GOVERNMENT FOR THE PEOPLE

The road to customer-centered services

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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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- Providing assistance to federal agencies to improve their management and operations, and to strengthen their leadership capacity
- Conducting outreach to college campuses and job seekers to promote public service
- Identifying and celebrating government's successes so they can be replicated across government
- Advocating for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service
- Generating research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing our federal government
- Enhancing public understanding of the valuable work civil servants perform

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Great customer service from the federal government can change, and sometimes save lives. Just ask some of the 13 million students who went to college in 2014 thanks to financial aid services from the Department of Education. Or the half-million survivors of natural disasters who sought help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency to rebuild their lives. Or the suicidal veteran who called a crisis line at the Department of Veterans Affairs and, after talking to a skilled and empathetic counselor, latched onto a glimmer of hope.

Government has pockets of excellence where its customers are well-served. Yet the federal government overall falls short on delivering the customer experience citizens expect and deserve. In fact, federal agencies score far behind almost all industries and sectors, including state and local governments, in several customer satisfaction measures.

Federal agencies should improve the customer experience for many reasons. At agencies such as the Social Security Administration and VA, providing high-quality service is the core mission. For an agency such as the Department of Health and Human Services, creating a good customer experience supports mission-critical goals such as increasing the number of Americans with health insurance. In addition to directly supporting an agency's mission, a good customer experience can contribute to savings that can be allocated elsewhere in the agency. For example, providing customers with easy-to-use self-service options can reduce traffic to more costly contact centers.

The Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services are engaged in a multiyear effort to explore how government can meet the daunting challenge of improving the customer experience. In our 2014 report, "Serving Citizens: Strategies for Customer-Centered Government in the Digital Age," we outlined a vision for improving the customer experience by making citizens' needs the driving force behind the design and delivery of services, and highlighted successful federal initiatives that have done just that.

But how customer-centered is the federal government overall? In this report we examine progress in agencies that provide a high volume of services to the public, and explore the extent to which leaders believe their agencies are embracing a customer-centered approach.

We found that most leaders acknowledge room for improvement. Some of them said government is not fully recognizing and addressing major customer experience challenges and, based on citizen satisfaction scores, the public seems to agree. Yet many leaders said their agencies deliver a high-quality customer experience and, by giving them an average grade of "B" on customer service, they seemed to hold a more optimistic view than the public did.

Strengthening the customer experience requires agency personnel to have a customer-centered mindset. But it also requires better coordination among agencies and within subcomponents—customer needs often cross organizational boundaries. Government can take an enterprise approach to improving customer service by collecting and sharing standardized data on the customer experience across agencies. It can also establish formal collaborations to pool knowledge and resources and accomplish shared goals.

Government has taken important steps on the long road to becoming more focused on the customer. This report highlights some of those initiatives and demonstrates there is much work to be done to put the needs of Americans, and others who seek services, at the center of everything government does.

FOUR PRIMARY CHALLENGES

THAT AGENCIES SHOULD ADDRESS TO BECOME MORE CUSTOMER-CENTERED AND IMPROVE SERVICES TO THE PUBLIC

01

DATA

Agencies are not making the best use of feedback and customer data to drive decisions and investments.

Leaders said they have plenty of customer experience data, but this information is often incomplete, outdated or not useful for drawing actionable insights. Data are often not shared across organizational units or service delivery channels, making it difficult to create a complete picture of an agency's customers and their needs. And staff are not always able to act on the data due to insufficient investments or legal obstacles.

Agencies should:

• Collect feedback and customer data on specific agency transactions and use those data, rather than assumptions, to make decisions and investments to improve services.

• Create a consistent and seamless customer experience by analyzing, sharing and integrating customer data across the organization's divisions, programs and service delivery channels.

• Share data with other agencies and the public on key services and transactions to establish government-wide measures of service quality, identify replicable successes and target improvements so the agencies' actions will have the greatest impact for customers.

02

GOVERNANCE

Many agencies lack a clear customer experience strategy and a senior leader responsible for the customer experience.

Five of 12 agencies interviewed do not have a plan for improving customer service; nine of those 12 do not have a senior leader responsible for the customer experience.

Agencies should:

• Create, implement and annually update a customer experience plan based on customer research and data. Plans should articulate who agency customers are, what kind of experience they expect, and what specific steps staff will take to improve services. The plan should align with the agency's overall strategy and goals, and be communicated to all staff.

• Consider establishing a chief customer officer who reports to the head of the organization and has enough funding and staff to succeed. This could help instill a customer focus and ensure a single agency leader has the expertise, insight, authority and responsibility to address complex customer experience issues that cross agency divisions or offices.

03

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Poor communication and lack of engagement between federal agencies and their customers can lead to service delivery that is out of touch with what the public needs.

Some agencies neglect to conduct customer research or assess customer needs when designing, delivering or improving services.

Agencies should:

- Involve existing and potential customers in designing and testing new services, and have them provide feedback to support ongoing improvements.

- Conduct outreach campaigns that educate customers about new or improved services.

- Identify and fix problems before customers get frustrated enough to lodge formal complaints.

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04

WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Agencies are not doing enough to build a workforce that is fully prepared to create a great customer experience.

Most leaders said their agencies are hiring effectively for customer service skills, preparing staff to serve customers, and holding employees accountable for the quality of service delivery. However, agencies often focus only on the skills of employees who serve customers directly, rather than recognizing that most of their workforce affects the customer experience.

Agencies should:

- Focus on customer service during the hiring process by defining the skills needed to create a great customer experience and requiring candidates to demonstrate them.

- Encourage empathy and customer understanding—for example, by providing rotations into a job serving customers directly—and ensure employees are engaged and committed to their work.

- Include in employees' evaluations how successful they have been in delivering a good customer experience. Use customer feedback to measure that success.

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INTRODUCTION

Great customer service happens every day in some corners of the U.S. federal government. Just ask customers of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services application support center at 250 Broadway in San Francisco. The office garnered a perfect five-star rating from more than 80 customer reviews on Yelp, a website that crowdsources customer reviews.

Several of the Yelp reviews tell a version of a similar story: A panicked customer arrives at the Broadway office concerned about missing a deadline to update immigration paperwork. Due to an emergency, the individual made last-minute plans for international travel but cannot leave the country without updated paperwork. The customer tried to resolve the problem at other immigration offices in the area, but found staff who were unable to help and less than sympathetic about the person's plight. The distraught customer tries the Broadway office. Within a half-hour, one of the friendly staff members takes care of the issue.

Unfortunately, such high satisfaction with government services is not the norm. The federal government falls well behind most industries and sectors, including state and local governments, in several customer satisfaction measures. In fact, the government ranks second to last out of more than 40 industries measured by the American Customer Satisfaction Index, ahead only of internet service providers.[1] It ranks dead last in the 17 industries measured by Forrester's Customer Experience Index.[2]

And these low citizen satisfaction scores are not improving. The government's 2015 ACSI score of 63.9 out of 100 is its lowest in nine years, dropping 4.5 points since 2012.[3] This decline was driven by lower ratings for the courteousness and professionalism of federal staff, as well as a drop in satisfaction with government websites.

The fallout from a bad customer experience with government is much more than low numbers. It could mean a student does not attend college because the federal student aid application process was too complex to navigate. Or a veteran suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder waits months for care due to inefficient scheduling systems. Since these and other government customers may have nowhere else to turn, there can be serious consequences when the customer experience frustrates the people the agency is trying to help.

Government has tried to tackle the customer service challenge before. Improving customer service was a major component of the National Performance Review, a government-wide reform effort led by the Clinton administration in the 1990s. The Obama administration is now working hard to address this challenge. In 2011 the White House issued an executive order requiring that agencies create customer service plans and identify a signature initiative to improve services. Strengthening customer service is also one of 15 cross-agency priority goals, and the White House launched several efforts to support this goal, such as implementing a presidential award program for customer service and launching a community of practice.

The General Services Administration has also contributed to the effort. GSA collaborated with the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of State and the Social Security Administration to pilot FeedbackUSA, an effort to collect standardized customer feedback across

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1   American Customer Satisfaction Index, *ACSI Federal Government Report 2014*, January 27, 2015. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1SH8Cag

2   Rick Parrish, *The US Federal Customer Experience Index, 2015: A Benchmark of Federal Agencies, Highlighting the Drivers of Great Federal CX*, Forrester Research, Inc., August 13, 2015.

3   American Customer Satisfaction Index, *ACSI Federal Government Report 2015*, January 16, 2016. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1QGrlks

Does the government have "customers"?

Whether or not they are aware of it, everyone in this country is a government customer. Interactions range from passive consumption of public goods such as roads, national defense and disease prevention to active exchanges such as paying taxes and receiving benefits.

A staggering number of people living in the U.S. receive services directly from federal agencies, according to agency documents collected for this report. In fiscal 2014 the Department of Education delivered financial aid to almost 13 million students; the Department of Homeland Security screened more than 100 million travelers; the Department of State issued 14 million passports and passport cards; the Social Security Administration assisted 43 million visitors in field offices; the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services covered 100 million Americans through their health insurance programs; the IRS processed almost 150 million individual income tax returns; and the National Park Service welcomed nearly 300 million visitors. And these services represent only a fraction of what government provides.

