



Design Thinking and the Consumer Experience

Creativity is today's currency for success. | BY PATRICK IBARRA

Right now, jot down at least two policies or practices that exist in your organization that are directed at either internal or external customers that you believe no longer add value and are cumbersome to navigate. Go ahead, I'll wait. That didn't take you too long, did it? Imagine asking your front-line employees to respond to that question, or your customers, for that matter. My guess is they would identify way more than two policies or practices that they consider as relics of the past.

Ours has become an "experience economy" in which people have moved 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 I refer to as 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 innovative 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. David Kelley of IDEO, a pioneer in the field of design thinking, asserts that "design thinking is a process for creative problem solving that starts with people and their needs."

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 resident behavior and preference and create strong communities. People interact with their governments not only at the utility and cognitive

levels but also at the emotional level. Ask yourself, are you in the cost or value business? How do your residents feel about their community? How do they feel about their government? What touches them? What motivates them? Increasingly, your residents think of themselves as active participants in the process of community building.

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 online. Ultimately, these front-line personnel have the most power in the organization as they interact with customers one on one. As they deliver a service, they can either hijack the process or they can highlight and strengthen the jurisdiction's brand. By the way, your agency's brand isn't its logo but its reputation, and there are several brands that exist within your agency—employer, place to invest, place to live, and the list goes on and on.

More and more, a range of government services are provided online. Ask yourself how simple it is for your customers to pay for a traffic ticket, for candidates to apply for a job, or for business investors to submit plans for review by your development services department? How often are you asking questions about ease and speed not of those who are delivering it, but those who are using it? What is your e-commerce strategy? (And don't ask your IT department to develop it.) Your website isn't a technology tool, but instead is a marketing device and commerce platform for customers to transact business 24/7.

Keep the following mindset at the forefront as you review not only the portfolio of your agency's services but in the way

"The key is starting with customers and working backward."

—Jeff Bezos



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they are provided: determine which are routine and transactional (i.e., cashier) and which require a more consultative approach (i.e., concierge). As you evaluate your delivery of services, use this as a gauge: how easily, accessibly, and reliably are they being provided?

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 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 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—smart, prudent, and thoughtful risk taking.
- Seek input from “unfocus” groups in which a range of consumers (including your own employees who are customers of your internal support functions, like finance, HR, IT, legal, and procurement) 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. Visit your agency’s website 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, registering for a recreation program, or paying for property taxes.

We are in the midst of a significant change in how we think about the role of residents 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 their residents’ lives, and more specifically, their needs. **PM**