

# A View to Succeed: How a Citizen-Centric Orientation Enhances Customer Service Outcomes in the Public Service

Stephen Lewis, Executive General Manager,  
Salmat Consulting



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# 1. Introduction

For the public sector, contact centres provide a vital link for citizens to access services and support as well as critical information about new initiatives or changes to Government Policies.

While government contact centres have a unique set of challenges to overcome in delivering a positive citizen experience, the strategies that have proven successful in the private sector can provide answers to these public sector challenges.

## 2. ‘Citizen’ or Customer

Despite the absence of private sector competitive pressures or the need to generate a profit, government contact centres are subject to political, social and economic pressures to be resourceful, efficient and successful.

Placing the customer at the heart of contact centre operations has proven to be the secret to success for many private sector organisations. This customer-centric philosophy is equally valid in the public sector, as citizens are, amongst other things, consumers of government services first and foremost.

While citizens don’t make any ‘purchasing decisions’ when accessing a government-provided service, they have been conditioned to certain levels of service in all other aspects of daily life, and this expectation extends to all service-related interactions, be it through government agencies and organisations, public-private partnerships or non-for profit organisations.

## 3. Less Effort, Better Experience

A recent Harvard Business Review article entitled “Stop Trying to Delight Your Customers” argued that organisations should focus their investment on reducing ‘customer effort’ in order to drive loyalty. Put simply, customer effort is all about removing barriers and making it easier for customers to interact with organisations.

This starts with taking an outside-in view of the organisation from the customer’s perspective to see the entire interaction from end to end: How and when do they interact with the organisation? What interactions could have been avoided if something else had been done better (for example better web self-service or improved back office processes)? What channel of communication do they prefer? What are some of the barriers (for example security authentication or complex IVRs) that they encounter? What information do they need most often? What processes are most complex and so on?

This outside-in analysis will allow an organisation to determine how well it operates, what can be improved, and what can be completely overhauled in order to deliver more effective, efficient and meaningful communication for its customers.

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*96% of customers who had to expend high levels of effort were subsequently less loyal*

*25% of customers will tell someone about a good service experience*

*65% will tell someone about a bad service experience  
(Source: Customer Contact Council)*

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## 4. Servicing Peak Demand

Consider the customer experience and the pressures on government services at periodical peaks such as tax time and the recent census collection period, or during unexpected peaks with the introduction of new initiatives or policies like the carbon tax. Many government departments offer alternative channels to alleviate pressure on the contact centre, such as providing information online. But are these channels effective in assisting both staff and customers, or are people still picking up the phone for assistance?

It is critical to take an end to end approach to understanding interactions, for example, why people might move from web self-service to the contact centre or why people are calling up every month to get simple information. Only by doing so can organisations implement improvements such as proactive outbound notifications or relevant alerts via social media.

## 5. Every Conversation is a Goldmine

Each time a customer contacts an organisation they provide a rich deposit of information that the organisation can use to better understand the customer's needs and how to meet them.

Rather than simply monitoring calls for quality assurance, organisations can harvest each touch point for in-depth customer intelligence. For example, building a knowledge base of the most common enquiries with a view to structure the contact centre's training regime around these needs. Armed with this valuable information, the organisation is then able to accurately predict what knowledge or skills are required and can prepare agents accordingly.

The solution here is more complex than creating a set of 'FAQs' which most customers won't read. The customer intelligence should be used to fix a problem at the source where possible.

## 6. Multi-Channel Success

In the not-so-distant past, a customer would make a phone call, mail a form or make contact in person. Now, customers are presented with multiple avenues or 'channels' to interact with government and community organisations – including web, mobile applications, social media, SMS, email, mail, phone or in person.

Expanding the reach across multiple channels has been proven to foster greater customer engagement and satisfaction. Additionally, new digital channels allow government organisations to respond quickly to issues and deliver more effective, meaningful and timely communication.

But with this new multi-channel dynamic comes a big challenge. That is, ensuring the channels don't become silos, ensuring that a consistent experience is provided across all channels. It is important to recognise the effectiveness of each of the available communication channels and also understand the preferences that exist across different customer groups.

