Dealing with the Angry Public

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"Why is it that you can't fix the three-foot hole in the road?" "Why don't you plow the snow instead of driving your truck with the blade up as you pass my house?" "Why can't you put up road signs I can understand?" Unhappy citizens ask these questions. These citizens are frustrated with government services. Frustration comes from knowing they have no alternative to the government services they perceive as poor. The monopoly government has on services does not allow the citizen an option to take his/her needs to another provider down the street.

What the citizen wants is to be treated like he is treated when someone wants his business. He wants someone to answer the phone, sound like they are glad he called, and answer his questions without having to call back.

Administering to public functions in an environment of citizen frustration is not new. Citizens' views of government have eroded over several years. Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider report that the general confidence in government has fallen since the 1950s. For example, in 1958 only 23 percent of the population thought "you cannot trust the government to do right most of the time" as compared to 73 percent in 1980. Likewise, citizens' views of government wasting a lot of money rose from 43 percent to 78 percent during the same time period. The view that "public officials are less caring about what people like me say" shows a similar increase from 35 percent in 1952 to 52 percent in 1980. Citizens' views of government responsiveness also have fallen from 32 percent of the people having a positive feeling in 1964 to 8 percent in 1980.

These general feelings about government set the foundation for specific attitudes about government services. In examining views toward federal bureaucrats, Robert Kahn and associates found that citizens were satisfied 69 percent of the time with the solution to a problem. Citizens thought federal bureaucrats extended an appropriate effort 73 percent of the time, and Kahn reports that citizens felt their problems were solved 71 percent of the time.

A comparison of these views of federal services to views of local services as measured by Shaheen Born in a study of Muncie, Indiana, offers some understanding of the assessment that citizens made about government service levels. For local services, citizens' positive evaluations varied according to the type of service. These ranged from a low of 19 percent for street maintenance, 40 percent for snow removal, and 45 percent for street cleaning to a high of 92 percent for fire protection.

What constitutes a good score is obviously debatable. Nevertheless, a score in the 90 percent range appears to be outstanding while a score in the 70s is modest. From this detail, it is clear that different government services are evaluated
independently by citizens. How is it that citizens have developed these varied images of different government services?

It is important to remember that images are the product of past experiences. Most people (58 percent) have contact with at least one government agency. This is not unexpected given the wide range of agencies that license, certify, or control our economic lives, or the number of agencies that provide library services and other services in meeting citizen needs for education, welfare, health, and community service. It is this one, maybe infrequent, contact with government that shapes an individual's perception.

Images are not necessarily built upon our personal experiences. Experiences are passed on from one person to another. As we could expect, the further removed from the event, the greater the likelihood the situation has been adjusted or enhanced by the transmitted information. Therefore, each primary contact is more important as an image builder than the facts of the situation.

In our interactions with citizens, we can be mindful that there are two parts to an interaction: content and style. Content is the subject matter or cause for the interaction, such as a need for a street light or the fixing of a pothole. Style is the manner in which the situation is handled. Segregating the interaction into these two parts is important since people usually remember the style of an interaction longer than they recall the reason for the interaction. Content should not be sacrificed for style, but each part of the interaction should be considered in serving clients.

Since interactions with citizens will take place in one of these forms--by phone, by mail, or in person -- each requires a different approach. Several basics can help structure the interaction with citizens so that the agency offers a positive image. Correct grammar and a helpful, pleasant attitude are two absolute necessities. Listed below are several guidelines to consider for each of the basic approaches to interaction.

TELEPHONE CONTACT

Remember, if the person did not want an immediate response, he would have used another form of communication.

1) Use a pleasant voice and manner.
2) Attempt to answer the inquiry at the time of the call. The person answering calls should be familiar enough with the agency to handle routine inquiries or to direct calls to the appropriate person, yet be flexible enough to respond to difficult situations without becoming stressed.
3) Transfer the call only once. The incoming call can be placed on "hold" while the agency person determines the appropriate person to handle the inquiry. This is more considerate than transferring the call several times within the agency. If the appropriate person is unavailable or the answer is unknown, take the caller's name and number and let him know when he can expect a return call.

CORRESPONDENCE

Written responses provide both visible and tangible projections of image.

1) Content must be accurate.
2) Correspondence must be error free: correct grammar, spelling, and name accuracy should never be assumed.
3) Style is critical.
4) Personalization is important and easily attained with the use of modern word processing technology.
5) Timeliness of response: respond as quickly as possible. Even in the best of scenarios, written communications require up to ten days for a citizen to make an inquiry, the agency to prepare and mail a response, and the citizen to receive the response. A concerned citizen does not consider all the time required in the correspondence communications chain. Since the agency can only control its part in the process, it must react quickly to protect its own image.

PERSONAL CONTACT

The physical environment combined with direct verbal and nonverbal contact will impact the citizen's perceptions. Factors include:
1) Initial impressions created by the physical appearance of the reception area and personnel;
2) Interpersonal behavior between the citizen and agency personnel and among the agency's coworkers; and,
3) Nonverbal communications, such as body gestures and listening attentiveness.

Responding to a citizen's inquiries, especially when the citizen is angry or frustrated, requires skill. Agencies can gain the maximum advantage by focusing both on the content and the style of the interaction. Agency responses that empathize with the citizen can help defrost a confrontation and lead to a joint effort in finding a solution. An agency approach that focuses on asking questions and giving a feedback of feelings accomplishes this objective. By summarizing a citizen's problem, the agency gives evidence of listening to the concern and understanding the situation.

There are several ways to approach the content of the citizen's concern or problem. It is important to work with the citizen to establish the desired result. What is wanted from the agency? What can be done to eliminate any frustration? What alternatives are possible for satisfying the citizen? Review with the citizen the agency's procedure to resolve a problem. Whenever possible, find a mutually agreeable solution. After the situation is resolved, a follow-up contact is a must.

In summary, to be successful in interactions with citizens an agency should adopt a management strategy that focuses the organization on the desired image. Such a strategy was identified by Ron Zemke and Karl Albrecht in their concept of service management: "managing the [citizen's] experience with, and perceived value of, the organization's primary service". This calls for looking at the organization as a citizen sees or experiences it. From the citizen's viewpoint, what can the agency do to define its services so that the citizen's experience with the organization fulfills the citizen's expectations of the agency? When employees throughout the organization know these agency values and the procedures for delivering the agency's services within this framework it is possible to establish the means for assessing an agency's performance. Among the best sources of evaluations are the customer's opinions. How do/did they rate the service delivered by
your agency? Assessment provides the means for recognizing how the organization is viewed and evaluated by the citizen.

Since the agency's end goal is to have the citizen as a satisfied customer, an agency can determine its success by assessing citizens' views. An agency that scores in the 90 percent range of positive citizen responses to an agency's effort or to citizen's satisfaction with the agency's service will be outstanding. By adopting a "service management" orientation, agencies can restructure the citizen's frustration and lack of confidence with government.

ENDNOTES


Lipset and Schneider cite data used in this paragraph as taken from Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller and Edward J. Schneider, American Election Data Sourcebook 1952-78 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) and 1980 data from Center for Political Studies, University of Michigan, 1980 American National Election Study distributed by Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, Michigan.


4. Robert L. Kahn, op. cit.