HOW TO DELIVER GOLD STANDARD CUSTOMER SERVICE

With help from a cloud-based contact center solution, a government agency can make its constituents feel like VIPs.

G overnment officials know it's crucial to provide excellent customer service. When a citizen needs to conduct a transaction or obtain information, agencies can no longer get away with a "good-enough-for-government" response. Citizens are customers, and customers today expect quick resolution and a choice of communications options.

The best way to give citizens outstanding customer service is to use the same tools that prevail in private sector contact centers. High on the list of such tools is an integrated cloud-based contact center solution.

This paper will explore best practices for implementing a cloud-based contact center solution that can transform frustrated constituents into satisfied customers.

WHY CUSTOMER SERVICE MATTERS IN GOVERNMENT

Customer Expectations
Thanks to their experiences with leading private sector companies, customers today want several communications options. Some people prefer to pick up the phone and hear a human voice; others would rather engage in a web chat, exchange SMS texts or use email. It's important to let citizens choose the channels they like best.

The private sector has also conditioned customers to expect a personalized response informed by knowledge about past transactions. If a cable TV company's agent can figure out that a customer has reported outages twice in the past three weeks, a department of code enforcement can determine it is not the first time a citizen has called to complain about trash in a neighbor's yard.

Citizens also expect a fast, efficient response. They don't want the same treatment people endured when they called the Georgia Department of Revenue's Motor Vehicle Division (GADOR MVD) several years ago.

"The system would get overloaded and would drop calls out of the queue," says Georgia Steele, director of GADOR MVD.

During overloads, the system might cut off a call between a citizen and an agent mid-sentence. "Or when the caller had been waiting in queue for 29 minutes and 59 seconds to talk to an agent, the system would decide it didn't want them to wait anymore and just drop the call from the queue."

Citizens who receive sub-par service from government agencies may take out their frustration in the voting booth.

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> Georgia Steele, Director, Georgia Department of Revenue's Motor Vehicle Division

Conversely, studies show that proactive communication is an effective strategy to build customer satisfaction and help taxpayers understand that public officials are looking out for their welfare.

Financial Concerns
By eliminating the need for on-premises equipment, support and maintenance, a cloud-based system can reduce operational costs. It also reduces capital costs, because there's no need to invest in new hardware. In addition, a cloud-based system allows agencies to pay only for the capacity they need, adding more seats to the call center when volumes are high or cutting back during quiet periods.

"If you have a system that requires you to take a one-year contract for a certain number of seats, you're going to pay for all those seats throughout the contract period," says Steele, whose agency switched to a cloud-based digital platform in 2012.

The new system allows the agency to add or subtract service agent seats as demand changes.

Another advantage an agency gains from a customer service platform in the cloud is improved employee morale and engagement. Most contact center agents want to do an excellent job. Giving them better tools to deliver quick and useful service to citizens helps them feel more productive.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A CONTACT CENTER SOLUTION

Cloud-Native Platform
Look for a solution hosted in the cloud, but don't stop there. Some cloud solutions were first developed to operate in a customer's data center. Later, as cloud computing grew popular, vendors moved that software into their own data centers so they could offer software-

as-a-service (Saas). Unfortunately, those products often suffer from many of the same disadvantages of an on-premises solution. Agencies can't scale capacity and they still pay for hardware to run the system; the solution simply shifts that hardware from its data center to the vendor's and builds the cost into a service charge.

A multi-tenant solution built from the ground up to take full advantage of the latest cloud technology eliminates hardware costs. It lets agencies scale their workforce as needed and provides the flexibility they need to match available skills with staffing requirements. Employees can also access the system remotely to work from home.

At GADOR MVD, which operates a 40+ seat call center that fields 1,200 to 1,500 calls a day, the cloud-native solution makes it particularly easy to provide service during an emergency. Take, for example, "Georgia Snowmageddon," the winter storm that shut down the metro Atlanta area for several days in 2014.

When the storm hit, if the agency's contact center had been using its old platform, that system would have placed calls in queue as usual, making customers wait even though there was no one in the office to help them. With all employees stuck at home, there was no way to communicate with customers via the phones lines.

