The Top 4 Trends in Customer Care for Public Sector

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According to a 2015 report released by the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), satisfaction with federal government customer service is at an all time low. Alarmingly, ACSI also found a direct relation between trust in government and customer service satisfaction; when satisfaction declines, so does trust.

One of the biggest deciding factors when it comes to loyalty and trust in an organization is customer service. Studies have shown that three in five Americans would try a new brand or company for a better service experience. Furthermore, analysts say that by 2020 customer experience will be the only differentiator, not products and not price.

Satisfaction with customer service directly affects how citizens feel about working with government agencies. Improving customer service and ensuring every constituent has a positive experience is an evolution and requires a definitive approach. In this paper, we’ll discuss how you can develop a plan to improve the way you provide customer service and empower citizens through innovation, automation and personalization.

**Customer service expectations today**

The average citizen of today expects far more than the citizens of the 1990s and 2000s. We’re in the midst of a “millennial mindset” of customer service that combines convenience, speed and the need for human-like experiences to build strong customer relationships. Limiting customer support to landlines is a thing of the past. The millennial generation and many of generation Y and X are technology-focused. They are comfortable with digital forms of communication via channels like text messages, email, social media and look to those same channels for customer support. Bluewolf says customer service requests through web, social and chat are expected to grow from 13 percent to 53 percent in the coming year alone.

In the modern world of customer service, agencies need to give citizens more communication options based on the technology they already use throughout the day. Citizens with active lives appreciate access to diverse service channels no matter where they are, what they are doing, or what device they use. In fact, 25 percent of consumers use one to two channels when seeking customer care – and 52 percent of consumers use three or four.

Common and more traditional customer service support include email and interactive voice response systems (IVRs) that allow customers to interact with a company’s host system via a telephone keypad or by speech recognition. Customer service through web self-service, online chat and text messaging is growing and agencies need to evaluate citizen preferences and offer a variety of communication touch points for better, more immediate service. This means that if a citizen prefers reaching a company via email, they expect a customer service email address to be easily accessible. If they prefer interacting using online chat outside of business hours when it’s convenient for them, someone
should be there. The modern citizen also demands a quick, first-time resolution when they ask for assistance. They want a timely response and don’t want to be routed to multiple agents or wait on hold for an agent to become available.

McKinsey research shows that 70 percent of buying experiences are based on how the customer feels they are being treated. The same is true for citizens interacting with government. They need to feel like the organization cares about their situation and is invested in the outcome of their issue. Creating a personalized experience that addresses an individual’s unique situation is critical. It’s how you show constituents they’re important.

Success depends on your ability to change your approach to become as versatile as the communities you support. To do so, government agencies must understand these evolving expectations and use innovative, intuitive technology to:

• Enhance citizen satisfaction
• Exceed citizens’ expectations
• Build a better experience for citizens

Trend #1 – Exceptional citizen care through personalization

Culture and technology have contributed to the changes in citizen expectations. And in turn, agencies need to evolve their culture and innovate to improve citizen satisfaction. Traditional IVRs have been a part of the call center solution set for many years but today’s more innovative solutions incorporate personalization. Personalized and adaptive IVRs learn caller preferences over time automatically, continuously improving performance for the caller. Through advanced analytics, IVRs comprehend information and build a customer profile that will adjust communication options, provide pre scripted information and change languages based on past interactions with an individual. For example, if a caller always selects “Spanish” as the language preference when prompted, the IVR will adjust and automatically provide options in Spanish without the caller having to select that as a preference each time they call customer support.

In one southern state, Conduent led a pilot to test the use of adaptive personalization technology to help automate IVR support for electronic payment card (EPC) programs. The result was significant customer service improvements including:

• Personalizing approximately 85 percent of IVR calls by conclusion of pilot
• Shortening calls by 37 percent for those personalized
• Reducing call transfer rate by 71 percent, making it easier for constituents to get the service they needed via the IVR without needing assistance from contact center agents.

Additionally, innovative Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools are ideal for managing massive quantities of data from citizen requests. Information must be accessible at the click of a button to quickly and easily resolve these issues. Searching for documents and information can turn an agent’s attention away from the citizen, making them feel irrelevant. Intuitive CRM tools are easy to navigate, capture all relevant citizen information and help agents find what they need and resolve issues quickly. It’s key to reducing the average handle time and increasing first call resolution and accuracy.
With our simplification tools, communication with the citizen more streamlined and efficient. A CSR clicks on the activity a citizen is calling about and they are taken step by step through the activity with scripts and call flows. When a New Mexico agency introduced this tool to their Medicaid beneficiary customer care center, it allowed agents to focus on callers’ inquiries and concerns rather than administrative tasks such as documenting the details and background of the inquiry. As a result, call times were shorter, and service quality and customer experience were improved.

