Taking Customer Service to the next level

The "essential tool" is automation.

Automation has become an essential tool for agencies seeking to enhance and expand online services for their customers.

A good example is the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, which needed to upgrade its call center operation to support customers submitting applications to the world's largest immigration system.

Its outdated and inadequate call center was incapable of handling the growing volume of calls. "It would have been absolutely impossible … with the infrastructure that we had to provide the services (an) individual needs," said Mariela Melero, chief of the Office of Citizenship and Applicant Information Services, USCIS.

During the past five years, the agency has launched a variety of digital tools to make it easier for users to find information and conduct transactions online.

For instance, my.uscis.gov helps users to navigate the immigration process, including a feature called "explore your options." The tool shows users steps they might take based on their situation or need – such as a green card holder looking to become a U.S. citizen.

The agency is also beefing up its transactional services. One of the most important platforms it has refined this year is a service that allows users to check the status of their cases online, Melero said.

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Customers now have an easy way of knowing where their application or petition is in the process.

"We have built this automation to serve both those that are looking and exploring, and most importantly those who have paid a fee," she said. The goal is for customers "to have the best experience they can have."

Most of the focus among agencies over the last few years has been on giving users the online tools they need to help themselves, said Chris Zinner, managing director, Digital and Customer Experience, Accenture Federal Services.

The USCIS is one example of this automated, self-service trend, and so is the IRS, which has automated websites and invested in interactive voice response systems to provide answers to generic tax law procedures, he said.

Momentum is growing in government to automate the transactional side, as agencies begin to incorporate artificial intelligence into services, such as chatbots, to provide a personal, cross-channel experience.

Already in the commercial world, "chatbots are looked at as virtual coworkers," Zinner said. "There is no reason the virtual chatbot can't transfer you to a human being when you run up against their limitations."

The USCIS is building algorithm-based intelligence into its chatbot, Emma, and will integrate her with its interactive voice response system, Melero said. "It's a way of personalizing the engagement via automation, which I think is where the biggest challenge is right now."

At the end of the day, automation has to make a positive impact on the lives of users. "The key is really how do you make a difference," Zinner said. Investing in digital self-service capabilities provides a return on investment only if people use them.

Innovation makes a difference by offering attractive alternatives, such as the ability to complete a transaction on a mobile phone, Zinner said. "As agencies continue to innovate and evolve their technology and their ability to automate, they can really start to realize some true value," he said.

They also have to embrace a culture that believes automation, specifically artificial intelligence, can help people do their jobs better, he said. "The leaders in industry understand that we either need to transform the workplace, or we're going to hinder the workforce."