
Customer-Centered Government

Innovation and Ideas for More Responsive
Public Services

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Authors

Jane Wiseman

CEO, Institute for Excellence in Government

Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government

Chetan Choudhury

Government Advisor

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Introduction

The rapid emergence of new technologies has enabled a variety of ways to harness public sentiment and ideas to improve government performance. This paper highlights a number of interesting approaches across the globe that are emerging in hopes of accelerating adoption of means to listen to the “voice of the customer” in creating excellence in public services.

Key questions addressed in this paper include:

- How is the voice of the customer improving the quality of public services delivered by government?
- What is the role of customer engagement in designing and co-creating better services?
- How does mystery shopping help a government deliver better services?

Private sector context

Without customers, a business would cease to exist. So, business leaders pay attention to what customers want. Sometimes it’s easy to see what the customer wants – like when people line up outside the Apple store for the latest iPhone release. Or when, in the summer of 2019, an Atlanta KFC restaurant unveiled plant-based wings and nuggets and in [5 hours](#) sold an amount equal to how much real chicken the restaurant usually sold in a week.

But it’s not always that obvious. So, businesses need to look at data on customer behavior to gain insight. In the age of big data, the data trail we leave enables personalization and data mining so companies can anticipate more precisely what we may want to buy. Sometimes they are able to suggest it for us before we even know we need it. Social media sentiment mining, online product and service reviews, the ubiquitous electronic customer satisfaction surveys, and IoT sensor data about how we move about in retail stores are providing companies with vast amounts of data on what we like and don’t like about their products and services. Such data allows them to continuously improve their marketing and [recommendation algorithms](#). Some firms are even resorting to creative approaches like hiring a [casting agency](#) to bring in customer voices with new ideas and perspectives.

Increasingly, both in brick and mortar stores and in online commerce, businesses are paying close attention to customer experience (CX) and trying to improve upon it. Research from [Forrester shows](#) that a vast majority (76%) of executives think that improving their company’s customer experience is a very important priority. As a result, many companies now have a senior-level official with direct responsibility for improving the customer experience. Titles vary (e.g. Chief Customer Officer, Chief Client Officer, Chief Experience Officer, Vice President for Member Experience, Chief Global Customer and Marketing Officer, etc.) but the goal is the same – figure out what customers want so they will buy more. According to [a study](#) by the Harvard Business Review, the vast majority (over three quarters) of these leaders are part of

their companies' executive management teams, and as such, are able to direct resources and strategy toward customer insights.

Having a positive environment for employees also provides direct financial value to a company. Called "employee experience," the behavioral norms of collaboration, creativity and empowerment have been examined via a [national survey](#) done by researchers from MIT Sloan School of Management. This research shows that companies with a positive employee experience had twice the customer satisfaction and twice the amount of innovation as comparable firms that provide a lesser employee experience.

One interesting insight from corporate customer experience literature is that often, when companies roll out new digital experiences for customers, rather than getting delighted with them, customers are left feeling frustrated if the technology is not sufficiently tested before rollout. When using a new technology that isn't intuitive, confused customers may end up calling support centers more rather than less. Further, as more technology is deployed, some customers are left frustrated by the lack of human resources available for problem-solving.

For example, flying is increasingly high-tech yet also increasingly challenging for some passengers. The airline industry has provided customers self-service seat selection and automated check-in, paperless boarding passes, and many electronic platforms for buying a plane ticket that have rapidly commoditized the flying experience. Airlines routinely send out satisfaction surveys asking for feedback (United Airlines alone gets [8,000](#) of these every day). Yet, even as the use of technology is increasing, customer satisfaction with flying is decreasing. New York Times technology columnist Farhad Manjoo [suggests](#) this is because airlines are "concerned with prices and profits above all else, with little regard for quality of service, for friendliness or even for the dignity of customers." This strong opinion points to the importance of turning customer ideas into action, and not just gathering data on customers.

Based on research showing how strongly customer loyalty is attached to positive emotional experiences, companies increasingly try to create positive "emotional experiences" for customers. Most customer care call centers focus on efficiency metrics, like time to complete calls and average wait time on hold. But some also focus on trying to create emotional connections to the caller. In one extreme example of human connection trumping transaction speed, a call center employee at an insurance company where the caller [mentioned feeling suicidal](#) after having been in an accident that caused a fatality, stayed on the line talking to the individual while contacting support services for the person, and waited until law enforcement arrived before ending the call.

Framework for customer feedback in government

Leading governments are already using many of the same tools to gain customer insight and feedback. Government innovators at all levels of government across the globe are tapping into public ideas via both digital and analog channels with increasing energy, and are fueling many new ideas that make services more customer-centered and efficient. Leading-edge governments are establishing offices of customer engagement and customer experience, and are appointing leaders for their CX programs. Some governments have taken the lead here while many others are still in the nascent stages of learning and experimentation.

