



Chapter Fifteen

Building and Maintaining Customer Trust in Government Services

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INTRODUCTION

In the Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln made famous the reference to “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” He did so at the height of the Civil War, a time when belief in the United States was fractured almost to the point of no return. While the nation has come a long way since 1863, the faith Americans have in the federal government is at a new sustained low. According to the Pew Foundation, which has tracked trust in social institutions since the 1950s, for the last 20 years, less than one-third of Americans trust in the federal government.¹

Declining trust in government is not purely an American phenomenon. The UN’s Decade of Action² and the OECD’s Reinforcing Democracy Initiative³ are both efforts to improve trust in well-established national governments, parliaments, and democratic systems. In America, the federal government’s answer has been a sustained and deliberate recommitment to work “for the people.” Across administrations, parties, and generations, government leaders have been working to improve the delivery of government services for the benefit of everyday Americans, with specific attention being paid to the metric of trust in the federal government. Over the presidencies of Biden,^{4,5,6} Trump,⁷ Obama,^{8,9,10} Bush,¹¹ and Clinton,^{12,13} an always similar, sometimes rebranded effort has existed to improve trust in the federal government under banners such as customer service, electronic government, digital government, service delivery, and customer experience (CX).

This chapter will describe how the ongoing evolution of the U.S. federal government customer experience efforts can ultimately succeed. It will also make a series of predictions on areas where government customer experience will face the biggest challenges for the next few decades.

Successful Trajectory of Current Efforts

Perhaps rather optimistically viewed, current government CX efforts can find success due to four primary reasons:

- An ever-improving set of **minimum CX requirements and activities** for federal agencies
- A **growing workforce** of CX-minded and tech-savvy federal employees

- The **institutionalization** of the federal CX movement within individual departments and agencies
- An active **ecosystem** of vendors, advocates, and Congress to continue pushing federal CX forward from all directions

The federal government emphasis to create minimum CX standards and activities across agencies has historically focused on a manageable number of agencies that represent the public's most important interactions with government. In 2016, an Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memo¹⁴ identified these as 28 Core Federal Services.¹⁵ And now in 2023, OMB recognizes 35 High Impact Service Providers.^{16,17} Across administrations, this group of federal programs has been the target for coaching, staff, funding, reporting, and leadership attention. The expectations of these programs will continue to grow over time, along with the baseline level of customer experience capabilities and requirements.

Improving the federal customer experience requires a well-trained workforce that knows how to use and apply service design principles, customer feedback, and technology capabilities that improve interactions and touchpoints with customers. The growing talent pipeline for this work now includes a number of specialized hiring programs and offices: Presidential Innovation Fellows (August 2012),¹⁸ 18F (March 2014),¹⁹ the U.S. Digital Service (August 2014),²⁰ the Subject Matter Expert Qualification Assessments (SME-QA) hiring process (January 2019),²¹ and the U.S. Digital Corps (August 2021).²² Across these programs, goals include bringing a new skill-set into the workforce, changing agency cultures, and facilitating a service mindset focused on ownership of the customer experience.

Within those agencies, CX institutionalization will continue, driven both by requirements from Congress as well as agency and department leadership. This institutionalization has come in the form of various advocate or ombuds person offices to resolve specific issues brought to them by customers, as well as divisions, directorates, or bureaus created to proactively improve the customer experience. To date, institutionalization has included actions by Congress (see Figure 1), as well as the creation of customer experience offices by department or agency leadership (see Figure 2)—all of which improves momentum and continuity across administrations.

Figure 1. CX Institutionalization by Congress

1976	Congress creates the Office of Advocacy within the U.S. Small Business Administration ²³
1988	Congress codifies the Office of the Taxpayer Ombudsman within the IRS ²⁴
1996	Congress replaces the IRS's Office of the Taxpayer Ombudsman with the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate ²⁵
2003	Congress creates the Medicare Beneficiary Ombudsman within CMS ²⁶
2008	Congress creates the Office of the Ombudsman within the Federal Housing Finance Agency ²⁷
2010	Congress creates the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau ²⁸
2014	Congress creates a Flood Insurance Advocate for FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program ²⁹

Figure 2. CX Institutionalization by departments or agencies

2010	Department of Education establishes the Chief Customer Experience Officer for Federal Student Aid ³⁰
2012	Export–Import Bank of the United States hires a Chief Customer Officer ³¹
2014	General Services Administration hires a Chief Customer Officer ^{32,33,34}
2014	Department of Veterans Affairs hires a Chief Customer Service Officer and establishes a Veterans Experience Office ^{35,36,37}
2020	Office of Customer Experience within the Department of Agriculture ³⁸
2023	Customer Experience Directorate within the Department of Homeland Security ³⁹

Lastly, a growing and active ecosystem of vendors and advocacy groups—with influence extending into state and local government service delivery—continues to push federal CX efforts forward from all directions. This “civic tech” ecosystem includes nonprofits, private companies, and advocacy groups such as Code for America and its Safety Net Innovation Lab,⁴⁰ Nava,⁴¹ U.S. Digital Response,⁴² Bloom Works,⁴³ and others. When combined, these factors—minimum CX standards, a growing talent pipeline, institutionalization, and an active ecosystem—can make current federal CX efforts successful, but also reveal a set of new challenges on the horizon.