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federal agencies. The agency also created a Digital Analytics Program that provides standardized data on web traffic to help agencies improve online interactions with government.

But the complex nature of the problem has left some experts questioning the extent to which real improvements are possible. With constant pressure to reduce budgets, some wonder if it is realistic to expect government to provide the quality of service citizens have become accustomed to from the private sector. Others in the customer experience community are concerned that, because government has a monopoly on most of its services, agencies lack sufficient incentives to improve customer service. Others suspect that the very nature of some government services, such as collecting taxes or enforcing regulations, will always lead to low customer ratings.

Yet every year some federal services overcome these challenges and get outstanding feedback. Customers of the National Park Service, which shares the top spot in Forrester's Federal Customer Experience Index with the U.S. Postal Service, report the agency "makes them proud of this country" and "is a good example of how the government should be."[4] The Social Security Administration produces online tools—including a "retirement estimator"—that consistently receive ACSI scores in the 90s (out of 100), which would be impressive even for the private sector. And in 2013 the Department of Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration earned an ACSI score of 96—the highest score ever achieved by any private or public institution.

Why government must improve

There are many reasons why the federal government must improve service delivery. First and foremost, providing high-quality services is central to the mission of many agencies, such as SSA and VA, which exist primarily to provide services to the public.

Good customer service is also linked to increased trust and confidence in government. Research shows that low levels of customer satisfaction with specific services reduce citizen trust and confidence in the federal government, which is now at an all-time low. A recent Pew Research Center survey found only 19 percent of Americans trust the government to do the right thing all or most of the time, down from 77 percent in 1964.[5]

Improving the customer experience can also help agencies save money, improve compliance and accomplish mission-critical goals more effectively. For example, SSA made progress in reducing overpayments to Supplemental Security Income beneficiaries by creating a user-friendly mobile app that makes it easier for beneficiaries to report their incomes accurately. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection is improving the arrival experience for international travelers to support the government-wide goal of growing our economy through increased tourism. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services is streamlining the medical insurance application process to increase the number of Americans with coverage. Regardless of an agency's goals, strategies such as providing self-service options can free up resources that can be used to support other programs.

The road to customer-centered government

In our 2014 report "Serving Citizens: Strategies for Customer-Centered Government in the Digital Age," the Partnership for Public Service and Accenture examined how government can improve services by becoming more customer-focused and offered successful examples of this approach. Simply put, we described a customer-centered gov-

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4   Ibid.

5   Pew Research Center, *Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government*, November 2015. Retrieved from http://pewrsr.ch/1R3Whww

Customer experience versus customer service

For our purposes, "customer experience" refers to the overall experience people have when interacting with government. "Customer service" is one aspect of that; it refers to a specific interaction, such as when a citizen calls an agency contact center about a benefit application. The overall customer experience includes other factors, such as the entire process of applying for and receiving the benefit, and how interactions with an agency shape someone's view of that agency and government in general. Increasingly, federal agencies are focusing on improving the overall customer experience, as opposed to focusing more narrowly on individual customer service interactions.

ernment as one in which customers' needs are the primary consideration when designing and delivering services.

In this report we examine government's progress toward becoming more customer-centered and the extent to which leaders believe their agencies are embracing a customer-centered approach. We investigate how agencies are implementing key practices to provide a good customer experience, describe current successes, highlight government's most prominent challenges and present recommendations to help agencies improve.

Our research found that while most government leaders acknowledge there is room for improvement, many believe they are already delivering a high-quality customer experience. Leaders gave their agencies an average grade of "B" on customer service overall. While some of the agencies these leaders represent may provide a better-than-average customer experience for government, this high self-assessment contrasts with low customer satisfaction scores for government overall. Although most leaders were optimistic about their own agency's efforts to strengthen the customer experience, several asserted that government as a whole is not fully recognizing and addressing major challenges.

Our research identified four ways agencies can become more customer-centered and improve services to the public:

- Make better use of customer data and feedback to drive decisions and investments

- Establish a clear customer experience strategy and assign a leader dedicated to the customer experience

- Improve customer engagement and communication

- Build a workforce that is prepared to create a great customer experience

The research is based on interviews with 46 government customer experience professionals and other experts. We interviewed leaders at 12 agencies that we estimated to have the highest volume of contact with the public, based on available statistics (see next page). We also selected agencies that serve individuals (as opposed to businesses or states) as at least one major customer group, and provide a direct service that involves interactive customer participation rather than a one-way interaction such as delivering information.

We asked these leaders a set of qualitative and quantitative questions (see Appendix I) to assess the extent to which their agencies are implementing strategies to create customer-centered organizations and improve the customer experience, as well as their level of success in doing so. We also sought to identify the most important challenges facing agencies trying to improve citizen satisfaction.

In addition to interviews, we held a roundtable discussion with 13 federal customer experience leaders to share the initial findings of our research and solicit their input. We also held a focus group with federal employees who provide services directly to the public, and we received written responses to interview questions from direct service employees.

AGENCY
Missions and Statistics

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Bureau of Consular Affairs, Passport Services Office

Mission: to protect the lives and interests of American citizens abroad and strengthen the security of U.S. borders by issuing visas and passports

Typical customers: U.S. citizens traveling or planning to travel outside the country, and individuals seeking to enter the U.S.

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: issued more than 14 million passports and passport cards

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: more than 425 million page views to travel.state.gov

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: 4.5 million calls

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

Mission: to provide medical coverage through Medicare, Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program and the Health Insurance Marketplace

Typical customers: individuals who participate in Medicare, Medicaid, CHIP or the Health Insurance Marketplace

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: approximately 54 million people were enrolled in Medicare, and approximately 64.9 million people were enrolled in Medicaid

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: about 1.3 billion page views to HealthCare.gov

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: 25 million calls to the call centers for Medicare and the marketplace

DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Transportation Security Administration

Mission: to protect the nation's transportation systems and provide the most effective transportation security

Typical customers: individuals travelling by air in the U.S.

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: screened more than 653 million passengers

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: more than 23 million page views to the TSA precheck website

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: more than 868,000 calls

U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Mission: to safeguard America's borders and protect the public from dangerous people and materials, and also enhance the nation's global economic competitiveness by enabling legitimate trade and travel

Typical customers: individuals travelling to and from the U.S.

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: processed 375 million pedestrians and passengers at 328 ports of entry

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: not available

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: more than 39,000 calls

Disaster Assistance Improvement Program (interagency program coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency)

Mission: to provide disaster survivors with information, support, services and a means to access and apply for disaster assistance

Typical customers: disaster survivors

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: responded to more than 530,000 requests for assistance or information

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: more than 800,000 site visits to DisasterAssistance.gov

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: more than 424,500 calls

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Mission: to oversee lawful immigration to the U.S.

Typical customers: individuals immigrating to the U.S.

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: more than 7 million benefit requests, including applications for naturalization, lawful permanent residence, change of status and refugee and asylum protection

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: approximately 4 million views per month to the MyUSCIS "Check My Status" feature

Call center volume in fiscal 2012: 12 million calls to the National Customer Service Center

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mission: to provide assistance to members of the military, veterans and their families, including disability, pension and education benefits, and health care

Typical customers: service members, veterans and their families

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: 1.3 million disability and pension claims processed, education benefits disbursed to more than 1 million students, and care provided to more than 8.3 million veterans

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: not available

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: not available

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Military Community and Family Policy

- **Mission:** to support the military community by providing family-support policies and programs, including family center operations, child care, youth programs, transition support services and support during mobilization and deployment

- **Typical customers:** military members and their families

- **Top transactions in fiscal 2014:** 4.2 million in-person contacts including briefings, presentations and nonmedical counseling sessions

- **Top web traffic in fiscal 2014:** more than 3.4 million views to Military OneSource, the military community's employee assistance program website

- **Call center volume in fiscal 2014:** more than 327,000 calls to the Military OneSource call center

SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Mission: to deliver a broad range of services and benefits, including retirement, Supplemental Security Income and disability

Typical customers: retired individuals and those who receive disability benefits

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: assistance to more than 43 million visitors to field offices and issuance of 16 million new and replacement Social Security cards

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: more than 196 million visits to the Social Security website

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: more than 81 million calls

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Federal Student Aid

Mission: to provide grants, loans and work-study funds to students attending college or vocational school

Typical customers: students seeking federal financial aid for education

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: $133.8 billion in aid delivered to 12.9 million students

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: 114 million visitors to FAFSA.gov, the federal student aid application site, and 43 million visitors to StudentLoans.gov

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: not available

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

National Park Service

Mission: to safeguard America's national parks and share stories with visitors

Typical customers: visitors to national parks

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: 292 million visits to national parks

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: 16.9 million visits to Recreation.gov

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: nearly 927,000 calls to the Recreation.gov call center

DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

Internal Revenue Service

Mission: to help taxpayers understand and meet their tax responsibilities

Typical customers: individuals and businesses that pay taxes

Top transactions in fiscal 2014: more than 147 million individual income tax returns and 2 million corporate income tax returns processed

Top web traffic in fiscal 2014: not available

Call center volume in fiscal 2014: more than 100 million calls

01 **DATA**

Agencies are not making the best use of feedback and customer data to drive decisions and investments

Customer-centered organizations develop a complex understanding of their customers that goes beyond simply what their customers want. The automotive executive Henry Ford is thought to have said, "If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said, 'A faster horse.'" Instead, customer-centered organizations seek comprehensive knowledge of who their customers are, what they hope to accomplish and how they feel when interacting with the organization. While anecdotal customer feedback can provide powerful stories, developing true customer understanding requires qualitative and quantitative data on the customer experience.

