

Customer Service & the 311 Transformation

In 1999, Chicago created a “311” call center, which takes citizen complaints and refers them to the appropriate department for resolution. What followed was remarkable enough to win an Innovation in American Government Award.

The city’s Graffiti Removal Group cut the average time it took to remove graffiti from 7.7 to 3.5 days. More important, by analyzing patterns, it figured out how to remove 85 percent of the graffiti before receiving any complaints. The Water Department used the system to figure out which hydrants were being opened repeatedly during hot weather and put locking caps on them, saving up to 150 million gallons of water a day. The Streets Department and Bureau of Electricity figured out how to avoid sending duplicate work crews to fix the same streetlights, saving \$6.9 million in 2003 alone. Overall, the 311 system saved the city millions of dollars every year.



New York, Baltimore, Albuquerque, Dallas and other cities quickly copied Chicago. (For a map of the cities currently using 311 click [here](#).) Those that use 311 as a serious management tool not only provide better service for less money, they make life easier for citizens, who now have one number to call with their complaints; take the load of non-emergency calls off the “911” system, helping it avoid delays; and give managers valuable information they can use to improve their service delivery.

Baltimore invented 311 as nothing more than a way to get calls off its overloaded 911 system. But Chicago took the idea much further. Chicagoans can dial the number (or do the same thing on a web site) 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to complain, report problems, request services, obtain information or access city programs. The call center receives more than 11,000 calls a day and boasts an average wait time of 10 seconds.



While several dozen cities now do this, few have taken the next step: using 311 data on how long it takes to respond to problems to create service standards that push agencies to work smarter. Baltimore, for example, now promises to repair all potholes and remove all graffiti within 48 hours of a report.

Once such standards are set, the management systems “behind” a good 311 call center measure response times and churn out real-time reports showing how often standards are met. In a few cities, this information is used to review performance, redesign services, and reward agencies for improvement or discipline them for poor performance.

Baltimore offers perhaps the best example. All complaints and resolution reports go into its “CitiTrak” system, an arm of its now famous performance management system, CitiStat. As part of CitiStat, each agency has a report card that tracks new, open, closed, and overdue service requests.

Once every two weeks, each department head appears before the city’s top managers (including, often, Mayor Martin O’Malley). The CitiStat staff has pored over the department’s latest performance data and compared it to the previous three reports. Using their analysis, the mayor and his aides grill the department head. Why are complaints about missed garbage collections so high? Why is response time on pothole repair down? If the subject is property abandonment, or rats, or lead poisoning, maps and data will show which neighborhoods have been hit hardest.

Discussions are pointed, and participants brainstorm about solutions. Other department heads or their subordinates sit nearby, in case the department in question tries to pass the buck. “Things get resolved in real time,” says Elliot Schlanger, chief information officer. “We call during the meeting for additional information if we need to. We’ve killed that old excuse: ‘It’s in the Law Department.’”

With the review come consequences for performance. Sometimes the mayor and his staff offer congratulations, and the mayor occasionally rewards presenters and their subordinates with Orioles or Ravens tickets or seats at a concert. On the other hand, Mayor O’Malley has fired department heads for poor performance, in two cases replacing



them with the CitiStat analyst assigned to their department. In the first year of CitiStat alone, the Department of Public Works terminated 94 employees who missed work chronically.

The city also posts CitiTrak and CitiStat data on its website, in a bi-weekly [citywide statistics](#) report. A [graffiti density report](#), for example, shows how well the city is doing at removing graffiti and pinpoints both trouble spots and zones clear of graffiti.

Albuquerque calls its service standards “service level agreements.” It has negotiated such agreements with the agencies responsible for resolving 386 different service requests. For example, complaints about abandoned vehicles must be resolved within 21 days. When service completion falls below such a standard, the city’s executives discuss the problem with the agency in a regular performance review.

Albuquerque holds Quarterly Quality Summits in which performance data is reviewed and improvement initiatives are discussed. “What we learn at the summit is used to follow-up with training as needed to make improvements,” says Michael Padilla, General Manager of the Dallas 311 System.

Dallas also uses service level agreements, which define how long an agency has to resolve a specific type of problem. Dallas has not yet attached any consequences to agency performance on customer service requests, however.

The ultimate value of 311 systems is that they provide raw data that helps managers to redesign their service systems and work processes. Those responsible for filling potholes can use the data to change their allocation of workers and resources. In New York the police used 311 to track complaints about noise, double-parking, and public urination back to their source: illegal social clubs. In Chicago the Sewer Department used “water in basement” reports during heavy storms to figure out how to improve the sewer system. Chicago even created an internal consulting group, called the Customer Advocacy Unit, to help department managers use 311 data to improve performance.

Perhaps New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg said it best, to the *New York Times*, “It’s not just a citizen service hot line, it is the most powerful management tool



ever developed for New York City government. I can't imagine running the city without it."

The Frontier: Publicizing Standards, Promising Redress, and Empowering Customers

To my knowledge, no American city has yet taken the next steps, which would make service standards and complaint resolution much more visible to the public. The first is to publicize the standards. If people don't know what you're promising, you're not going to get many points for delivering it. And when you fail to deliver it, few are going to notice—hence the pressure on your agencies will relax once leaders like Mayor O'Malley move on.

In Britain, under the Citizen's Charter, every government in the country had to develop customer service standards and post them in their offices and on their web sites.

The second step is to promise redress to your customers when you fail to meet your standards. If someone calls about a pothole and you don't fix it within your promised 48 hours, how can you make it up to that citizen? Perhaps repave a block that they select? In Britain, if your long-distance train is more than an hour late, you get a voucher worth 20 percent of your ticket price. If your commuter line misses its on-time standards in a month, you get a discount the next time you buy a monthly pass.

Redress gives customer service standards *teeth*. It accomplishes three things: it tells your customers that you take your promises to them seriously; it often turns disgruntled citizens into satisfied customers; and it creates consequences for the service agency, which makes them take their standards far more seriously. If it costs them money every time they miss a standard, they're going to stop missing them. British Rail had to pay 2.4 million pounds in discounts in 1993-94, when it launched its redress policies. In one year it got the number down to 0.2 million pounds.

The final step is creating a citizens' group that will keep the pressure on your organization to create meaningful service standards and redress policies and actually stick to them. Setting standards that mean something to customers and then fulfilling them can



the
Public Strategies Group

The Osborne Letter
6/26/06

take heroic efforts. Most organizations won't go that far unless a leader drives the process—and when that leader leads, they'll gradually water down their standards. So you need some external force that keeps the pressure on—forever. Consider an independent customer council with a revolving membership.