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**D**ata is key to making sure customer service meets customer needs, but collecting this information can be a hurdle for government agencies, according to a panel of experts.

Addressing that challenge means understanding customers and acting on that knowledge, said Abena Apau, customer experience officer at the Department of Agriculture’s Farm Production and Conservation Business Center. She spoke at the “Data for Change” panel at the recent Customer Experience and Engagement Summit.

Also, the pandemic has made it more difficult to keep track of customers, she added. “One of the things we did at USDA during the pandemic was to reach out to farmers, electronically and in paper form,” Apau said. “We had 93% respond to our first-ever customer survey. They responded by paper. We’d done the research and found that’s how most of our customers want to engage with us. They don’t have access to reliable broadband.”

The pandemic helped FPAC understand how to better serve customers with more effective communications, she said.

The pandemic also helped validate social media as another prolific source of customer data, said Ben Cathers, global principal solutions consultant at social media management provider Hootsuite. “We’re seeing activity on social media feeds as being very actionable for customer experience, especially for government organizations,” he said.

Social media for customer input increased during the pandemic as more customers found a way to communicate efficiently with organizations and agencies, according to Cathers.

For example, Canada’s national parks agency started using user-generated posts, like those on Instagram or Twitter, to get feedback, he said. The agency looked at hashtags related to different parks instead of just using paper surveys. It then used this online feedback to make changes or improvements.

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Ben Cathers, Global Principal Solutions Consultant, Hootsuite

### **Managing Internal Change Is Important**

Along with external challenges, agencies also face internal delays and issues. Lloyd “Colt” Whittall, chief experience officer and HQE at the Department of the Air Force, said one of his CX apps is “challenging.” Whittall’s office was creating a CX-focused mobile app that would help its personnel move from station locations.

The MyPCS program is designed to make the often challenging and costly task of relocating personnel for work smoother.

Automating the process, however, cuts across many operations and systems silos and can change their processes, Whittall said.

“We can build a mobile app that looks great, works great and even solves the security issues involved, but getting all the organizations to work with us and interconnect is very challenging so far,” he said. However, other CX projects measuring customer

satisfaction with IT across operations have yielded positive results both in implementation and actual customer satisfaction, he added.

Understanding wild cards in CX can be critical, according to Frederico Lara, chief innovation architect at New Relic. The “uncontrolled environment” of customer data, he said, is where 70% of CX data activity lies. That data is outside of what agencies control with their networks and CX. Data observability in that uncontrolled area is the focus of industry, using artificial intelligence and other technologies, he said.

“We’re focused on getting context of that uncontrolled environment,” Lara added.

### Know What You’re After on Socials

Social media can break down data silos in organizations, according to Cathers, but understanding which social media data matters is complicated.

“Is it people directing with social handles, is it people talking about us, or not mentioning us, or general trending conversations?” he said. “The key to breaking down data silos is figuring out what social media metrics we want to align with our long-term agency goals. If the goal, for instance, is to create more citizen engagement, we should focus on those metrics that involve engagement.”

Effectively filtering, and not getting lost in, the enormous range of data that can come from social media is critical to effectively advance specific CX missions, according to Cathers.

### Look Out for Blind Spots

“Blind spots are areas where you have little, or any, data, or you’re accessing it indirectly, like in a report level,” Lara said. These blind spots, he said, are universal across CX operations around the globe.

Some factors that agencies can’t control, including APIs and third-party tools, network problems and even weather, can impact customer experiences. Agencies have to think about those issues.

“Agencies have to ask themselves ‘just beyond our control area, what is the actual customer experience overall, not just on the app level, or on the system level?’” Lara said.



### CX Data Can Drive Deeper Improvements

In the future, the CX data gathered now can be used for more specific, targeted jobs, according to Whittall. For instance, the Air Force is now collecting data from a number of sources, including users, computers, applications, performance of WANs, Teams and call quality, he said. The organization uses that data tactically in PowerPoint charts to help drive funding decisions.

However, this data can be applied in many ways and is useful for various groups. It can be used in everything from mission operations to business cases.

“We’re just at the beginning stages of making all of the audiences aware of how to use this data,” Whittall said. “It’s like going from carpet bombing to precision-guided campaigns.”

