The Path to Customer-Centric Service

A Candid Survey of Federal Managers

June 2015
Purpose

After a series of events that arguably damaged the reputation of the federal government’s customer service programs, in 2015 the Obama Administration announced its intention to overhaul public services to make them more customer-centric. Customer service factors heavily in the Digital Services Playbook, while the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has designated it a Cross-Agency Priority Goal, focusing on streamlining transactions, developing standards for high-impact services, and using technology to improve the customer experience.¹

However, leading consumer studies and public opinion surveys have found that there is still much to be desired from federal customer service. According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), for instance, federal customer service continues to lag behind the private sector standard.² Further, there is disagreement as to whether the challenges are primarily cultural or technological.

To better understand customer service from the perspective of the federal workforce, evaluate the drivers and challenges to reform, and shed light on improvements currently underway, Government Business Council (GBC) and Deloitte conducted a survey of federal managers.

Methodology

GBC deployed a survey to a sample of Government Executive, Nextgov, Defense One, and Route 50 print and online subscribers on May 12, 2015. The pool of 410 respondents includes employees at the GS/GM 11-15 grade levels and members of the Senior Executive Service (SES). Respondents include representatives from at least 31 federal and defense agencies.

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Executive Summary
Executive Summary

Perceptions of customer service quality differ between federal managers and the general public

65 percent of federal managers indicate that their organization goes above and beyond to deliver a customer experience tailored to users’ unique needs, and 67 percent say their organization’s service is on par with that from the private sector. However, according to leading consumer surveys, satisfaction with government services is at an eight-year low and the federal government ranks near the bottom in a cross-industry comparison.

The motivation to improve customer service, as well as the obstacles, vary depending on agency mission and constituency

Respondents who report that their agency’s core mission is regulation and enforcement perceive compliance with federal mandates as the leading driver of customer service improvements. Alternatively, those whose organizations are primarily focused on providing public services cite the need to improve engagement with citizens and customer satisfaction. Overall, respondents report that the obstacles to meaningful reform are budgetary, technological, and cultural. Public service-focused respondents, however, are more likely to cite outdated technologies, cultural resistance to change, poor training, and a lack of interagency collaboration as challenges.

Many agencies have yet to take key steps necessary to improve service

Less than one-quarter of respondents say their organization uses analytics to define customer segments, integrates data with data collected by other agencies, uses a customer relationship management (CRM) system, or aligns incentives with attention to customer-centric service. Further, less than half believe that their organization does a good job soliciting feedback from customers and only 42 percent say their organization uses quantitative metrics to track performance toward customer service goals.
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Respondent Profile
The sample is comprised largely of senior officials in management roles

**Job Grade**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-15</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-14</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-13</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-12</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-11</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

75% of respondents are GS/GM-12, or military equivalent, and above

**Reports/Oversees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reports/Oversees</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-20</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-50</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-200</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 200</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

45% of respondents oversee at least one report

Percentage of respondents, n=410
The sample includes respondents from a diverse array of job functions.

Here is a breakdown of the job functions:

- Program/project management: 19%
- Administrative: 12%
- Acquisition and procurement: 11%
- Technical/scientific: 7%
- Human capital: 7%
- Finance: 7%
- Agency leadership: 6%
- Auditing: 4%
- Healthcare: 4%
- Facilities management: 3%
- Other: 20%

“Other” includes law enforcement, information technology, communications, and legal.
Most frequently represented agencies

Department of Agriculture
Department of the Army
Department of Defense
Department of the Treasury
Department of Veterans Affairs
Department of the Navy
Department of the Air Force
Social Security Administration
Department of Health and Human Services
Department of Homeland Security
General Services Administration
Department of Transportation
Department of Commerce
Environmental Protection Agency
Department of the Interior

Department of Energy
Department of Housing and Urban Development
Department of Justice
National Aeronautics and Space Administration
Department of Education
Department of Labor
Department of State
Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
United States Marine Corps
Office of Personnel Management
Small Business Administration
U.S. Agency for International Development
Executive Office of the President
National Science Foundation
Other agencies

Agencies listed in order of frequency. Not all participating agencies listed.
Respondents are affiliated with diverse core missions that shape the services they provide.

In general, how would you characterize the core mission of your specific bureau/sub-agency?

- **Public service provider** (i.e., delivering transactional services like healthcare and social services on behalf of the federal government) - 39%
- **Knowledge creation** (i.e., conducting or sponsoring research and/or disseminating information) - 9%
- **Regulation and enforcement** (i.e., developing policy and/or enforcing legal rules) - 25%
- Other - 24%
- Don’t know - 3%

Percentage of respondents, n=410
Respondents describe their organization’s core mission in their own words

In general, how would you characterize the core mission of your specific bureau/sub-agency?

Respondents who selected “Other” were asked to describe their bureau’s mission in their own words. Words used most frequently appear largest.
Respondents’ “customers” vary depending on their organization’s core mission

In general, whom does your bureau/sub-agency consider its primary “customers”?