Lack of data that would help government customer experience professionals understand their customers and make good decisions is the biggest challenge for these employees, said Phaedra Chrousos, chief customer officer at the General Services Administration. "Culture isn't the problem," she said. "They just didn't have the information to take action and [weren't] empowered to take action. They used a lot of anecdotal information but not data."

The leaders we interviewed said they have plenty of customer experience data and, in most cases, the right data to understand citizens' needs. However, our research revealed many cases in which leaders have incomplete or outdated data that were not useful in identifying the cause of customer problems. Even leaders who were confident they had the right data acknowledged challenges in drawing insights from those data and acting on them. And even those who were able to draw insights expressed concerns that staff could not always improve services because of legal or budgetary restrictions.

This report uses the term "customer experience data" to refer to quantitative and qualitative information that describes how services are delivered to and perceived by customers. Customer experience data may include statistics from customer satisfaction surveys, insights from customer focus groups, and analytics or performance measures from sources like an agency contact center, website or social media account.
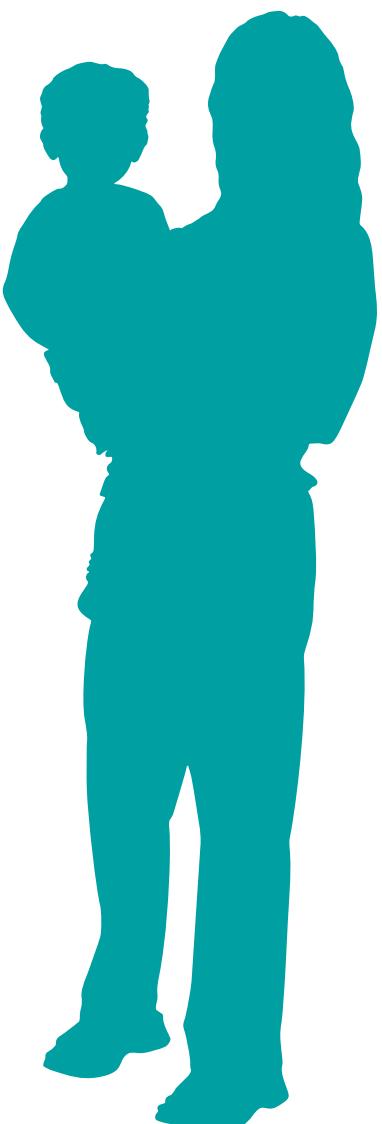
USING DATA TO UNDERSTAND CUSTOMERS BETTER

Most agency leaders said their staff understand customers' preferences and pain points. Nineteen of 26 respondents agreed with the statement, "My agency tracks the right information to fully understand the needs of the customers we serve." However, government's customers have a different perspective. Only 45 percent think agency representatives understand their needs, compared with 66 percent of private-sector customers.[6]

A few interviewees pointed out that federal leaders sometimes think they understand customers, only to learn later that their understanding was incomplete. "Our experience of what we thought the customer experience was, and what we found out when we actually talked to the customer, was very different," said Martha Dorris, former director of strategic programs for the Federal Acquisition Service at GSA.

The customer experience can suffer when agencies make decisions based on assumptions rather than data. For instance, they may invest heavily in a new service or product that does not actually meet a customer need. Or they may make small, well-intentioned changes that mar the customer experience. One Department of Veterans Affairs call center switched its on-hold music from oldies to military songs, which they assumed their customers would prefer. But when

6   Rick Parrish, *The US Federal Customer Experience Index, 2015: A Benchmark of Federal Agencies, Highlighting the Drivers of Great Federal CX,* Forrester Research, Inc., August 13, 2015.

Customer personas and journey maps

When conducting user research, agencies can create customer personas and journey maps to understand customer characteristics and needs better.

Customer personas are fictional profiles that describe customers' behaviors, emotions, attributes, motivations and goals. They range from simple to complex but usually include features such as a typical customer's demographics, needs and preferences.*

Journey maps detail a customer's experience with an agency from the initial problem or point of contact through the transaction or resolution and sometimes beyond. The maps illustrate the story of the customer's journey through an agency—and sometimes across multiple organizations—identify challenges and determine how all employees and processes affect the customer experience.

Several agencies use these strategies to understand their customers better. When the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services creates customer personas, the agency begins with the individual's demographics and then incorporates other aspects of the person's life such as children, job and other responsibilities, said David Simeon, a division chief in the Customer Service and Public Engagement directorate. The agency also maps customers' complete journeys from the point at which they begin looking at information about applying for citizenship to post-citizenship participation in the civic process.

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* DigitalGov, "Using Personas to Better Understand Customers: USA.gov Case Study." http://pewrsr.ch/1R3Whww

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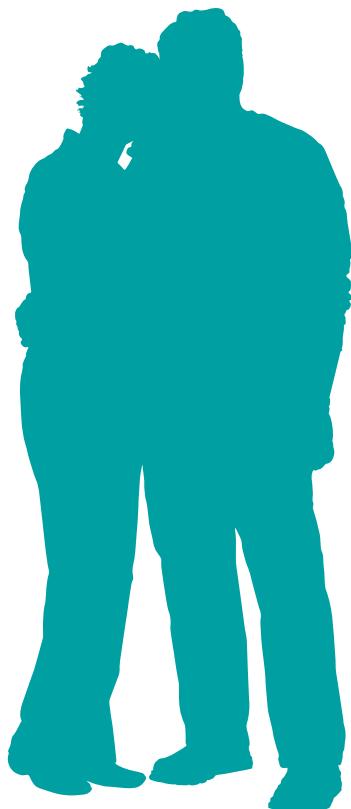
they actually asked veterans, they were told to bring back the oldies, according to Tom Allin, the chief veterans experience officer.

Federal leaders may be missing the data they need to understand their customers fully because they may not have the right data, or data may be incomplete or outdated. Even when agencies have the right data, employees may struggle to make sense of the information.

The wrong data

Some agency leaders said their agencies were not collecting the right data for what they were trying to achieve. Upon arriving at VA, Allin noticed that the agency collected plenty of data about how it serves veterans, but the data were not measuring the right things. "It was like Measurements R Us," Allin said. "We've been asking the questions we think must be important. We haven't asked our veterans what's

important to them." To have the right data needed to make improvements, leaders must conduct some initial user research to understand what aspects of service delivery are most important to the customer, and then collect data accordingly.

Incomplete data

When agencies have incomplete data they may not be able to diagnose why there are customer problems. Some agencies rely heavily on surveys to understand customers, but those often are not helpful for identifying the cause of customer problems, according to Victoria McFadden, GSA's deputy chief customer officer. "Surveys don't always tell you the answers but can tell you where to start," she said.

One challenge is that agencies often conduct broad annual customer surveys rather than seeking real-time customer feedback on specific transactions or services. These

transaction-level data on an agency's most important services often lead to better insights, according to interviewees.

To address this issue some agencies do in-depth research on what broad survey data show. For example, a survey showed GSA's customer experience office that employees were unhappy with onboarding processes, but did not reveal the source of dissatisfaction. The customer experience team dug deeper, interviewing employees and creating customer journey maps outlining the steps in the onboarding process. The team found the security process was a major issue and highlighted specific problems to address, such as poor coordination between offices and information not written in plain language.

VA uses an approach called "human-centered design" to complement surveys and understand veterans' experiences better. Human-centered design research allows staff to gain

nuanced insights by exploring the experiences of a small number of representative customers. VA used this approach to redesign the pension claim process. The agency conducted one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions and observed veterans' behavior when they were sitting in the waiting rooms and meeting with staff. VA learned that veterans were uncomfortable with the process, often because they had little information about what it entailed. The agency is working to address the issue.

Outdated data

The problem with old data is that they do not accurately represent the current customer experience. Results from an annual customer survey that takes months to complete, from the time of collection to analysis, may be out of date by the time they reach decision-makers.

Some agencies have reduced the time it takes to capture, analyze and act on feedback. "Two years ago we would get customer satisfaction feedback and input from other channels, would hold onto it, and aggregated it twice a year for review," said Karole Johns, deputy director of the Recovery Technology Programs Division at the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This process would take six to nine months, she said. Moving to an agile IT approach, FEMA now quickly aggregates customer feedback on its digital systems into its web development plans. Improvements to those plans can be implemented in a matter of weeks.

The biggest challenge in making this switch was getting buy-in from both leadership and program staff, according to Johns. "Being quickly responsive is not an easy task in government," she said. "It's not easy because people resisted on principle because they were skeptical that we could do things quickly."

Analyzing the data

Even when an agency has the right data, sifting through that information for useful insights can be diffi-cult. "If anything, it's too much information," said Mandy Cohen, chief of staff at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "The challenge is making sure we get the right information and not the noise."

Similarly, Brenda Wensil, chief customer experience officer at Federal Student Aid, said, "We probably have more information than we have time to sort through and know what to do with."

