

THE AMAZON-IFICATION OF GOVERNMENT, AND WHY WE NEED MORE OF IT



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Ours has become an "experience economy" in which people have shifted from passive consumption of products or services to active participation in the process. Recognizing this shift, many companies now invest in the delivery of experiences -- what might be called the Amazon-ification of retailing. This process has come to be known as "design thinking," and governments need to pay more attention to it.

Design thinking is a "[next practice](#)," a methodology that infuses innovation activities with a human-centered design principle powered by a thorough understanding of what people want and need and what they like or dislike about the way a particular service is provided.

This is as important in government as it is in business. It has become evident that functional benefits alone are no longer sufficient to capture citizens and create strong communities. Citizens interact with their governments not only at the functional and cognitive levels but also at the emotional level. What do they feel about their communities? How do they feel about their government? What touches them? What motivates them? Increasingly citizens think of themselves as active participants in the process.

Experiences in government are not delivered by elected officials or chief administrators but on the spot by front-line staff -- at a counter, on the phone, in the field or via the Internet. Ultimately, these front-line personnel have the most power in the organization as they interact with citizens face to face. As they deliver a service, they can either hijack the process or they can highlight and strengthen the jurisdiction's brand.

But in designing a service, governments typically start with the constraint of what will fit within the framework of the existing service model. All too often, government agencies and staffers fail to keep in mind that they are not the audience for the program or service they are delivering, so their lack of empathy for the actual customer/consumer affects the design of the service or program. Moreover, because government service-delivery systems are designed for efficiency, new ideas tend to be incremental, predictable and easy for other governments to emulate, which has given rise to an over-reliance on best practices.

Design thinking is a way to get past those roadblocks to innovation. Here are some ideas for a design-thinking game plan for government:

- Transition your workplace culture from one that values conformity and toward the kind of creative culture that is essential to generating innovative ideas. To be creative, a workplace does not have to be kooky and crazy, with skateboards and free food. What is needed is an environment in which people can experiment and take risks.
- Seek input from "unfocus" groups in which a range of consumers and design-thinking experts are assembled in a workshop format to explore a new concept around a particular topic. The power of this type of format is that participants engage in an active, collaborative exercise.
- Acknowledge that technology, by itself, does not necessarily result in a better customer experience. Access your agency over the Internet and experience firsthand the process, and likely the frustration, of signing up as a new utility customer or accessing a public record. Designers of purely technology-based solutions rarely factor in the consumer experience.

Opportunities are endless for the public sector to pursue design thinking and dramatically improve the delivery of services or programs, whether it's obtaining a building permit, applying for a government job, registering for a social service or responding to a request for proposal.

We are in the midst of a significant change in how we think about the role of citizens as consumers. Government staff and officials must become more comfortable with the erosion of the boundary between themselves and the public. It's vital that public-sector leaders integrate design thinking into those areas that touch citizens lives.



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