

Executive Viewpoint

ONE-ON-ONE WITH MARTHA DORRIS

Former director of strategic programs for GSA provides suggestions for improving a citizen's experience with the federal government.



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The federal government is focusing on customer service more than ever before. But that focus may evolve in the near future. Martha Dorris championed the customer experience concept throughout her 33 years of public service. Now Founder and President of Dorris Consulting International, Dorris spoke recently with Francis Rose, host of Government Matters on ABC 7 and News Channel 8, about the federal government's evolution in dealing with customers.

Rose: What's the difference between customer service and customer experience in a government setting?

Dorris: Customer service is related to a single touch point. Customer experience is about the entire journey. It's about the perception your customer has of your organization.

Rose: Is making a citizen's experience with the federal government like the private sector a reasonable expectation?

Dorris: I think it would be great if we could provide the kind of experience that the public has with Amazon, for example. It would be great if you went to USA.gov and you were able to access different agencies, services, and information the way you can when you go on Amazon and access all of those different products and services from different companies. There are some challenges with that.

One major challenge is, we don't have a single identity management solution in the federal government, even though we tried and tried.

Having a single ID would be a big thing for customers. It would also save the government millions of dollars because every agency is building its own identity management solution. You have agencies that are providing online services or digital services where they have to create accounts; among them are the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, Medicare, and others. If we could do it with a high security level, and build it all at once, it would save a lot of money and it would create a more seamless experience for the public.

Rose: But that is a challenge for the private sector too, because I don't log on to Ebay and buy things there the same way I log onto Amazon.

Dorris: Yes, but you can log on to Amazon and buy things from a lot of different organizations. It would require a lot of work on the back end to make sure those agencies want to work with that identity management solution and be able to go in. There are countries that have done that. Australia is one.

Rose: What are the big hold-ups if there are models where this exists around the world?

Dorris: I'm not sure that we have had the exact right solution. We have tried different solutions over time, and I mean over decades. We keep starting over, for whatever reason. I think it's just making it a priority and putting the citizen at the center of your government. We have said it for

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years and years and years. We need to come to terms with the question of what citizen-centric government means.

We (at the General Services Administration) asked Charles Rossotti, the former Commissioner of the Internal Revenue Service, what his single most important recommendation would be. He said the person at the top has to believe in customer service. Then you have to figure out how you put that in place so that it aligns throughout the entire organization, through the mechanisms we have in place.

One recommendation I have is putting customer service or customer experience in Senior Executive Service core competencies. Then it is going to start trickling down across all of the executives in the government and into the rank and file. It's not just that you need customer service standards in the performance plan of a person that answers a telephone. You need it in every single person's plan. It's the job of every person in an agency.

Another one of the holdups is, some agencies don't even believe they have customers. They don't like the terms customer service or customer experience. They want to call it operational efficiency. In reality to improve customer experience, you improve the mission. It sometimes improves efficiency because in many cases, like the VA and federal student aid, you're reducing the footprint of your contact centers and of your website, which is saving you money. It also increases the public's perception of, and trust in, government.

Rose: Does the government do a good job of understanding the customer's expectations and needs so they can improve the experience?

Dorris: I think there are pockets of agencies that do some decent research on what their customers want. But it is not brought together in a way so that you could share the data across agencies, and break it out by demographics. Some agencies try it, but it is so difficult because of the hoops we have to jump through because of the Paperwork Reduction Act.

Rose: Is there a role for the vendor community in improving customer experience in government beyond just selling services to the agencies that need or want them?

Dorris: I think trade organizations could bring a lot of the companies together in this space to help identify best practices, share them between industry and government, and even help identify ways that we can share them across government agencies. Services is one of the major ways that you can improve customer experience. I think industry can play a big part in that, to educate and share the way that they have done things and learn from the government as well.

Rose: We have less than a year until the Obama administration ends and a new President and new administration take over. What do you want to see customer experience leaders in the government do to make sure there is minimal loss of momentum between now and next year?

Dorris: Everybody just needs to look at their programs realistically, and understand the experience that their customers are having. Then they should ask themselves what experience they want their customers to have, and what the action plans are that they need to do to improve that experience now. What's within their own jurisdiction, or their own authority to do? What do they need help with? Leaders should have those lists ready when the new administration comes in, and then they should say, "Here are ten things that I need you to do." That's how to hit the ground running in the new administration.

This interview continues at Carahsoft.com/innovation/Dorris