Interviewees noted that data analytics and visualization tools such as data dashboards are critical to help staff quickly digest customer experience data, identify key trends and communicate useful insights.

Cohen said she thinks CMS has the right data-analysis skills on staff to make sense of the agency's customer data, but other interviewees were not as confident. Nancy Berryhill, the Social Security Administration's deputy commissioner of operations, was concerned her agency needs more analytics skills to do sophisticated forecasting of customer needs.

CONNECTING CUSTOMER DATA ACROSS SILOS

Companies like Amazon have mastered the art of creating a seamless customer experience, and people increasingly expect the same from government. Instead they often encounter a maze of bureaucratic departments, many of which do not seem to be sharing information with one another. Agencies struggle to connect customer data across organizations and service-delivery channels to create a comprehensive customer view, our research found.

For example, people visiting a SSA field office might expect the representative to know about their recent online interactions or calls to the agency. But that is not always the case, according to Kim Baldwin Sparks, deputy associate commissioner for SSA's Office of Electronic Services and Technology. "That's important information to have, but our systems are not built in a way to give us those data. I really don't know what the customer's experience was. I can tell you individual

experiences but not holistically."

The Internal Revenue Service also struggles to connect customer data across service-delivery channels, according to Rajive Mathur, director of online services. The agency knows why customers call but not how often or if they have checked the IRS website first, he said, adding that the agency would like to be able to track customers' activities no matter how they contact the organization.

Another challenge is that customer data often gets locked up in organizational silos. "We have over 200 databases that don't communicate with each other," Allin said. As a result, veterans registered at one VA hospital have to start from square one if they visit any other hospital. Allin contrasted this experience with the service a citizen might receive at a CVS Pharmacy. Once a customer has been entered into the drugstore chain's system, any store in the country can access that information.

The Department of Defense's Military OneSource program, which connects military families with a variety of resources and services, faces a similar challenge. Since military families move frequently, program leaders would like to provide service members with a customized profile that follows them wherever they go and connects them with resources such as schools, hospitals and recreation facilities, according to Charles

Milam, the principal director of Military Community and Family Policy. But legacy IT systems and security concerns are a major obstacle, he said.

Legacy IT systems and privacy concerns are common barriers for agencies trying to share data across organizational boundaries and create a comprehensive view of their customers. In our "Serving Citizens" report, the Partnership and Accenture highlighted examples of successful efforts to overcome this challenge.

For example, the Disaster Assistance Improvement Program, a multiagency initiative led by FEMA, addressed this challenge by building a centralized, online system that shares data among multiple agencies that support disaster survivors. The system allows survivors to submit one application for assistance that is transferred across agencies and programs, rather than having to submit duplicative information to each program. This initiative addressed privacy concerns by establishing detailed data sharing agreements among agency partners, enabling them to share customer data with one another legally and securely.

Rather than building new systems, agencies may be able to implement less expensive workarounds to connect customer information across silos. Our report highlighted, for example, how application program interfaces allowed some agen-

cies to extract customer data from one system and use it in others.

At times agency culture creates barriers to building a comprehensive view of customers. Agency divisions do not always coordinate and share data that could improve the customer experience.

Several agencies addressed this problem by establishing formal mechanisms for collaborating and sharing customer data across the organization. For example, web designers for DisasterAssistance.gov hold focus groups with the program's call center representatives when designing digital services such as online applications for assistance. "Call center representatives bring invaluable information to designing this process because they've seen how people's minds work, especially people in duress," said Johns from FEMA. "Our literal minds would give a different [approach], but they will bring a different perspective."

The customer experience office at FSA created a formal process to aggregate, analyze and share customer service data across service channels and project teams. Every month representatives from each office review customer data and create a report to share across the organization, according to Wensil. The group then identifies trends, problems and potential areas for collaboration. When the challenges are substantial or arise repeatedly, they are brought to the attention of agency leaders.

Continuing challenge: The Paperwork Reduction Act

Many of the leaders we interviewed cited compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act as an obstacle to collecting customer experience data. The law requires that agencies complete an approval process before collecting information from 10 or more members of the public—a process that often takes six to nine months, including internal agency reviews. It includes publishing in the Federal Register for public comment a description of the information that will be collected, and receiving clearance from the Office of Management and Budget. The approval process creates a substantial hurdle when agencies seek to collect new customer feedback or revise an existing survey, interviewees said, noting that the law has not been updated to reflect the realities of the digital age.

OMB recently attempted to streamline the approval process for voluntary customer feedback by establishing a fast-track review for eligible customer surveys. However, several interviewees said this process is restrictive, since many surveys are ineligible for fast-track review.

For instance, the General Services Administration's Digital Analytics Program plans to offer agencies a free tool to conduct voluntary customer surveys on satisfaction with federal websites. This tool could save agencies money, provide much-needed cross-agency benchmarks on website satisfaction, and yield meaningful data to understand the digital experience and make quick improvements. But the program has been delayed due to a requirement that every participating agency must go through its own PRA approval process, according to a GSA official.

ENABLING STAFF TO ACT ON INSIGHTS

Our research revealed that even when federal leaders have the right data that lead to insights, they cannot always take action to improve. "Data can be empowering. They can also be incredibly frustrating. Sometimes you don't have the budget, resources or flexibility to act to address the issue," said Dennis Alvord, executive director of BusinessUSA, which aggregates federal resources for businesses.

Mariela Melero, associate director of the Customer Service and Public Engagement Directorate at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, agreed that budget realities and legal restrictions pose obstacles. "I think we understand our customers' needs, but are we able to address those needs? There is a big distinction between understanding what they need and being able to deliver."

Cash-strapped federal programs need to maximize limited resources if they are to improve the experience for their customers. But our research found that customer experience data do not usually enter into budget decisions. Agencies often fail to use customer experience data when making digital services investments, according to Rick Parrish, a customer experience expert at Forrester Research. "You have a lot of YouTube channels out there with seven page views. Agencies just [set up a YouTube channel] because they think they are supposed to have one," he said.

Alvord shared the same concern. "Customer data are not driving budget decisions," he said. "In so many cases across government we have a lot of data saying the customer experience is terrible. No one is investing to fix it. It's just patently ignored."

Some agencies have made progress nonetheless. For example, the Social Security Administration frequently uses call center data in its budget negotiations with the Office of Management and Budget and Congress, said SSA's Erik Jones, assistant deputy commissioner of operations. The data helped the agency make the case for increased funding for some call centers.

Legal and regulatory restrictions can also prevent agencies from taking action on insights gleaned from good data, and federal agencies are much more likely to face these restrictions than private-sector organizations. For example, the immigration service would like to be able to send customers emails notifying them when they become eligible for naturalization, but the agency is restricted from doing so due to legal issues. Similarly, FSA knows that customers are frustrated with aspects of the federal student aid application process, including how loans are delivered and the structure of repayment plans, but Congress dictates many of these features.

Some agency leaders overcame this challenge by encouraging staff to think creatively. "We try to get people to think outside the box but within the law," said Michael Hoffman, director of the New York City Passport Office. In emergency situations, for example, staff members take advantage of legal flexibilities and issue "limited validity" passports—good for a maximum of 12 months—if an applicant's paperwork is almost complete. The applicant then has in hand a passport for an upcoming trip and can return to finish the process for a full passport.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agencies should gather and analyze customer experience data, and use insights from those data to guide decisions and investments.

- In addition to soliciting broad customer feedback through tools such as annual surveys, agencies should collect real-time data and feedback on specific transactions and services, and dedicate a portion of their budget each year to service improvements that will have the biggest effect on customer satisfaction.

Agencies should embrace customer feedback.

- Interviewees reported that fear of negative feedback or poor results sometimes prevents agency leaders from collecting and analyzing customer experience data. However, less-than-glowing feedback can provide a great opportunity for leaders to learn and improve. Agencies that collect and use customer experience data can often identify and fix customer problems before they become widespread or generate bad publicity.

Agencies should share customer experience data with the entire organization, using tools to visualize, analyze and display data in an engaging way.

- Some interviewees noted that staff tend to be protective of their customer data. But clearly displaying and communicating customer experience data is invaluable for helping staff understand the customer perspective, particularly for staff members who do not typically interact with customers. Staff members who do interact with customers should have access to systems that collect and organize data about previous customer interactions across all agency divisions and service delivery channels, so they are aware of customers' history and prepared to serve them well.

OMB should require agencies to collect comparable customer experience data on government's most important services and transactions in order to assess customer satisfaction across agencies and target improvements where they are needed most.

- Government has very limited data comparing the customer experience across federal agencies, and this information is primarily limited to broad customer perceptions rather than satisfaction with specific transactions or services. Standardized cross-agency data on the customer experience would help identify successes that should be replicated and problems that need to be addressed.

Congress should consider customer experience data when making funding decisions.

- When making decisions about where to invest in programs and services, Congress should consider data indicating that the resources requested will improve the customer experience and meet a pressing customer need.

Congress should revise the Paperwork Reduction Act to remove unnecessary barriers to collecting customer experience data.

- One of the purposes of the law is to reduce the government burden on citizens, but instead the law created a barrier for leaders seeking data and feedback to improve public services. Congress should revise the law to clarify that it does not apply to voluntary customer feedback.

CAN YELP HELP?

