

Best Practices in Public Agency Customer Service



Public agencies are coming under increased pressure today to not only reduce budgetary expenditures but to also improve the service offered to citizens. Agency management are looking to technology and rapidly developing Best Practices to increase efficiency and customer service. This white paper examines the importance of customer service benchmarking in the private sector and explores the role of technology in supporting this growing trend. Customer Service terminology is introduced and case management Best Practices are discussed.

What is the Meaning of “Customer Service” for Public Agencies?

The concept of excellence in “Customer Service” is now main-stream in the public sector. Citizens accustomed to the instant response and constant contact offered by businesses in the private sector now expect that from their government agencies, and public agencies are rising to the occasion, measuring their ability to satisfy their citizen customers. The establishment of a standard of agency customer service excellence requires setting a standard in responding to and resolving citizen requests. An excellent customer service interaction is one in which staff responds to customer’s requests (inquires, questions, complaints), quickly, professionally and with a high level of care, leaving the customer feeling valued, heard, and important to the community.

The Importance of Customer Service in Government

The measurement and goal of providing standards and excellence in customer service is of vital importance to public agencies because the agency exists ultimately for the benefit of its citizens. When citizens have good experiences in communicating and resolving issues with their government, they are more likely to feel satisfied with its performance and to become more engaged in the maintaining that standard of good governance throughout their community. As the bar is raised by and for the citizen, the agency and community both benefit from the foundation of mutual trust and good will that is established.

The Value of Benchmarking in Meeting Standards of Excellence

The measurement of customer service is best done with the routine generation of benchmarking reports. Reports that show case closures and time to closure, by department and employee, give agency management insight into resolution problems, issue trends and helps to highlight any resource issues. Management should strive to improve response time and utilize report data to reallocate resources and measure staff performance. Staff should feel empowered to take action and should be goaled to provide outstanding service to customers, consistent with the law, common sense, efficient use of resources and adopted policies.

The Role of Software in Customer Service Benchmarking

Software designed to improve customer service in public agencies is vital to the establishment of Best Practices. The practice of routinely generating software reports provides data that uncovers problems and supports resource allocation decisions. Customer service software also acts as the infrastructure for the centralization of customer case data and encourages the standardization of case management procedures throughout the department or multiple departments. Customer service software enables staff to check the status of any case at any time, so long as that staff member has been granted access by the software administrator, enabling the entire staff to be responsive to citizen requests.

Customer Service Case Management: Terminology and Process

Within the context of citizen case management, the citizen’s initial communication is called a “request” and each request is assigned a unique case number. Once a case number is assigned, the request is thereafter referred to as a “case”. Software specifically designed to support the needs of agencies should allow the attachment of notes and documents to support a case, as this will increase the efficiency and speed of case processing and closure. Management and staff should be committed to establishing benchmarks, identifying problems and providing excellent service, all reinforced through personnel evaluations that include customer service as a component of staff performance.

Recommended Best Practices in Customer Service

The following are several Best Practices that an agency may implement with the goal of improving Customer Service. These practices involve establishment of and staff adherence to specific case management procedures and timelines. These are suggested Best Practices that may be altered by agency and situation. In any case, a set of Best Practices must be established, communicated to staff and reinforced through routine reporting and staff evaluation in order to reach customer service goals.

Maintaining Staff Professionalism

Since a citizen's first impression of an agency results from staff responsiveness and demeanor, staff approachability and professionalism are essential. It goes without saying that during all interactions with customers, staff should maintain a polite, professional demeanor regardless of the customer's behavior. However, no employee should be expected to accept abuse, profanity or threats from a complainant and may decline further discussion if the complainant refuses to proceed reasonably.

Managing Customer Expectations

When a citizen request is made, staff should notify the citizen who made the request within one business day that a case has been opened. If closure will take more than one business day, staff should keep the customer informed of the status by periodically calling, e-mailing, or otherwise communicating with the customer. All requests that cannot be resolved immediately, or are very sensitive in nature, are worth tracking.

Phone Receipt of Customer Requests

When a citizen request is received via phone call, staff should minimize any call wait time, personally guide calls to the appropriate party, and avoid "bouncing" calls from one number to the next. If the necessary staff person is not available, the responsible staff should ask if the customer wishes to leave a voice mail message. Staff should use their "Out of Office Assistant" whenever they plan to be unable to respond to e-mail for 24 hours or more. The message should indicate when the staff person will return and include the name, telephone number and e-mail address of a staff person who will be available in the interim to respond to the customer's inquiry.

Website Request Management

Staff should notify the caller if their request may be submitted through the organization's website. Customer Relationship Management software transforms the website into a 2-way communication portal and gives citizens 24x7 access to the agency. Citizens are able to answer their own questions using FAQs, submit or check on the progress of requests, and subscribe to topic interest groups for email updates on the topic of interest. Integration of CRM software designed for the needs of public agencies increases the agency's efficiency and service and reduces overall case management costs.

In-person Receipt of Customer Requests

When a customer comes to the agency to file a request in person, the reception staff shall try to quickly ascertain the nature of the person's complaint and summon the appropriate staff person. If the appropriate staff person is not available, reception staff shall request the assistance of another knowledgeable staff person. If there does not appear to be any appropriate staff person available, reception staff shall input the customer's request into the CRM, and provide the case ID#. Staff may also arrange for the complainant to meet with an appropriate staff person at a later time.

Sensitive Request Management and Difficult Situations

Any complaint or inquiry that relates to a situation, which, if uncorrected, could reasonably lead to imminent harm to people, property, or the agency's reputation is a sensitive complaint. Any complaint that originates from, or has been copied to, a City Council member or the media, is a sensitive complaint. Any department receiving a sensitive complaint shall move expeditiously to confirm and correct the situation described, and shall inform the City Manager of the situation and the measures to be taken.

Comcate, Inc. is the leading provider of customer relationship management request tracking software for public agencies, with over 150 agreements signed to implement Comcate's solutions. For more information on Customer Service in Public Agencies or Comcate software products, please email info@comcate.com.