However, without the need to compete against rival companies for market share, the public sector as a whole has not yet embraced this trend. This paper shares examples from leading government efforts to understand the needs of customers and to use their feedback to improve service delivery.

In order to understand this more effectively, a high level framework has been outlined here to put these efforts into context. This framework categorizes the various methods available for government to gain customer insights as follows:

1. Understanding public **sentiment**
2. Gathering **ideas** from customers, and
3. Putting the ideas into **action**.

These need not be sequential, but can be. Ideally, a government would pursue all three, but the first category can be thought of as a baseline against which to measure progress in adopting the other. This framework is described below.

Feedback source	Types of feedback/tools
SENTIMENT: Public sentiment towards government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How satisfied is the public with the general quality of services provided by the government? • How satisfied is the public with a specific service or department? • To what degree does the public have faith that government is competent and ethical? 	
General public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular resident survey • Special purpose survey • Social media sentiment mining • Focus groups on specific topics, services, or departments • Direct feedback (“email the mayor,” call center, online suggestion box, etc.)
IDEAS: Public input on a government task	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can government improve a specific public service? 	
Customers receiving service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Real-time satisfaction assessment (kiosk, survey, etc.) • Follow-up survey (omni-channel) • Social media sentiment • Formal complaints or compliments • Focus group, interview, etc.

Feedback source	Types of feedback/tools
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plain language communications, and A-B tests to determine usability • Human-centered design and journey mapping • Customer segmentation
Interested stakeholders (vendors, suppliers, government partners, families of service recipients, civic groups, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey • Participation in results meetings (e.g. ResultsWashington) • Formal complaints or compliments • Focus group, interview, etc. • Ideation platforms (e.g. MiMedellin) • User testing groups (e.g. civic tech groups)
External evaluators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of customer service standards (e.g. Star Rating) • Evaluation of quality and consistency of product and service (e.g. “mystery shopping”) • Evaluation of service delivery environment (“mystery shopping”)
Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey • Focus group, interview, etc. • LEAN and other process improvement methods
ACTION: Translating sentiment and ideas into actions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can government allocate resources toward customer priorities or choose new initiatives? 	
General public Engaged residents (e.g. committee participants) Activists and interest groups Employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Town hall meetings, neighborhood and community meetings • Online or e-town halls • Committee meetings • Surveys • Engagement tools and platforms such as Participatory Budgeting • Referendum (e.g. for special taxation for specific project)
<i>Source: Author Analysis</i>	

With the framework in place, let us now look at some examples where leading government entities have been using customer engagement as an effective tool to inform and improve themselves.

Gathering public sentiment about government performance

In the broadest sense, public faith in government in the US remains at historic lows, with [78%](#) saying they are either angry or frustrated with government in the most recent national study by Pew (2019). This is consistent with the recent (2018) Forrester federal government customer experience [survey](#), which found that 80% of federal agencies fell into the category of “poor” or “very poor” customer experience, compared to just 20% of private sector companies, and that in 12 industries, even the weakest companies outperformed the federal average. The highest-ranking federal agency of the 15 agencies studied was the National Park Service with a score of 77 out of 100, and the lowest ranking agency was USAJobs with a score of only 44. The average across the federal agencies was 59 out of 100, which is in the category of “poor” performance.

Despite this bleak outlook, there are positive signs as US federal agencies move forward to comply with new requirements such as:

- [OMB Circular A-11 Section 280](#), “Managing Customer Experience and Improving Service Delivery,” a part of the President’s Management Agenda which puts customers’ expectations and experiences front-and-center.
- The [21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act](#), under which US federal agencies will be required to improve the usability of their websites by promoting electronic signatures, increasing the use of digital forms and creating self-service customer experiences. By the end of calendar year 2020, all public-facing forms are required to have a digital option.

And while there is much progress to be made, many entities have been gathering feedback on their performance for a long time, and continue to routinely collect resident satisfaction survey data to provide a baseline for understanding both what the public is generally happy and unhappy with, and what specific services need attention. Some cities also conduct routine resident wellbeing and happiness surveys. Some entities are tapping into social media to understand sentiment and to try to address areas of concern. Also, several leading federal, state and local governments use innovative methods to capture public sentiment. For example:

- US federal website user feedback is growing in volume. The company ForeSee conducts pop-up feedback surveys of users of federal government web sites, and serves [90%](#) of executive branch agencies by providing feedback to make the website experience more user-friendly.
- A growing number of entities are now electronically capturing quick customer feedback at the point of service delivery. For example, the city of Riverside, CA has been focused on customer service since 2012 and uses kiosks from the company HappyOrNot. These kiosks allow customers to rate their service experience using four “smiley face” buttons signifying four categories of experience - very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat unhappy or very unhappy. Customer data from the kiosks allow managers to monitor trends by time and location. Many customers who would never fill out and mail back a written survey or spend the time responding to a phone survey, will stop on their way

out, hit the right smiley face button, and keep walking. This is much simpler feedback but large amounts of it can be gathered in near-real time. There are now terminals at 11 city departments, and on the city web site. At the same time, the city is also using HappyOrNot terminals to monitor employee morale - , a smart move as employee engagement is a key driver of customer experience.

