

Case Study #18 – USA SERVICES

1. Background

In 2002, USA Services was designated as one of 24 Electronic Government initiatives in the Bush Administration. USA Services, www.usaservices.gov, is an integral part of the President's Management Agenda to simplify and unify government and make the government more citizen-centric. Citizens in the United States, as elsewhere, increasingly demand a level of service that many government organizations are not equipped to provide. Federal agencies tend to focus on their own operations rather than on the total citizen experience across government. As a result, citizens transacting business with government are often obliged to deal with multiple, distinct organizations and frequently receive conflicting information.

USA Services was officially launched in July 2003 with 12 agency partners, a multi-channel contact centre and Federal web portal USA.gov with a one-stop point of contact for obtaining information from and about federal agencies. It achieves its mission in two powerful ways: through the direct delivery of services to citizens and by providing leadership in improving citizen response levels government-wide. One of the agency partners, the Department of the Interior (DOI) partnered with USA Services to pilot a Tier 1 customer inquiry response program. Two DOI bureaus, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Office of Surface Mining (OSM), diverted telephone and e-mail inquiries to USA Services to respond on their behalf. USA Services information specialists answered these phone calls and emails as if they were FWS or OSM employees.

2. Organizational Design and Governance Arrangements

USA Services is managed by the Office of Citizen Services (OCS) within the GSA. It uses the infrastructure of the OCS and the USA.gov portal to provide citizen-centric solutions that improve the ease with which citizens can interact with the government. USA Services also acts as a solution provider for other federal agencies by assisting them to respond to their own particular citizens' inquiries. It currently partners with over 40 federal agencies to develop and manage cooperative programs that improve service to citizens. One of these programs, Web Manager University, educates and trains federal employees on standards, best practices, and policy for creating and managing government web sites. Over 4500 employees have attended classes in the last three years.

The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has directed agencies to sign working agreements with USA Services for misdirected telephone and email inquiries, and to determine the feasibility of using USA Services to respond to routine citizen inquiries.

USA Services is also responsible for helping agencies across the government to improve their interactions with citizens by providing agencies with contact centre services through the FirstContact contract vehicle (explained below) and by providing leadership to contact centre and web managers across all levels of government. This

includes organizing and managing interagency committees and intergovernmental collaboration that develops and promulgates best practices.

3. Business Model

The overriding principle on which the business model of USA Services is based is a commitment to responding to citizens' inquiries about government in an accurate, timely, and consistent manner.

3(a) Activities, Channels and Migration

Activities

USA Services develops citizen-centric solutions that improve the ease with which citizens can interact with the government. It has developed a [Strategy for Improving Agency Citizen Services](#).¹ USA Services works with federal agencies in a variety of ways:

- By speeding up the contact centre procurement process through FirstContact, which offers a full range of contact centre services and can help agencies respond to telephone and email inquiries using information specialists, establish automated responses to citizen inquiries via the phone, and enhance web capability. Over 14 task orders have been awarded in the last three years. Three of these task orders were in support of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to respond to citizen inquiries as a result of four major hurricanes striking the southeastern United States over a period of six weeks, leaving thousands homeless.
- By handling telephone and email inquiries via a Tier 1 service for 8 partnering agencies and bureaus.
- By handling misdirected telephone calls and emails. Agencies redirect telephone and email inquiries that are not related to their mission to USA Services using 1(800) FED-INFO or an agency-specific email. USA Services answers the inquiry using its extensive database. If USA Services does not have the information, it refers the citizen to the appropriate agency. There is no charge for this service.

In addition, USA Services has, among other activities,

- Conducted numerous intergovernmental information-sharing meetings, workshops, videoconferences, teleconferences, webinars for officials of federal, state, local and other national governments to foster collaboration among the members of an extensive network of senior government officials.
- Promoted access points to citizens through radio, television, and print Public Service ads.
- Established a government-wide USA Services Advocate network of forty

¹ www.usaservices.gov/strategy.htm.

- agencies to promote citizen service improvement activities.
- Established a government-wide Frequently Asked Questions system on USA.gov that provides USA Services the opportunity to more quickly answer citizen inquiries, thus increasing satisfaction and reducing costs.
 - Completed comprehensive benchmarking of public/private sector customer service performance standards and customer best practices.
 - Completed and published a report on Citizen Service Level Expectations for government that includes a comprehensive review of existing market research and new focus group research.
 - Submitted to OMB a set of government-wide recommendations for citizen service performance levels on telephone and email and customer service best practices.
 - Conducted a Government-wide Assessment or census of citizen service activities in the federal government, such as call centres, contact centres, and field offices. This assessment is a follow up to the Budget Data Request conducted by USA Services and OMB in 2004 and provided a more complete picture of all the channels the government uses to serve citizens, as well as information about which channels citizens may prefer and what opportunities may exist to improve these channels.

