



# THE MOST IMPORTANT **CUSTOMER**

Improving the citizen experience with government



**PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE**

**accenture**

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- Providing assistance to federal agencies to improve their management and operations, and to strengthen their leadership capacity
- Conducting outreach to college campuses and job seekers to promote public service
- Identifying and celebrating government's successes so they can be replicated across government
- Advocating for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service
- Generating research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing our federal government
- Enhancing public understanding of the valuable work civil servants perform

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# INTRODUCTION

The new administration has pledged to make government work better for the American people. One of the best ways to demonstrate this commitment is by improving the customer experience with government services. This means making it a top priority to simplify and speed up how people get help with their taxes, obtain benefits, make their way through airport security and get the myriad other services government provides.

Astute federal leaders recognize what the private sector has long known: The benefits of improving the customer experience go well beyond satisfied customers. It also can advance the mission by increasing efficiency and lowering the cost of providing services.

In researching these efforts in government, the Partnership for Public Service and Accenture Federal Services found many examples of how providing a better customer experience can help agencies achieve important goals, such as: promoting public safety and security; reducing waste; delivering maximum value to citizens; and reducing the burden of government regulations.

## A customer focus can promote public safety and security



Agencies that work to enhance public safety and national security often rely on information from citizens to help keep the country safe. When agencies make it easy for citizens to supply that information, government is more likely to get what it needs.

For example, the State Department recently created a convenient, online process to report lost or stolen passports, making it more likely that citizens would file a report. This simplified the process for citizens, but also improved national security by preventing criminals or terrorists from using these missing passports. (see page 4)

The effort has been so successful, the department plans to add other digital services, including an online appointment system to reduce wait times in passport offices, and an online passport renewal option.

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## A customer focus can reduce waste



Agencies that distribute public funds often need information from citizens to make accurate payments. The Social Security Administration saved taxpayers money by reducing improper benefits payments, in part by making it easier for citizens to report changes in their income. (see page 5)

SSA is now working to eliminate the need for some citizens to report their wages at all. Congress authorized the agency to explore data-sharing agreements with private-sector payroll providers that keep wage data on 60 to 70 percent of the U.S. workforce. With employee and employer permission, these providers could share wage data with the agency automatically, making reporting more accurate and timely, and taking the monthly reporting burden away from some Social Security recipients.

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## A customer focus can help deliver maximum value to citizens



The Trump administration seeks to improve services to citizens while also streamlining the federal workforce. To meet these objectives, it will need creative ideas to help government work smarter. Doing more with less could be challenging given that the federal workforce has been flat for decades even as government agency missions have expanded, and the population that government serves has grown.

Leading commercial practices, such as expanding the use of digital, self-service channels, can help agencies improve the customer experience even with fewer employees. For example, the short-staffed IRS struggles to answer tax questions that citizens phone in. In fiscal 2016, nearly half of the taxpayers who called the agency could not get through to a representative, according to the Government Accountability Office.<sup>1</sup> This amounted to approximately 50 million unanswered calls.

By continuing to invest in online self-service options, the IRS could reduce the number of calls, lower costs, deliver a better experience for taxpayers and increase compliance with tax laws.

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## A customer focus can reduce the burden of government regulations



The administration also wants to reduce the burden and cost of government regulations. One way to accomplish this is to make it as simple as possible for businesses and taxpayers to comply with federal regulations.

The New Zealand government offers a successful model for reducing the regulatory burden. The government there launched an initiative called “Better for Business” to lighten the regulatory load and streamline compliance for companies. Based on the results of surveys and interviews with business leaders, the government found several ways to make life easier. One change links government databases and provides businesses with a single identification number, so they do not have to submit the same information to multiple agencies.

