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The call to rethink government customer experience

The White House wants to make engaging with the government easier. How can agencies meet the challenge?

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July 2022

When it comes to government services, Americans are very dissatisfied with their customer experience. In fact, they rank state and federal government services dead last compared with their experiences with airlines, banking, or car insurance shopping (exhibit). And for historically marginalized communities, the experience of accessing public services is often worse than for their White counterparts.[1] This lack of customer satisfaction is reflected in attitudes toward government. For example, in 2019, Black Americans were about half as likely as White Americans to report that they always or most of the time trusted the government.[2]

Indeed, engaging with government services can be hard, and navigating multiple government agencies can be even harder. Many beneficiaries are unable to access the critical support they need and are entitled to.[3]

So imagine the potential impact if federal agencies set a shared goal of ensuring that all people who are eligible for government benefits could access them. Imagine if government agencies built seamless customer journeys that spanned public agencies. Imagine if frontline government employees were empowered to make real-time decisions that could improve day-to-day interactions for all customers.

This is the vision set forth by a recent White House executive order that declares customer experience (CX) a priority for federal agencies, asks them to think of the public as customers, and calls on the 35 high-impact government service providers to improve equitable delivery across their agencies. The order also includes the goal of improving how the public interacts with the government during five critical life experiences: approaching retirement, recovering from a disaster, navigating the transition from military service to civilian life, navigating birth and early childhood for mothers and children, and becoming eligible for critical support programs after a financial shock.

This shift toward treating people as "customers" raises the bar for what Americans can expect from their government when accessing benefits and services.

Given the significant changes needed to successfully meet this call to action, government agencies may struggle to determine where to start. But there are examples of how to move forward. Based on our experience, many public agencies have successfully transformed their approach to CX by following a three-phased approach: generating insights by understanding customer experiences, redesigning journeys to improve the customer experience, and implementing redesign efforts.

The state of government CX today

Now more than ever, customers expect more from their government.[4] They are increasingly looking to the government to deliver the same digital-first, frictionless interactions they have in their everyday consumer experiences, and this expectation has only intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as residents have relied more on the government for critical services—and for digital access to them.[5] In the private sector, interactions have shifted dramatically to online channels, with the average share of all digital customer interactions in North America increasing more than 50 percent during the first year of the pandemic alone.[6]

Indeed, the pandemic has underscored for the public just how essential government services are to their lives and livelihoods. Positive experiences with government services have allowed people to find essential healthcare, access critical income support, and travel more safely. On the other hand, frustrating experiences may have resulted in a

[1] Tony D'Emidio, Laura Johnson, Alex Lapides, and Meg Sachdev, "Redesigning public-sector customer experiences for equity," McKinsey, January 21, 2021.
[2] "Public trust in government: 1958–2022," Pew Research Center, June 6, 2022.
[3] "Executive order on advancing racial equity and support for underserved communities through the federal government," The White House, January 20, 2021.
[4] Tony D'Emidio, Julia Klier, Jonah Wagner, and Thomas Weber, "The public sector gets serious about customer experience," *McKinsey Quarterly*, August 15, 2019.
[5] "Delivering excellent, equitable, and secure federal services and customer experience," Performance.gov, accessed June 16, 2022.
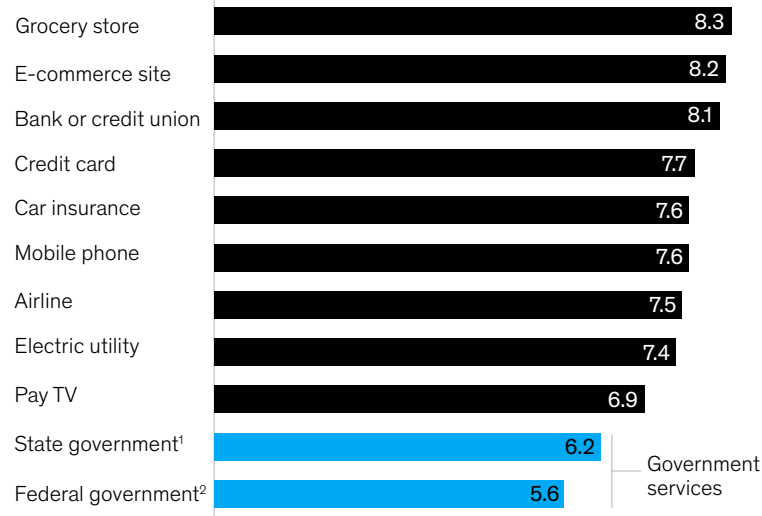[6] "How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point—and transformed business forever," McKinsey, October 5, 2020.

Exhibit

Government services rank below all other experiences when it comes to customer satisfaction.

Average US customer satisfaction scores
Scale of 1–10 (1 = extremely unsatisfied; 10 = extremely satisfied)

Category	Score
Grocery store	8.3
E-commerce site	8.2
Bank or credit union	8.1
Credit card	7.7
Car insurance	7.6
Mobile phone	7.6
Airline	7.5
Electric utility	7.4
Pay TV	6.9
State government[1]	6.2
Federal government[2]	5.6

Government services

[1] Q: "How satisfied are you with your state government overall?"
[2] Q: "How satisfied are you with the federal government overall?"
Source: American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) sector score 2019; Forrester Customer Experience Index; McKinsey Public Sector Journey Pulse Survey, Nov–Dec 2016 (n = 15,269); Pew Research Center 2019

missed rent payment or an inability to get tested for COVID-19. Such poor experiences carry potential repercussions such as costing users time, eroding trust in government, and decreasing employee engagement.[7] Reorienting service delivery around customer experience rather than agencies or policies could help resolve these issues. Furthermore, IT support could improve equity in how people access services and help the government start from a place of empathy and understanding and better fulfill its promise to be of and for the people.