- Increasingly, digital platforms allow for online “town hall” sessions to gather reactions from the public to proposed ideas. Many governments use this method, yet it is still not ubiquitous nor used more than episodically.

Co-creating ideas for government service improvement with the public

Of late, many governments have been making efforts to bring users into the service design process. One example is the US City of Miami, FL, where Chief Information Officer Mike Sarasti created a program to leverage individuals already in city buildings waiting in line for services and ask for their feedback on city web services. They provide real-time feedback during the development process and make better use of their time waiting for in-person city services.

When many governments rolled out their web sites decades ago, the predominant method of searching for information was a desktop. Today, with an increasing volume of searches done on mobile devices, more governments are developing mobile-friendly search and navigation options.

The digital experience of government is increasingly becoming user-centric. For example, the US city of Las Vegas, NV recently introduced a [unified login](#) for residents, allowing citizens to perform a number of online transactions or access a variety of services all from a single point of entry. Rather than having to sort through a maze of government departments, users can pay parking tickets, sign their kids up for baseball camp or report problems through one platform. In another example, the US state of Indiana has also developed a single sign-on portal called [Access Indiana](#). From this single user-friendly site, residents can connect to 14 interconnected services that don't require a login. [According to](#) the Chief Administrative Officer in Indiana's Office of Technology, Robert Paglia, "If you go in and renew a boating license, we can promote Indiana parks, or where you can book a cabin stay, or we can direct you to renew your fishing license."

Other innovative approaches to getting ideas from the public to improve government services include the following:

- Challenge.gov engages the public to effectively "crowdsource" answers to US federal government problems. The website enables the government to engage citizen-solvers in prize competitions for top ideas and concepts as well as breakthrough software, scientific and technology solutions that help achieve their agency missions. Freed from the typical government procurement practice, challenge.gov is able to generate fresh ideas. Since 2010, the U.S. government has run nearly 1,000 challenges in more than 100 federal agencies, and with solvers spanning the gamut between students and hobbyists to small business owners and academic researchers.
- A third of the US Department of Veterans Affairs employees are veterans, which in turn implies that they already understand the customer perspective. The VA has created the [Veterans Experience Office](#), specifically to gather ideas and feedback from customers at the VA health centers and benefits programs. Several ideas have already been generated to help hospitals create a more welcoming environment, such as having "red coat" ambassadors to help patients and families navigate their way around facilities, and having "green glove" responsibility for every employee to help keep the physical environment clean and hospitable. Several forms and letters have been updated to use

plain language and user centric design, and many of them went through A-B testing before deploying the improved design.

- The US state of Washington performance management effort, Results WA, includes regular “results review” meetings chaired by the governor and focused on a specific government goal. Each meeting is open to the public, and typically customers receiving the service are included so that they can provide feedback on the quality of service being delivered.
- Medellin, Columbia was once a drug and homicide capital, but is now a shining example of how civic innovation can turn around a city, and an economy by bringing new ideas, arts, culture, and excitement to what had been a dangerous place. One great example of successful civic engagement is [MiMedellin](#), an online platform for the public to directly co-create solutions to challenges facing the city government. Since its launch in 2013, nearly 19,000 ideas have been contributed to the platform. There are three main ways this site invites interaction –short surveys (pulsos) that take the pulse of public interest, a forum for sharing new ideas with the city that relate to specific challenges (ideas), and voting on ideas presented by other members of the community.
- In the US state of Pennsylvania, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services regularly engages the public in idea generation via its [neighborland engagement portal](#). Current issues open for feedback include youth homelessness (“How can we help to ensure homeless youth in Allegheny County have safe places to live?”) and foster parenting (“What could we do to make it easier for you to become a foster parent to a child who needs you?”). When the County sought input on policy ideas for senior care, 46 ideas were contributed by over 400 participants in the forum. The County also surveys youth in foster care, and received 200 responses to an anonymous survey of youth. Feedback helps provide [customer insight](#) that helps address challenges amongst specific populations with unmet needs, such as female, minority and LGBTQ youth.

While many of the innovations are digital in nature, government must still pay attention to all channels of customer interaction. While private sector entrepreneurs can choose to be digital-first or digital-only in their customer interactions, government must serve all. As shown in the table below, according to a study by consulting firm McKinsey, while 58% of Americans are comfortable with digital technologies, another 38% are either uncomfortable with digital technology or are completely offline. Government must serve both groups.

Group and % of consumers	Characteristics
Digital by lifestyle (23%)	For these consumers, digital is fully integrated into their lives. They don’t perceive a separation between the digital and traditional worlds—that is, they use social media every day and tend not to watch traditional TV or read newspapers.
Digital by choice (35%)	Individuals who enjoy the advantages that digital brings, such as Netflix, Skype, YouTube, online check-in for travel, and online banking transactions, have options for how they engage but opt primarily for digital channels
Digital by need (25%)	Digital is beyond the comfort zone of these consumers, who engage with digital channels only when necessary.

