

Removing Barriers to Citizen Engagement

A White Paper for the Obama Administration
By
The Government Contact Center Council

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Introduction:

The federal government is actively redefining its relationship with citizens. Most notable today is its use of new media, which presents unparalleled opportunities for engaging more citizens in more ways. In fact, in many cases, as new media use increases, the number of communications through traditional channels also increases. Fifty nine percent of contact centers have annually increasing call volumes.¹ So it is not surprising to learn that nearly sixty percent of the public wants phone numbers and email addresses available from the government online.²

The Government Contact Center Council (G3C), the only community of federal contact center leaders, cautions the new administration that the government must be not just accessible to citizens, but that it must be able to provide succinct, accurate and relevant answers to their questions. Barriers today present a challenge to doing this well. Increased openness and transparency will undoubtedly result in even more communications of all types and styles with citizens. Increased citizen engagement must be supported by a strategy that considers and coordinates all types of interactions from media events and press releases to citizen inquiries and information requests. It must educate the public on how to get information while also allowing them to provide feedback on services and to have a meaningful and understandable measure for how government is performing.

The discussion of how best to engage citizens needs to mature from one focused on technology as the solution to one focused on strategy—with technology, regardless of the communications channel, as the enabler of that strategy.

There are many barriers that technology alone cannot overcome. This paper provides recommendations for the Administration's citizen engagement strategy to overcome four barriers that prevent the government from meaningfully advancing its engagement with citizens.

The Government Contact Center Council Provides Leadership

The Government Contact Center Council is sponsored by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) and consists of more than 50 contact center leaders from over 30 federal offices. Agencies represented include the Social Security Administration, Internal Revenue Service, Department of Education, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, General Services Administration and others. Its members collaborate to share and discuss communications best practices, research, and trends. They benchmark performance and progress against each other's successes and failures, serve as sounding boards for other members, and work together to improve services provided to the public across all communication channels, while also recognizing the intrinsic variances in service that drive differences in measurement and results.

Contact centers support telephone, Internet and emerging channels of communications, including aspects of Web 2.0. Two-thirds of government contact centers interact with customers via other

¹ Brad Cleveland, "Five Ways Web 2.0 Communities and Other Communications Developments are Changing Call Centers," <http://www.icmi.com>, February 2009.

² U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services, Federal Solutions Division, *Top Findings, Forrester Q3 2008 Online Survey of U.S. Individuals*, http://www.usaservices.gov/pdf_docs/TopFindingsForresterQ3onlinesurvey.doc (Accessed 20 February 2009).

channels of communications in addition to the telephone.³ Within government, services that are part of a contact center cost significantly less to provide than when provided independent of a contact center.⁴ Contact centers are also more likely to use performance, customer service, and cost metrics to make sure they are managed effectively and give the public the results they need.⁵ The concentration of staff, content management, best practices, and communication channels in contact centers makes them a focal point for any agency's customer engagement, especially in times of crisis when citizens prefer the telephone to other communications options to initially contact the government.⁶

G3C members are dedicated to improving service to federal government customers. In the rapidly-evolving landscape of technology, society and communications, G3C members are on the forefront of citizen engagement. They know better than most what changes will bring about the best improvements to citizen services.

Engaging Citizens Effectively Is the Goal

Two-hundred million times a month, government customers engage the federal government looking for accurate and relevant information.⁷ Half of that volume comes through contact centers.⁸ Whether calling in the aftermath of a natural disaster or using the Internet to search online for financial aid, every successful encounter with the government demonstrates the government's dependability and effectiveness and builds public trust in that government and its programs.

Government contact centers and G3C members value the public's trust and are working to earn it. They are improving the quality, timeliness, relevance and accuracy of the information they provide to citizens. They are speaking in plain language to citizens. Contact centers are striving to eliminate the need for citizens to understand the intricate structure of government and its programs in order to get information. They do this by providing easy access to self service channels, by allowing citizens to contact government through the channels of their choosing, and by allowing transactions begun in one channel, such as the Internet, to be completed in another, such as the phone. Government agencies are adopting new media and technologies to engage citizens on the citizen's own turf. For example, citizens will increasingly be able to transition from viewing entertainment—or perhaps government-created videos—on a social media website, to asking a question of the government on that same site. Other contemporary web-based capabilities, such as web-chat, are already quickly becoming the norm in many contact centers to provide assistance to their website customers.

³ Jon Anton, "Government Industry Benchmark Report" (West Lafayette, IN: BenchmarkPortal, 2008), 46.

⁴ U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services, Federal Solutions Division, *Government-Wide Assessment Final Report*, <http://www.citizenservices.gov/survey> (accessed 20 February 2007).

⁵ Ibid

⁶ U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services, Federal Solutions Division, *Citizens' Service-Level Expectations, Final Report*, http://www.usaservices.gov/bestpractices/pdf_citizens/GSAServiceLevelExpectationsv11Final-PostfocusGroup.pdf (accessed 20 February 2007).

