



GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE SOLUTIONS, LLC

ENHANCING GOVERNMENT SUCCESS

GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY IN THE AGE OF HIGH CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

The changing nature of government transparency

Today, more than in any other era, citizens are demanding so much more from their local governments. And nowhere is that more apparent than in “transparency.” In many ways, transparency translates into enhanced expectation of customer experience and service.

Today’s customers of government – not just of the nation, but our states, our counties and cities – are becoming pretty demanding of their local governments. And they should be demanding - their taxes pay for the activities and services provided by those entities.

Yet it is becoming clear that these customers, especially taxpayers, are becoming much more expectant of quality customer service from their government representatives. The old perspective embodied in “we’re the government and...” is no longer acceptable. The government is not always right, and in this age of immediate news and constant social media messaging, governments are pretty easy to “call out” when they fail.

What is driving this demand? The commercial sector. Many of us experience the nearly always-available and easy-to-use systems the commercial market makes available to us. As the movement by commercial entities has transitioned (or is transitioning) to quality customer experience/customer service, so too are residents and taxpayers coming to expect that same level of experience from their governments and public servants.

It is important to observe here that, despite what legislators and political leaders think, residents get their impressions, and thus their attitudes about value, of their governments not from elected officials but from those day-to-day interactions with government entities. The visit to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles, the call to the Department of Revenue for clarification, the application for a fishing license, etc. Those are the interactions that matter most to our residents, and so providing a quality experience leads to positive attitudes about the value of government. And, of course, failure to provide a quality experience leads to dissatisfaction. And that leads to complaints and damaged reputations. People are less willing to pay for things that are difficult or simply do not work for them. If getting a fishing license is convenient, people don’t mind the fee. However, if it is difficult or inconveniently painful, they are more very likely to complain about the cost.

As elected officials begin to learn this relational dynamic, they are becoming (or will become) more engaged with their entities on behalf of their constituents. And those pressures can increase stress, increase distraction from core business, provide new challenges, and cause a reduction in confidence in government agencies by elected representatives – who are also responsible for funding and providing oversight into those entities.

And while the public media is significantly reduced these days in both stature and impact, they are still a major factor in building, or damaging, government entity reputations. Investigative reporters, when provided with the negative story, can do significant damage to organizations. Couple this with the immediacy of social media, a communication sphere with no seeming controls, limits, and little fact-checking, and one bad story can result in serious damage to an agency's reputation and the confidence people have in them.

We also daily face a challenge from the available government budget to provide services. Even when economies are good and revenues strong, there is always a competition for available dollars. Those agencies that have good reputations and provide good quality service to constituents are rewarded when budgets are written. Those who are not, pay a price. Just look to the Internal Revenue Service to see that result in action.

The IRS conducted some questionable activities, was challenged for those activities, and paid a price. They are still paying that penalty through insufficient funding that leads to poor customer service (for example: long wait times on the phones), slow processing, increased risk of fraud, and an inability to update some computer systems, many of which are now 50+ years old - and led to the crash of some of those systems on April 17, 2018 causing the IRS (and all the states as a result) to extend individual income tax filing and payment deadlines by an additional day - much to their embarrassment. Ultimately, of course, the real penalty was and is paid by taxpayers.

Finally, when it comes to collecting past due financial obligations the playing field continues to see rule changes in a time of expanding issues on electronic communication and changing regulations and tax law. This often leads to customer uncertainty about their rights and means that government agencies and their partners must be on top of their contact and collection behaviors to stay in compliance with regulatory and statutory requirements.

Changing nature of taxpayer expectations

So, what is it about those pesky residents (or taxpayers) that has changed? There are four major areas where their attitudes and expectations have changed:

Accountability. More and more residents, citizens, taxpayers (and any other nouns that are appropriate) expect their government and its agencies to be accountable to them for their actions. Across the board, with every entity of government, customers want agencies to step up their game and provide exceptional, understandable, and open service. They want their customer service to look and feel like the best they experience in the commercial arena. They want errors – yes, they do happen – to be acknowledged and corrected quickly and efficiently.

In the case of accounts receivable management, government agencies must be accountable for their collection activities. Few would suggest that we should not collect what is due. But almost everyone reacts negatively when government agencies cannot behave appropriately in the process. Overbearing attitudes, imperious agents, unwillingness to accommodate circumstances, and inflexible rules and regulations all lead to negative impressions. And those impressions are now frequently

communicated openly and quickly via modern communication channels like Facebook and Twitter - leading to a more vocal public.

Residents' attitude is: "We want to know what you are doing and that you are doing it right."

Responsiveness. The public now expects a responsive government. Gone are the days when the public sends a letter and expects to hear something back in a few weeks or even months. Interactions with the commercial world and their immediacy of communication and action (read: Amazon, many banks and their like) have led our residents to expect a similar experience from their government. Immediate response to phone calls, limited lines at locations, minimal/quick processing times, an openness to creative solutions, and other expectations now abound.

Residents' attitude is: "My bank can do this, why can't you?"

Performance. Our residents have a "git 'er done" attitude now, especially about all things pertaining to themselves. Again, this is a result of the commercial/retail sector moving to a more robust customer service/customer experience model. Expectations developed there translate to their relationships with government. It translates to speed of processing, accuracy of transactions, knowledgeable employees, robust computing capability, and especially today, robust cybersecurity measures.

[An image that supports a positive outcomes idea.]

The days of low-capacity telephone banks are gone. The days of old computer systems that degrade performance and delay customer service are gone. The days of "We've always done it that way," are gone. The days of unempowered employees are gone.

Here's a test: Are you offering public facing, secure, and easy to understand and use online portals for customer interaction? Are they integrated or are you operating multiple, stand-alone systems that require the public to make multiple visits to multiple sites? Are they accessible from mobile devices?

Do you have a workforce empowered to "help" people, or just answer questions? There's a major philosophical difference between those two positions. One will be positively received, the other not so much.

Residents' attitude is: "Make it easy for me and get it done quickly and correctly."

Channels of communication. Of course, in the 21st Century, communication is immediate and multi-channeled. The commercial/retail sector has driven this to a whole new level with multi-channel offerings designed to give the customer many options to communicate with them:

- Telephone
- Email
- Snail mail
- Text messaging
- Chat
- Secure web portal

- Social media
- Mobile applications
- And many others

Many of these are immediate and some of them are secure. Others can be made secure. Yes, some of these are limited. That doesn't matter. If you are not offering ALL of these options, you are behind customer expectations.

Moreover, customers want to choose their channel of communication, not allow the government agency to dictate the channel.

Government needs to move to these new channels as quickly as possible, consistent with security and privacy concerns. But security and privacy concerns cannot be used as an excuse to avoid expanding communication channels. Our residents have expectations and we need to meet them. They don't want to hear excuses when commercial/retailers can do it.

Here are a couple of tests: If you are not operating an automatic call-back system in your contact center, you are behind the curve. If you don't have chat enabled for your call/contact center, you are behind the curve.

Residents' attitude is: "I want to interact with you my way, not your way. And I want to do it right now."

Conclusion

Customers in the 21st Century, including those we call citizens, residents, taxpayers and other monikers, have increased expectations of their government agencies and entities. Driven by the commercial and retail sectors, they have the same expectations of their governments. And while it is always more difficult to move as quickly as commercial entities, government agencies still face rising expectations.

The observations above can only lead to one conclusion: Government agencies and entities must understand today's customer service and customer expectation environment and be moving aggressively to meet those expectations. Failure to do so will lead to failure, complaints, sagging public respect for government and its agents (agencies).

The lesson: Understand these enhanced customer expectations and be visibly and actively moving to satisfy them.