Channels

USA Services is a multi-channel enterprise. It was built on the foundation of three successful information providers, each of which had been providing comprehensive access to federal information and services within its particular medium. USA Services helps government agencies offer services to citizens through USA.gov (for Web services); the Pueblo, Colorado distribution center (for publications), and the National Contact Center (NCC) 1-800 FED-INFO (for telephone and e-mail services).

USA.gov is the official portal to all government information, services and transactions. This site pulls together more than 180 million federal, state and local government web pages. Over 97 million web visits were recorded in FY 2007. Citizens can obtain information and services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They can also use an e-mail form to send questions and comments for a response within two days. Citizens can connect to USA.gov's *Citizen's Gateway* for information on such topics as social security, and filing taxes. The *Business Gateway* links to information on business opportunities, laws and regulations. And the *Government Gateway* connects to important resources for federal, state, local and tribal governments.

At www.pueblo.gsa.gov, consumers can read, print out, or save the current Consumer Information Catalog and the full text of all the publications listed in it. Consumers can access additional information on a wide range of subjects by clicking on different topic headings. Hundreds of publications, the latest product recalls and scams, updates of consumer news from various federal agencies, and a calendar of consumer-related events are also available. Over 22 million publications were distributed in FY 2007.

Since 1990, the NCC has been available nation-wide through the telephone number 1(800) FED-INFO. The number is listed in more than 500 telephone directories around the country, thereby serving the majority of the American public. The NCC responds to

thousands of government information requests every business day, either providing the information directly or locating the source of assistance for the caller. Service is available in both English and Spanish. The NCC, operated under contract by the ICT Group in Lakeland, Florida, has two main functions: responding to telephone and e-mail inquiries about federal programs, benefits, and services, and processing telephone requests for consumer publications. Trained staff receive telephone calls from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. In 2003, the NCC began accepting [e-mail](#) inquiries through USA.gov. E-mail inquiries are answered within two business days. Recorded information on frequently requested subjects is available around the clock. From October 2006 to March 2007, USA Services registered over 11 million citizen contacts through telephone and over 2.6 million citizen contacts through e-mail.

Migration

USA Services has initiated cross-agency customer service for citizens by integrating the FCIC's call centre with USA.gov to provide citizens with the ability to receive federal information via telephone, e-mail, publications, and Internet. In 2006 USA Services integrated all delivery channels by establishing a common Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) database that is now used by all customer service agents whether answering telephone, email, chat or FAQ's on USA.gov.

3(b) Funding

USA Services is funded entirely by congressional appropriations. It receives funding from two different GSA accounts. The OMB budget for USA Services was \$42 Million in FY2006, \$47 Million in FY2007 and is expected to be \$51 million in FY2008.

3(c) Human Resources Issues

USA Services has a staff of over 80 full time employees. Training is provided to increase areas of expertise and leadership training is also encouraged to prepare team leaders to fill the shoes of "boomer" managers who will be retiring in the next 2-5 years. USA Services is deeply committed to GSA's goal of ensuring a diverse workforce that reflects society, by monitoring the workforce and taking steps to ensure there is appropriate representation by minorities, women, persons with disabilities, veterans, and other identified groups as a whole and at various grade levels.

USA Services program managers are evaluated under APPAS (Associate Performance Plan and Appraisal System) rating system which links pay to program performance. As one of five Presidential e-Gov initiatives, USA Services performance is closely monitored. On a quarterly basis, managers brief the organization's Administrator (or designee) on performance progress measured against established targets, budgetary goals, program schedules, and any significant issues affecting program operations

3(d) Performance Measurement

Through *Expectmore.gov*, a government value for money and effectiveness assessment program, USA Services was rated as “Effective” and received a three-star rating. This is the highest rating a program can achieve. Programs rated Effective set ambitious goals, achieve results, are well managed and improve efficiency. The report noted that

- USA Services provides citizens a uniquely comprehensive and integrated mix of information channels (web, e-mail, telephone, and print) that provide easy access to consistent and authoritative government information. USA Services also plays a government-wide leadership role in developing benchmarks for high performing web and contact centre based solutions used by other federal agencies.
- Since the beginning of the program in 2004, citizens’ use of USA Services has increased over 31% in two years, customer satisfaction has continued to improve, and efficiency results are within 99% of target. Although independent evaluations have given high marks to individual components of this program, there has never been a comprehensive evaluation of the entire program.

Primary performance measures are number of touchpoints (citizen contacts made) over the previous year and reduction in cost per touchpoint. In FY 2007, the total number of touchpoints across all contact channels increased by 67% to 222 million. Cost per touchpoint was reduced by 20% from 26 to 21 cents per touchpoint.