Group and % of consumers	Characteristics
Offline society (17%)	Individuals who live in the nondigital world and prefer personal contacts make up nearly one-fifth of all customers. They use bank branches, shop in brick-and-mortar stores, and typically do not use the internet
Source: McKinsey, February 2019 (https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/operations/our-insights/how-to-capture-what-the-customer-wants)	

Putting publicly generated ideas into action

Starting with placing members of the public onto advisory and performance management committees, there are a wide array of options for putting public ideas into action. Perhaps no method is more widely replicated than Participatory Budgeting.

The idea of Participatory Budgeting (PB) is to empower the public directly to decide how their government spends some of their tax dollars, typically for some small portion of the budget, and often for capital investments rather than operating funds. PB started in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, and within a decade the innovation had spread to more than 120 Brazilian cities. Results of an [external evaluation](#) showed cities that adopted PB spent more on education and sanitation than did comparable cities, and the PB cities saw higher decreases in infant mortality compared to their peers. The evaluation also showed improvements in governance that built over time, likely the result of the continuing communication and constituent input into decision-making. Further, the researchers found that the increased transparency of PB resulted in less corruption.

PB has now spread to over [3,000](#) cities, states, counties, housing authorities, schools, and other public institutions across the globe. The [Participatory Budgeting Project](#), a non-profit organization based in New York City has built toolkits and other resources to help advance the idea. To date, they have helped 400,000 participants in 29 cities allocate [\\$300 million](#) in local projects, with 1,600 community-generated ideas that are now funded projects. In one instance, in the US city of Boston, MA schoolchildren decide how to spend \$1 million each year learning about government process while expressing their opinions and developing a sense of civic engagement.

The largest PB implementation in the US by far is in NYC, which will adopt the practice city-wide next year. The city's PB program won the Harvard Kennedy School's prestigious [innovation award for public engagement](#) in 2015. Since the award, the program has continued to grow, with 118,000 participants choosing how to spend [\\$1 million](#) in each participating city council district, for a total of \$39 million.

Last year, students in two Brooklyn schools voted on how to allocate more than \$1 million. Students were engaged at every step of the process, from developing ideas and creating formal budget proposals, to narrowing the number of proposals under consideration, and finally voting on the ideas. Winning capital expenditure projects ranged from bathroom renovations to new drinking fountains to a new basketball court. As former New York City Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith [notes](#), "It is early training for tomorrow's leaders and a great example of the kinds of things our democracy can do when we dare to innovate."

United Arab Emirates: A case study in customer centric government

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a relatively small nation in the Middle East with a population of about 10 million, provides a remarkable case study. The form of government in this nation is a monarchy, and the government is administered by an executive branch of 39 federal ministries and authorities which provide over 3000 services to the public.

The leaders of this government are not afraid to take the lead on innovation. For example, in 2017 the country was the first to appoint a minister for artificial intelligence (AI), and in October 2019 it opened the world's first AI University specifically devoted to graduate studies in AI, Computer Vision, Machine Learning and Natural Language Processing. To promote access, the university is tuition-free to admitted students, and classes are planned to begin in the fall of 2020.

Similarly, the UAE government has forged a leading role, regionally and globally, with its focus on customer service and customer experience. In February 2019, at the World Government Summit, the UAE Prime Minister's Office (PMO) launched an online global [platform](#) to share knowledge, enable interaction and activate ideas on government services called Government Experience (GX.AE). This forum brings together thought leaders to share ideas to advance placing the customer at the center of government services. Several efforts under way in the UAE already exemplify this idea, including the Global Star Rating System for Services, the Happiness Meter and the Mystery Shopper program. Each of these is described below.

Global Star Rating System for Services

A significant government innovation in the UAE is the focus on achieving customer-centered service excellence. In an effort to make government services as customer-responsive as possible, and to meet or exceed private sector standards, in 2012, the PMO of the UAE launched the [Global Star Rating System for Services](#) (GSRSS) to bring every office serving the public up to a level of excellence in customer service. Specifically, [the goal](#) of the effort is for government to “create a future for customers that is personalized and welcoming like hotels, accessible around the clock like airlines, and provides the one-stop-shop efficiencies of banks.”

The GSRSS was developed as part of the Emirates Government Service Excellence Program (EGSEP) with a focus on customer centricity, employee happiness, and enhancing operational efficiency, with the goal of providing high-quality, seven-star services in all government operations. The GSRSS is based on global best practices from both the public and private sectors. Recognizing the growing importance of omni-channel engagement, the GSRSS includes an effort to involve the customer in service development and delivery through co-creation and e-participation and includes assessment of various service delivery channels, including brick-and-mortar customer service centers, call centers, websites, and smart applications. The assessment includes elements of the United Nations E-Government Survey, including emerging technologies, digital inclusion, open data, and cybersecurity.