- Individuals/members of the public
- Businesses/private organizations
- Other public sector entities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Individuals/members of the public</th>
<th>Businesses/private organizations</th>
<th>Other public sector entities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggregate sample</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public service providers</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulators</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of respondents, aggregate n=406, public service providers n=159, regulators n=100
Customer service initiatives must consider the differing agency missions and customer groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Agency Missions</th>
<th>Individuals/Members of the public</th>
<th>Businesses/Private Organizations</th>
<th>Other public sector entities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public service</td>
<td>• Veterans Health Administration provides health services for veterans</td>
<td>• DLA evaluates and awards contracts to suppliers of materiel and equipment</td>
<td>• Federal shared services (e.g., for HR, IT, financial management functions, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• U.S. Postal Service delivers mail</td>
<td>• BLM awards permits for cattle grazing on public land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge creation</td>
<td>• Launch of a new space telescope by NASA</td>
<td>• US-CERT disseminates list of latest cyber threats to critical infrastructure providers</td>
<td>• OMB circulates best practices to help agencies improve customer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discovery of a new cancer drug through NIH-funded research</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research by GAO and CRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation and enforcement</td>
<td>• TSA conducts airport safety screenings</td>
<td>• SEC requires financial institutions to implement new reporting requirements</td>
<td>• CMS supervises states’ expansion of Medicaid benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• IRS issues penalties for tax code violations</td>
<td>• EPA enforces clean air regulations on firms</td>
<td>• Treasury Dept. oversees implementation of open spending data initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3
Research Findings
i.
The State of Federal Customer Experience
A majority of respondents say their organization tailors services to customers’ unique needs

My bureau/sub-agency goes above and beyond to deliver a user experience tailored to its customers’ unique needs.

65% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization provides a customer service experience tailored to its users unique needs.

Percentage of respondents, n=407
Two-thirds of respondents say their customer service is at least on par with the private sector

My bureau/sub-agency provides a customer service experience that is at least equal in quality to what one would expect from the private sector.

67% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization provides a customer service experience that is at least on par with the private sector.

Percentage of respondents, n=408
Respondent confidence in high service quality is consistent across customer groups

- 69% of respondents say their organization provides a level of customer service to *businesses or private organizations*...

- 68% of respondents say their organization provides a level of customer service to *individuals or members of the general public*...

- 64% of respondents say their organization provides a level of customer service to *other public sector entities*...

...that is on par with the private sector standard

Percentage of respondents, individuals/members of the public n=186, businesses/private organizations n=89, other public sector n=117
Yet, citizen surveys paint a different picture of federal customer service

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) indicates that public satisfaction with federal customer service is at an eight-year low.

The federal government still trails private sector industries in terms of customer service quality.

### Federal Government ACSI Score*, by Year

- 2007: 67.8
- 2008: 68.9
- 2009: 68.7
- 2010: 65.4
- 2011: 68.4
- 2012: 64.4
- 2013: 67.8

### ACSI Score 2014, Cross-Industry Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Services</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail/Trade</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy/Utilities</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance/Insurance</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Government</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Scores range from 0-100.

Users of intra-governmental services have mixed feelings about customer service quality

I am satisfied with the quality of customer service I receive from other departments/agencies.

Only 56% of respondents are satisfied with the services they receive from other departments/agencies.

Percentage of respondents who indicate they receive service from another department/agency, n=121
Drivers and Obstacles
Compliance and citizen engagement top the list of factors driving customer service reforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Drivers of Customer Service Reforms</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents, n=408</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complying with federal mandates</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving engagement with customers/citizens</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving customer satisfaction with public services</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing costs</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving public trust in government</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving employee productivity</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving interagency collaboration</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
Complying with federal mandates
Improving engagement with customers
Improving customer satisfaction
Reducing costs

Top Drivers of Customer Service Reforms, by Core Mission

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Aggregate sample</th>
<th>Public service providers</th>
<th>Regulators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compliance with federal mandates</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving engagement with customers</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving customer satisfaction</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reducing costs</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of respondents, aggregate sample n=408, public service providers n=159, regulators n=99
Respondents were asked to select all that apply
However, budgetary, technological, and cultural challenges impede necessary reforms.

### Top Obstacles to Improving Customer Service Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacle</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents, n=403</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Budget constraints</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdated systems/technologies</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural resistance to change</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of proper training</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of coordination with other agencies</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of leadership buy-in</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misaligned employee incentives</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliance with privacy laws governing customer data</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
Many of the challenges federal agencies face are structural

“We have an exponentially expanding customer base due to the baby boomers reaching retirement age and a static or declining level of resources. In addition, customer expectations for new service delivery platforms (i.e., Internet, live chat, etc.) are increasing, but we do not have the resources to bring these platforms online as quickly as public preferences are changing. That creates a drag on our ability to affect change."