Emerging Challenges and Areas of Focus

In the future, the most significant challenges related to federal customer experience will emerge where public goods and services intersect with private goods and services—for instance, when private companies deliver public goods, or with customer journeys that require both government and private sector transactions. As examples of the challenges when private companies execute public goods, look no further than government funded loans and insurance,⁴⁴ commitments to privacy, and follow through on the 21st Century IDEA Act.

In these situations, the following challenges will emerge and become problematic as federal CX continues to mature:

- Competition over **ownership of the relationship** with the customer when the ultimate good or service provided is supplied and financed by the government
- New challenges in **maintaining customer privacy**
- The federal government’s **difficulty keeping pace** with changing consumer preferences and private sector capabilities

Private firms who develop their competitive advantage by providing a good customer experience may be unwilling to share data, insights, processes, and information that would help other providers and overseeing government agencies to improve their customer experience. Without access to these insights, government may find it harder to exercise authority over improving the customer journeys that it administers. This can also lead to a kind of “provider displacement,” where a private partner supersedes government as the service provider in the public imagination. For example, in the case of student loans and crop insurance, the Department of Education^{45,46} and Department of Agriculture⁴⁷ (respectively) underwrite and finance

a product that students and farmers see as being provided by the bank or insurance company of their choice. The extent to which Americans mistake public services for private transactions would limit attempts to improve trust in government institutions. The federal government must take care when relying on private partners for service delivery to ensure that such partnerships properly allocate responsibilities and ownership. Without special attention the federal government may inadvertently limit opportunities to participate in human-centered design processes.

As government customer experience efforts mature, they face growing challenges to keep up with changing customer expectations influenced by new technology and private sector offerings. For example, in 2010 the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) began pushing boundaries of government data collection with body scan technology at airport security checkpoints.^{48,49} Within a year, a biometric security services company called CLEAR was founded⁵⁰ and began exploring contract opportunities with TSA. The quickly established technology gap between the TSA and its private partner, which uses retinal and digital fingerprint scanning tools to whitelist entrants, exemplifies the challenges government will continue to face in catching up with technology modernization.

Outdated laws can undermine government's ability to deliver high quality experiences. For example, the Privacy Act of 1974 is nearly 50 years old and has not kept up as individuals' privacy expectations have changed. Advances in technology, relational databases, and computer matching were beyond the realm of possibility when the legislation was initially drafted. Timely implementation of new laws is another area that illustrates the challenge government has when trying to keep pace with technological change. For example, though the 21st Century IDEA Act was signed into law in late 2018, many legislative goals have not been met and federal agencies still have a long way to go to effectively implement this law.^{51,52}

Not all government efforts need to be inflexible or slow. A more flexible, scalable, and effective model for government transformation exists in the biannual FITARA scorecards initially implemented in 2015. Now in their fourteenth iteration, these scorecards leverage changing categories and standards that are updated with each edition, improving the government's ability to "keep up" with changing expectations and technologies.⁵³ To succeed in improving the customer experience, the federal government must develop new ways to meet the public's technology expectations even as private sector tech champions move forward.

LOOKING FORWARD

The increasing lack of trust in government cannot be ignored. With ongoing commitment, efforts already in place to improve federal customer experience capabilities can succeed. Agencies are restoring trust in government by incrementally rebuilding trust in individual government services. Improved CX requirements for federal agencies, alongside a growing workforce of CX-minded and tech-savvy federal employees, can galvanize the institutionalization of CX best practices across the federal government. The existing principles that underpin customer experience and human-centered design are essential tools to restoring trust in government.

Policymakers and other government leaders must also look towards the new challenges that will occur with the further blending of public and private goods. Public entities must continue to lead in the customer journeys they are responsible for, regardless of who executes the transaction or service. For goods and services primarily provided by government agencies, as well as those provided through public-private partnerships, agencies must continue to progress beyond understanding their customers to ensure that government programs continue to earn back customer trust.

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Disclaimer: The views and opinions presented in this chapter do not represent the views of FEMA or the U.S. federal government.

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