Yelp is a well-established source for customer reviews of private-sector services, but users can also rate government services. In August 2015 the General Services Administration released a government-wide terms-of-service agreement that made it easier for agencies to launch their own Yelp pages or to claim existing pages created by Yelp users. Agencies can take advantage of this low-cost avenue to obtain customer feedback and make improvements, especially for in-person services.

To understand what customers are saying about federal services on Yelp, the Partnership analyzed reviews for six federal services in offices across 12 major U.S. cities.[7] While visitors to the website might expect to find reviews full of complaints, our analysis found that many government offices received fantastic feedback. For example, the Department of State's passport agencies in all but one city averaged ratings between four and five stars, with five being the highest possible. Similarly, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services support centers averaged a 4.3-star rating across the cities reviewed.

Reviewers often described friendly and knowledgeable staff, efficient service and sophisticated technology. For example, one user commenting about an immigration service support center in San Francisco, wrote, "Hands down the friendliest, politest and most efficient US government office I have ever been to."[8] Similarly, a veteran described an experience at a VA hospital outside of Chicago, writing, "I couldn't be happier at Hines, they go out of their way to treat you with the best possible care and cater to your specific needs. It's a humbling experience to be thanked for my Service by every Doctor and every staff member that I came into contact with."[9]

Despite pockets of excellence, Yelp reviews show a wide range of satisfaction with the services delivered, both across and within federal agencies. For example, while many U.S. Postal Service offices averaged four-star ratings, others were consistently rated poorly: two offices in Chicago have more than 100 reviews each, and an average rating of just 1.5 stars.

How can agencies use Yelp reviews to improve their services? They can use feedback from Yelp and other online sources as a quick check on the customer experience. For example, leaders could compare Yelp ratings across offices that deliver similar services to identify pockets of success and find practices to replicate.

Agencies could also use Yelp reviews to reveal problem areas to investigate, respond to customer comments and make improvements. For example, Michael Hoffman, director of the New York Passport Agency, said his office often reads its Yelp reviews and offers feedback and training to employees based on the content.

While it can be helpful to analyze Yelp reviews and other online comments, this approach has its limitations. Online reviews are not a scientific measure of current customer satisfaction, and there is no way to verify that reviewers received the service they described. Unfortunately, Yelp is currently one of the only publicly available sources of customer feedback that agencies can use to compare across agencies and services. Without comparable data, it is difficult for agencies to figure out which offices are delivering a good customer experience and which need to improve. This highlights the need for agencies to collect standardized feedback on high-volume services and transactions, and to make those data publicly available.

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7   We analyzed 3,426 Yelp reviews of federal government services in the cities of Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Kansas City, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Seattle. For each we searched for listings on services provided by the following federal organizations: Department of Veterans Affairs, Internal Revenue Service, Department of State passport services, U.S. Postal Service, Social Security Administration, Transportation Security Administration, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. We selected these organizations based on an initial analysis indicating that these were the federal services with the largest number of reviews on Yelp. About three-quarters of the reviews were written in the last three years; some dated back to 2007. We calculated a weighted average for each organization using the average star rating and number of reviews for each Yelp listing. Results were primarily for in-person services. The Yelp pages reviewed were not officially claimed by the agencies.

8   Yelp, "USCIS Application Support Center." http://bit.ly/1o6EtWO

9   Yelp, "Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital." http://bit.ly/1TDTOu0

02
GOVERNANCE

Many agencies lack a clear customer strategy and a senior leader responsible for the customer experience

Agencies typically have taken a piecemeal approach to improving the customer experience. For example, an agency may have separate strategies for online services, contact centers and field offices. And these services are often the responsibility of multiple leaders so that no one leader has visibility into all the interactions that affect the customer.

To be customer-centered, agencies need clear, organization-wide strategies for the customer experience and leaders responsible for carrying out those strategies.

All the leaders we interviewed were passionate about improving service delivery to the public, and most said doing so was a top agency priority. However, five of the 12 agencies lacked a detailed, up-to-date customer experience plan or strategy. And nine did not have a senior leader explicitly responsible for improving the customer experience across the organization.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE PLAN

Without a plan that clearly defines a great customer experience, agency employees are unlikely to share a common understanding of what they are working toward, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs Chief Veterans Experience Officer Tom Allin. "When you say 'the customer experience,' no one knows what that means. Everyone can have a different view, which isn't helpful. Now we're talking about three elements: predictability, consistency and making it easy to be a customer," Allin said.

Because customer expectations shift quickly with changes in technology and social trends, establishing a customer experience plan also helps agencies prepare for an uncertain future. For example, the Social Security Administration developed a "Vision 2025" document that articulates its plan to meet customer expectations given the major technological, demographic and budget changes the agency foresees over the next 10 years.

In 2011 many agencies created customer service plans required by an executive order, but our research found that several agencies have not updated these plans. Five of the agencies we interviewed did not have updated customer experience plans, nor was improving the customer experience a key component of their agencies' strategic plans.

According to best practices identified in the private sector, a customer experience plan should be based on customer feedback and data, and should clearly articulate who the customers are, what kind of experience they expect and what gaps need to be addressed to meet customer needs. The plan should define the top customer experience priorities based on data and customer research, and provide an implementation roadmap.

Such a plan should also be aligned with the organization's overall strategy. For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency integrated its customer experience strategy into its 2014–2018 strategic plan, which set aggressive targets for increasing citizen satisfaction. The plan helped to ingrain in the agency that employees' work is "all about the survivor and not about the agency supporting the survivor," said Karole Johns, deputy director for FEMA's Recovery Technology Programs Division. For a customer experience plan to work well, employees in the organization need to see it and understand how their work contributes to the plan's implementation.

THE BENEFITS OF A CHIEF CUSTOMER OFFICER

Of course, plans will do little good without senior leaders held accountable for implementing them. Historically, agencies have diffused responsibility for customer service throughout the organization, but recently a few established a senior leader who reports to the head of the agency and is responsible for improving the customer experience agency-wide.

The chief customer experience officers we interviewed reported several benefits to establishing the role. For one, it can signal that times have changed for agencies that have not had a strong customer focus. For example, when the secretary of VA announced he was establishing a chief veterans experience officer position, it sent a strong, positive message to the organization that improving the veteran experience was a top priority, Allin said. The chief veterans experience officer is one of only three people in the agency who report to the secretary, giving the position substantial authority and power to effect change.

Establishing a chief customer officer role also ensures that a single leader has the insight and authority needed to strengthen and coordinate customer experience efforts. Like most agencies, VA had decentralized responsibility for customer service throughout the agency, with each line of business responsible for its own customer experience. While this approach made sense for the structure of the agency, it often resulted in poorly coordinated services that confused and frustrated veterans.

As chief veterans experience officer, Allin is working to streamline these services. "We have Veterans Benefits Administration call centers, Veterans Health Administration call centers, one for women, one for families ... so these things have popped up like mushrooms," Allin said. "Each call center is viewing their capacity individually as opposed to the capacity of everyone together. The Veterans Experience Office is one of, if not the only, enterprise-level office at the VA where we can look down the silos and see the different business lines. We have a visibility that no one else has."

Led by a senior official, a customer experience office can act as a "SWAT team" to deal with complex problems that extend beyond one unit or office, and which other agency staff may not have the time or expertise to address. This model has been implemented government-wide with the Office of Management and Budget's U.S. Digital Service and the General Services Administration's 18F, which are both offices that help agencies address high-profile customer experience problems such as the HealthCare.gov turnaround. A dedicated customer experience team in an agency can help ensure there is enough internal capacity to deal with challenges—before they turn into front-page news.

Finally, establishing a position to oversee the customer experience guarantees that the voice of the customer is communicated to agency leaders, and increases the odds that the agency will prioritize spending on improvements that will have the biggest impact on customer satisfaction. The strategy also ensures that someone is accountable for the quality of an agency's services.

Although placing responsibility for the customer experience with one person provides many benefits, several leaders, who reported that their agencies were already customer-centered, were skeptical that it was the right strategy for their organization. "I don't know that it would add a focus that's not there now," said Erik Jones, assistant deputy commissioner for SSA's Office of Operations.

A few interviewees expressed concern that a high-level official in Washington may not connect effectively to a direct-service workforce dispersed across the country, and that it would be better to use the resources to support and supervise employees in the field than to establish a senior customer experience leader. An interviewee from a regional office said field staff may react to the position by thinking, "Oh great, they just hired another GS-15 to tell us to be nice."

Simply establishing a chief customer experience officer position will not address the challenges agencies face. Our research identified a set of best practices that would increase the chances of creating and implementing a successful chief customer experience office.

Leaders should carefully consider what the goals of establishing the position are, according to Brenda Wensil, chief customer experience officer at Federal Student Aid in the Department of Education. "What does the organization need and what are you trying to solve for? Are there quick wins? Is there a fire to put out? Is there something with urgency or a pain point you can begin to solve early and quick?" she said.

In addition, the customer experience leader needs a budget and staff. "You should not underestimate the resources that are required to do this job well," said Michelle Cartagena, director of customer service at the Transportation Security Administration. "Some of these offices come with staff, and some come with just one person. One person is nice, but it looks like a figurehead as opposed to a person with staff that can really bring about visible and productive change."

