

A lot of change in customer service is happening at the state and local level, but the federal sector confronts a bigger challenge, Herriman said. For one thing, the sheer size of the federal government makes it difficult to effect change. Sixty-four percent of federal government employees are spread across 48,000 offices at 82 agencies. “So think about making change with that many people spread out across the country,” Herriman said.

Even within agencies and offices, there are often stovepiped bureaucracies and myriad separate contracts that divide one aspect of a public-facing program from others. For example, one contract may govern an agency’s website channel, while another governs contact centers, and maybe a third governs some of the agency’s processes and data analytics.

Agencies that provide basic necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, and health care are the ones citizens are going to look for to have the best citizen experience, Herriman said.

The Homeland Security Department and its various components are closely aligned with the topic of customer service, said Wayne Baker, associate chief of the U.S Customs and Immigration Services’ Verification Division. USCIS’s focus has been on enhancing the citizen and workers’ personal experience through E-Verify, the Web-based system set up to assist employers in verifying eligibility of employees — both U.S. and foreign citizens — working in the U.S.

Currently over 600,000 employers are enrolled in E-Verify with 1,500 companies signing up each week. Moreover, 1.5 million worksites are using E-Verify, and in 2014 the agency processed 20 million inquirers. E-Verify compares the information on an employee I-9 form with Social Security Administration and DHS records. “So we have a collaborative effort with SSA and many other agencies with this program” Baker said, during the ELC Summit.

E-Verify scored an 86 out of 100 on the American Customer Satisfaction Index in 2013, 20 points above the federal government average that year. In addition, 98.3 percent of its queries are automatically processed within seconds. “So our focus has been on the customer service. We strive to continue in that area and are trying to identify and build new Web features that complement the E-Verify process and empower workers,” Baker said.

To that end, in October, USCIS launched the My E-Verify website, a one-stop shop for employees to create and maintain secure personal accounts and access new features for identity protection.

Map the customer journey, ecosystem

Going forward “agencies have to reinvent themselves from the outside in — from the customer’s perspective inward,” according to Forrester’s Parrish.

It is a big task that involves reinventing people, processes, policies and data within your organization from the customer’s perspective inward instead of from the top down, Parrish said at the ELC.

An essential step in this direction is “customer journey and ecosystem mapping,” he said. Most agencies are not applying this approach, yet. Agency managers not only have to map how they are providing services to the public, they also have to map the journey their customers take to achieve a particular goal.

“This includes not just the touch points you know, own and influence, but the touch points you don’t even know about that are crucial to the customer’s journey,” said Parrish.

For instance, in mapping how a citizen might obtain his benefits from an agency, it would be too simple to note that the customer goes to the agency website, signs in securely, looks at his account, and requests a particular service. What the agency manager misses is the customer waking up for the 15th morning in a row and saying, “Today is the day I have to apply for that benefit.” Later, the customer’s spouse reminds him over dinner to apply for that benefit thing. So the customer emails his sister and says, “You did this last week. How was it?” The sister says, “Terrible. Avoid it at all costs.”

“These are all the important touch points from the customer journey that you don’t know about unless you map it from the customer’s perspective and the ecosystems behind it,” Parrish said. This is what most agencies are not doing as they map the customer journey and ecosystem, he said.

Another bit of advice: focus on emotion. Delivering a compelling citizen experience requires a focus on ease, effectiveness and emotion.

Parrish noted the language of the White House’s customer service goals includes many references to ease and efficiency. However, Forrester’s research indicates “the biggest boost in customer experience comes when people feel that the experience is not only easy and effective but emotionally compelling.”

Adopt a case management approach

Citizens are typically using more than one channel to interact with government. So it is important for agency managers to pay close attention to the information available through those multiple channels, HighPoint Global’s Herriman said.

Federal customers expect whoever they are interacting with to have all the information they have given the agency or agencies about their particular situation, whether they are interacting with a Web tool, looking for information online, interacting with a mobile application, calling someone on the phone or interacting with a person at an agency office.

“They don’t want to have to reiterate all
aspects of their problem first online with someone and reiterate it all again once they get somebody on the phone,” Herriman said. “Having access to all the data and really providing a case management approach to handling the citizen experience is really where the focus is.”

**Create a Chief Customer Officer**

Agency managers also should consider bringing in a chief customer officer to facilitate the spread and adoption of the citizen experience across their agencies, experts say.

Agencies have high level executives who focus on finance, operations and technology, so there needs to be someone at the same level for the customer, Parrish asserts.

They are tasked with reinventing the approach that the agency is taking toward customer and citizen services. This shows agencies are willing to invest, and are doing it from the highest levels of the organization and those are all good things to move out of the awareness stage to the transitional phase, Herriman said.

The GSA hired a chief customer officer last year. And in January, the VA created and hired a Chief Veterans Experience Officer who will help harmonize and integrate the many benefits programs the agency offers to vets. VA tapped private sector executive Tom Allin, who previously worked at Jolibee Foods and McDonalds. Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald also has rolled out a massive reorganization of the VA’s vast regional presence in order to align all VA programs toward a single regional framework that will be capable of addressing all aspects of a veteran’s needs: health care, education, housing, loans, burial services and more.

McDonald, former CEO of consumer-goods giant Procter & Gamble, has been pushing to refocus the VA on customer service since taking over the troubled agency in July 2014, following a scandal over long patient wait times for veterans seeking health care and falsification of records by VA employees and managers to cover the delays.

Herriman said her concern is that, once agencies bring in a chief customer officer, there is a danger that ownership for driving improvements will lie solely on that person’s shoulders. And that would be defeating the cause because the chief customer officer needs to be a facilitator, not an owner. “They need to drive the change in the mindset of everyone in that organization, especially those on the front lines interacting with the customer,” Herriman explained. “That is where the customer experience takes place, so you have to have the people engaged in that experience.

The Veterans Affairs Department recently implemented several efforts focused on improving customer service, including appointing a Chief Veterans Experience Officer.
directly owning that experience itself.”

GSA’s chief customer officer, Phaedra Chrousos, said as much in a blog posted four months after she was on the job. Chrousos acknowledged that it was clear GSA employees were aware of the importance the role that customer experience plays in the agency successfully fulfilling its mission. However, “it was also clear that GSA often tripped over its own size and breadth of service.”

Each customer experience initiative, she noted, “resided within specific departments and teams separated by function, geography, or both.” The GSA has 12,000 employees, five functional offices, and 11 regional centers, so few people both within and outside the agency were aware of the initiatives.

“These initial realizations meant that my role as CCO was much less about beating the drum for customer experience and much more about harnessing the enthusiasm at GSA and expanding on, scaling, and coordinating isolated efforts,” Chrousos wrote.

“We recognize that an agency we are working with may not have the authority to change everyone in an agency to move people to think about a citizen-centric approach,” said HighPoint Global’s Herriman. However, they might own a single channel like the contact center. So the company is working with a maturity model that really allows an agency to optimize a single channel and to start more from a grassroots level to connect a contact center with the website — for instance, outfitting a Web application team with the Web chat tools that are in use at a corresponding contact center.

“Once you start to tie those channels together then it starts to grow from there. And then you can get enough force and momentum where you reach a tipping point and the rest of the agency will follow,” Herriman said. In other words, needed changes can come about from top down as well as from the bottom up.