

Taking Care of Business

Landmark study suggests how governments can improve the quality of services to businesses

by Charles Vincent and Patrick Zhu

“Taking Care of Business” is the latest in a series of world-class research initiatives designed to give public-sector managers the information and knowledge they need to improve service quality in a way that truly makes a difference to those receiving those services. More than twenty public-sector organizations came together to initiate the project.

In recent years, governments across Canada have spent significant time improving service delivery to businesses. Information and services have been brought together making it less complicated to start a business; forms and processes have been made available electronically making it easier and less costly to access government services; and the vast array of regulations has been reviewed and rationalized lessening the burden on businesses while still protecting the public interest. Most impressively, these initiatives have often been accomplished in a collaborative manner across multiple levels of government through projects such as the network of Canada Business Service Centres.

Listening to the business community

While these initiatives have been undertaken in consultation with the business community, public sector managers have lacked an instrument through which they can hear directly from businesses about their experiences, expectations and priorities for service improvement. Where *Citizens First* provided public sector managers with the opportunity to hear “the voice of the citizen,” no such platform existed to understand the service needs of the business community. “Taking Care of Business” meets that need.

Dispelling myths about service quality

One of the important findings from “Taking Care of Business” is the revelation that businesses often feel they receive high quality service from governments. The myth that the quality of public services is inherently poor is not supported by the business community. In fact, the pattern of service quality appears similar to the private sector, with some public services (most notably those involving regulation) receiving fairly low scores while others receive much higher ratings.

Common Themes Driving Government to Business Service Quality

COMMUNICATION

I was informed of everything I had to do to get the product or service
The information I received was up-to-date

MINIMIZING BURDEN

Overall, the amount of burden related to this service was minimized

FAIR TREATMENT

I was treated fairly

OUTCOME

In the end, I got what I needed

TIMELINESS

Overall, I was satisfied with the amount of time it took to get the service

Drivers of service quality

Even more important than the ratings themselves, is what public sector managers can do to improve service quality. What are the drivers of satisfaction, and where should scarce resources be focused? “Taking Care of Business” set out to identify the drivers of service satisfaction and found five themes that recur across a broad range of services:

- communication of information
- minimizing burden
- ensuring fair treatment
- achieving the desired outcome when possible
- providing timely service.

While it is important for service managers to confirm the drivers of satisfaction for their own clients, performing well in these five areas can mean the difference between a service quality score of 4 out of 5 versus one of 2.5 out of 5 when performance in all areas is low.

Use of Different Channels
(n=5965)
Taking Care of Business, 2004

Channel	Per Cent of Respondents who used...		
	One Channel	Two Channels	Three + Channels
Phone	33	63	86
Regular mail	34	47	78
Visit a website	16	39	66
Fax	3	18	63
Visit a government office	9	17	40
Email	1	8	37
Receive visit from govt. representative	3	4	25
Kiosk	2	3	11

“No wrong door”

It will come as no surprise to today's service manager to learn that businesses are using multiple channels to access government services. While the telephone is the most common way to contact government, and a significant number of businesses are using the Internet to contact government, more traditional channels of communication such as posted mail and the fax machine remain vital links between businesses and governments. In fact, almost 75% of all government-to-business service interactions involve more than one channel of communication. A business may start by going to a website, but then choose to make a phone call to ask a question. Similarly, a business may start by making a phone call, but then go into an office to submit an application. Regardless of the combination of access channels, businesses are using them together, so governments need to coordinate services across them.

Integrated service

As public sector managers search for ways to meet the demand for multi-channel access, “Taking Care of Business” provides evidence supporting the need for coordination and integration of services across channels. When asked about concepts such as sharing information across organizational boundaries and personalizing services based on previous service interactions, businesses responded in a relatively positive manner. While privacy and security of information are clearly important, the business community appears to see the value of integrating services across boundaries and across service channels.

Changing opinions of government

There is no question that service quality is important in its own right. Businesses expect (and should expect) to receive high quality services. As *Citizens First* discovered, however, service quality is also important because it influences the trust or confidence that citizens have in their democratic

The Institute For Citizen-Centred Service

The Institute for Citizen-Centred Service is an inter-governmental project supported by members of the Public Sector Service Delivery Council (PSSDC) and the Public Sector CIO Council (PSCIOC). The mission of the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service is to promote high levels of citizen satisfaction with public-sector service delivery. The ICCS achieves its mission by undertaking research to identify citizens' service needs and expectations, and by assisting the public sector in applying innovative solutions that support service quality.

Taking Care of Business

“Taking Care of Business” is an innovative research initiative that brings together service quality leaders from the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments. Support for this study came from more than twenty public-sector organizations, including the Government of Canada, ten provinces and territories, three municipalities, and the Municipal Information Systems Associations of BC and Ontario. The extent of alliance and cooperation among governments in Canada in undertaking this project speaks to the recognition of service delivery as a critical issue and to the determination of Canadian governments at all levels to address citizens' concerns. “Taking Care of Business” was produced by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service in cooperation with the Institute of Public Administration of Canada. The study was conducted by Phase 5 Research and is based on a representative sample of almost 6000 Canadian businesses from every province and territory.

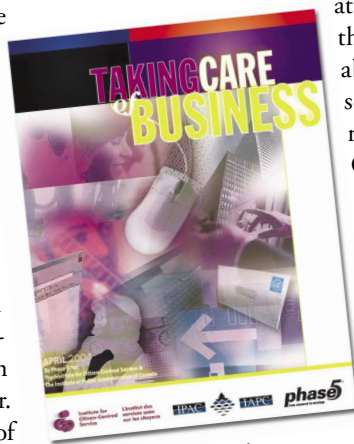
institutions. “Taking Care of Business” further informs our understanding of the influence of service quality, drawing a link between service quality and the underlying attitudes that businesses hold toward government service. Improvements in service quality can lead to direct, tangible improvements in the attitudes and opinions that businesses hold about government services. In fact, the results from “Taking Care of Business” suggest that a 10% increase in service quality can actually improve the perceived value of government service by as much as 7%, and, in turn, improve the underlying attitudes of businesses toward government service by as much as 5%.

Conclusion: From research to action

“Taking Care of Business” has shown that many government services receive good ratings from businesses, and that good ratings can even be achieved in regulatory services, like workplace regulation, providing that the five important service “themes” are performed well. “Taking Care of Business” also paints a forward

path for public sector managers who want to improve services to the business community. Some of the actions needed can occur within specific programs and organizations (the five themes), while others require collaboration among departments and governments (integrated service delivery). If successful, the public sector will not only raise service satisfaction ratings across the business community, but also change the way the business sector views government. Thus, the challenge now for public sector managers is to put this important new research into action. ☐

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Institute for
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