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MAKE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT PART OF THE CULTURE

Agencies must transform priorities and operations to focus on the citizen.

A commitment to developing a strong customer relationship is central to the success of any organization. For some government agencies, the very nature of the services they deliver automatically puts them in close contact with their customers. For others a close-knit relationship is more difficult to forge.

It's not enough for agencies to say they believe in putting the citizen first. They must create a culture and a mindset within the organization that supports this notion, according to industry and government speakers at a Feb. 22 Citizen Engagement Summit.

Making citizen engagement an integral component of the agency mindset is easier for some agencies than for others. The National Cancer Institute, for instance, has always been mission-driven by an issue that affects many. At its core is a desire to advance research that truly helps people. That in turn has helped it strengthen its citizen engagement efforts.

There is a passionate commitment to helping people who are in a time of crisis, which means reaching out to

them with "empathy and concern [and] evidence-based information," says Lakshmi Grama, associate director for dissemination and digital communications, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health. "That becomes our mission."

This desire to forge stronger customer relationships means the Institute finds various ways to interact with them. It has focused its efforts on user centered design, structured content and data informed design and development, says Grama. "Engaging through multiple channels to communicate that helps a lot in the way we engage with our citizens."

Other agencies, including the Census Bureau, which provides data on the country's economy and people, also have a culture that encourages citizen engagement, says Lisa Wolfisch, deputy director of the Center for New Media and Promotion, at the U.S. Census Bureau.

Even agencies with rich histories of citizen engagement, however, find their relationships evolving and shifting as customers embrace new technology and look for new ways to interact with government. Agencies have typically

relied on call centers, e-mail, and face-to-face interactions to connect with their customers, says Wolfisch. Now organizations are focused on the customer journey. This means understanding “what are the touch points you have across all these customer journeys?”

In the past, this journey may have begun via a visit to Census.gov or at a service center, says Wolfisch. These days it may start with a query to a search engine, which offers a new opportunity for engagement. This means Census has to make the information consistent and easy to access regardless of the source.

may be a difficult concept for some legacy organizations to embrace.

These organizations will have to spend less time on what they are going to do and how they are going to do it, and more time on why they are doing it, says Andrew Tarver, global business services, IBM. Start-up companies have typically done a good job of focusing on the why.

“What they are doing and how they are doing it will change ... but the one thing that doesn’t change is why they’re doing it,” he says. “That is culture.”

"There are a lot of digital ways we can communicate now, that are more cost effective than they were."

—Lisa Wolfisch, deputy director, Center for New Media and Promotion, U.S. Census Bureau

REACH OUT AND UNDERSTAND

Having a customer-oriented agency means meeting the citizen where they are, says Jacob Parcell, Manager, Mobile Programs, Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies, GSA. In today’s world, this includes embracing mobile applications to ensure information is presented in an understandable and consumable manner.

Focus on user-centric design, but also reach out to other areas of the organization such as procurement, security, and privacy teams and build a relationship with them, says Parcell. “You have to think of this holistically, because it’s going to disrupt a lot of people’s processes across the organization if you do it right.”

Sometimes an agency needs an evangelist who can talk with others in the organization, make connections and keep the focus on the user, says Grama. Build a coalition through education, and show people the value in what you are doing. “I haven’t been successful with a top down approach.”

It’s important to develop a mindset where systems and applications are tested with actual users and this information and the lessons learned must be shared with the rest of the organization. “We’ve moved from talking about human centered design in the context of web sites that are public, to applications,” says Grama. “Now we’re talking to programs about the insights we have using our usability labs for applications being developed.”

This also helps engage senior leadership in discussions about the roles of user input, engagement and data. Any organization looking to create a citizen-focused business must establish a culture that centers on the needs of the individual instead of the needs of the organization. This

Cultural change is possible if agencies truly believe the citizen is the center of agency activities. They can’t just talk a good game. “That goes back to the purpose and to the why. If you really do believe ... you can rebuild what you do as an organization around the needs of an individual,” says Tarver.

One of the biggest changes agencies will have to make revolves around personal data. Today organizations consider individuals as product and service consumers, but in the future it will be the reverse. Agencies and companies will need to consume individual personal data to better understand what citizens need.

This operating model shift is fundamentally important, because no organization today has digital ears. “They can’t listen to my digital voice,” says Tarver. “They can’t listen to what I need.” Instead, they pay social media companies for this type of insight and data on individuals.

Another challenge to citizen engagement is procurement. It is important for agencies to spend money on programs that will deliver the greatest return on their investment. “Communications scales,” says Wolfisch, “and that is really true on the engagement side. There are a lot of digital ways we can communicate now, that are more cost effective than they were.”

The duplication of technology across government, which Tarver calls unjustified, is another area agencies must be willing to address. Ideally, they should reduce IT duplication by 90 percent, he says, which will simplify the process of creating a citizen-centered organization and help save the government money. “If you actually start to work across the silos and try to build around the digital citizen,” he says, “you can do it.”