**Trend #2 – Consolidate and go virtual**

As citizens have evolved, so has the traditional work environment. Recent IT advances (specifically with cloud alternatives) enable states to reduce spending on IT infrastructure. The cloud also allows agencies to adopt a virtual contact center environment where all hardware and software are housed in one secure data center. No matter an agent's location, the cloud gives them the ability to route calls between virtual call centers and instant access to vital information, reducing upfront hardware and software costs and increasing workflows, efficiencies and profitability.

In addition to reduced costs on infrastructure, other workforce advancements like at home agent programs support job creation in rural areas as well as opportunities. Conduent was a pioneer in remote monitoring and auditing of agent activity to ensure agents are productive, efficient and quality driven. This trend will continue to increase with the number of home-based customer service agents expected to grow at a compounded annual growth rate of 36.4 percent. This has related benefits to government workforce management, potentially reducing costs for office space and allowing agencies to draw from a larger talent pool.

Even if at-home agents aren’t used, consolidation offers substantial benefits. States that once maintained a separate call center for each program are beginning to issue requests for proposals (RFPs) and award contracts for consolidated centers. An enterprise human services center that includes Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), aging services, and similar programs can streamline the call handling process, getting the state more “bang for their buck” from the same training, innovations and technologies.

The increasing prevalence of digital devices in daily life means meeting customers where they are. And it’s not only the millennial generation that is active online. Almost 50 percent of all social media users have used social customer service, including roughly a third of those over 65 years of age. Social media has awakened the customer’s voice. They expect (and like) to be heard. Customers are online and want the organizations they are working with to be accessible there as well. The need to monitor customers through social channels has never been greater, but the volume of traffic can be overwhelming.

Partnering with a third party can enhance an organization’s social presence, increase accuracy and mine traffic to create actionable insight and help identify issues before they
arise. Conversations are happening constantly online and it’s important for organizations to be a part of them, or at least monitor what is being said. Incorporating functions like predictive analytics, natural language processing, and machine learning along with keyword identification, gives structure to the huge volume of social traffic and automates the delivery of more accurate insight into customer sentiment and operational metrics. Social media monitoring and engagement programs can track citizen compliments and concerns about a program. This allows agencies to proactively adjust IVR programming, CRM tools and agent scripts to answer citizen questions before they are even asked. These insights can help improve community engagement, citizen sentiment, and analytics – and even reduce agency costs.

**Trend #4 – Automation and intelligence**

With virtual contact centers and innovative tools like advanced analytics, today’s customer service solutions may seem futuristic. However, many of them remain primarily reactive. The interaction begins when a customer calls, emails or uses social media channels to communicate with an organization. In the future, this model will become much more dynamic. Automation will include technology to manage customer dialogues well beyond today’s question-answer capability through advanced natural language processing techniques. Advancements will help technology analyze the customer’s need. For example, if a customer says, “I’m still receiving mail to my old address,” they need to update their account information and technology will be able to process the request.

Advanced techniques in socio-linguistics and statistical modeling will allow customer care to become truly personal. By analyzing the style of language used on social media, email or on the phone, agencies can get clues about a person’s personality and interests to create better engagement and develop stronger relationships. This helps to understand citizens better and decide where to reach them, when they might be interested in a new service or program or when they might be losing faith in an old one. For example, if a citizen contacts a service center looking for assistance with a technical issue, knowing their level of expertise and familiarity with the technology or service helps the CSR deliver the appropriate level of assistance.

**Trend #3 – Finding value in the use of social media**

Among the multitude of changes to the customer service industry, the explosion of social media has been the biggest game changer. The interaction between a customer and a customer service representative used to be private behind closed doors, but social media has brought these conversations into the public. This can have a powerful positive effect – or an equally powerful negative one. Through social channels, customers can air grievances on a public platform, sharing their bad experience with a mass audience. Touch Agency estimates that over 1 million people view tweets about customer service every week and roughly 80 percent of those tweets are negative in nature. Conversely, a positive customer service experience has the ability to amplify reputation.
The Internet of Things (IoT) will also play a role in the future of public sector customer care, making life for constituents easier by offering proactive assistance. Examples could include:

- Garbage cans with sensors can signal when trashcans are full and need to be emptied versus customers having to wait for a specific day
- Equipping cars with the ability to notify drivers when speed limits change
- After two failed attempts to use a WIC EBT card, a citizen is automatically contacted to offer assistance

With routine matters handled in a satisfying and cost effective way with low or no human touch, organizations will be able to focus on high-value conversations with their customers and allow human agents to take care of more difficult situations. According to the Gartner Customer 360 Summit, by 2020, customers will manage 85 percent of their relationship with brands (and agencies) without interacting with a human. Human agents will still be used, but they will be positioned behind the technology, ready to intervene when necessary.

Upping your customer service game

Today, citizens are better informed and accustomed to self-service and multiple channels of communications. They want easy access to information and service by their preferences. Contact centers must be considered knowledge centers in order to meet the new demands of the general population. By personalizing the customer service relationship to the individual, citizens will feel like their voice is truly heard. Deploying flexible solutions that meet the needs of today but can also grow and evolve far into the future as preferences and requirements change is key to finding success.

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