“Services need to be individualized but staffing levels have decreased, which decreases amount of attention each case can receive.”
However, respondents also identify the need for process and technological transformation

“Lack of state of the art technologies to meet customer expectations and allow employees to provide a better experience for customers.”

“It is difficult to efficiently roll out programs and meet customer needs with a system that can't handle the workload! Our system seems to be down more than it is up and going. Sometimes I feel like we are set up to fail.”

“Our organization does not try to collect information from customers, nor does leadership use the feedback from employees to try and understand what they have and/or what to do as far as giving directions or decision making.”
Public service providers perceive greater technological and cultural challenges

Top Obstacles to Improving Customer Service Quality, by Core Mission

- **Budget constraints**: 55% (Aggregate), 55% (Public service providers), 56% (Regulators)
- **Outdated systems/technologies**: 45% (Aggregate), 42% (Public service providers), 55% (Regulators)
- **Cultural resistance to change**: 38% (Aggregate), 42% (Public service providers), 35% (Regulators)
- **Lack of proper training**: 35% (Aggregate), 38% (Public service providers), 35% (Regulators)
- **Lack of coordination with other agencies**: 33% (Aggregate), 38% (Public service providers), 33% (Regulators)

Percentage of respondents, aggregate sample n=403, public service providers n=159, regulators n=97
Respondents were asked to select all that apply
iii. Reforms Currently Underway
Agencies employ a wide variety of channels to solicit customer feedback

Which of the following tools does your bureau/sub-agency use to solicit customer feedback?

- **Online feedback tools**: 51%
- **In-person surveys**: 28%
- **Interviews/focus groups**: 24%
- **Social media**: 18%
- **Case studies**: 14%
- **Telephone surveys**: 13%
- **Mobile apps**: 8%
- **Other**: 8%
- **We do not solicit customer feedback**: 15%
- **Don't know**: 14%

Percentage of respondents, n=407
Respondents were asked to select all that apply

71% of respondents report that their agency is using any of the above methods to collect customer feedback.
But less than half of respondents say their organizations do a good job collecting feedback

My bureau/sub-agency does a good job of soliciting customer feedback.

Only 47% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization does a good job of soliciting customer feedback.

Percentage of respondents, n=407
Half of respondents say their organizations clearly display customer service guidelines

My bureau/sub-agency clearly displays its customer service policies and guidelines for public consideration.

Only 53% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization clearly displays its customer service policies and guidelines.

Percentage of respondents, n=407
Many agencies have yet to take crucial steps toward improving customer service

Which, if any, of the following steps has your bureau/sub-agency taken as part of its efforts to improve customer service?

- Integrate customer data gathered at various points of contact throughout the customer experience: 35%
- Prioritize improvements to high-impact customer interactions: 32%
- Use analytics to define customer segments: 24%
- Use a customer relationship management (CRM) system: 15%
- Integrate customer data with data gathered by other agencies: 23%
- Align employee incentives with customer-centric service: 15%
- Analyze social media to understand public attitudes: 14%
- Utilize crowdsourcing to solve challenging problems: 8%
- Appoint a chief customer service officer: 6%
- Other: 4%
- None of the above: 16%

Percentage of respondents, n=404
Respondents were asked to select all that apply.
Less than half of respondents say their agencies use quantitative metrics to track performance

Only 42% of respondents report that their organization uses quantitative metrics to track customer service performance.
Final Considerations
To achieve more customer-centric service:

**Identify and prioritize cultural and process-driven improvements to customer service**

Although limited budgets will continue to be a reality for the foreseeable future, many of the challenges identified in this report can be addressed through a re-examination of current processes. Respondents, especially those in public service-focused organizations, indicate that overcoming cultural resistance to change and improving training and interagency collaboration could help agencies improve customer satisfaction. Further, less than half of respondents say their organizations are using quantitative metrics to track customer service performance, and even fewer report that their agency is taking other crucial steps like prioritizing improvements to high-impact services and aligning employee incentives with customer-centric service. Addressing these issues can make meaningful improvements in service quality despite the current budget environment.

**Use customer feedback to help identify areas for improvement**

Less than half of respondents say their organization is doing a good job of collecting customer feedback. By encouraging customers to voice their opinions on the services they receive, agencies can more readily identify problems that might have been overlooked or caused greater issues downstream. In addition, demonstrating responsiveness to customer feedback can help agencies build trust with their core constituencies and help improve overall satisfaction.

**Leverage data and analytics to provide a more personalized user experience**

Agencies have a diverse range of core missions and customer groups, which makes it essential that agencies tailor their services to users’ unique needs. While a majority of respondents believes that their agency is already doing this, there is ample room for improvement. Respondents indicate that agencies are behind the curve when it comes to integrating customer data from various touchpoints, as well as with data collected by other agencies. By adopting a more data-driven approach, agencies can better understand and anticipate the needs of their major constituencies and deliver better, more customer-centric service.
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