How Federal Agencies Can Reshape the Customer Experience

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When interacting with federal agencies, today's citizens, soldiers and agency staff have come to expect a digital experience that can rival any commercial entity. This means reaching information, services and support when, where and how the customer chooses to do so, whether it be through web resources, self-service or an old-fashioned phone call.

Providing tech-infused, customer-friendly user experiences can seem like a tall order for government agencies, but by tapping the correct digital transformation tools, agencies can create a pathway to offering the types of omnichannel experiences that all customers have come to expect. This is according to experts on the recent online viewcast from Verizon: "Citizens, Soldiers, Staff: How Digital Transformation Is Reshaping the DoD & Civilian Agency Experience," which featured speakers who have helped to usher in true omnichannel experiences at agencies, including the Department of Defense and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Here are five top takeaways government and IT leaders can use to gain better insights into how to steer digital transformation initiatives in ways that help agencies interact with customers and clients more effectively.

Define What Omnichannel Means to Your Customers

So, how can agencies get started when it comes to providing stellar customer experiences? The first step is to understand what omnichannel actually means to customers.

While many agencies offer options to reach agencies through several channels, "if I [as a customer] have to give the context [of what I'm looking for] again when I cross channels, it's really a multi-channel offering, not an omnichannel," said Cary Cusumano, CX design strategist at Verizon. "It's only when I pick up the phone and say, yes, I do see you had a chat with one of our agents yesterday that you have a true omnichannel experience. That's hard to do because you have to maintain some kind of knowledge base of who the client is ... who the agency is, who the the federal elected officials are, and, know when they're contacting you, what the context is and, and how to best help them."

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Understand What Your Customers Want from an Experience

Once an agency sets out to not just offer several channels, but connect them effectively, the next step is to understand which mediums people actually want to use.

While chat bots and texting might seem like the next wave of interaction for customers, particularly younger generations that are tied to their smartphones, the reality is more complex.

"There was a lot of hype around chatbots ... that they would come in and there would be no need for call centers," said Cusumano. "We've seen the opposite of that happen. Because what happens is I might get the fundamental answer I'm looking for in a chat, but then it raises other questions that I have to go find out more."

Cusumano notes, that people will choose a particular channel "based on their own perceived complexity of that transaction." An address change, for instance, is something that customers believe they can easily do online, while paying an invoice might be something they'd rather have a dialogue about over the phone.

By working with providers like Verizon, agencies can look to better understand and cater to customer needs.

Adopt Tools and Approaches that Cater to Your Customers

But each agency and client base is unique. So, how can agencies gain visibility into their client's preferred modes of communication? Considering the particular needs of their customer base is a great place to start.

David Berine, director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program, Defense Personnel and Family Support Center for the U.S. Department of Defense, notes that many of their customers are overseas and, as such, require answers to their questions at unusual hours.

> **"Since the department doesn't offer a 24/7 call center, customers are often seeking out information and support via digital channels,"** says Berine.

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As such, the agency seeks to provide information on commonly asked questions on their websites and through digital offerings. Similarly, after seeing success with an AI tool called Ask Emma, a computer generated virtual assistant that answers user questions, the USCIS is looking to expand its AI offerings to not just answer questions, but also predict them. By tracking previous user behavior, the new system would aim to forecast why a user is logging into a system to streamline the user experience as much as possible.

"We're trying to get more to a proactive approach than a reactive approach," says Kevin Coleman, chief of Customer Contact Operations for the IRIS Directorate at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Follow the Metrics to Customer-Focused Digital Transformation

The DoD also relies on analytics to better determine what types of information their customer base is looking for at any given time.

> **"What we do in order to make sure we're supporting them is look at our analytics …. To see trends not only in terms of our call center by topic, but also our email traffic," says Berine.**

This entails categorizing every transaction — without collecting personal or identifying information — by topic.

"If we see a spike or some topic that's trending, we will feature that directly on our center landing page to direct people more towards it," said Berine. "Let the need drive what you're going to do."

Coleman notes that his agency also uses metrics from call centers to answer frequently asked questions directly on their website as well as effect incremental operation changes over time.

By tracking interactions, government agencies can allow customers and clients to drive digital transformation investments and practices.

"There's a lot of data out there that's accessible to agencies to [help them answer the question]: How can I best, you know, best meet the needs of those citizens who are trying to reach me?" said Cusumano. "Start with the analytics. It's going to work you inwards towards the technologies that will better support that need."

Offer Employees a Roadmap to Making the Most of New Technologies

Change isn't easy and taking the time to learn, trial and adopt new tools can seem time-consuming and impractical for already resource-stretched government employees, even if these new tools will save time and improve the customer experience in the end.

During digital transformation, however, government and IT leaders can work to vet tools and offer guidance on how to integrate new products most effectively into current workflows to help ease transitions and bolster the odds for success.

"The workload within the federal sectors is rather enormous in terms of being an expert in so many different areas," says Berine.

He notes that oftentimes leadership can go the "hard sell" approach when it comes to introducing new technologies instead of taking the time to understand tools and showing agency employees how to use them

"If you show them rather than just describe it to them, uh, it may actually help carry the day and then it drives into the budget cycle," says Berine. "To me the most important thing is just to say: I need someone to be able to feed that information to me, a trusted source and then I can maybe make a run at it."

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