Given the tight budget climate, some agencies were creative about making better use of existing resources to fund their customer experience offices rather than requesting additional money. "We were able to fund our own team by taking customer surveys from across the organization and consolidating them," said Phaedra Chrousos, chief customer officer at GSA. "This consolidation yielded $3.5 million because every organization was doing their own survey with a consulting firm or using a different tool. By consolidating you can find a pot of money. Then we went to our administrator and said, 'Hey, we just saved you this. Can we have half of it to fund our team?'"

FSA was similarly focused on budget neutrality when establishing its customer experience office. It saved the agency about $1.5 million by consolidating four financial aid websites into one, according to Wensil. This consolidation not only saved money, but also improved the customer experience by creating a simpler web presence.

Interviewees stressed the importance of another practice: placing the customer experience leader as high in the organizational structure as possible, preferably reporting to the head of the agency or a major subcomponent. Making substantial and lasting improvements to the customer experience requires coordinating leaders from across the organization, harnessing data owned by different offices and, at times, fundamentally shifting how the agency does business, according to interviewees. Without considerable authority and access to the head of the agency, those big changes can be difficult for a customer experience leader to achieve. "If this role hadn't been at a senior level, I don't think the work here would have been as effective," said Wensil. "If it's placed down in the organization ... you can't get a foothold fast enough."

Echoing this sentiment, Chrousos said that a customer experience leader "needs authority to pull data from different parts of the organization and the authority to do something about what the data say." The customer experience office at GSA was originally located in the administrator's office but was later moved to a different part of the organization. This created challenges around garnering the support and influence needed to make changes and, as a result, it is moving back. "Moving away from the seat of power made things a lot harder by magnitudes," said Chrousos.

Another element that leads to a successful customer experience office is to be seen as leading the charge without being the sole entity responsible for customers, according to interviewees. "Naming someone could even actually be counterproductive because it takes it away from it being everyone's job," said Mandy Cohen, chief of staff at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Others had similar concerns. "The problem is that we own the customer experience for USCIS," said Mariela Melero, associate director for the Customer Service and Public Engagement Directorate at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "I don't want to own that. I want the customer experience to be one that the entire enterprise recognizes as value added. If I assume the responsibility on behalf of 20,000 employees, I will fail." This concern highlights the need to engage an agency's entire leadership team in efforts to improve the customer experience.

Finally, a customer experience leader and office cannot improve services if no one knows they exist. "Communication from the top of the organization is key," said Cartagena, explaining that at first there was very little awareness among TSA employees that a customer service branch existed, and little understanding about how the branch could help staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agencies that provide services directly to the public should have a current, publicly available customer experience strategy that articulates who their customers are, the experience the agency wants to provide and the top priorities for improving services. The strategy should:

- Include specific and measurable customer experience goals based on customer research and data, link those goals to agency strategic and performance plans, and assign leaders to be responsible for those goals;

- Be developed with employee input and shared with all agency staff; and

- Contain a detailed timeline for implementing and updating the plan.

Agencies should consider establishing an organization-wide customer experience office led by a senior official.

- A chief customer experience office is most needed for agencies that need to strengthen their customer focus as well as agencies trying to reduce fragmentation to create a consistent and unified customer experience.

- A chief customer experience officer should be placed as high in the organizational structure as possible and be given the budget and staff they need to succeed.

Whether or not a customer experience office is established, agencies should engage a wide range of leaders in efforts to improve the customer experience rather than relying exclusively on a small team.

- Leaders who should be involved include, but are not limited to: chief data officers, chief innovation officers, chief information officers, chief human capital officers, supervisors of direct service staff, and leaders of digital services and other programs the public uses.

OMB should convene all agencies that provide services directly to the public and support them in creating, implementing and annually updating a publicly available customer experience strategy, as outlined above.

03
COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Poor communication between agencies and their customers can lead to services that are out of touch with public needs

Customer-centered organizations are in constant communication with the people they serve. But many federal agencies have overlooked the need to routinely conduct customer outreach and communications. When agencies do communicate with the public, it is often a one-way interaction rather than a dialogue. For example, few agencies have in-depth conversations with customers about how the agency should design new services or improve existing ones. In a recent international survey only 13 percent of government agencies reported a high level of citizen involvement in creating digital services.[10]

Agencies face challenges in quickly adopting new communication channels, such as social media, to engage with customers. While all Cabinet-level agencies have social media accounts, agency policies sometimes put onerous restrictions on staff about how they use the accounts to interact with citizens, according to interviewees.

Poor communication between government and citizens often leads to confusing service delivery processes that are out of touch with public needs. "Our processes have been designed internally without awareness of how they might impact the customer," said Tom Allin, the Department of Veterans Affairs' chief veterans experience officer.

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10   William D. Eggers and Joel Bellman, *The journey to government's digital transformation*, October 2, 2015. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1o6Evhf

Agencies can adopt a more proactive approach to customer engagement and communication. This approach is in line with the Obama administration's initiative on open government, which seeks to improve government transparency and collaboration with the public. Resources such as the U.S. Public Participation Playbook (see above) provide guidance about engaging with the public and examples of agencies that have done so successfully.

Agency leaders can start by engaging citizens in deep and meaningful conversations early in the design of new services, according to interviewees. Once services are launched, agencies should conduct outreach to educate citizens about how to use them. When customers have problems, agencies should act quickly to address those issues rather than waiting for them to become widespread.

ENGAGING CITIZENS EARLY IN THE DESIGN OF NEW SERVICES

The best way to ensure that a service meets customers' needs is to involve citizens early in the design process, according to interviewees. The Social Security Administration created some of government's highest-rated digital tools, which Kim Baldwin Sparks, SSA's deputy associate commissioner for the Office of Electronic Services and Technology, attributes to extensive user testing. "We talk to customers about three times before we put anything out," she said. "We start the design process with the customer at the table."

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services also engages its customers to test new technologies. The agency is now developing a virtual assistant avatar that will help customers navigate online services and immigration processes. The avatar is being tested by a select group of volunteer customers, according to Mariela Melero, associate director of the Customer Service and Public Engagement Directorate. That testing will help the immigration service continue to build and refine the product before it is fully released to the public.
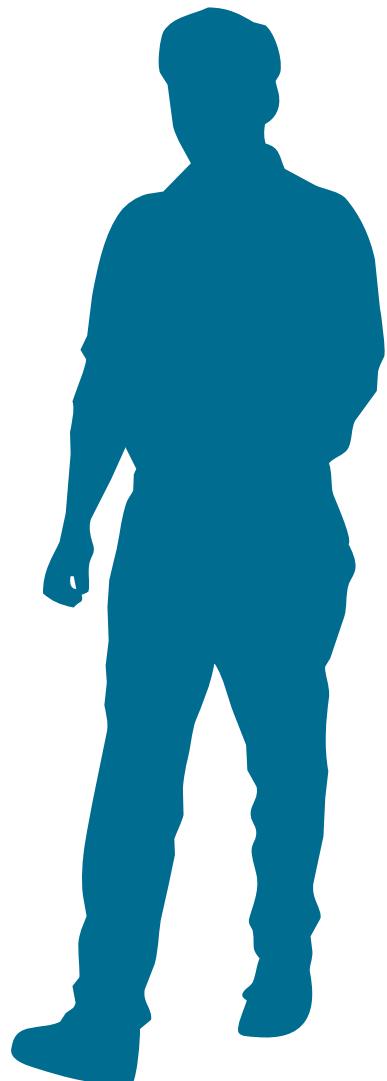
EDUCATING CITIZENS ON THE AVAILABILITY OF NEW SERVICES

Once a new service is designed, agencies sometimes struggle to educate customers about accessing and using the service, according to interviewees. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services faced that struggle after building the MyMedicare.gov portal, which allows participants to create accounts to access their health records securely. It has been challenging to create awareness of the portal among the older population that Medicare serves; only 10 percent of beneficiaries use their accounts, according to Mandy Cohen, CMS chief of staff.

Some agencies tackled this challenge by launching outreach campaigns to inform customers about new services or products. Leaders from Federal Student Aid at the Department of Education identified a steady theme from their customer conversations: confusion about the loan repayment process. Customers did not understand their repayment options, where to go to estimate their monthly payments, or how to differentiate among FSA's multiple repayment calculators.

The organization responded by consolidating repayment calcula-

tors and allowing customers to import their loan information directly into the new calculator, but it did not stop there. FSA also created a customer outreach campaign about loan repayments that advertised the new calculator and answered common questions via several communication channels, including social media posts and direct emails to customers. The campaign resulted in more than 66 million media impressions, and FSA now plans to conduct a similar effort each year.

IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING CUSTOMER PROBLEMS QUICKLY

Better communication with customers can also help agencies find and tackle customer problems quickly. For example, when travelers who use the U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Global Entry Program abandon an interaction at an airport kiosk, they automatically receive an email asking them what went wrong. These emails quickly raised issues that the agency could fix, such as fingerprint-scanning software that did not properly reactivate when the system was turned on each day, according to John Wagner, deputy assistant commissioner of field operations at CBP.

The State Department's Directorate of Passport Services also uses proactive customer outreach to prevent problems. Customers often do not realize that passports for children need to be renewed every five years, as opposed to every 10 years for adults, according to Aileen Smith, an office director. The office educates customers about this issue by reaching out to schools, the travel industry and parent/teacher associations, and publishing information on the department's social media

accounts. These campaigns have prevented customers from having to rush and request expedited passports when their child's passport is about to expire, according to Smith.