A summary view of USA Services Performance Measures can be found at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov/c-7-5-usaservices.html>.

3(e) Use of Information Technology/Web 2.0

USA Services completed comprehensive benchmarking of public/private sector customer service performance standards and customer best practices. They also have developed and reported on a number of metrics that measure operational performance and help to ensure accountability. In 2006, USA Services received the CIO Leadership Award for the Citizen Services Cost Calculator for “electronic government and information technology advancements that will have major impact on the way government conducts business on a government-wide basis.” The Cost Calculator is a software tool that allows agencies to compare the current cost of operations with alternatives. It assists the user to determine how to save time and money when estimating the expenditures required to establish and operate contact centres that meet citizen expectations.

In 2006 USA Services was one of the first government agencies to successfully introduce a chat application (instant messaging). Citizen web chats via USA.gov now average 1,100 per month. In 2007 USA Services introduced “Gov Gab” one of the first federal blogs. Five staff personnel write one blog for each day of the work week. RSS feeds are available at <http://www.usa.gov/rss/index.shtml>. Social networking technology, such as “wikis,” are used to promote collaboration across all levels of government, attracting over 1.1 million visitors between Oct 2006 and May 2007.

3(f) Partnerships

USA Services has “Agency” partners and “Solutions” partners. It has signed partnership agreements with more than 40 federal agencies and e-Government initiatives to work together to provide quality customer service for citizens. The partners agree to work toward a seamless citizen information network that is accessible and secure and provides consistent, timely, and professional responses to constituents. Among these Agency partners are Cabinet-level departments such as Agriculture and Defence and independent establishments, government corporations and e-Government initiatives such as the Smithsonian Institution, the National Science Foundation and E-Authentication. USA Services is dependent on solution providers to assist with web hosting, contact centre management and operations, and market research for citizen expectations. The Solutions partners are experts in the contact management field (e.g. ICT Group, Inc., TeleTech Government Solutions, Datatrac Information Systems.)

4. Community Engagement

USA Services is involved not only with the federal community but also with the state, local and international e-government communities. In FY 2007, USA Services

- Conducted 50 intergovernmental information-sharing meetings, workshops, videoconferences, teleconferences, webinars for officials of federal, state, local and other national governments to foster collaboration among the members of an extensive network of senior government officials.
- Issued 13 intergovernmental publications targeted for the e-government community. These include e-mail newsletters, topical newsletters, issue alerts and other documents disseminating information about issues of common interest.
- Facilitated 19 information-technology communities of practice that conduct government work collaboratively.

5. Issues Encountered/Challenges

While USA Services has experienced success, the 2007 report of the Government-Wide Assessment of Citizen Service Activities prepared for GSA listed several government-wide challenges to providing quality customer service. These challenges that the majority of agencies face include

- availability of funding
- creating awareness of services
- consolidating data sources and service activities.

The report included five recommendations to improve quality customer service including

- establishing a customer service work group
- developing a customer service guidance (benchmarks and standards)
- fostering increased awareness of service availability

- promoting consolidation of citizen service activities
- promoting consolidation of data sources and
- promoting professionalization of customer service.

6. Critical Success Factors

Cost Savings USA Services saved agencies over \$22 million in FY 2007 through the following services: the FirstContact contract vehicle, "Tier 1" service support (answering basic questions from citizens), 1-800-FED-INFO, USA.gov search, FAQ database and handling misdirected email/telephone inquiries for agencies. The total cost savings government-wide over the last three years is now \$75 million.

Performance Measures. USA Services uses two outcome measures that provide a comprehensive, continuing overview of program performance. The first tracks citizen "touchpoints" or the volume of usage by the public of all USA Services channels, including web, telephone, e-mail, and publications. The second measure is the level of citizen satisfaction with all agency websites government-wide. The number of citizen contacts or "citizen touchpoints" provides a valid measure of citizen awareness, usage, and satisfaction with USA Services information channels. The fact that millions of citizens choose to use and re-use these easily accessible services demonstrates that they are successfully using USA Services to obtain the government information they seek.

Mission and Vision. USA Services' mission and vision is clear from the top to the bottom of this organization of 80 people. Everyone in the organization is enthusiastic about providing high-quality service to citizens.

Political Support. USA Services has strong support from the Office of Management and Budget which is located in the Executive Office of the President and controls the purse strings.

Partnerships. A related consideration is that the strong political support enjoyed by USA Services encourages many government agencies, along with state and local governments, to partner with it so as to improve the quality of their service delivery.

Adequate Funding. Funding for USA Services through the appropriations process has been adequate and consistent.

