



Better Constituent Engagement for Better Government

MARKET TRENDS REPORT



Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted government operations in profound ways. Its spread forced an abrupt curtailment of traditional communication between public sector workers and the constituents they serve. In the past year, many offices closed or operated at reduced capacity, including help centers and other facilities that had provided in-person services.

Forced to find innovative solutions to the challenge of disrupted communications, many agencies sought to stay connected by doubling down on digital services. Over time, they discovered that IT solutions initially adopted as stop-gap measures — high-tech Band-Aids, if you will — have increased levels of constituent engagement beyond pre-pandemic norms.

“At a high level, government agencies are trying to manage an influx of inquiries on outdated legacy systems at a time when policies, rules and regulations are changing daily,” said Maria Country, Vice President of Sales for Public Sector at Zendesk. “Maintaining excellent customer service in the face of uncertainty while using platforms that have rarely, if ever, been updated is an urgent challenge facing many agencies.”

So what happens next? As vaccination programs gain momentum and the threat of the pandemic begins to ebb, will agencies revert to old methods of engaging with constituents? Or will they build on the experience of recent months and continue to leverage digital solutions?

To learn more about how agencies can efficiently and effectively engage constituents, GovLoop teamed with Zendesk, which improves how government agencies engage with citizens, external partners and frontline employees. This report will discuss the shifting expectations customers have for the government, the necessity for government to engage people where they are and the kinds of tools that can meet those expectations.

By The Numbers

91%

of government agencies and nonprofit organizations **reported major disruptions** to the way they work in the third quarter of 2020.

23%

of government organizations and nonprofit organizations **laid off workers in Q3 of 2020**.

80%

of Americans in the 1960s **trusted the government** to do the right thing always or most of the time.

20%

of the American public **trusts the government today**.

68%

of governments and nonprofits say they care more about customer experience this year than they did last year.

In a **recent report**, the World Bank Group looked at the future of citizen engagement. Its findings include:

- Governments and politicians will increasingly use data about citizens to decide how important it is to respond to their requests and demands.
- Activists and large technology companies will fight an ever-escalating arms race about who gets to speak to citizens, and who doesn't.

"The real win for citizens will take place when institutions start to change their rules to match the capabilities of modern tools, and the expectations of modern publics."

Future-Proofing Citizen Engagement

The Challenge: Legacy IT Deficiencies

Many agencies were caught flat-footed when the pandemic hit. They were unprepared and unable to quickly respond to rapidly shifting circumstances. Having survived the initial crisis, agencies turned to assessing their technological capabilities, particularly as they relate to constituent engagement and preparedness for the next unforeseen disruption.

The increased use of digital tools during the pandemic provided for continuity of government. In the bargain, government agencies became more aware — painfully so at times — of legacy systems' inability failures to support increased demands for constituent engagement. Out of necessity, agencies adopted new technology and communication channels.

That's because underperforming legacy systems can undermine customer service in ways that make government — and democracy itself — less robust. When communication between government and people being governed suffers,

The Solution: Intelligent Help Centers

Digital transformation isn't a one-time event but a process of evolution.

Many federal, state and local agencies are taking the first steps in that direction, moving from legacy platforms to cloud-based software-as-a-service (SaaS) systems. As agencies seek to increase staff productivity, improve the management of services and make those services more effective and accessible, a modern SaaS solution can accelerate attainment of those goals.

As agencies plan for the future, Country recommends that they focus on three pillars:

1. Enable self-service. Allowing constituents to access information and services without the involvement of a government worker has major benefits, including happier customers and lower transaction costs.

2. Streamline all customer communication into a single platform, no matter where the customer reaches out. A seemingly operational adjustment, in this case channel

that deterioration, in turn, diminishes citizen engagement and community buy-in of government activities.

As has been demonstrated often in the past year, citizens will be heard. If government's legacy IT systems are ill-equipped to engage constituents, they will find other means.

“Louder or more insistent voices become the ones who are most likely to be heard,” Country said. “Without a centralized platform for communication, metrics on what constituents are most concerned about become challenging to receive.”

Failed communications systems can further perpetuate systemic inequalities and other challenges that citizens expect government to solve.

“Citizens are feeling the need to be heard amid a tense political and social environment,” Country said. “Citizen engagement and participation are crucial to community buy-in and incorporating citizen voices into decision-making.”

consolidation, yields big results, including greater efficiency, fewer miscommunications and a clearer view of actions happening within the system.

3. Integrate with systems to create a unified view of your customer. Integrating with other systems opens the potential for customer engagement and service that are unattainable in a more fragmented system.