The Transportation Security Administration realized that customers were using Twitter to vent their frustrations about airport security. Rather than shying away from negative feedback, TSA saw this as an opportunity to improve. "Right now it's just floating out there as a negative experience," said Michelle Cartagena, director of TSA customer service. "Our desire is to reach out to those individuals and say, 'Hey, what was the problem and see let's see what we can fix.'" TSA established a Twitter account—@askTSA—where travelers can tweet about problems and get a quick response from the agency.

This strategy had the added benefit of providing a new source of candid customer feedback the agency was unlikely to receive otherwise. "I don't know how many people would be willing to come into a focus group and candidly share their opinions to TSA," Cartagena said. "We've

received complaints where people say, 'I'm sure this will put me on the watch list.'"

Similarly, agencies such as FSA and the immigration service hosted Twitter chats to answer customer questions online. Interviewees said this approach helps reduce traffic to call centers because staff can answer many customer questions at once, rather than individually. Officials at the immigration service noted the importance of protecting customer privacy, and they made clear when starting the events that customers should not share personal information about their immigration cases. Agencies can also use this approach to allow customers to help each other by asking and answering questions while a moderator from the agency ensures correct responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agencies should develop customer outreach and communication plans when designing and delivering new services.

- These plans should address how customers and direct service staff will be involved in the design of new services, how the agency will educate customers on the availability of services, and how the agency will solicit customer feedback and address concerns.

Agencies should consult resources such as the U.S. Public Engagement Playbook and the U.S. Digital Services Playbook throughout the design process.

- Agency customer experience teams should work closely with their communications and public affairs offices when creating customer outreach plans.
- Coordination with these offices is essential to ensure that agencies are delivering clear and consistent messages to the public.

Agencies should use social media strategically to communicate with citizens.

- They should gain insight on how their customers use, or would like to use, social media to interact with the agency so they can make the best use of these platforms.
- They should be diligent about maintaining their social media accounts. For example, businesses often respond directly to negative reviews on Yelp to address customer concerns, and agencies that establish official Yelp pages should do the same.

Agencies should communicate with customers using plain language.

- Confusing and jargon-packed language is a consistent source of frustration for customers, and one that agencies are required to address through the Plain Writing Act of 2010.

04
WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT

Agencies are not doing enough to build a workforce that is fully prepared to create a great customer experience

Every agency needs a skilled, engaged workforce that understands its customers and is prepared to serve them. To build this workforce, agencies need to hire the best people, train and prepare staff to serve customers, and hold employees accountable for the quality of service delivery. While most leaders interviewed said their agencies are doing these things well, our research revealed challenges in creating a more customer-centered workforce. For example, we found agencies could do more to instill a customer-centered culture throughout their entire workforce instead of focusing solely on employees who serve customers directly.

While strong front-line customer service employees are critical to success, the workforce that serves customers goes beyond the employees who interact with customers directly. It also includes those who create policies and regulations, design products and services, and supervise everyone involved. "Wherever you work in the organization, you're impacting the customer," said Abraham Mariñez, chief of staff in the customer experience office at Federal Student Aid in the Department of Education.

To improve the customer experience, all employees need insight into the customer perspective. For example, employees who design and build government websites need to know what it is like to be a customer visiting their website for the first time. Is it intuitive to navigate? Does it convey the most important information succinctly? "They need to understand what the customer understands," said Brenda Wensil, FSA's chief customer experience officer. "That's not picking up the phone and talking to clients, but it's working all day with the main product that customers use."

HIRING FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

Considering customer service skills and experience during the hiring process is a crucial first step to developing a customer-centered workforce. While leaders from nine of the 12 agencies interviewed agreed that customer service skills were evaluated effectively during hiring, we found that agencies could do a better job of instilling a customer focus into all aspects of the hiring process.

Customer service considerations are largely absent from a key component of the federal hiring process: job opportunity announcements on USAJOBS, the government's main hiring portal. Our analysis of USA-JOBS data found that only 3.5 percent of federal job announcements contain the word "customer."[11] Managers are required to make hiring decisions based on the job description, so if customer service is absent from those descriptions, it is unlikely that it will be taken into consideration during the hiring process.

Several interviewees acknowledged hiring challenges, such as the fact that some agencies must con-

sider factors other than customer service when hiring for positions that interact with the public. Many candidates seeking positions serving customers at passport agencies would also be responsible for making decisions on citizenship issues. Therefore a higher emphasis is placed on those "adjudication" skills than on soft skills such as customer service, said Aileen Smith, an office director at the State Department's Passport Services Directorate.

Even when agencies do seek to evaluate a candidate's customer service skills, interviewees said it is often difficult to assess soft skills such as active listening or demonstrating empathy. Michelle Cartagena, the Transportation Security Administration's director of customer service, said that while it is easy to determine whether a candidate has customer service experience, it is another story to assess the quality of the service that candidate provided at previous jobs.

Some agencies have addressed this challenge by creating a formal structure to assess candidates' soft skills. Beyond simply screening a candidate's resume for customer service experience, the Social Security Administration uses a method called "meet and deal."

The agency includes customer service competencies, such as oral communication and interpersonal skills, in job announcements for positions dealing with customers. Because such competencies could be broadly interpreted, the agency develops detailed descriptions that define each competency in the context of its work. During interviews, hir-

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11   Approximately once per week between August 2015 and October 2015 we reviewed USAJOBS data made available by the Office of Personnel Management on data.gov to identify how many job opportunity announcements contained the word "customer" anywhere in the announcement. To determine if a large number of announcements contained relevant synonyms (which they did not), we also searched for the following words or phrases: "customer service," "citizen service," "customer experience," "beneficiary" and "recipient." We calculated the average number of announcements that contained the word "customer" and divided by the approximate total number of job opportunity announcements listed on USAJOBS at any given time (40,000).
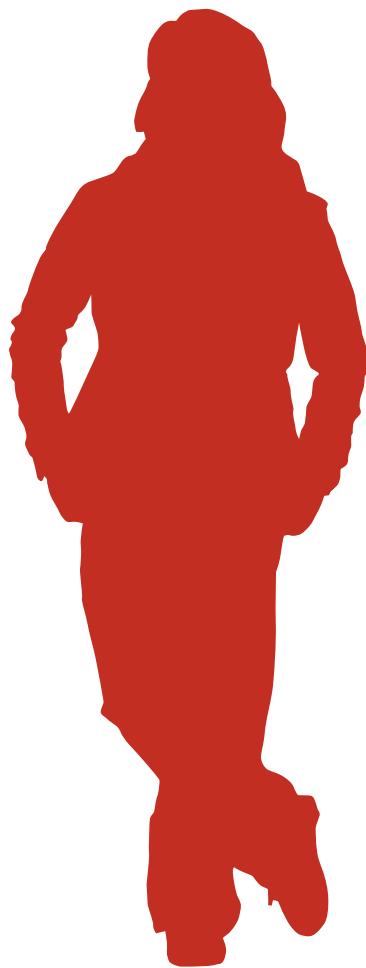
ing panels ask candidates questions to assess whether the applicants can meet these competencies. The questions require candidates to describe how they would handle the specific kinds of difficult and complex situations agency employees often face when interacting with the public. Despite the extra work required to screen candidates, the meet-and-deal method "has proven extremely valuable [because] it allows us to get the right people on our front lines," said Erik Jones, assistant deputy commissioner for operations.

Charles Milam, principal director for Military Community and Family Policy at the Department of Defense, described a similar approach. During interviews for call center employees, hiring staff pose scenarios to candidates and ask them to talk through their response. For instance, a call center hiring manager might probe candidates on how they would react to a service member calling about a domestic-violence situation. After the interview, candidates tour the call center with headphones and listen to real, ongoing calls. This type of strategy allows the agency to assess candidates in more depth, and also gives applicants a glimpse into what their job would entail.

Agencies can also adopt a customer-centered mindset when hiring senior executives and supervisors. Because customer service is a component of the Executive Core Qualifications for the Senior Executive Service, agencies can evaluate SES candidates on their ability to anticipate the needs of internal and external customers and deliver high-quality products and services.

PREPARING EMPLOYEES TO DELIVER EXCELLENT SERVICES

Hiring for customer service skills is important, but it is not enough. Agencies need to ensure that all employees are prepared to deliver an excellent customer experience. This entails providing them with information and training to serve customers, encouraging empathy and customer understanding throughout the organization, and ensuring employees are engaged and committed to their work.

Agencies can improve the customer experience through strategies that promote empathy and customer understanding among staff. For example, agencies can provide employees with customer personas that profile typical customers, and journey maps that detail the steps customers go through when engaging with the agency. Providing customer personas and journey maps has improved customer understanding among U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services employees who do not typically work with the public, such as those in policy, IT and adjudication, according to Mariela Melero, who leads the agency's Customer Service and Public Engagement Directorate.