This initiative has reduced compliance costs for businesses by 12 percent. The government estimates that the identification numbers alone will save businesses \$60 million.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GAO, 2016 Filing Season: IRS Improved Telephone Service but Needs to Better Assist Identity Theft Victims and Prevent Release of Fraudulent Refunds, GAO-17-186, January 2017, 10. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2mCq993>

<sup>2</sup> William D. Eggers and Pankaj Kishnani, Compliance without tears: Improving the government to business experience, August 24, 2016. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2nwDC1w>

## CASE STUDY

# The State Department: Keeping U.S. Passports Secure



The number of U.S. passports being issued is increasing rapidly. In 2016, the State Department dispensed 18.6 million passports, up from 15.5 million the previous year.<sup>3</sup> In 2017, the department expects to issue more than 20 million—a record high.

As more Americans travel, the proliferation of those blue books and cards increases the risk that passports could fall into the wrong hands. Criminals who steal or buy them could use them to identify theft, terrorism and other illegal activities. It is critical for citizens to immediately report their passport lost or stolen so department personnel can warn international authorities and other federal agencies such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

“The U.S. passport is one of the most valuable travel documents in the world,” said Lee Smith, director of Passport Service’s program management office. “It is critical that we allow an avenue for citizens to quickly report their passport lost or stolen.”

Unfortunately, citizens do not always alert the department when their passport goes missing, often waiting

until their next trip to apply for a new one.

Prior to 2015, citizens could only make a report by calling the National Passport Information Center, mailing a paper form to the Consular Lost and Stolen Passport Unit or visiting a passport agency or another facility that accepts passport applications (for example, a post office) and completing a paper form. Those options are not convenient or easily accessible for some citizens.

In 2015, the department implemented an online option in an effort to provide customers another way to report their lost or stolen passport—through [travel.state.gov](http://travel.state.gov).

Once the online option became available, the department experienced an immediate spike in the number of reports. Previously, it received approximately 6,500 reports of lost and stolen passports per week across all of the reporting options. Soon after implementing the online option, it began receiving more than 1,000 additional weekly reports. By early 2017, as more citizens became aware of the online option, the total number of reports was more than 9,500 per week, a 46 percent increase since the option was launched.

The online option helped the department improve national security and brought other benefits to citizens. For example, citizens reporting online that their passport was lost or stolen receive an electronic confirmation of its cancellation, generally within 48 hours, instead of waiting several weeks for a mailed confirmation, according to Regina Ballard, the division chief who oversees the lost and stolen passport unit.

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**After launching an online option to report lost and stolen passports, the State Department saw a 46 percent increase in the total number of reports they received worldwide.**

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State, “Passports Statistics.” <http://bit.ly/2mSzk7C>

## CASE STUDY

# The Social Security Administration: Safeguarding Taxpayer Funds



In providing almost \$54 billion in benefits to Americans each year, SSA's Supplemental Security Income program has a huge responsibility for managing taxpayer money correctly. Managers of the program, which provides benefits to help the elderly, blind and disabled meet their basic needs, work to make sure beneficiaries receive correct payment amounts.

Meeting this goal is no easy task. Program benefits are based on an individual's wages, which often change, given that many program participants work part-time or in low-wage jobs. A lack of timely, accurate wage updates was a major cause of improper payments, according to Erik Jones, SSA's assistant deputy commissioner for operations.

Leaders at SSA examined the problem from their customers' perspective and learned that many recipients didn't update their wages with the agency because they found the process inconvenient.

They had two options—mail or bring pay stubs to a field office and wait for an employee to make manual updates—a time-consuming process. Participants could also update their wages through an automated phone

system. However, this option was not available to everyone, and many customers who spoke with accents or had unique names found that the automated system did not understand them.

In August 2013, the agency began offering beneficiaries a convenient mobile phone app to report their wages, and quickly began receiving about 4,000 wage updates a month through the new app, according to Kayla McNeil, a program analyst in SSA's Office of Electronic Services and Technology. By early September 2016, the number had jumped to more than 60,000. At the same time, the number of citizens reporting their wages over the phone declined slightly, indicating that citizens preferred this new option.

