



USCIS Customer Service Case Study

By Marina D. Crosby

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to Mr. Jeffrey M. Sapko director of the Raleigh-Durham USCIS field office for spending time with me explaining, from the inside, the changes in customer service I had experienced as a customer. Thank you to Jay Weselmann and Joe Kernan Community Relations Officers in the Raleigh-Durham and Atlanta offices respectively for helping organize the meeting.

I am very appreciative that my final experiences with USCIS have been so good. I almost regret I will have no more need for its services since I was sworn in on March 18th as an American Citizen. This feeling towards the former INS is one I could have never envisioned having when I first went to an office in 1996.

Mr. Sapko's personal goal to deliver excellence in customer service in a government office has been achieved. Not only has he shown it is possible, I have had the privilege of experiencing it.

Summary

This is an exciting example of what happens when people throw *brain* rather than money at a problem. USCIS has managed to take a moment of externally triggered change and use it as an opportunity for internal cultural change. Without the power to re-engineer the processes guided by law, they re-engineered everything else around those processes giving them a new interface with the clients.

Technology at the service of customers was the starting point with a web based self scheduling system. Overcoming pessimism they found it worked beyond their expectations. Picture people in tents overnight outside immigration offices vs. a person scheduling an information interview on a computer from home, the library or a kiosk and you will begin to understand the very dramatic improvement that took place.

Capitalizing on what was achieved they aimed at a change of philosophy rooted in the idea that government had the potential of delivering excellence as well as any other organization. This simple idea is a change in paradigm to some. Management commitment and zeal over their performance was done with hands on approach. Being there when service is delivered, being there when people come in and when people leave, talking to people and understanding their point of view. Thinking it is possible, collecting feedback, adjusting behavior, procedure and layout and measuring results.

The huge distance between "before" and "after" scenarios and an attitude of optimism and continued improvement on market steered revenue, makes this a powerful case to study.

Background

The difference in customer service provided to me as an immigrant and to other immigrant and non-immigrant foreigners by the Federal Government between 1996 and 2009 was so dramatic that I felt compelled to find out how it had been brought about. Informal inquires

showed other foreigners shared my impression. I found that the people that had the worst experiences in the nineties were the ones that needed information. These were people that did not really know what process they could or should initiate or that were in the middle of a process that had somehow gone astray. Conversely those who knew exactly what to do, had comments about the processes taking a long time but no particularly bad experiences at the offices. Everyone I talked to perceived the service had greatly improved. If they had only recently had their first exposure to USCIS then they had no negative experiences to report.

Because I had personally experienced the “before” and “after” scenarios I wanted to incorporate the “how” to my Customer Service Training programs. I requested a meeting with whoever was responsible for this positive change. It was a long shot effort to find out about a good example in a government office and I was prepared for it to fail. To my amazement, after a very short time and a few easy communications; I got to speak with the man who had led the change in customer service. Mr Sapko spared his time to give me a bigger picture to the one I had anticipated. The process of improved customer service had not only impacted me and my family in North Carolina but was part of a broader change in Immigration Services across the US.

This short case study is intended to document this change in a manner that is useful to other people wishing to improve the customer service level in their own organizations.

The Opportunity

In 2003 the former Immigration and Naturalization Services office (INS) was divided in three different agencies. Two of them, the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have an enforcement mission. The third office is the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and it has a Service mission. The latter agency is the one covered in this report.

When enforcement and benefits were delivered by the INS, it was very hard to put the resources on the benefit aspects of the agency. In general the enforcement mission got more focus, more attention from the media and a bigger budget. It is usually enforcement what gets the political focus and will. To date it is enforcement what people most ask for when trying to solve immigration issues. It is easier to discuss a wall (enforcement) than it is to agree on comprehensive immigration reform (enforcement + benefits).

When in 2003 enforcement and benefit services were split into different organizations there was a unique opportunity to redefine the benefit services philosophy. It was then that the concept of facilitating legal immigration was born. While the change in modality is evident through the changes experienced as a USCIS client, the new mission statement is not really easy to find in the website (see Resources section at the end of this report). I find sometimes you have to do things first and announce them later to give cultural change a fair chance in an organization. I prefer to be surprised by awesome service than to read about it in an impossible to miss mission statement any day.

The idea was to remove the enforcement mentality. It became important to focus on explaining the benefits and the procedures. Things did not have to be perceived by the clients as arbitrary but as following the law as it was written. The adversarial attitude was

dropped. As Mr. Sapko puts it: “Our relationship with customers is one where the customer is a person that is relying upon us to do the right thing, and they are in a position of having no alternatives to us”. USCIS still held the immigration services monopoly like the former INS did but they nevertheless strove for excellence.

