

WHAT CAN GOVERNMENT LEARN FROM APPLE

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Apple has been in existence for less than 40 years, yet it is the world's most valuable company and brand, with a market capitalization north of \$700 billion and over \$160 billion in the bank. Beyond its financial strength and market dominance, Apple's internal culture and its approach to its business have become the gold standard for a number of industries. So how can a public-sector organization become "the Apple of government?"

Apple describes itself not as a computer or technology company but as one that combines the roles of innovator, integrator and -- of particular applicability to government -- experience provider. Besides its function as a democratic institution, the role of government is to be the protagonist for a better quality of life for residents/citizens/taxpayers. In that pursuit, beyond the delivery of public services and programs, government also creates a sensory experience. Ask residents of a city if they feel safe and the reply won't be about the number of officers on the police force but about their perceptions -- a blend of their own experiences, first-hand and otherwise.

So what is the gauge by which government might remake itself in the Apple mold? While Apple doesn't share the secrets of its success, enough has been published to provide ways for a governmental organization to begin resetting its value proposition:

- **Be passionate.** Great success is the result of great passion. Ask yourself, "What is our organization passionate about?" Steve Jobs said that Apple is about connecting the humanities to the sciences, creativity to technology, and the arts to engineering. Consequently, the company selects employees from the creative class who are critical thinkers and collaborative problem-solvers.

When conformity and compliance is expected among its workforce, government puts a straitjacket on its ability to connect with anything. It is critical for government leaders to begin asking mission questions. In doing so, government will begin recruiting more artists -- those who are adept at blending plumbing (functionality) with poetry (beauty).

- **Lead, don't follow.** While Apple didn't invent the portable music device, smartphone or tablet computer, it radically redefined the status quo for each of them. Real improvement in government isn't a cut-and-paste approach. So-called best practices are often emblematic of status-quo thinking. Progressive leaders recognize that best practices are typically about today, while "[next practices](#)" are about tomorrow.

At Apple, innovation isn't a strategy or department, but a mindset that is factored into everything the company does. In government, innovation is always advocated for, but its actual implementation is fraught with challenges. Most notable among these is the risk aversion that permeates the public-sector workplace culture. Mistakes are bad, but what's worse is a culture that doesn't tolerate them.

- **Aim to surprise.** Instead of satisfying your customers, how about delighting them? Too many government leaders know all about costs or budgets but little about value. All too often, government agencies and staffers fail to remember 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. Apple provides a fantastic end-to-end user experience. What if your permitting counter were operated like Apple's Genius Bar? While government's customers will use a technology solution, such as online permitting, to expedite a service, research shows that they also desire more personal and caring treatment.

- **Focus on what customers really need.** Jobs often reiterated a famous quote of Henry Ford's: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." Like Ford, Apple always has stayed out ahead of its customers, producing products that they didn't know they would want. Peter Drucker, the influential management consultant and author, once said that the best opportunities are "visible, but not seen."

The idea of working to identify unseen opportunities may seem a little crazy to people steeped in the culture of the public sector. But as Jobs so memorably put it, "People who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." How crazy are you?



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