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Managing Government's Customer Relationships

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It has taken a long time, but most government leaders now understand their organizations need to treat the people they serve as customers and not take them for granted. Customer service and high customer satisfaction have become rallying points for some of the most innovative government organizations. Customer relationship management (CRM) and the call/contact center are the front line tools that will be used by government at all levels - state, local, and federal -- to provide these newly discovered "customers" with the level of service they have come to expect from their interactions in the private sector.

NPRG's Call To Restore Trust In Government

The idea that the federal government had "customers" began in 1994 when the National Performance Review (later called the National Partnership for Reinventing Government, or NPRG), called on federal agencies to create a different experience for the people they serve. [NPRG](#) sent out the call that, to restore public trust in government, it was up to every government entity to improve the public's access to the services and information they need. Call centers are an important part of that effort. They are, after all, usually the first place a person turns when they need help or information. They should be designed to make it as easy as possible for a citizen or business interacting with a government entity to get information. A well-run call center will reduce the number of calls a government customer has to make and will enhance the image of government.

The Social Security Administration (SSA) has been in the forefront of the government call center revolution for years. As early as 1995, Dalbar Financial Services ranked them over companies like L.L.Bean in courtesy, responsiveness, and knowledge. And they have continued to improve according to NPRG, currently handling 70 million calls a year. By September 2000, they expect to be able to take claims for retirement and survivor benefits over the phone in a first point of contact single transaction, and have at least 90 percent of calls to their toll-free number go through on the first try.

The Fall 1999 American Customer Satisfaction Survey (ACSS) produced by the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan Business School affirms SSA's position, giving them an [American Customer Satisfaction Index](#) (ACSI) rating of 82, putting them on the same level as commercial enterprises like Federal Express and well ahead of the banking and airline industry. But the ACSS also shows how far the government as a whole has to go. Recent Medicare beneficiaries ranked the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) within Health and Human Services a 61, and commercial pilots gave the Federal Aviation Administration a 58.

CRM In The Public Sector

The government enterprise has a unique complexity and scale. But that doesn't mean that it can't adopt the same tools the commercial world uses to provide the same level of service. In the commercial sector, the best call centers are not stand-alone units reading from canned scripts, they are integrated parts of enterprise-wide customer relationship management solutions. Call center employees are a company's face to the world, the first point of contact with the customer. The more information the call center contact has about customers -- from simple facts like names and addresses to the detailed records of a transactional history -- the more satisfying and complete the customers' encounters are likely to be.

This integration of the call center with customer relationship information is considered a necessity in the private sector, and is no less necessary in the public sector. The Defense Supply Center Columbus (DSCC) Call Center is one example where that integration is working. The Defense Supply Center provides the materiel necessary to maintain the preparedness of U.S. armed forces, in addition to supplying the FAA, U.S. Customs Service, and the Border Patrol. The Call Center operates 24x7, 365 days a year. Their 24 well-trained advocates deal with 17,000

customers a month, and the DSCC's inventory includes 2.5 million national stock number items. The DSCC Call Center handles everything from requisitions to customer complaint research.

The private sector is going beyond that, however, to integrate more than just the ordering and fulfillment functions with the call center. General Electric is one example. When a customer calls them with an appliance problem, GE already knows what models are owned by tying in the phone number to purchase records. The call center contact logs the problem, generates the work order for the repairman, and sets up the appointment on the spot. After the repair is made, the repairman logs the repair information into a handheld computer. And, in a final customer service touch, someone calls to monitor satisfaction.

Government has to be able to work just as effectively. An agency's call center, information resources, Web site, and field personnel all have to be integrated into a seamless whole that serves the needs of the customer. That is not going to happen overnight. The key to getting there quickly will be taking advantage of the legacy systems governments have in place and intelligently applying Web-based portals and middleware to make those information-rich sources available for customer self-service and call center personnel. Technology is important, but senior managers skilled in leadership and change management will be the most critical factor in transitioning government organizations to achieve high customer satisfaction results.

Real-World Examples Of Governments Serving Customers

Many government entities are moving in the right direction:

- Governor Parris Glendening of Maryland recently signed legislation to create [eMaryland](#). The state will move from 15 percent of services being offered over the Web and other electronic channels to 80 percent by 2004.
- Commissioner Charles Rossotti of the IRS has made customer service a top priority. The e-filers of the IRS give it a top mark in the ACSI survey, though the traditional paper-based filers think there is significant room for improvement.
- Tax Commissioner Danny Payne of Virginia has embarked on an ambitious program to reengineer their revenue and customer service systems. They have already begun to see the benefits of their tele-file and business sales tax e-file implementations.

Additionally, the private sector has jumped in to push the move to e-government. AOL announced its new "Government Channel" in March of 2000 to satisfy customer interest and demand for government services on line. Also, a number of venture capital-backed startups emerged in 2000 as one-stop Web-based services where citizens can easily make electronic payments of various kinds to over 36,000 towns and cities. A high demand for streamlined access to government services exists today. Internet-based technologies along with process and policy changes will enable those services to be delivered faster, cheaper, accurately, and more consistently than ever before.

Politicians, businesses, and government executives are all focusing energy on developing innovative and cost-effective ways for government to serve its constituents. Providing the customers of these systems with comprehensive solutions that work consistently across multiple touch points (i.e., Web, call center, kiosk, walkup, etc.) will be the hallmark of the most successful solutions.

One example of a truly integrated system was just announced by the United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM). Using Siebel Systems eBusiness software (commercially available, best-of-class customer service technology), the Integrated Customer Support system is a full CRM implementation that includes intelligent call routing, multi-channel services, and computer telephony integration. It will enable the command to perform its critical mission of providing air, land, and sea transportation to all of the armed services and will make it much easier to provide excellent customer service. The system provides a single point of entry for Department of Defense customers, first contact resolution of any problems, and captures information to create a permanent enterprise-wide knowledgebase.

Another example is the innovative work being done by the Commonwealth of Virginia's Tax department. Virginia is using commercial eBusiness software to enable process changes in how customers are served. Contact center staff have at their finger-tips electronic support tools to see that callers get the most up to date and accurate information available. The CRM technology allows the state to tailor its customer service to the needs of the callers, increases the productivity of the customer service personnel, and makes it much easier for them to train staff. Integration of this capability with web-based, customer support will further improve productivity and service levels to the tax paying public and business.

Looking To The Future Of Government CRM

Everyone who interacts with the government, including businesses and other government agencies, will demand the kind of responsiveness discussed here. Whether they come in via a call center or a Web site, they should be able to find the information or get the service they require. An integrated approach to knowledge management for customer service purposes will be a critical success factor for improved government performance and public perception in the years to come.

Ultimately, government will be forced to embrace the idea of serving customers: the people, as customers, will demand it.

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