7. Next Steps

In FY 2008, USA Services has planned to continue with and/or implement a variety of service improvements, innovations, and best practices:

Complete the first comprehensive, independent evaluation of USA Services by a Federal Funded Research Development Center.

Expand marketing to promote the availability of USA Services information channels to the general public and to those with special needs, including the

underserved, elderly, persons with disabilities, and citizens with Limited English Proficiency.

Strengthen and expand the scope of the dynamic Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) knowledgebase self-help system on USA.gov by sharing FAQ information across the government. Include FAQ services developed by agencies which address the needs of citizens with Limited English Proficiency and persons with disabilities.

Continue to expand support mechanisms for Multilingual Website Managers through the Federal Multilingual Website Committee's sub-committees on Language use, website development and maintenance and marketing. Strengthen the Federal Multilingual section of Webcontent.gov to provide all new resources available to manage multilingual websites, including educational modules.

USA.gov and GobiernoUSA.gov - Continue to maintain and improve content to continue to serve citizens in their top government needs. Enhance the portals to accommodate emerging multimedia technologies. Develop and integrate capability to provide localized and personalized web content, and to support audio-visual libraries and other new interactive features. Add more dynamic and interactive applications and features, in response to citizen needs and abilities of emerging technologies.

Expand online marketing efforts, including search engine optimization, search engine marketing, blogging and bloggers, YouTube and other social media outlets, and other means.

Continue to maintain and improve content and service delivery to citizens via FCIC's consumer- oriented websites and through the print distribution facility in Pueblo, CO.

Government-wide Best Practices

USA Contact - Award a new and improved contract vehicle for contact centre services, USA Contact. It will provide agency partners with a fast, efficient, and economical contract vehicle for multi-vendor contact centre services.

Customer Satisfaction Study. Complete best practices study of private industry and government customer satisfaction measurement methods and process with recommendations for government on best surveys, tools, and solutions providers to use for variety of citizen facing programs and services.

Share Common Content - Develop, evaluate, and integrate methods and processes across government that will make it easier to exchange common data (e.g., contact and agency directories) back and forth between and among USA.gov and government agencies. Content experts will develop the content and share it across government to be repackaged and re-used in various formats to best meet the needs of the American public. This effort is in support of the government's effort to adopt common enterprise architectures and data reference models.

Collaboration - Enhance the ability for government web and contact center managers to work together in collaborative communities to evaluate and share best practices and innovative approaches to increase efficiency, reduce duplication, and improve the quality and usefulness of the federal government's customer service across all channels of communications with citizens, such as websites and contact centers.

Channel Integration - Develop best practices and case studies to help agencies integrate their external websites with their other customer channels -- intranets, phone, email, in-person offices, etc.

Training and Core Competencies for Government Web Managers -- Through Web Manager University, enhance training for government web managers by providing additional web-based training opportunities, including online tutorials, webinars, podcasts, and other training that can be easily accessed by a mobile work force. Identify core competencies for government web and usability professionals and work with agencies and OPM to ensure those competencies are addressed in position descriptions, training, and performance plans.

Customer Service Census - Conduct a census of quantity and quality of customer service activities across the federal government for changes compared to the 2006 Government-wide Citizen Services assessment survey study. Study will include an assessment of how long it takes average citizens to complete the most critical government tasks, whether they try to complete their task by email, phone, web, or other communication channels. New programs and services in support of partnering federal agencies' citizen service activities will be initiated as a result of the challenges, issues, and findings from this report.

Customer Service Research - Continue to conduct research of citizens and government customers through studies, focus groups and polling to determine changes or new trends in the preferred methods of communication as well as expectations of service when contacting the federal government.

Citizen-centric Practices - Analyze the trends, practices and policies of best-of-breed government and private sector customer service through communities of interest like CSLIC for possible adaptation or adoption by government agencies as benchmarks. With the help of CSLIC Online Resources Group we will create a weblet that contains citizen service best practices.

Evolving Citizen Expectations - Update the government-wide citizen service levels performance standards, guidelines, policies and best practices created in 2005 to incorporate the findings of the census, survey and benchmarking.

Implement Greater Citizen Interaction - based on citizen research findings, implement shared electronic democracy services such as online town halls, bulletin boards, the ability to comment on emerging public policy, and other means for citizens to actively engage with their government and government officials. Utilize new social media and web 2.0 tools to allow citizens more control over content and more interaction.

Manage an Online Resource Center (www.USAServices.gov) that will provide a central location for all available information, best practices, tools, and other resources for creating, improving, and measuring government citizen service activities. The site will also include communities of interest to share experiences, common challenges, lessons learned, successes, and new ideas.

Contact:

Stuart Willoughby

Position: Director, USA Services Federal Solutions Division

E-mail address: stuart.willoughby@gsa.gov

Telephone: 202 501-9121