The GSRSS process involves rating each government service center on a scale of two-to-seven stars based on its degree of excellence in customer focus. The criteria for a seven-star rating are intentionally challenging, making them attainable, but a stretch goal for any government entity, and equivalent to the best of the best in private sector. To earn a seven-star rating, a government entity must innovate and improve across each of the eight evaluation factors and maintain high customer satisfaction ratings.

GSRSS is a comprehensive way to capture the multiple elements of the UAE’s customer experience program. It comprises a thorough assessment of an entity and its service delivery channels, evaluating its maturity level for each of the eight elements of excellence. The process involves field visits to the center to assess quality, and also incorporates mystery shopper results, and customer satisfaction and happiness reports. To motivate the drive to customer service excellence, cash incentives are sometimes provided to staff at the five highest ranked service centers.

To assure neutrality, assessments are conducted by an independent evaluator. The evaluation report includes coaching to help move each public service center toward increased customer service excellence. Initially, some public leaders were reluctant to join the program, afraid of a negative assessment. But over time interest has grown and several cases have demonstrated the power of external ratings in improving service standards. In the first round of assessments, only 19 government service centers participated. Within two years that number had grown to 159 centers. Today every one of the country’s government service centers is participating.

Service Centers are evaluated every two years. A plaque is placed on the wall of the center with the results – just like a hotel with a star rating outside the main entrance. Assessment is based on eight criteria: strategic alignment, citizens, services, channels, citizen experience, service efficiency and innovation, people, and technology. As shown in the sample report below, for each of the criteria, the assessment report groups the results into four categories: leading, maturing, developing, and basic.

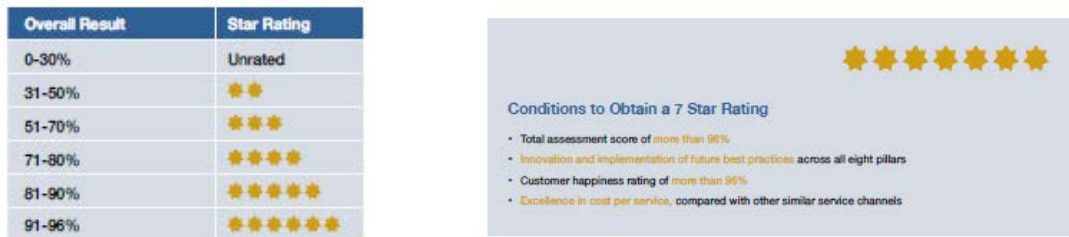


Source: March 2019, UAE Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Cabinet Affairs & the Future

For areas that are not rated highly, there are constructive suggestions for improving the rating in the next assessment. The foundational component of the Star Rating system is to connect the delivery of services to the strategy, the “why” of service delivery. The “what” of service

delivery is assessed in the actual customer interactions, as well as the underlying enablers, or the “how” of service delivery, such as the back-end human resources and IT systems that enable high quality customer-facing service.

Numerical scores from 0 to 100 are given, with each of the eight categories contributing to the overall score. Based on the score, a star rating is assigned, with a seven-star rating requiring a score above 96% (along with additional conditions), as shown below.



Source: March 2019, UAE Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Cabinet Affairs & the Future

One example of an agency that has used the GSRSS as a launchpad for improving customer service is the [Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship](#) (ICA, previously known as the Emirates Identity Authority), responsible for establishing identity for UAE residents, assigning a unique identification number and keeping electronic records of residents. ICA is responsible for issuing passports and identification cards. It operates more than 60 service centers and has taken part in the Global Star Rating System for many years. Early results showed that the various centers scored differently. One top performer, the Al Barsha Center, went from a four-star rating to a five-star rating after receiving feedback and incorporating that feedback into their service improvement plan. For example, they set a goal of reducing customer wait time to 10 minutes, and achieved that. Further, they provided value-add services to customers while they were waiting, such as knowledge corners for customers to read while they wait, as well as access to wifi, computers, and printers. They created an app that provided real-time information to customers about wait times, which allowed customers to know the expected wait time in advance and could help them avoid the busiest locations and times, or at least be forewarned of a long wait. Now, with this best practice example in place, the ICA will be working to bring the rest of its centers up to the level of this five-star center.