"But this system is responsive," Steele says of the new contact center platform.

Calling into the center from home, agency officials recorded an emergency message to inform customers that, although the Atlanta office and many county offices in North Georgia and Metro Atlanta were closed, offices in South Georgia were doing business as usual and customers could also conduct transactions online or via license plate renewal kiosks located in a few supermarkets.

Multiple Communications Channels
An integrated contact center solution that operates in the cloud provides multiple modes of communication, including voice, email, web chat, SMS texting and social media.

GADOR MVD plans to take advantage of the email management functions in its contact center solution so supervisors can more easily measure how fast agents respond to queries that arrive through this channel.

Besides offering each customer the communications channel he or she prefers, an advanced contact center solution gives an agency the chance to improve its self-service options. An agency can replace an outdated, punch-in-the-number interactive voice response (IVR)

Best Practices for Implementing a Contact Center Solution

☑ **Assign agents with the right skill sets to each communications channel.** Some people have a natural talent for serving customers on the phone. Some show a flair for being helpful and tactful in an email exchange; others are great at texting. Make sure each agent's skills fit the demands of the job.

☑ **Implement a quality management program for digital channels.** Review email exchanges, transcripts of web chats and other materials to ensure agents provide the best service possible. For example, when GADOR MVD implements the email management functions in its new solution, Steele will use that capability to review the responses her agents provide to make sure they are correct and consistent. Her team will also continue to enhance and develop additional standard email responses to common queries.

☑ **Integrate the system with your customer relationship management (CRM) or e-government platform.** Tight integration ensures that an agent will have all relevant information about a customer during each engagement — everything from a mailing address to details of past transactions — right at his or her fingertips. Your contact center solution might come with a pre-built interface to your CRM or other system. If not, make sure your vendor offers a robust application programming interface to simplify integration.

☑ **Measure things that matter.** GADOR MVD has always tracked how quickly its agents answer calls and how many calls the contact center can handle. More recently, it has added several new key performance indicators (KPIs), such as how often agents resolve customers' issues in a single call. A strong contact center solution allows agencies to track many kinds of KPIs. Be sure to concentrate on the ones that most impact quality of service.
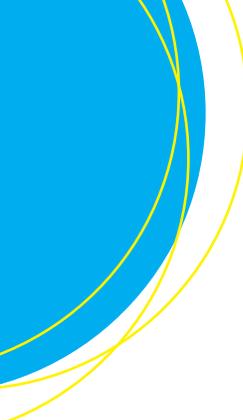
system with one that supports voice response. An agency might even back up the IVR with artificial intelligence to support a more natural conversational experience.

Strong Security
Every agency should ensure the solution it selects complies with standards and regulations designed to protect agency and citizen data. Important standards and authorizations to look for include the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP).

"The security of customer data is top priority for us," says Steele, whose platform was the first cloud-based contact center solution to receive Authorization to Operate under the FedRAMP standard.

Seamless Integration
Some contact centers have implemented software over time, choosing different products to manage different functions such as call routing and agent scheduling. That approach can add time and labor to daily processes and increase human error, as it forces users to maintain the same information in multiple systems. A cobbled-together solution can also trigger operational and customer service problems — for example, if the routing system and the forecasting and scheduling system reach different conclusions about how much or what type of work an agent can handle.

A fully integrated suite that manages all contact center functions eliminates redundant processes; it also ensures

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that all staff have access to the information they need to do their jobs, and all functions rely upon the same sets of data.

Strong Reporting Capabilities
The best solutions provide real-time metrics about contact center operations. At GADOR MVD, managers used to have to wait until the next day to measure factors such as call volumes and wait times. That made it hard to match staffing with need and to maintain optimal customer service.

Georgia's new system reports metrics immediately, and the related workforce management tool uses those numbers to "forecast how many people we're going to need at specific times of day, or how many people we'll need six months from now," says Steele. That information is invaluable when planning the contact center's budget.

Conclusion
In the corporate world, excellent customer service wins loyalty and trust. A well-designed, cloud-based contact center solution can do the same for government, giving citizens the assistance they need when they need it while making the best use of taxpayer dollars.

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