Increasingly, intelligent help centers are capable of providing constituents with fast answers to urgent questions. Integrated support allows constituents to easily move from a self-service help center to help via chat, email or phone. Recognizing the value of these advanced tools, government agencies are focused on how quickly they can scale those capabilities to meet constituents' needs and deliver value to taxpayers.

“By broadening how agencies interact with constituents, they will be able to serve more individuals from a more diversified background,” Country said. “Constituents will also now be accustomed to having new channels of communication with government agencies.”

Best Practices in Constituent Engagement

Does your agency's IT system provide for dynamic customer engagement and the efficient delivery of services? If engagements with customers are unsatisfactory, consider leveraging digital tools to improve constituent engagement and lessen overreliance on staff.

Moving from legacy IT platforms to more nimble cloud-based applications could streamline communications and service delivery — and empower constituents to easily find information and answers to their questions. Adopting efficient, scalable and adaptable systems can reduce demands on constituents and staff — making resources available for more complex engagements.

Advanced customer service platforms often incorporate features that improve agencies' engagements with constituents:

- **Streamlined workflows:** Automated ticket management saves time and improves the rate of ticket closure.
- **Better self-service options:** Flexible solutions enable customers to access services on their own terms and empower agents with relevant, timely information.
- **More accessible digital and mobile support:** A single platform encompasses all channels and centralizes all customer communications.
- **Streamlined, automated platforms:** Tracking key trends improves identification of potential problems, promotes collaboration among agents and facilitates transfer of tickets.
- **Cloud-based systems that track and route constituent requests:** Automated workflow management makes it easy for agents to work anywhere without disruptions to workflow.
- **Intelligent help centers that answer questions:** AI-powered functions can suggest content of highest value for customers.
- **Reduced staff workloads:** Self-service help centers promote ticket deflection, reducing agency workloads.
- **Seamless constituent services across multiple channels:** (e.g., chat, email and phone) Focusing on customer convenience makes it easier for constituents to get questions answered.
- **Scaled services to meet shifting demand:** Simple user interfaces promote onboarding of agents when demand is high.



Case Study: Tennessee Gives Voice to Constituents

The state of Tennessee, eager to improve its customer service and better engage constituents, turned to Zendesk's customer service solution. It proved to be a savvy move.

Following Zendesk's deployment, Tennessee residents used the channel to request a new feature on the state's Department of Labor and Workforce Development website. The department complied, adding a button residents can use to inquire about the status of their unemployment compensation claims. The website feature was a hit.

Across the state, Tennessee uses Zendesk to provide seamless citizen support — via chat, phone and email — to its 6.6 million residents, while saving \$250,000 in annual maintenance fees. In addition, citizen satisfaction has increased by 35%.

How well did Zendesk improve customer engagement? When the Labor Department's "unemployment button" was mistakenly disabled during a website update, customer satisfaction metrics plunged, and residents used Zendesk to voice their displeasure. The agency's IT team, relying on visibility made possible by Zendesk, quickly identified the problem and restored the button to operational status.

"We could only accomplish that because we had Zendesk," said a former Deputy Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development. "We had real-time information that we were monitoring, and we had details that we could quickly drill down into to find the root of the problem. In the past, that would have taken several management meetings and a lot of water-cooler talk guessing at what was wrong, and a lot of missed hits on what our fixes would have been."

HOW ZENDESK HELPS

The urgency to update constituent engagement systems is critical. Many agencies now see digital transformation as a necessity, rather than a nice-to-have upgrade. An emerging "new normal" is creating opportunities for government to expand into virtual engagement and add voices to what should be an ongoing conversation between public sector organizations and the private citizens served by government.

Agencies that had been reluctant to embrace digital transformation are finding that moving

beyond traditional legacy systems means improved efficiency and financial savings. In addition, systems that are nimbler and more powerful create opportunities for agents to work more efficiently, reducing the need for additional staff.

Finally, it isn't as challenging to integrate a new support system as IT veterans might think. Integration can be simple and result in a major impact on citizen satisfaction, engagement and overall operational efficiency.

To learn more: www.zendesk.com.

Conclusion

The Digital Future Is Now

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ABOUT ZENDESK

Zendesk is a customer service software company with support and sales products designed to improve customer relationships. We believe that every great customer relationship stems from a conversation, so we built a company that designs solutions to foster better customer relationships. Powerful, innovative customer experiences should be within reach for every company, no matter the size, industry or ambition. Zendesk serves more than 170,000 customers across a multitude of industries in over 30 languages.



ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to “connect government to improve government.” We aim to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

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