GX Customer Councils

In October 2018, the Prime Minister’s Office established the GX Customer Councils to facilitate communication between the federal government and its customers. The effort focuses on collecting customers’ views on government services through focus groups, surveys and discussions to explore new ideas towards improving government services and providing an optimal customer experience. The Councils bring together customers and youth, along with experts and academics familiar with the best global and regional practices in service development. The Councils identify international best practices that can be applied to the UAE

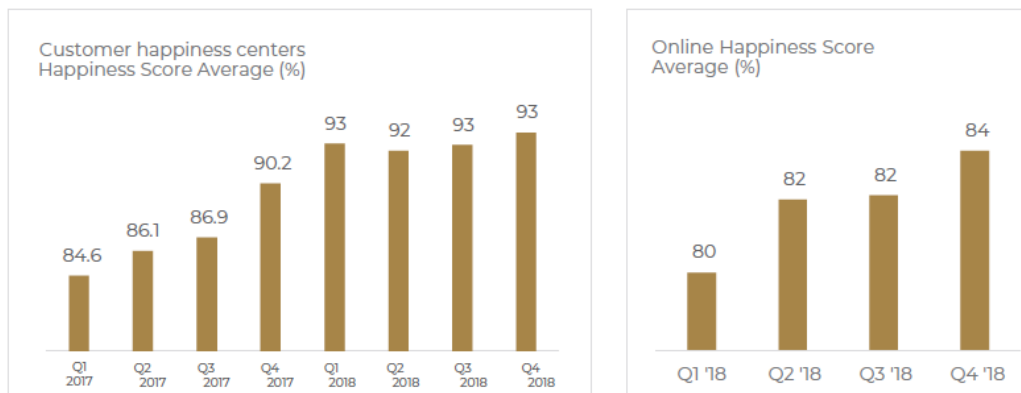
government, in line with the objective to make the UAE the number one country in the world for government services by 2021.

The Councils meet frequently, and to date, the discussions have provided the government with information on the perspective of its customers as well as business partners. This channel has enabled direct and focused communication with customers to explore their preferences and recommendations. Regular meetings bring together government entities and customers and allow the sharing of ideas for developing innovative and customer-responsive government services, both at brick and mortar service centers and via digital transactions.

Happiness Meter

In an effort to advance toward its goal of being the happiest country in the world, in 2016, H. H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of UAE and Ruler of Dubai, announced the National Programme for Happiness and Positivity. At that time, he also named the country's first ever Minister of State for Happiness and Wellbeing. As part of this program of fostering happiness, the UAE government has implemented a Happiness Meter for measuring residents' satisfaction with government services, and this satisfaction data is also incorporated in the Global Star Rating System for Services mentioned earlier.

For calendar year 2018, the overall reported happiness rating for services was 92.6%. As the graphic below demonstrates, happiness scores for both brick and mortar service centers and online services have increased since the initial rollout of the happiness Meter system. One insight noted by a recent external assessment of Happiness Meter was that scores from devices deployed physically at customer service centers were on average about 10 points higher than the results achieved in online surveys, perhaps suggesting that it is easier to provide critical feedback in the privacy of home instead of in a public space.



Source: Happiness Meter Reporting dashboard

Source: Applied Innovation Institute, "UAE's Happiness Meter: Delivering Government Services Innovation Through Data Analytics" page 12. <https://gx.ae/en/resources/launching-the-gx-case-studies-uae-s-happiness-meter>

All federal government ministries and authorities now employ this method of assessing customer satisfaction. In a country of about 10 million people, the 5.5 million responses to the

Happiness Meter surveys represent significant customer input, far exceeding most government customer feedback efforts in the US.

This customer-friendly tool is deployed on over 5,000 iPad devices available at the customer service centers, and is deployed in online format for all digital government transactions. As the photograph below demonstrates, the simple user interface makes it easy to assess happiness based on accuracy, quality, timeliness, and courtesy of the service provided. Responses are stored and analyzed in a secure central data center, with results sent back to each center leader.



Source: Applied Innovation Institute, “UAE’s Happiness Meter: Delivering Government Services Innovation Through Data Analytics”; <https://gx.ae/en/resources/launching-the-gx-case-studies-uae-s-happiness-meter>

As shown in the table below, rollout of the Happiness Meter has spanned both traditional brick and mortar customer service centers and digital transactions.

Happiness Meter data collection spans all aspects of government			
Service delivery type	Extent of deployment	Total number of data collection points	Volume of customer responses
“Brick and mortar” service centers	26 entities (all eligible centers)	512 centers	1M responses
eServices, Web sites/apps	39 Federal Ministries and Authorities (all federal entities)	550 services	4M responses

Source: Author analysis of data provided by Prime Minister’s Office

As a demonstration of how fully the country is embracing the idea of happiness, all brick and mortar customer service centers have been rebranded as Customer Happiness Centers. The

leader of each Customer Happiness Center receives a Happiness Meter Weekly report via an online dashboard. The data is not publicly shared, but is visible to each center leader so they can use the information to improve services and address areas of unhappiness.

Customer Happiness Center leaders are beginning to use the information provided to help them deliver better services. They are using the data to identify process bottlenecks, so they can streamline the customer experience, reducing unnecessary trips to the center. In one example, the Ministry of Health & Prevention realized that customers coming to the main center were subject to long wait times, but could complete their transaction at a center closer to their home with a shorter wait time. Another example from the same ministry identified a bottleneck in the pharmaceutical training service process, where customers had to present a large number of documents and usually had to make multiple visits to the center before they had all documents in place. The documentation requirements were streamlined as a result of identifying this customer 'unhappiness', and some documents were enabled to be submitted online. The shorter, more electronic process increased customer happiness scores. In yet another instance, the Ministry of Education flagged a process through its Happiness Meter data and reduced the number of steps from 13 to 6, and the time was reduced from 5 days to 10 hours for its process to confirm the educational certificates of customers.