A few agencies foster customer understanding by using rotations that move employees who typically do not interact with customers into positions working with the public. Front-line staff often have the best understanding of customers, many of our interviewees said. "Our front-line employees know about the customers. They know about what the pain points are and what needs to be done to fix them," said Ruby Burrell, chief strategic officer at SSA. Recognizing the value of experience on the front lines, SSA created the Job Experience Learning Program, which provides 30-day rotational opportunities for headquarters employees to work at regional offices, and vice versa. The program benefits all employees: Headquarters staff have a chance to interact with customers and see the effect of their work on the people who receive services, and front-line staff are exposed to agency decision-making and management.

Great customer service also requires that employees are engaged in and committed to their work. The Partnership's annual *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government*® analysis reveals that many agencies struggle with low employee engagement—a problem that permeates all aspects of an agency's work. In 2015 federal employees had a satisfaction and commitment score of 58.1 out of 100, compared to private-sector employees, who had a score of 76.7 out of 100.

Studies have demonstrated that strong employee engagement leads to a better customer experience because engaged employees are more likely to go the extra mile to help customers, and they are less likely to be absent from work.[12] Engaged employees tend to stay longer at an organization, which translates into employees who are more likely to be knowledgeable and prepared to serve customers. Recognizing this important link, the Department of Veterans Affairs made improving employee engagement a key component of improving the veterans' experience. Tom Allin, VA's chief veterans experience officer, learned from his time in the private sector that great customer service companies often focus on their employees even more than they focus on their customers. "In every great service company, employees are No. 1," he said.

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12   James K. Harter, Theodore L. Hayes and Frank L. Schmidt, "Business-Unit-Level Relationship Between Employee Satisfaction, Employee Engagement, and Business Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87(2) (2002), 268-279, doi: 10.1037//0021-9010.87.2.268.

After hiring good people and preparing them to serve customers, agencies need to hold employees accountable for the quality of service delivery. Twenty-two of 26 respondents representing 12 agencies said agency employees are held accountable for the quality of customer service, and leaders from 11 of the 12 agencies interviewed reported that customer service metrics are included in employees' performance evaluations.[13] Yet our research revealed that some agencies struggle to align employee performance measures with customer needs.

"VA has some extraordinary employees driven by the mission to serve vets," Allin said. "We've done a poor job in supporting them, freeing them up to do that, and aligning their performance measures with what we're trying to accomplish for customers. If performance judgments are counter to what's good for customers, that's not good."

Allin's assessment is not unique to VA. A recent survey of federal employees revealed that only 15 percent of respondents said their agency aligns employee incentives with customer-centered service.[14]

Several agencies grapple with the challenge of determining what measures to include in employee performance plans to spur excellent customer service. For example, some agencies evaluate call center representatives on call "handle times"— the amount of time a representative spends on the phone with a customer. But pushing for shorter calls can have unintended consequences. Perhaps representatives will end

calls before fully resolving customer issues. Not only is this bad customer service, but it also increases the likelihood that the customer will need to call back or visit an office, creating more work for the agency.

SSA tackled this issue head on. When incentives were driven by work output, the agency created inefficiencies for itself, Jones said. For example, staff might sign up customers for services they did not need just to boost their statistics and artificially inflate their workload. The agency has since switched to a quality-oriented model that looks at work coming into the office as well as how much employees accomplish. Nancy Berryhill, SSA's deputy commissioner of operations, said, "We don't want to be about chasing numbers. It's about doing a quality job and carrying out all of the actions to completion."

Some agencies balance quantitative metrics in employee performance plans with soft skills such as courtesy and conflict management. The Federal Student Aid Ombudsman Group has an expert on staff to evaluate the tone, soft skills and emotional intelligence of customer service representatives. Several agencies

referred to continuous call monitoring as a method to assess and improve the quality of customer service.

The importance of accountability extends to leaders as well. Agencies can improve the customer experience by including service quality measures when evaluating senior leaders. "You get what you measure," Allin said. "If customer experience is being measured, that's going to impact employee behavior and leader priorities." To increase accountability at the State Department's Passport Services Directorate, front-line employees' performance on customer service elements is factored into supervisors' performance evaluations, according to Aileen Smith, an office director.

A few agencies are turning to their performance offices to handle customer service improvements and accountability. At the Department of Labor, subcomponents are required to submit an annual operating plan that contains measures for collecting customer feedback on major programs. Labor uses quarterly performance meetings required under the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010 to discuss the customer experience with the deputy secretary.

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13   One interviewee did not know if customer service metrics were included in employee performance plans.

14   Government Business Council, *The Path to Customer-Centric Service: A Candid Survey of Federal Managers*, June 2015. Retrieved from http://bit.ly/1Kzu0x6

RECOMMENDATIONS

Agencies should expand their commitment to building a customer-centered culture among all employees, not only those who have direct contact with the public.

Agencies that provide direct services should ensure that customer service skills are evaluated during the hiring process.

• All job descriptions for employees who would influence the customer experience should include qualifications and evaluation criteria related to their ability to serve customers, and hiring managers should assess candidates against these criteria during the interview process.

• When considering candidates for senior executive positions in agencies that provide direct services, agency executive resources boards should prioritize experience with improving service delivery and an aptitude for customer-centered thinking.

Agencies should prepare employees to deliver excellent customer service.

• Agencies should provide employees with information, tools and opportunities that lead to greater customer understanding. These include sharing customer personas and journey maps with staff, and offering rotational assignments.

Agencies should determine the customer experience they want to create and then design performance plans and metrics that align with that vision.

• For example, if an agency wants to focus on the quality of a service it might evaluate contact center staff on measures like first contact resolution—when an employee provides accurate information or resolves a customer's issue at their first point of contact with the agency—rather than measures like the average length of customer calls.

Agencies should view increasing employee engagement and commitment as a key strategy for improving the customer experience.

• Leaders can use the Partnership's *Best Places to Work in the Federal Government* analysis to understand and improve employees' attitudes toward their jobs.

CONCLUSION

Interactions with the federal government often cross agency boundaries. For example, someone who endures a natural disaster might receive support from dozens of programs that span multiple agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Small Business Administration and the departments of Housing and Urban Development and Education. Strengthening the customer experience requires a customer-centered mindset by each agency, but it also requires better coordination among agencies.

It is not easy to collaborate across organizational boundaries to improve government services, but our previous report, "Serving Citizens: Strategies for Customer-Centered Government in the Digital Age," highlighted success stories that demonstrate it is possible, and can yield impressive results. Rather than each agency working independently to improve the customer experience, agencies should work together to streamline services, identify common challenges, share data, and pool knowledge and resources to accomplish common goals.

The Office of Management and Budget is leading several initiatives to improve coordination of the customer experience across government, in addition to the cross-agency priority goal efforts mentioned previously. For example, the U.S. Digital Service is an OMB team that produced a playbook to provide steps for agencies to use to build customer-friendly digital services. The team also collaborated with the General Services Administration's 18F office to produce the U.S. Web Design standards agencies can adopt to bring a consistent and appealing look and feel to federal websites. And GSA's Digital Analytics Program provides a free tool to track and analyze web data to enable customer-focused improvements.

More can be done to coordinate the customer experience across government. Rather than each agency building and executing its own customer survey and dashboard to view results, agencies that run similar programs could all develop and use standard, customizable survey questions and feed those data into a common dashboard. This strategy could save money and provide valuable insight, enabling government to compare the customer experience across federal services, identify key trends and areas for improvement, and find successes that could be replicated.

Improving the customer experience is now a top priority for many agencies, and government has taken important steps on the long road to becoming more customer-centered. This report demonstrates how agencies can build on initial successes and focus on putting citizens' needs at the forefront of everything government does.

1. Does your agency have a customer service strategy or similar plan that articulates the experience you want to provide to citizens? What are the top two or three priorities from this plan? How often is this plan updated?

2. Has your agency designated a senior official responsible for strengthening the customer experience across the organization? If yes, please explain that role, including the formal authority this leader has over the agency's service.

3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Customer service skills are effectively evaluated during the hiring process at my agency"?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
1	2	3	4	

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Employees responsible for delivering services to the public receive sufficient customer service training at my agency"?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
1	2	3	4	

5. What are the primary strategies that your agency uses to understand the needs and preferences of the citizens you serve? For example, do you: a) solicit open-ended feedback, b) conduct customer satisfaction surveys, c) conduct focus groups, d) create customer personas, e) create customer journey maps?

6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "My agency tracks the right information to fully understand the needs of the citizens we serve"?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
1	2	3	4	

   a. What are the most important pieces of customer service/satisfaction data that your agency collects and tracks?

7. What is your agency's continuous improvement process for turning data/customer feedback into action to improve the quality of services? Please describe any examples of taking action on data/customer feedback and/or describe the challenges your agency faces in doing so.

8. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The services and transactions that my agency offers are personalized to the needs of individual citizens"?

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree   I don't know

     1   2   3   4

9. Has your agency established measurable customer service standards regarding the timeliness and quality of services it provides? Are those standards publicly available?

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Staff at my agency are sufficiently held accountable for the quality of the services they provide to the public"?

Strongly disagree   Disagree   Agree   Strongly agree   I don't know

     1   2   3   4

   a. How are both customer-facing staff and executives rewarded for excellent customer service or held accountable for poor customer service?

11. What letter grade would you give to your agency's customer service overall?

12. How do you structure contracts with external customer service providers to incentivize excellent customer service?

13. What other resources, support or services from external partners, the administration or Congress would help your agency improve its services to the public?

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