FORGING TIGHTER LINKS
with customers

The pressure is intensifying for agencies to provide a customer experience on par with that of the private sector

WHEN STATE GOVERNMENTS began closing schools and directing Americans to stay home to slow the spread of the coronavirus, people flocked to the web for reliable information about the potentially deadly illness. Visits to the websites of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization rose to 45.8 million during the week of March 9 to 15 — a 425% increase over the rates in mid-January, according to Statista. The CDC alone had almost 934 million page views in March.

Agencies were already under pressure to improve the customer experience (CX), but now they saw just how critical it is to provide information that's easy to find and available in multiple formats.

The government's ability to offer meaningful digital engagements has long trailed behind that of the private sector. In the American Customer Satisfaction Index's "Federal Government Report 2019," citizen satisfaction with federal services fell for the second consecutive year — to 68.1 on a 100-point scale. The decline has "virtually [erased] the large gains made between 2015 and 2017," according to ACSI.

The results are based on four key drivers of citizen satisfaction: the timeliness and ease of government processes, the professionalism and courtesy of customer service, perceptions of government website quality, and perceptions of the quality of information being provided.

Despite such setbacks, lawmakers and agency leaders at the federal, state and local levels are making efforts to improve the digital experience for government customers. For example, the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act requires federal agencies to modernize websites, digitize services and forms, accelerate the use of e-signatures, and improve the overall customer experience. The act's goals include creating government websites that are accessible, consistent in appearance, easily searchable, secure, user-centric and mobile-friendly.

In a recent FCW survey, 61% of participants said their agencies have already begun modernizing websites, 58% are digitizing forms, 51% are implementing e-signatures and 26% have begun providing personalized content.

CX also figures prominently in the President's Management Agenda, which uses the term "customer experience" 16 times, and the Trump administration has made improving CX a cross-agency priority (CAP) goal. In addition, the Modernizing Government Technology Act helps fund agencies' purchases of new IT, and the Office of Management and Budget's Circular A-11 has been updated to include a section on managing CX and improving service delivery.

State and local governments are focused on improving CX, too. The National Association of State CIOs cites modernization and customer relationship management among its members' top 10 priorities for 2020. And the National Association of Counties' 2019

conference included a session on how to improve services and customer experiences with design thinking.

'Understanding the root causes of barriers'

Better CX benefits both agencies and customers (citizens and partners of all kinds). Experts say people are more likely to comply with directives, engage proactively and forgive mistakes when agencies offer good CX, while agencies can save money and enhance their ability to accomplish their missions.

But as with any change, there are challenges. The CX CAP Goal Team identified several of those challenges, which include executives and employees who don't make CX a priority, program leaders who don't understand their customers and unhappy employees who aren't motivated to provide good CX. Agencies also struggle to find the funds to buy the next-generation technologies that power CX, such as cloud and artificial intelligence, and cite the lack of a workforce skilled in using those technologies.

Addressing such challenges will require agencies to go beyond modernizing IT. According to the CX CAP Goal Team: "Understanding the root causes of barriers to delivering the outcomes we seek may require policy changes, rethinking how enrollment processes work and their timing, how information is presented and framed, how choices are presented, how we structure incentives, or even connecting people between federal programs or broader systems of support."

Furthermore, McKinsey and Co. has identified six hallmarks of best-in-class CX practitioners that can guide government improvements:

1. Define a clear aspiration
2. Develop a deep understanding of what matters to customers
3. Use behavioral psychology to manage expectations
4. Reinvent customer journeys using digital and design thinking
5. Use customer journeys to empower frontline workers
6. Establish metrics and a governance system to constantly improve

Progress even in a pandemic

According to Deloitte's "Government Trends 2020" report: "Government leaders who are looking to make a triple value impact — improving customer satisfaction, increasing efficiency and enhancing mission effectiveness — are increasingly focusing on CX as a core function of government."

Many agencies are seizing the opportunity to achieve those goals by revamping their approach to CX. The Education Department's Next Gen Federal Student Aid initiative, for example, addresses the complexities associated with applying for, accessing and repaying student loans. As part of that initiative, the agency combined three websites into an improved digital portal at StudentAid.gov, which launched in December 2019. Now students can more easily file their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and consolidate and track their loans.

Additionally, the agency released the myStudentAid app last year to enable students to fill out and file FAFSAs via mobile devices, and the new Loan Simulator helps them develop repayment strategies — all of which benefits the department and the people and partners it serves.

State-level efforts include New Jersey's own 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act. It calls for the state's agencies to transition from paper-based to digital processes, adopt citizen-centered design and ensure accessibility to "change the paradigm for the delivery of government services and dramatically reduce the cost of government operations."

Far from stalling such efforts, the coronavirus pandemic is accelerating them in many cases. By exposing gaps in agencies' ability to provide seamless digital experiences, it has forced them to come up with solutions quickly to continue providing vital services even as offices closed and employees worked from home. Those changes are unlikely to roll back once the crisis ends. That's because the need to meet customers where they are has never been more apparent. ■

Digital experience BY THE NUMBERS

14%
Americans who trust the federal government to do what is right "most of the time"

67%
Amount of trust in government that can be explained by CX

51%
Americans who prefer digital access to government services rather than phone calls or personal visits

78.3
Customer satisfaction with mobile government pages and apps (on a 100-point scale)

30%
FCW survey respondents who said improving digital CX is a top priority at their agencies

Sources: Brookings Institution, FCW, McKinsey and Co., Pew Research Center, Statista