⁷ U.S. General Services Administration, Office of Citizen Services, Federal Solutions Division, *Summary of the Government-Wide Assessment*, <http://www.citizenservices.gov/survey> (accessed 20 February 2007).

⁸ Ibid

Removing Barriers to Progress

Based on their experiences, the G3C identified the four most important barriers that should presently be addressed to improve citizen engagement, whether they are tackled through new technologies, processes or policy:

1. Lack of Intra-Agency Collaboration and Coordination
2. Lack of Public Awareness of Government Points of Service
3. Lack of Minimal Government-Wide Standards for Measuring Customer Satisfaction and Service Delivery Performance
4. Lack of Timely Approvals to Collect Citizen Input

These barriers, at their heart, are deceptively simplistic and surprisingly non-technical considering the critical role that technology plays in communications. From social media that promotes collaboration to other Web 2.0 website technologies that improve customer satisfaction and performance reporting, we recognize that modern technology will be needed to help tear down these barriers. But technology alone is not strategy, and merely collecting data is not success. New policies and programs—in fact a new philosophy—that drives and rewards rapid, thorough, coordinated and consistent delivery of information must form the core of a successful new citizen engagement strategy. And the Government Contact Center Council is prepared to help.

Barrier 1: Lack of Intra-Agency Collaboration and Coordination

Government agencies communicate with their customers in many ways. These include but are not limited to press releases from Public Affairs, television interviews with agency executives, publications, websites and conferences. Regardless of what message is sent out through which channel, contact centers are often the first point of contact for citizens to convey their questions, concerns or comments. But whether citizens inquire about the protections in place for polar bears, the availability of White House tours, transparency in a government report, or the status of loved ones in an overseas terrorist attack, contact centers need to have an agency-wide system in place to push information to all relevant points of citizen contact so that the agency can respond accurately and quickly, regardless of what prompted the inquiry or how it arrived.

Too often today, agencies' communications with citizens exist in silos of operations that do not communicate with each other, although these agencies are communicating with common customers. Websites especially, each with their own staff and mission, dot the communications landscape of some agencies and hinder successful citizen navigation. Some agencies have a "main" contact center and an "official" website, yet the management of each rarely talk or share information, much less coordinate their uniform deployment.

Agencies need an agency-wide governance body to ensure collaboration and coordination of all communications with their customers across all communications channels. This leadership will collectively result in streamlined decision making, maximized use of existing centers, economies of scale in operations, common solutions for information sharing, fewer redundancies, reduced need for contractors, less overhead, more accurate information and higher quality service.

Citizens' ability to get correct information from the federal government on their first try can make or break their relationship with the government. This has never been more important than in this era of promised government transparency and openness.

Recommendations:

- 1) Agencies should be required to have one senior executive accountable for coordinating all points of service to agency customers, regardless of channel, insisting on intra-agency collaboration and information sharing.
- 2) The government should have one senior official who is accountable for facilitating improved services, government-wide, to citizens. This official would work with the agency executives mentioned above. Working together, they would know the barriers to improving service and would be responsible for addressing them. This official would also be responsible for overseeing other government-wide initiatives that promote collaboration and information sharing within and between agencies to reduce the costs of providing and improving citizen services. Strong intra-agency unity of purpose in public communications will form a natural basis for the smooth flow of public information between agencies.
- 3) Agencies should be required to articulate in their strategic plans how they are using contact centers, including all available electronic channels of communication. This will promote transparency and facilitate intra-agency collaboration ensuring that citizens have adequate access to all of our government's services and information.

Barrier 2: Lack of Public Awareness of Government Points of Service

Even as the demand for services proliferates in the public and private sectors, agencies are experiencing reduced budgets for marketing and outreach. The Federal Blue Pages in most telephone number directories has been reduced and citizens are increasingly being encouraged to use the Internet as their primary source for information.

The problem, however, is that the exponential growth of the number of Internet sites, including government sites, confuses citizens. A recent survey found that fewer than 15% of those surveyed knew that USA.gov existed to guide them through the labyrinth of government agencies and programs, and less than 1.5% knew about 1 (800) FED-INFO⁹. These two points of service are the primary general information vehicles the federal government offers citizens to navigate to the correct point of service when they do not know where to go.

Additionally, citizens have trouble identifying which services found through the Internet are legitimate government sources. Locating trustworthy services through the Internet, regardless of the preferred contact channel, is a challenge for many. Although much more cost-effective, the Internet does not make it easier to identify authoritative and trustworthy sources of information. When citizens choose incorrectly the result can be costly, if not catastrophic, for them.

More public education, outreach and marketing, in tandem with a streamlined and intuitively logical array of websites, are necessary to help citizens successfully find and use authoritative government services—including contact center phone numbers. The government cannot engage with citizens or share critical information such as the status and details of economic recovery programs when citizens do not know where to go.

⁹ U.S. General Services Administration, Federal Citizen Information Center, "Comprehensive Report and Analysis 1-800-FED-INFO, USA.gov Pueblo, CO" (unpublished report, Washington D.C., 2008), p.2, 8, 9.

