



# PRIORITIZING THE Customer Experience

As customer expectations evolve, agencies are finding that digital services and IT modernization are the keys to better CX

**A**GENCIES AT THE federal, state and local levels have been engaged in efforts to make their activities more customer-focused for years. Progress has been rapid for some, but others have been slow to allocate resources to the work involved in understanding the customer experience (CX) and invest in the technology and processes to improve it.

However, the pandemic and resulting economic downturn have been a wake-up call to agencies that they can no longer afford to delay their CX initiatives, particularly the move to digital services.

According to Performance.gov – which reports on agencies' efforts to deliver a smarter, leaner and more effective government – agencies continue to improve call center functionality, solicit and incorporate feedback from customers, embed CX into strategic planning and governance, and build omnichannel, fully digital services.

Reflecting on the third year of efforts to achieve the cross-agency priority goal on improving customer experiences with federal services, the team at Performance.gov wrote in a Jan. 8 blog post: "We continue to be inspired by the impressive public servants across government who are deeply connected to their mission and the people they serve." However, the authors also noted that "while we continue to improve CX outcomes, we continue to have a lot of opportunity in front of us."

Rick Parrish, a vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research, urges the Biden administration to elevate CX to an even higher level. In a blog post, he advocated creating a permanent federal chief customer officer role "to oversee policy, spending and interagency coordination for all federal [CX] efforts."

He added that despite modest gains at some agencies, "Forrester's Customer Experience Index shows that the quality of federal CX remains poor and lags the private sector. Average federal CX quality has risen only 4.6 points on our 100-point scale – from 56.5 to 61.1 – from 2015 to 2020. Many agencies' scores have remained flat that entire time."

In stressing the importance of a federal chief customer officer, Parrish said: "Given the vastness and complexity of the federal government, just keeping up with the pace of rising customer expectations is a win. Nevertheless, Washington needs to do better."

## Digital services are here to stay

Although improving CX was already a priority to varying degrees for government agencies, the pandemic highlighted just how important those initiatives are. The agencies that pivoted most quickly to support teleworkers and expand digital services for citizens were those that were already heavily committed to IT modernization.

For example, state agencies across the country turned to chatbots to help them answer questions about unemployment benefits

and pandemic-related assistance. For many agencies, that contact volume jumped from thousands to millions in a matter of weeks. Gartner predicts that by 2022, 70% of customer interactions will involve an emerging technology such as machine learning, chatbots or mobile messaging, and 20% of all customer service interactions will be completely handled by artificial intelligence. And those changes are being driven by customer expectations.

During the pandemic, agencies also had to support a workforce that shifted virtually overnight from on-site to online work. The IT team had to quickly address challenges related to protecting agency data in the cloud, authenticating users, and making sure employees had the skills and tools to deliver customer services remotely.

Experts and government officials believe that many aspects of telework are here to stay. The shift to a distributed workforce prompted many states to use federal funds under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act to expand their broadband capacity, which benefits workers and helps ensure that all students can access online education while schools are closed.

The realization that those challenges won't disappear when the coronavirus subsides is evident in the fact that "Digital Government/Digital Services" is No. 2 on the National Association of State CIOs' Top 10 Priorities List for 2021 (behind "Cybersecurity and



## Digital Services **BY THE NUMBERS**

**81%**

FCW survey respondents who said the pandemic has improved the way their agencies deliver customer services

**75%**

States that deployed chatbots to help answer questions about topics related to COVID-19

**1/3**

Air Force employees who may continue working remotely after the pandemic subsides

**0.1% to 43.5%**

Increase in Medicare primary care visits conducted via telehealth from February to April 2020

**61.1 out of 100**

Average federal score on Forrester's 2020 CX Index

Sources: Association of Defense Communities, Department of Health and Human Services, FCW, Forrester Research, National Association of State CIOs

Risk Management”). The activities include developing a framework for digital services, improving and digitizing citizen experience, and enhancing identity management and privacy protections.

Federal agencies are also heeding the lessons from the pandemic. In a recent survey of FCW readers, 81% of respondents said their agencies' response to COVID-19 was improving the way they delivered services for citizens, employees and partners. When asked how their agencies' commitment to citizen-focused services had changed in the past year, 73% cited an improvement as a 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5, and only 6% said such services had become less important.

In terms of respondents' CX priorities in 2021, providing citizen services digitally and improving employee management, especially for remote workers, topped the list at 63% and 59%, respectively, followed by accelerating IT modernization at 48%.

### **The growing emphasis on trust**

In a Jan. 15 post on Performance.gov, federal officials shared insights from 2.2 million responses to public surveys on government CX. They concluded that digital modernization improves trust and satisfaction, and the ease and efficiency of services “strongly correlate to satisfaction and trust in websites and services completed online.”

The issue of trust is receiving greater

attention elsewhere in government, and some experts believe trust is more important than customer satisfaction, especially when it comes to government services. In its 2020 update of Circular A-11 guidance on budget preparation, the Office of Management and Budget revised Section 280 on “Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery” to add details on best practices for measuring and managing CX. Section 280 also instructs agencies to look beyond satisfaction and create trust scores based on customer survey data.

In addition, the authors of a paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research last year explore the links between quality of government and citizen happiness. Their research was inspired in part by “a growing dissatisfaction with using GDP per capita as a sufficient measure of human progress.” Among their conclusions: “Trust is an asset partly due to government actions, and is good for happiness in its own right as well as aiding the achievement of other policy objectives.” Furthermore, they note that the quality of government service delivery “is significantly correlated with national happiness.”

The message for agencies is that providing services that exceed customer demands sets the stage for greater success in all mission areas. Furthermore, by investing in IT modernization and digital services, agencies can build trust in government services and sharpen their customer-first focus. ■