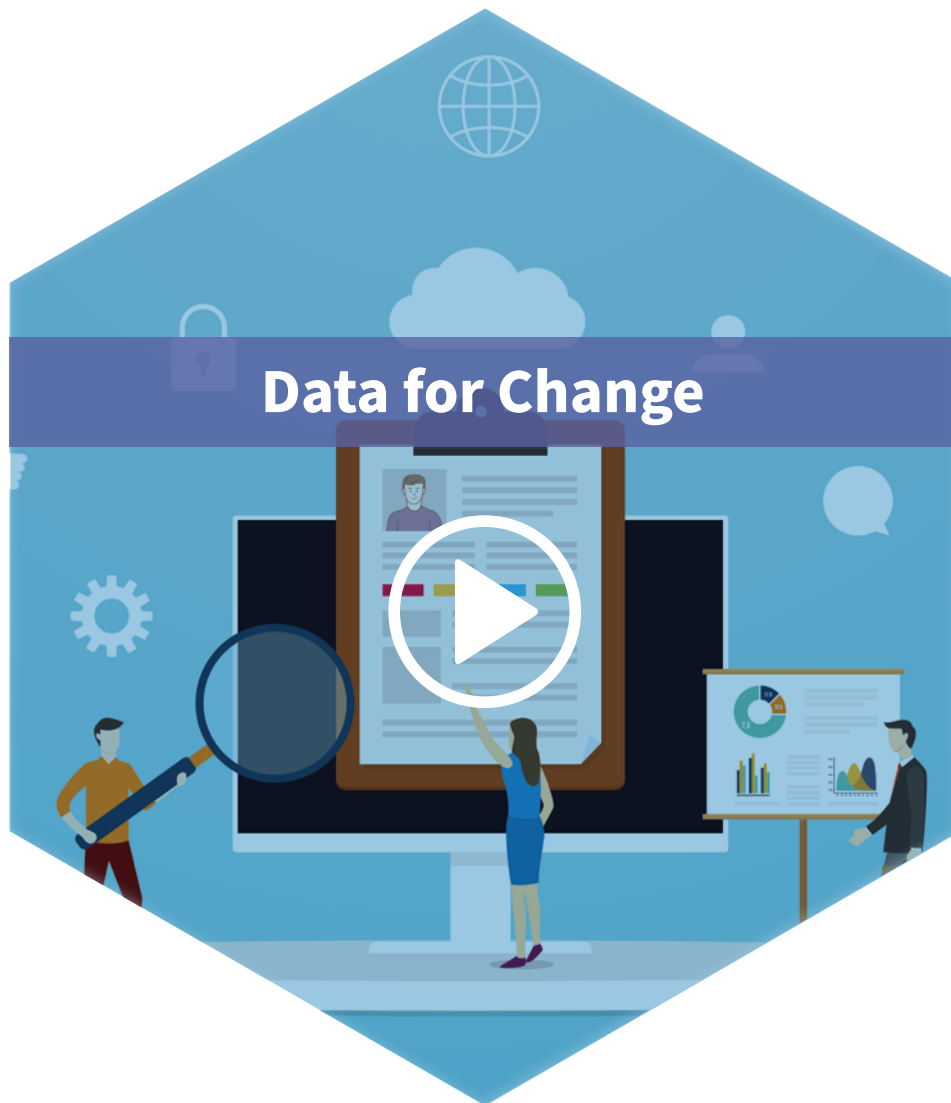
As an analogy, with the former approach, the Air Force might opt to upgrade all the routers at every base indiscriminately. In contrast, a precision-guided strategy would pinpoint specific routers at certain bases that present issues and replace only those showing the most critical need, Whittall explained.

It allows agencies to spend on projects where improvements are actually needed, instead of broad spending that may or may not solve a problem, Whittall said.

### Data Helps Create Conduits to Users

Ultimately, all the hard work to hone data and use it in the most effective manner creates “amazing vehicles” for customers, Lara said. Agencies and commercial entities alike are still working on how to fine tune and apply the data they’re getting.

“You’re not alone in this,” he said. “Data observability is powerful. The more we do it, the more powerful those vehicles become.”



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