A future update of the Happiness Meter is planned to include a mobile device survey for those calling a customer service call center, and it will be called "Happiness Meter on the Go" – a survey to be delivered via SMS to mobile devices. With a high penetration of mobile devices in the UAE (two per person according to [World Bank](#) data) and a desire to meet customers where they are and to make government transactions efficient, the UAE government has already achieved its goal of having all priority government transactions available online by 2020 and to have 80% of all government services be "smart services."

Mystery shopping for public service improvement

Retail organizations have long used mystery shoppers to test customer service and problem-solving skills of their employees along with the cleanliness and presentation of their stores. Mystery shoppers are typically assigned a specific task to complete or item to purchase; then they report back to the organization on every aspect of the interaction with the store and its staff.

Mystery shoppers are trained to be objective and consistent in their observations and documentation of the customer experience. According to international better practices, mystery shopping is intended as a feedback mechanism for overall performance of an organization, not to assess any individual employee (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, [ESOMAR](#)). With a growing amount of retail commerce moving online, brick and mortar stores must maintain their standards or risk losing even greater market share.

Government has also adopted mystery shopping, but to a lesser degree. When government does use mystery shopping to improve performance, it provides front line workers with

valuable input on their customers' perspectives. In the US, the United States Postal Service has long used mystery shoppers at their retail outlets. Other federal government entities in the country use mystery shoppers to validate claims made by organizations they oversee or audit, with the General Accountability Office and the Federal Trade Commission among those using this tactic. The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission has had inspectors ride taxis to get real feedback to improve the safety and cleanliness standards of taxis. Local governments in Georgia and the city of Somerville, MA have at times used mystery shoppers to document the customer experience and provide feedback to staff. Many government call centers use mystery shoppers who place calls and document wait time as well as other aspects of the call such as accuracy, courtesy and time to complete. Mystery shopper programs typically rely on a small number of trained shoppers to provide feedback.

One of the more ambitious and technology-driven approaches is being tried in the UAE, which has just rolled out an app (<http://ms.1.ae/>) which will enable any member of the public with a smartphone to download it and begin providing feedback to the government on the quality of services delivered at any federal government service center. The app was recently launched by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, through an [announcement](#) on Twitter. The app, called the UAE Mystery Shopper, is easy to install and gives users a choice of 8 languages (Arabic, English, French, Urdu, Spanish, Russian, Hindi and Mandarin Chinese). Users can rate their entire experience, from looking for a parking spot to get to the center, to wait time, to the interaction with the center staff and the result of the interaction. Users can provide a thumbs up or thumbs down rating, and do a more detailed rating to assess every aspect of the visit. As this data achieves critical mass, it will be incorporated into the overall customer service information used in the Global Star Rating System for Services.

Mystery shopping is not new to the UAE government, which has employed this technique to evaluate the quality of customer service at government offices serving the public since 2008. Demonstrating his commitment to customer service quality and to the mystery shopper program, in [July 2018](#) Shaikh Mohammad himself performed a [surprise mystery shopper visit](#) to the Dubai Airport. In the spring of 2019, one very high-profile mystery shopper experience at Emirates Post [made news](#) when it resulted in a tweet by Shaikh Mohammad. Sharing a photo of a long line of customers waiting at the postal office, Shaikh Mohammad also shared the complete report of the mystery shopper with details about the customer experience and the customer service culture, in an exemplary effort to promote transparency. The biggest and a one-of-its-kind move was made in September 2019 when the UAE [publicly announced](#) the results of a sweeping review of federal customer service centers conducted over a period of more than two months. nearly 600 agencies were "shopped" and results released [publicly](#), with the best agencies receiving bonuses and accolades and the worst facing reassignment. Declaring boldly that "We have the courage to evaluate ourselves and our teams with ultimate transparency, because covering up our mistakes and shortcomings costs far more," Sheikh Mohammed himself announced the top five and worst five centers in a series of tweets and told officials that the UAE government would not be satisfied until they reached the lofty goal of achieving the best services and facilities in the world.

Conclusion

Long ago, Aristotle described the role of city government as follows: “While coming into being for the sake of living, it exists for the sake of living well.”