The application also reduced the workload for SSA staff, who previously entered wage information manually, and has decreased errors related to data entry. The mobile wage app is a great example of how SSA has combined its agencywide focus on reducing improper payments with its mission to provide world-class customer service.

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**In addition to adding convenience for SSA recipients, the application has increased the accuracy of the information SSA collects on beneficiary's wages, helping the agency reduce improper payments and save money for taxpayers.**

# The administration should build on momentum and advance reforms

There is strong momentum to improve the customer experience with government services. Several agencies have taken important steps toward making government more customer-centered. For example, the VA recently launched a major transformation initiative called MyVA focused on enhancing the experience for veterans receiving services.

The White House also launched the U.S. Digital Service in 2014, which attracted top technology talent from the private sector to help agencies design and deliver better digital services. The Digital Service has supported agencies in important projects, such as launching an online college scorecard to help students select schools and improving implementation of Medicare payment changes.

These and other efforts have already begun to pay off. In 2016, citizen satisfaction with government services rose for the first time in three years, according to a survey conducted by the American Customer Satisfaction Index. The improvement was largely driven by increased satisfaction with government websites.

The Trump administration should seize this momentum, and quickly take the following actions to deliver results for the American people.



# RECOMMENDATIONS



## **Make it a top priority to improve the customer experience with government**

The White House is required to identify and take action on several cross-agency priority goals, and multiple agencies must collaborate to implement them.<sup>4</sup> The White House should make it a goal to improve citizens' experience with government services, sending a clear signal that it plans to make government work better for the American people.



## **Revise the Paperwork Reduction Act to allow agencies to meet the needs of today's citizens**

The Paperwork Reduction Act, which has not been updated for decades, requires that agencies complete an arduous clearance process before collecting information from 10 or more members of the public. This has created an unnecessary bureaucratic hurdle that makes it harder for agencies to ask for voluntary feedback, and harder for citizens to voice concerns and provide suggestions to government. The director of the Office of Management and Budget, the agency responsible for implementing the act, should work with Congress to exempt agency requests for voluntary customer feedback from the law.



## **Establish a customer experience dashboard for government**

Government collects and publishes a lot of performance information. But rather than setting and tracking measures important to citizens, it often focuses on measures related to internal government goals. For example, in addition to tracking measures such as the number of benefit applications an agency processes, leaders also should measure citizens' satisfaction with the benefit program and application process.

OMB should launch a public performance dashboard on the federal services that most affect the public, using data and customer feedback. This would reveal opportunities for program improvement, highlight successful strategies to spread, and increase accountability.



## **Build partnerships that cross organizational boundaries**

Citizens' dealings with government, from opening a business to accessing a benefit program, often involve interacting with multiple federal agencies, state and local governments, and the private sector. The administration should focus on building partnerships across organizations to ensure that government presents a simple, unified face to the public.

Building these relationships can lead to agencies sharing data and linking systems in ways that benefit citizens. For example, the VA is working on an initiative to link internal databases so veterans have a seamless experience if they move from one VA hospital to another.

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<sup>4</sup> Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010, 31 U.S.C. §§1101-1125 (2010).

# CONCLUSION

Focusing on the customer experience with government services can help the Trump administration accomplish many of its goals—none more important than ensuring that government meets its citizens’ needs.

It is also important to recognize that lack of attention to the customer experience can lead to major embarrassment or worse. After struggling through its troubled response to Hurricane Katrina, the George W. Bush administration launched a major effort to reform disaster aid to survivors, while also seeking to repair a damaged reputation.

And it took the failed launch of HealthCare.gov for the Obama administration to start the U.S. Digital Service to help agencies build customer-friendly digital services.

By making the customer experience a top priority, the Trump administration can avoid potential problems and deliver on its most important promise—to make government work better for the American people.

APPENDIX  
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