

4 ways to improve customer experience across the federal government.

Government service recipients expect high quality customer experiences and organizations are harnessing human-centered design to enhance service delivery.

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Federal agencies recently shifted toward a human-centered approach to constituent services, focused on elevating the user experience. They are actively using feedback to improve accessibility to crucial information, simplify service processes and break down barriers. This move aims to meet people's needs more effectively and create a user-friendly atmosphere — all of which have the knock-on effect of improving trust in government.

In the recent Nextgov/FCW roundtable, "From Initiatives to Actions: Enhancing Customer Experiences Across the Federal Government," sponsored by Verizon, customer service experts from various agencies discussed their insights, experiences and recent achievements. Here are the main highlights:

1. Listen to the public

The first step to enhancing the user experience is pinpointing areas that need improvement. Agencies use various approaches, tapping into everything from user surveys to social media and chatbot interactions to connect with customers effectively.

The Education Department's Federal Student Aid (FSA) transformed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, which made it more accessible for 18-year-olds and parents, simplifying how they understand college financial aid. This change comes from actively analyzing surveys and social media feedback, leading to an improved FAFSA, website upgrades, informative webinars and effective information dissemination.

Similarly, the Social Security Administration (SSA) is tailoring its approach to diverse groups, including people with disabilities and the elderly. The agency works to ensure information and forms are accessible across various channels, leveraging technology like chatbots to bolster customer support.

A Verizon digital experience expert highlighted the evolving role of chatbots, noting that in addition to supporting call centers, these bots now offer a wealth of information that allows agencies to directly capture public queries, gaining valuable insights to address the community's needs more effectively.



2. Use a human-centric approach to constantly evolve

To deliver a user-friendly experience, agencies need to keep evolving alongside customer needs. A U.S. Digital Service (USDS) expert said an internal goal is to streamline the information flow within the federal government and help other agencies reach their customer experience targets. This means spotting best-in-class solutions, learning from agencies that effectively used them and then actively applying these strategies across the board. For example, feedback links on USDS websites give the agency quick access to data as real-time comments show the agency's focus on meeting customer needs and improving service.

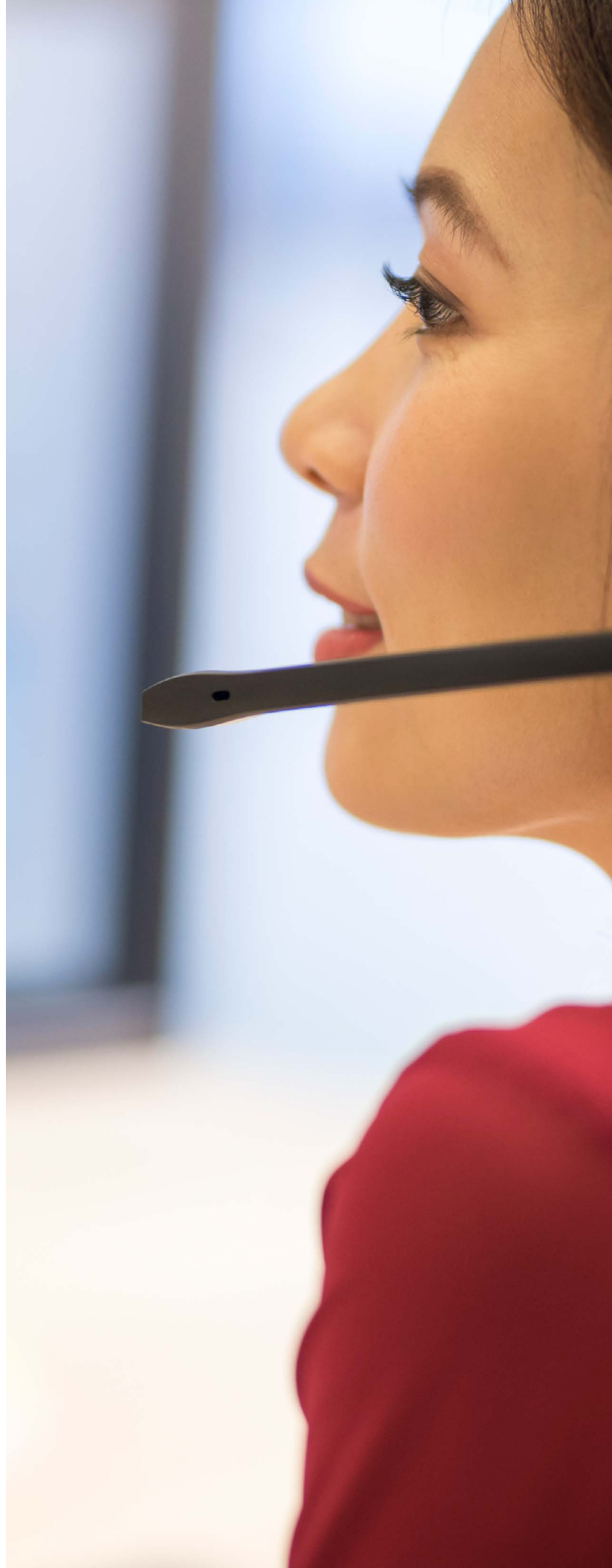
When Federal Student Aid started using human-centered design, it found out its processes and information weren't as user-friendly as needed. This insight drove it to merge nine agency websites into a single, user-focused site.

The agency also actively engages with social media comments, demonstrating a real commitment to listening to and addressing customer needs. This year, the big challenge was the end of the student loan repayment pause. To address this, the agency launched a detailed communication campaign using email, texts, social media, its website and a chatbot to ensure users had the information needed to begin loan repayment.

3. Look at the customer journey, end to end

According to a Social Security Administration customer experience expert, understanding the customer journey from beginning to end is crucial to serving the public well.

Introducing new services can cause problems when users struggle with digital identity and cybersecurity. Balancing customer needs with security is tough and lack of flexibility and diverse options can put some users at a disadvantage.



Federal Student Aid created an SEO team and strategy to help users quickly find what they need online. The agency wants to meet customers where they are, using various tools. For example, FSA emails include UTMs in links to monitor website visits and they use heat maps and analytics to track the customer journey, ensuring users follow the right path. These methods provide a better understanding of the customer journey, from beginning financial aid research to choosing the best repayment plans.

The USDS expert also noted a big change in government-public interaction. Whereas it used to be one-way, with people going to government offices to fill out forms, now, technology allows for two-way communication, improving processes and customer relationships.

4. Listen to employees.

Focusing on customer experience is important, but so is listening to internal stakeholders. SSA, which has a large network nationwide, faced challenges during the pandemic. With offices closed to prevent COVID spread, phone communication was vital but customers experienced problems like unresponsive phone lines and dropped calls. Initially thought to be a network issue, the agency surveyed both external users and its own employees to discover a simpler solution. The issue was the short battery life of employee headsets and buying headsets with longer battery life fixed the problem. By looking at both external and internal viewpoints, SSA successfully addressed a major user experience issue.

Additionally, the employee experience plays a crucial role in achieving positive outcomes for customers, as shown by USDA. The employee feedback showed where to improve internal processes, important for staff dealing with customers. And by collecting insights from inside and outside the agency, those working on user experience can find better solutions to improving their interactions with government.

Learn more about how Verizon is enhancing customer experiences.

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