Employing CX (Customer Experience) Principles in Government Services

How Government Agencies Can Deliver More Efficient, Satisfactory Customer Service Through Human-Centered Design

The Time for Public Sector CX Has Arrived

On December 13, 2021, President Biden signed an executive order that may have passed under many US residents' radar—despite its far-reaching goal of changing their relationship with government.

The "Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government" directs 17 federal agencies to implement an array of customer experience (CX) improvements.[1] The framework intends to save residents time and "deliver the level of service that the public expects and deserves." In an age of low public trust in government, the president did not undersell the order's potential impact.[2]

"We have to prove democracy still works," President Biden stated in a White House release.[3]

Treating constituents as customers is not a new idea at any level of government—it's simply hard. The public sector simply does not have the same incentives as the private sector. This Executive Order shows that we have come a long way towards creating a more human-centered government, but there are still obstacles as we continue to learn from the past and to create government services that meet the needs of the people.

The pandemic drastically changed the degree of public need as well as the channels through which residents communicate with and access services from government agencies. It is now more critical than ever for local, state, and federal governments to properly leverage the CX tools and techniques traditionally used in the private sector to deepen the level of insight and connection government organizations have with the public.

Why Governments Should Leverage CX

The federal government's call to protect residents' faith in democracy through CX efforts is compelling and timely, but it is not the only reason government leaders should be working to improve constituent experiences. On the more practical, day-to-day side, providing more accessible, less time-consuming services can create efficiencies for government entities and better outcomes for constituents.

Consider the experience of Julia, a single mother of a 5- and 7-year-old facing homelessness for the first time. To access housing support, Julia must make an in-person appointment at a government office with her children present, requiring she pull her children out of school and miss out on a much-needed shift at her job, where her hours have already been cut. After a wait with squirming children, Julia shares her story with a social worker, who refers her to another social worker whom she will meet during another appointment on a different day—and her kids will be required to attend again. By the time Julia has secured the services she needs to give her children a safe place to sleep, those children have missed six days of school, Julia has lost six opportunities to work, and she has told her entire story to six separate social workers. Meanwhile, those six government employees were duplicating efforts, creating costly redundancies for their departments.

There must be a better way. While Julia is fictional, in our experience working with government agencies, we at Guidehouse have found stories like hers to be common. It is also reflective of access challenges present in numerous government services from renewing a government-issued ID card to applying for SNAP benefits. Because time and effort challenges require resources to overcome, the inaccessibility of government services becomes a social equity issue.

Constituents' expectations for receiving equitable access to services is changing. In a July 2020 poll, 84% of US respondents said that "events in recent months have made me think differently about the role and responsibility of government to protect the rights of all Americans."[4] To address societies' needs and expectations, governments must shift away from an approach that requires residents to actively seek to have their needs met, regardless of barriers. Governments instead should reach out to those residents; understand constituent needs, wants, experiences, and feelings; and adapt their public service delivery to meet communities where they are.

Differences between Public and Private Sector CX

CX has evolved over the past 25 years from a newfangled marketing idea to a concept Harvard Business Review has called one of the "driving forces of business," leading the publication to declare that "every company needs a chief experience officer."[5] People are willing to pay more for good customer experiences, making the competition for optimal CX aggressive.

Yet, therein lies the core challenge for translating CX into the public sector: The profitability of good CX does not factor into government entities' traditional incentives in a clear, direct way. Because CX benefits the public sector differently than it does the private sector, optimizing for it can also look and act differently too.

Julia, our mother looking for housing services, for example, is not a customer willing to pay a premium for a great experience, but providing one benefits the government in two ways: It saves a constituent time, effort, and stress, and it also creates a more efficient, less costly intake process. Julia also demonstrates a key differentiator in how corporate CX versus CX in public service should be approached. While companies may, for instance, want to focus their CX efforts on seamless digital experiences, leaving customers preferring in-person interactions behind, government services cannot leave anyone behind. While digital tools can expand access to public services, CX principles must be applied to in-person experiences too, both in instances where in-person contact is necessary and when it is the preferred —or only—method for some constituencies.

Public versus Private Sector CX

In understanding the need for and analyzing the best approach to CX in government, it is important to note these key differences:

CX Aspect	Traditional (Commercial)	Public Sector
Goals	Companies use CX to retain patronage, sell more products, increase profit, and expand market share, among other goals.	Governments leverage CX to reach as many people as possible, provide accessible interventions, transition customers out of services, and more.
Targeting	Companies target customers who will help them achieve the above goals—the most influential, wealthiest, largest demographic, etc.	Governments use targeting for specific messaging and services but must reach all groups.
Language	Companies often deploy buzzword-focused language options specific to target audiences.	Governments require plainer language to increase accessibility as well as multilingual options.
Digital focus	Many companies focus CX efforts on enhancing website and mobile interfaces.	Governments' digital focus is on expanding access and increasing usability, but they must apply CX principles to in-person experiences too.
Competition and financial motives	Companies compete with both private businesses and public entities to meet financial incentives.	Government entities have no traditional competitors or competitive incentives.
Customer power	Customers often exert leverage over companies' CX efforts and operations.	As government is the provider of last resort, customers do not generally possess leverage.
Customer loyalty	Companies desire loyalty, with customer time and attention as metrics.	Loyalty is not required for governments to operate, but attention is required for civic engagement.
Data availability	Companies have high levels of data availability.	Governments have low levels of data availability.

How CX Can Be Leveraged in Government

Most government employees are very familiar with the challenges of public service delivery. We also know that the CX improvements that could help overcome some of those challenges will have certain fundamental differences from private sector CX. The question that has long troubled government entities is how exactly to implement CX in the public sector in a practical, effective way.