This had to be done without neglecting the verification responsibilities the agency has. It is still USCIS’ responsibility to assess the information their clients provide and make sure only people that are entitled to get the benefits they request get them. USCIS is a critical element of homeland security and this aspect has been strengthened during this process.

By steering the new agency to service and facilitation there was a new opportunity to share success in the relationship.

The “How”

The first step: Infopass

By this time, it was not unusual to see people spending nights in tents outside immigration field offices even in Saint Paul, MN, where the weather makes it particularly difficult. The organizations were developing an expertise at designing waiting rooms. This was seen in many USCIS offices and had been that way for years.

In 2003 Mr. Sapko was assigned the task to solve the issue of people camping outside the Miami USCIS office.

His solution was Infopass, a web based system that enabled clients to schedule appointments at their own convenience. Simple and powerful, it added flexibility at two levels. Now people could schedule their appointments anywhere they could find access to the internet and choose their appointment time and date.

If they did not have a computer at home they could go to the library or to an advocacy organization that could facilitate it. Kiosks were put in places where people with no internet access at home would be able to schedule their appointments. Around 30% of the appointments were made through these kiosks.

Infopass was deployed in Miami in 2003, in Los Angeles and New York City in 2004. The offices with most volume of clients were thus converted to a client driven scheduling system that ended the overnight outside camping scenes, the never ending waiting times and the wasting one day or more to get information. It also opened the opportunity to spend more quality time with each client focusing on responding all outstanding questions aiming at minimizing the return of the same person.

The underlying idea is that if you allow for a comfortable meeting conducive to the exchange of information the client will get all the needed answers and will not be an information client in the future unless the circumstances have changed. This was another way of lowering volume of people in the offices. It also minimized the calls to an 1800 inquiry number which is paid by USCIS by number of phone calls. The less people call, the better.

I was not aware of the fact that people unsatisfied with the immigration services performance would contact their representatives and ask them to intervene. It is clear how this intervention would demand more time from the USCIS officers just to communicate with any representative that expressed a complaint. Those alternative routes have been less used as less people are unsatisfied with the services. In turn, communications with representatives can be initiated by USCIS and delve on suggestions to improve the processes laid out by the law.

Top Down: Management Leadership

Contrary to my expectation the customer service training was not central to this cultural shift in immigration services. In Mr. Sapko's words: "We made it so that giving excellent customer service was the path of least resistance". Management commitment and leadership was at the core of this country wide change.

There was customer service training as part of the initial training for new employees. However it was more relevant that managers would walk around the building, observing and listening in while services were provided to clients. If there were issues with clients, managers would see them unfolding. If there were employee attitude problems managers would be aware of them. The easiest thing to do for an agency employee was to serve the clients well.

It is a personal goal for Mr Sapko to defy the notion that government cannot deliver excellent service. With that in mind he strove to do exactly that. He waited outside his building and asked the people leaving it about their recent experience. People were open and shared their opinions and corrective actions were taken.

The same hands-on approach was used to supervise external contractors like the people in charge of finger printing. A customer service survey was implemented to get anonymous information from clients about their experience.

Procedures, Layouts and People

While actual procedures are dictated by law and can not be changed by USCIS the look and feel of the interaction with the public has changed dramatically. This is again a case of seized opportunity. It is very hard to justify a budget to redesign an office layout just to improve the "feel" of a government office. More so when the clients are not even citizens.

However, splitting the former INS into three different agencies meant some office moves would be necessary. New offices reflected the new philosophy of facilitation and shared success in the relationship with clients. The goal was to provide a welcoming feeling.

In general the bullet proof glass that used to be between the INS officer and the client was eliminated. This immediately improved the communication because you can better hear each other. Chairs for the clients were added to the layout giving you a better chance of focusing on the information you request and receive. Waiting rooms could be made smaller because people were not coming in all at once but at their appointment times giving more possibilities to the space. The security personnel took a facilitation role besides their still relevant security role. The old INS uniforms which were clearly law enforcement ones were not worn anymore.

In 2008 the Raleigh-Durham CIS field office opened with Mr. Sapko as its director. The Raleigh-Durham office is particularly reflective of the new approach to clients because it is a new building and was built under the direction of Mr. Sapko. It is welcoming and environmentally friendly which adds one more layer of harmony to the experience. You do not ever feel totally indoors or confined in it.