Social media offers an enormous opportunity to 'listen' and respond to feedback in real time. Many government agencies are active on Twitter and Facebook, giving their followers a public forum to provide feedback as well as a fast and efficient way to respond to criticism or direct enquiries appropriately. However, social media should be viewed as just one of many channels that complement the more traditional channels, which by their nature may be better equipped to respond to complex issues. It's important to be aware of "channel shopping" as customers move between channels due to the inability for them to be serviced over more effective channel. For example, customers are increasingly complaining (and being serviced) via Twitter because they are unable to reach organisations via more traditional channels such as email or phone.

Currently, with the significant increase in the use of multi-channel communications systems, customer still prefer phone contact as the number one choice of contact, particularly when the customer believes they have a problem.

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## 7. Harnessing Technology

Government contact centres typically have to handle a huge volume of contacts from a large and diverse customer-base. They need to have fingertip access to complex and ever-changing information and have to adapt quickly when policies and new initiatives are introduced. So government contact centres have an even greater need to develop and optimise their processes to respond to these challenges.

Technology is playing a major role in the vast improvement in the perception of the contact centre. Today, a caller's identity can be verified and their enquiry correctly assigned before they've even spoken to an agent – drastically reducing call duration and improving service quality. The result is a win-win – the customer spends less time to get the assistance they require, while the agent obtains

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*25% of contacts are routed to the wrong person in a typical medium to large organisation*

*Customers who speak to more than one agent are **12% less satisfied***

***120 seconds** - Average time wasted in a misdirected call  
(Source: Salmat data)*

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the correct information and ensures compliance with security and privacy protocols. Furthermore, the organisation is better able to utilise the available pool of agents and skills and structure them around the customer's needs.

Security is a major barrier for customer interactions for many government departments. In New Zealand, the Inland Revenue Department has introduced voice biometric-based identity verification to eliminate this barrier and make it easier for their customers to interact with them. Voice biometrics allow callers to be securely identified using the unique characteristics of their voice and removes the need for lengthy and frustrating security checks.

The range of sophisticated telephony technologies includes:

- Intelligent call steering – quickly and efficiently establishes the reason for the call by understanding the caller's spoken request with no need for confusing IVR menus. Customers can be quickly routed to the best available agent for their enquiry reducing overall call times, increasing first contact resolution and alleviating stress on the agent. Transfer rates are significantly reduced over traditional IVR solutions, therefore creating clear benefits from both an efficiency and experience perspective.
- Knowledge and biometric-based identity and verification – driving call centre efficiencies and improved security and privacy levels. Voice Biometrics reduces fraud and identity theft using sophisticated biometric verification that uniquely identifies individuals via a 'voice print'. The result is faster, more secure service. Ninety per cent of all voice biometric installations in Australia and New Zealand are deployed by Salmat.

Technology is now also allowing contact centres agents to work from home, providing employment opportunities for remote, regional communities or possibly those with a disability. This also has advantages in creating flexible and inclusive employment opportunities while reducing the related office-based overheads.

## 8. Return on Communication

Essentially, the key to help overcome some of the service challenges faced in the government sector is all about focus; dismantling organisational priorities and structuring the organisation around the customer.

Using technology and data-driven insights will help contact centres achieve a number of benefits – delivering a better return on investment. Service efficiencies and long-term cost-savings are just the beginning.

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### *Strategies to create a more effective, customer-centric contact centre*

1. **Take an ‘outside-in’ view** of communication channels to ensure that all solutions are built around customers.
2. **Identify and eliminate** technologies, processes and techniques that diminish the customer experience.
3. **Harness technology to reduce caller effort** such as speech recognition, self-service, intelligent call steering and voice biometric verification.
4. **Learn from your customers:** develop a knowledge-base that captures and prioritises the information customers need most and structure the team around this. This intelligence should also form the basis of relevant skills training, knowledge and capability development.

Enhancing the customer experience by reducing effort creates satisfaction and a richer interaction for both the customer and contact agent, as well as mitigating risks. By placing the customer at the centre of all decisions and striving towards delivering value from the customer's perspective, rather than simply cutting costs and reducing call durations, the contact centre team will be able to consistently deliver service excellence.

the evolution of one to one communication