Today, there are many channels with which government can assess the degree to which it enables the public to live well, and many means of collecting public input on how services can best enable this outcome. Leveraging the private and public sector examples described here provides a roadmap for other governments. Given the current pace of change in digital technologies, there is a unique opportunity to take a significant leap forward at a time when public faith in government sorely needs to be improved. In thinking about the future, government leaders should consider the following issues, challenges and ideas:

- **Assess where you are.** Pursuant to the US President’s Management Agenda, the Office of Management and Budget Government Effectiveness Advanced Research (GEAR) has created a [self-assessment tool](#) for government organizations to use in determining their level of customer experience maturity. The public-private GEAR team has developed many helpful resources to support organizations in moving towards amore extensive capture of customer insight and better use of that insight to drive operations and policy.
- **Develop a plan.** A realistic, multi-year plan should describe how leaders, mid-level managers, and front-line staff will be trained in customer-centered services, how the voice of the customer and the customer perspective will be incorporated into service design, and how technology will be leveraged to re-orient service delivery to improve ease of use. Customers should be consulted about the plan so that it is truly informed by customer needs.
- **Understand the customer journey.** Journey mapping places service designers in the position of those receiving the services, often alongside real customers.
- **User-centered design.** The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) in the US conducted [consumer interviews](#) to gather insight on how individuals come to drug and alcohol treatment, and how that pathway might be improved. DHS interviewed 60 consumers, their friends and family members, and treatment staff, and asked questions like, “How did you learn about treatment?” and “How might we make it easier for someone to access treatment?” Based on input, the team mapped 29 customer service experiences and learned a lot by looking at the process from the customer’s perspective. Looking for patterns, and applying human-centered design, the group came up with “personas” for typical consumers seeking treatment, to help focus the team on ways to improve the pathway to service. One such significant way was identified as addressing the perceived barriers, such as lack of insurance, unfamiliarity with treatment options, shortage of available treatment slots and concerns that treatment might not work.
- **Ask for customer input.** Simply asking for input from customers can enhance their trust in government. For example, the US Department of Veterans Affairs , which has now collected over three million feedback surveys from veterans using their health system,

shows that [88% of those asked](#) for feedback trust the agency, nearly four times the average for government.

- **Seek benchmarks across sectors.** There may be private sector exemplars. And, there could be non-profit and other government and semi-government entities delivering similar or related services with excellent customer orientation and service provision. Government managers should borrow leading and better practices and leverage ideas from across functions and types of organizations to improve the customer experience.
- **Start with what's easy.** Wholesale change to and in any organization takes time. Hence, quick wins that do not require large numbers of stakeholders can help generate momentum for customer experience efforts e.g., allowing higher levels of engagement with a government web site, as is done in [Helsinki, Finland](#), where it is easy to give feedback on any aspect of government. Another quickly implementable solution is installing customer satisfaction kiosks. The Allegheny County Department of Human Services mentioned earlier, has installed kiosks that clients can use to answer questions about their satisfaction and, with the press of a button, to anonymously send feedback on questions ranging from how they felt about the service to whether they felt heard by staff.
- **Leverage digital feedback tools.** Many online public engagement tools make it far faster and cheaper than before to use digital town halls, conduct feedback polls, and mine social media sentiment to understand customer priorities.
- **Use multiple methods.** Multiple feedback mechanisms should be employed as customers respond differently to different types of requests. The nature of feedback received from in-person interaction inside a service center could be very different from feedback given from the privacy of home, as was shown earlier in the case study on the Happiness Meter in the UAE. Also, when using surveys, they should be kept short because research shows the longer the survey the lower the response rate.
- **Seek unheard voices.** Government must serve all and not only those who are able to express their feedback with confidence. For example, some communities are fearful of reprisal, or have language or learning challenges that prevent them from providing customer feedback to government. Public sector leaders need to seek these voices out to ensure they are not left out. One such effort is the MIT Media Lab's [Local Voices Network](#), which aims to bring under-heard community voices, perspectives and stories into the mainstream public dialogue. The Network achieves this by hosting in-person and digital listening sessions with the goal of enabling participants to listen, learn, and be heard. By documenting the conversations, they open a new listening channel for journalists, leaders, and the community at large to inform policy development.
- **Don't get distracted by setbacks.** When the US federal government embarked on a cyber-security re-skilling effort and trained 50 staff for important roles in this emerging field, [only one was actually placed](#) in a job, frustrating many who had invested their time in the six-month training academy. The problem: outdated job descriptions that aren't keeping pace with new skills.
- **Executive buy-in matters.** While there are many ways to ask for customer input, the most important starting point is to have the key executives vested in the idea of

customer service optimization. When a mayor, governor, minister, cabinet secretary or other chief executive leader is engaged, it sends the signal to others to join the effort in earnest.

- **Involve front line staff.** Employee engagement is a key driver of positive customer engagement. Involving employees in customer service initiatives brings many benefits. For example, program managers with day-to-day operational responsibility will often know exactly what kind of customer-satisfaction data would be most useful to them in aligning their operations with what customers most value. An added benefit here is that if program managers are part of the program design, they're more likely to be enthusiastic in implementing the programs.

Finally, one of the most important things is to keep improving. It is important to iterate and continuously improve whatever customer feedback methods are attempted, and to try various methods – digital and analog, group and individual feedback, etc. By putting the customer at the core, governments can make quantum leaps forward in service delivery excellence.

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