After you go through the security post, similar to an airport boarding security post you are in an open space and you are received by a receptionist that assigns you a number and instructs you where to go. If there is a line to the receptionist it is one that moves quickly.

People that go to make inquiries wait in a different room than people there for other reasons. When your name or number is called you get undivided attention from the officer who takes care of you until you are done. You do not have the uncertainty of being in the wrong place or having been forgotten altogether by someone behind a glass window. You are sure at all times that you will get out of the building having obtained the information or result you went to achieve. You do not waste a whole day in the process.

There are screens with the news and also with information about the number being called. Infopass keeps track of waiting times for different processes. It is always nice to know that the time you wait is being recorded and someone has it in their best interest to keep that time as short as possible.

The office of Raleigh-Durham, has all new staff. People there were never part of the former INS and their attitudes show it. The last time I went to the Charlotte office, before Raleigh-Durham had opened, I did see impressive improvements but I also saw remnants of the old guard not quite striving for excellence yet. Raleigh-Durham has a professional dynamic, people are on board with the excellence approach. Mr. Sapko reports low turnover and committed staff.

The challenges

While this case is all about capitalized opportunities it did not lack challenges. A cultural shift of this caliber was met with disbelief, even of the clients who were satisfied unexpectedly.

The first challenge was developing the Infopass system internally with the same technical people who had supported the enforcement modality. Moving from main frame, center of the universe mentality to the accommodating the client mentality took some convincing to do. Then, the perception that immigrants would not have access or want to access the system on the internet was also raised. While 30% used the kiosks and others used the phone, the vast majority of the clients used the system.

The managers who needed to commit to the new concept and carry their staff with them were not so much actively against it but passively pessimistic about it. It took some showing how it did work elsewhere to get people on board one by one.

Old guard people who liked enforcement better were either put in positions where the focus is verification of information (very close to enforcement) or remained in one of the other two enforcement organizations since that was a better fit for them.

USCIS' operating expenses are fee based, the clients pay for the service. This means that in times when people make less immigration applications there is less operating expense budget. It also means that you cannot plan with certainty what your operating expense budget will be. The way they cope with this is with a percentage of temporary workers that can be relocated geographically or to other government agencies, or dismissed when and if the application volume decreases. This is a real challenge that many market driven organizations face but not many government agencies deal with. It gives them the opportunity to try people out before committing to them but it also forces them to let talent go sometimes losing a lot of training and human resource capital.

The future

How do you feel about *Self Scheduling* for everything? For instance, you begin a process and you get a card back "Your application has been processed; your next step is an interview. Please go to WWW.555USCIS.gov to schedule your interview. You have XXX days to do this before your application is deemed abandoned." Same thing for finger printing or any other procedure that would require your going to the USCIS office.

No more frantic rescheduling to accommodate the government. You would do it at your own convenience and hold some responsibility for the continuity of the process. If you schedule with celerity and bring all your required documentation you will get a faster delivery than those who don't. Maybe this is too much. Maybe something like: "Your application has been processed; your next step is an interview. You are expected on mm/dd/yyyy at HH:MM at the address below. However, please go to WWW.555USCIS.gov to re-schedule your interview if it is not a convenient date or time. You have XXX days to do this before your application is deemed abandoned."

Either way, however the next steps are implemented, the path is laid out for excellence in customer service, high job satisfaction for employees and a new concept of what government offices can deliver.

Resources

More information can be found at www.uscis.gov

Customer service related documents that in my opinion best reflect what is covered in this report are:

[USCIS Strategic Plan 2008-20012](#) in particular the following sections:

[Stakeholder Engagement](#) They consider all the players when planning ahead which makes them very effective

[USCIS Accomplishments](#)

[Strategic Plan Framework](#) this has the Vision and Mission Statements

[Core Values](#) Integrity, Respect, Ingenuity and Vigilance

[Provide Effective Customer-Oriented Immigration Benefit and Information](#) Main topic of this report

[Support Immigrants' Integration and Participation in American Civic Culture](#) Welcoming immigrants as a sound security strategy

[Promote Flexible and Sound Immigration Policies and Programs](#) Leading changes when perceived as necessary on the ground

[Context for Strategic Planning](#) Working with the changes in the immigration situation

[Strengthen the Infrastructure Supporting the USCIS Mission](#) Buildings, layouts and tech and IT components

[Operate as a High Performance Organization](#) Human resources component

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