Through our work with many government agencies, we at Guidehouse have found three key paths to success. These approaches to CX address the unique nature of public service delivery, focusing on constituent needs and preferences to improve outcomes.

1 Adopt a more empathetic, CX-oriented mindset.

CX is not just a set of strategies but also a mindset. Whereas government processes have traditionally been designed with risk aversion, diligence, and fiscal responsibility in mind, a CX mindset is motivated by empathy. Government leaders typically view responsible use of public funds as the ultimate measure of protecting the public interest. But, as the White House notes in its December executive order, the burdens placed on residents by onerous barriers to accessing services cost residents too. They call it a "time tax."[6]

By viewing constituents' time and energy as costs to be prioritized and saved, governments can responsibly integrate empathy into their operations. These techniques can help in that process:

- Adopt a human-centered mindset and explore emotion-driven behaviors and motivations to build empathy and understanding of the audience.
- Consider the entire customer journey. This is done through journey mapping, a process described below.
- Analyze the customer experience as well as outcomes when evaluating service delivery.

2 Leverage targeting to increase reach and service delivery.

In the private sector, audience targeting directs marketing messages to a specific, high-value demographic at the expense of a low-value demographic. For companies, it makes sense: why waste money advertising to the wrong audience?

But for government organizations, there is no wrong audience—all constituents are entitled to information on public services. This fact can allow governments to adopt a messaging approach that feels neutral: posting information in a central location for all to see. However, not every community group has equal access to that central location, be it a website or a sign at city hall. Often, this is especially true of the under resourced communities that need government services the most. Targeting is therefore even more important for government organizations, as they are often obligated or desire to seek out the voices of customers who are not influential, large in number, vocal, or easy to contact.

Guidehouse partners with governments to identify audiences in need of specific services or information and help reach them. In this way, CX can be a powerful tool for engaging the most vulnerable communities and increasing their access to services.

③ Employ journey mapping to deepen customer understanding.

Critical to designing service delivery around constituent experiences is understanding exactly what those experiences are like. Journey mapping is a methodical approach to learning about the customer experience from beginning to end. The US General Service Administration's Federal Customer Experience Initiative has leveraged journey mapping to understand constituents' experiences surviving natural disasters, seeking employment, and facing life changes.[7] The practice exemplifies the CX mindset because it examines customers' journeys holistically, combining qualitative and quantitative data to capture how a customer progresses through—and feels about—every interaction.

Journey mapping is a major undertaking that is critical to CX success. The Julia persona example used above illustrates how valuable the process can be. Through our work with government agencies, we at Guidehouse have mapped the journeys of many constituents like Julia. Through that process, we learned that in one particular city, housing-insecure residents had to repeat their intake interview with five to seven different social workers—and present their children at each meeting as proof of their existence—to secure appropriate housing assistance. What appeared to be a diligent, responsible process from the government agency's perspective was putting an excessive time tax on the already-overburdened residents the services were intended to help.

Key journey mapping principles include:

- **Points mapped must extend beyond touchpoints with the government entity in question.** Journey mapping is from the customer's perspective, so it cannot be confined to one service provider. For example, a person's journey through three public transit providers en route to the government agency in question should be included.

- **Efficiency and satisfaction are both important metrics.** Using journey maps, public organizations can understand all the factors influencing their customers' satisfaction and identify more impactful and creative ways to improve their experiences.

Journey mapping is critical to prioritizing and implementing improved CX in public service delivery. Guidehouse partners with state and local governments to execute journey mapping and customer research to help agencies understand why programs and policies work (or do not work) and how to design better interventions that meet policy objectives.

A Human-Centered Approach to the Future of Public Service Delivery

The concept of making government more responsive to residents' needs may not be new, but the path to effectively implementing a more human-centered approach to public service delivery has never been clearer and for good reason: Applying CX principles to the public sector is not as straightforward or as well-worn a practice as it is in the private sector.

The reality is, however, that government agencies currently face both a great need for more accessible, equitable public service delivery and changing expectations from residents. In the private sector, consumers are experiencing increasingly streamlined and rewarding customer experiences. These interactions make stressful and time-consuming experiences with government entities all the more frustrating in comparison.

By working with Guidehouse, public officials can learn how a CX approach can help their organization deliver the types of services today's constituents expect and deserve. They can leverage our expertise to execute journey mapping, human-centered design techniques, and customer research that can help create efficiencies in service delivery that improve constituents' experience with and confidence in their government agencies.

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Leveraging CX in the Public Sector

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- ○ Leverage targeting to increase reach and service delivery.
- ○ Employ journey mapping to deepen customer understanding.

About Guidehouse

Guidehouse is a leading global provider of consulting services to the public sector and commercial markets, with broad capabilities in management, technology, and risk consulting. By combining our public and private sector expertise, we help clients address their most complex challenges and navigate significant regulatory pressures, focusing on transformational change, business resiliency, and technology-driven innovation. Across a range of advisory, consulting, outsourcing, and digital services, we create scalable, innovative solutions that help our clients outwit complexity and position them for future growth and success. The company has more than 12,000 professionals in over 50 locations globally. Guidehouse is a Veritas Capital portfolio company, led by seasoned professionals with proven and diverse expertise in traditional and emerging technologies, markets, and agenda-setting issues driving national and global economies. For more information, please visit **www.guidehouse.com**

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"Leaders in Resilience Share How They Gain Community Buy-In," https://guidehouse.com/insights/national-security/2020/covid-19/lir---gain-community-buy-in

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[6] Biden, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/.

[7] Federal Customer Experience Initiative, "A human-centered approach to government," General Services Administration and the Office of Management and Budget, https://www.performance.gov/cx/projects/.