Recommendation:

The government should support more nationwide marketing campaigns to educate citizens about how to contact government, what services are available from the government, and how to identify official government websites and services. Today, with few exceptions, the approach is “every agency for itself” in the marketplace. No one is tackling the difficult issue of helping citizens understand what is officially government and what is not.

Barrier 3: Lack of Minimal Government-Wide Standards for Measuring Customer Satisfaction and Service Delivery Performance

Leadership in the federal government often looks for meaningful ways to understand how well agencies are performing. The information sought is important and valuable. Consequently, agencies have numerous reporting requirements and invest a lot of time and money to meet them.

But, despite these reporting requirements, comparisons made between agencies too often do not accurately reflect the differences between agencies’ missions and customers and are therefore misleading. This can even occur between different offices within the same agency. Inaccurate and unfair comparisons do not lead to meaningful change. Often, it just leads to frustration and more reporting. These requirements are burdensome and are often seen as unnecessarily complex and expensive.

A new foundation for performance measurement needs to be laid based on meaningful “apples to apples” comparisons of agencies’ performance. New minimal standards and guidance should let agencies continue to decide what is most meaningful for them to measure in their situations and for their needs, while also allowing them to have some minimal level of meaningful benchmarks to know how well they are performing compared to others. A 2008 report by GSA’s Office of Citizen Services discusses some of these issues.¹⁰

Recommendations:

1) The government should create a task force to reevaluate existing performance measure reporting requirements. They need to identify a meaningful way for the federal government to measure performance that results in meaningful “apples to apples” comparisons of agencies’ services, while providing the information necessary for course corrections in the operations of those services.

2) The government should engage experts to create an open standard for measuring customer satisfaction to enable the “apples to apples” comparison of customer satisfaction between agencies’ points of service. Since an open standard is one that no one owns and is free to be used by everyone, having an official open standard offers many benefits. It will decrease the cost to agencies when they evaluate measurement options, ensure a government-wide fair comparison of agencies, give every agency access to the same measurement method regardless of budget, and create a transparent measurement process. An open standard has the additional benefit of allowing vendors to embed the measurement methodology within their products, increasing the standard’s ubiquity and ease of use.

¹⁰ The report is titled, “Customer Satisfaction Measurement Best Practices Study,” and can be found at: <http://www.citizenservices.gov/aboutus/csms.php>.

Barrier 4: Lack of Timely Approvals for Collecting Citizen Input

The Paperwork Reduction Act was enacted to minimize the paperwork burden for individuals, small businesses, educational and nonprofit institutions, Federal contractors, state, local and tribal governments, and other persons resulting from the collection of information by or for the Federal Government. The Act is important and affords many safeguards and benefits.

However, its implementation has the unintended consequence of producing a lengthy process to obtain approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for surveys that collect citizen input and measure customer satisfaction. It is common to hear agencies say that their approval process took nine months or longer, so long that sometimes a survey is no longer relevant. Ideally, this process would take no longer than nine weeks.

Recommendation:

The government should create a task force led by OMB to fully understand the implications on agencies of the Paperwork Reduction Act and to identify ways to minimize the length of time it takes for an agency to get approval for citizen-facing surveys.

Support is Necessary from the Obama Administration

For the government to more meaningfully engage citizens, the administration needs a citizen engagement strategy that will remove the current barriers, creating:

1. Centralized leadership of citizen engagement responsible for increased collaboration and information sharing within and between agencies,
2. Increased public awareness of government points of service,
3. Better guidance and tools for measuring performance and customer satisfaction, and
4. More timely approval of surveys to collect citizen feedback and input.

The government is forging a brighter future for citizens and other customers with new technologies that allow them to communicate with the government via a common language and platform and to allow them to provide input to government processes in new and exciting ways. Some say that the future is now; based on our experience, we know better. The expectations of citizens are a moving target, increasing as new styles of communicating are adopted by young and old alike.

More important today than this new technology is a new type of leadership for citizen engagement, one that drives agencies to embrace this new technology and realize its full potential in concrete ways that helps answer questions for citizens versus just providing them information. Leadership is needed whose philosophy insists that technology is a means to an end, but not the end itself. Technology is nothing if it is not part of a focused and goal-oriented plan—if it exists independent of a comprehensive strategy to bring answers and information to people in the way that is best for them. The Obama administration is uniquely positioned to create a citizen engagement strategy that is rooted not in randomly applied technology, but in cohesive leadership; leadership that enables agencies to support the administration's goal of increased government transparency and openness and agencies' goals of supporting their customers through the best processes, policies and technologies available for their circumstances.

Contact centers are on the forefront of citizen engagement. Whether providing government services and information or responding to inquiries about government openness and transparency, contact centers are an integral part of government's success in serving the public. G3C hopes the recommendations in this paper are seriously considered. We look forward to working with our government's leaders to remove barriers to progress and improve services to citizens and other government customers who reach out to the federal government in one way or another nearly two and a half billion times a year. With support, commitment, guidance and encouragement from leadership at all levels of government, we can make improvements that surpass both the federal government's and citizens' expectations.