While some public agencies are already working to better serve customers throughout their journeys by increasing digital access and empowering

their frontline employees, many have yet to start transforming. And it may prove especially difficult to improve customer journeys that span multiple agencies. For example, consider an individual who experiences a financial shock. The shock will have implications for this individual's tax filing, federal student loan payments, and unemployment benefits. And these issues involve multiple federal and state agencies—each with its own way of operating. Moreover, leadership and priorities in government are subject to frequent change, which can inhibit long-term plans and strategies. Public agencies working to improve CX need to be cognizant of these realities.

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[7] McKinsey 2018 Public Sector Journey Benchmark Survey; global results from Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Three phases that can change CX

To make the transition more manageable, public agencies could adopt a bias for action. They could start by solving impactful, bite-size problems—such as rewriting critical correspondence in plain language—and then scale up over time as they build trust and momentum and uncover what works and what doesn't. This approach to redesigning CX could unfold over three phases.

Phase one: Generate insights

The objective of the insight generation phase is to quickly identify the most impactful and relevant customer journeys. For instance, a tax agency prioritized the early part of the tax filing journey (preparing and filing federal tax returns) based on its importance to customers and its relative impact. Agencies can then link journeys to the value that could be unlocked by improving them. In the public sector, value is defined more broadly than by metrics such as revenue or audience funnel. Rather, it is gauged by the cost efficiency of administering government services, the relative burden those services place on civil servants and their morale, how efficiently agencies deliver on their mission (reducing the "time tax" burden, for example), and the ultimate impact of programs on the people who access them. Understanding the journey's link to value could help agencies prioritize a subset of journeys for redesign based on an assessment of impact potential and feasibility—such as technical complexity, stakeholder alignment, budget, and resourcing.

Agencies could also consider viewing the customer journey holistically when prioritizing areas for transformation, eliminating parts that serve no value and redesigning others to address pain points. Combining quantitative research (such as customer surveys and customer behavior data) and qualitative research (such as user interviews, listening sessions, and mobile diaries) could enhance agencies' understanding of the end-to-end experience. These insights, combined with an assessment of existing CX capabilities, digital properties, and journey mapping, could help agencies gain a clearer picture of the current state of the customer experience and uncover areas that are ripe for rapid transformation and immediate impact—for example, redesigning a website or fixing the way data are collected. Innovative CX practitioners are moving beyond using survey data to harness sophisticated analytical tools that draw from a wide range of ethically sourced consumer data to generate insights.

Building partnerships across the organization—for example, with field operations; call centers; and IT, policy, legal, and business departments—may prove crucial for building organizational buy-in and identifying potential obstacles that could impede future redesign efforts. Executive sponsorship, ideally from agency leadership but at least from business executives with decision-making power, may be important to remove such roadblocks and sustain the pace and scale of change needed for

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an effective transformation. This leadership may be even more crucial when redesigning journeys that span multiple agencies and involve cross-agency collaboration.

Phase two: Redesign the experience

The objective of this phase is to redesign the most impactful aspects of prioritized journeys through a human-centered process that engages users and taps key agency partners whose insights and expertise could identify solutions that agencies can rapidly prototype and pilot. Such fixes could include redesigning part of a business process, implementing a digital solution that can plug into the existing IT environment, or creating a job aid. The idea is to build momentum through quick wins that improve customer experiences, identify a backlog of issues to pilot and test, and provide a clearer picture of what the full transformation could feel like for customers.

To that end, public agencies can consider starting with a pilot that has an achievable goal, removes a pain point felt throughout the organization (for example, excessive paperwork or manual processes), and can be delivered in months rather than years. A pilot that meets these criteria is likely to have broad organizational support and lower complexity in terms of both technical considerations and organizational dependencies, giving it a fair chance of success. Successive waves of these bite-size pilot programs released in rapid cycles of design, test, and iterate can also build momentum by allowing teams to quickly identify and scale effective solutions, learning from those that are ineffective.

Phase three: Implement the new design

As the first sets of customer journeys are successfully transformed, stakeholders may shift their focus to scaling the transformation across a larger set of prioritized journeys and subjourneys. Improving a journey may require changes across systems, staffing, processes, and design. And sustaining the pace of change may require prioritizing CX and organization-wide CX capability building.

This undertaking may seem daunting, especially for large agencies with entrenched ways of working. The key is not to relegate CX to a small set of roles but instead to embed customer centricity across all roles. To do so, agencies could consider creating governance models that empower team members across relevant businesses and functions to rapidly make and execute decisions. Agencies can then test, scale, and formalize these ways of working as transformation efforts mature. Over the longer term, an agency may evolve its organization and governance model to be journey-centric—by either assigning cross-functional teams to support a cross-agency journey or reorganizing into product lines or journey teams that include all relevant functions.

Leading CX organizations in both the private and public sector are also building analytics capabilities that enable real-time customer insights and servicing decisions informed by customer data. For government agencies, in the short term this may be as simple as aggregating three to five sources of customer data (such as applications or call center inquiries) to guide service actions. As efforts mature, they may adopt an automated system that collects dozens of data inputs and triggers automated service decisions—for example, a customer who misses an appointment is automatically sent a notification and reentered in a queue. And as agencies successively implement journeys and enhance CX capabilities, they can build the muscles needed for a sustainable, customer-centric delivery model.

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Government leaders are at an inflection point. The White House has issued an order to federal agencies to make customer service a priority. By taking an action-oriented, scaled approach to transformation, public organizations have the potential to rise to the challenge and improve how residents interact with government every day.

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