Why Can’t the Government…? Private to Public Reinvention
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"...Of the people, for the people and by the people."
-Abram Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address

Going Postal
Once again the US Postal Service (USPS) increased First Class mailing fees. It was just the next in a series of increases that have been forced on the public in the past few years. Recently the news carried the story that the USPS still lost over $4 million dollars in the previous four months!

People just shook their heads. Once again the argument is made to decrease the number of post offices, home deliveries or days of service. However, Canada Post only runs on weekdays, delivers to central locations in urban centers, - and is projected to lose money this year. Decreases aren’t the sole answer.

Why can’t a government enterprise make a profit, or at least break even? I was consulting with a group of city and county managers and we came to the conclusion that there are many reasons (regulations and costs), this is unfeasible right now, but there are some ideas governments can do to decrease spending and increase their public perception. Public institutions can learn a lot from private enterprise… and stay in business.

My county manager’s office purchased an empty bank building when the company had closed its doors. The property was for sale cheap. They converted the building to the tax office. The drive thru lanes became a fast alternative for citizens to pay their automobile tax and receive their new vehicle registrations. No more wasting half a day sitting and waiting on your number to be called.

They got the idea from fast food restaurants. Starbucks recently reported that when they add a drive thru lane, their business increases by about 60%. We live in such a mobile society with time being just as valuable as money, that it makes sense to do something convenient for your customers. Government learned this from observing banks, restaurants, dry cleaners, pharmacies and many other businesses who use drive thru windows to assist customers.

I am often asked to train public institutions (towns, cities, clerks, counties, state workers, federal employees, etc.) in customer service workshops. The public service employees are so accustomed to being the only business in town that they lose sight of the need for better customer service. The perception has grown that the government just doesn’t care.
No wonder participation in public meetings, hearings and elections is declining. The only times citizens vote in large numbers are when they see a value in casting their ballots in local elections. There is a lot of frustration against fellow citizens who are working for the public.

**Private Enterprise Lessons**

So what if our public institutions borrowed a few ideas from private commercial business? What if convenience rather than obligation was the driving force behind decisions and service on the governmental level?

1) Streamline services using the internet. Recently I had a medical procedure. The doctor’s office gave me the option of showing up 30 minutes before my scheduled appointment to fill out paperwork, OR filling it all out online in about 20 minutes prior to the appointment so I could show up on time. I chose the online alternative, was taken back to the prep room immediately and got home an hour ahead of my schedule. The staff told me at each point that they already had everything they needed and it sped up the whole process. I was back to my daily routine in a shorter time!

Then I had to pay a city water bill…. Their system is online, but not available for anyone to access except the municipal employees. There was a room filled with frustrated (and angry) individuals attempting to simply pay bills. Most of these people pay every other bill they have (electricity, credit cards, health insurance, mortgage/rent and auto insurance) online. What can you do to seize the movement of internet service to convenience both your citizens and your employees?

*People respond best to simplicity and ease.*

Customers will cooperate without complaining as much if your process is simple, easier and faster. Airlines have made checking in for a flight easier by enabling text messages to smartphones. Even the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has information stored and processed to expedite security at airports nationwide in the US.

2) Be more creative in solving public problems. There is a famous story about the town leadership of London, England in 1900. Faced with a population boom they knew that decisive action was required to meet the growing demands people brought with them. According to the story, they selected some of the smartest people in England and sequestered them in a building to develop a strategic plan to move London into the 20th Century.

The planning committee studied the problem, but their solution was based on their experience and not of the people who were moving into London. They decided that the city fathers needed to invest in over a thousand horses for transportation and commerce – because their experience was with horses for their entire lives.

Next they knew there would be a need for waste removal. They were smart enough to know that with over a thousand horses on the streets, there would be “something else” on the streets, too! Finally they planned on building more stables and equipment barns for all of the horses. This would make London the most industrially advanced large city in the world.
However they failed to notice the growing popularity of the gasoline propelled vehicles that were beginning to populate the streets. Within a decade there were fewer horses on the streets of London and more automobiles. Within a few more years there were almost NO horses in use on the streets.

The more people involved in planning and solutions, the more creative the solutions and ownership.

*People respond best when they are involved in the process.*
The most admired companies have learned how to creatively deal with problems and obstacles. They take their cues from their customer/public base. They know that customer involvement in problem solving will create ownership and develop better ideas than a few people sequestered in a room.

3) Increase perception through customer/public service training. Remember, when you speak to one individual with a private company, you take their attitude as the attitude of the entire organization. One false step and the entire organization is blamed for incompetence or indifference. Southwest Airlines is known for delivering some of the best customer service in the airlines industry...most of the time. But last summer, a man was treated rudely by a Southwest gate agent. He tweeted about it. The gate agent boarded the plane and demanded that the angry customer delete his message, or leave the plane. The man chose to leave and complained to practically everyone by going back online. He then blamed the entire company for the behavior of one individual employee. Southwest immediately apologized to him and made an offer to compensate for the rude gate agent’s behavior.

Successful companies train their associates in delivering better service. Not just because poor service would run customers to the competition, but because...

*Great attitudes beget great service!*
No, you don’t have competition, unless people move to another location. But maybe the reason people are angry at your staff is because the employees are treating people like they have no choice but to comply.

If you want a smoother operation in your public office, train your people how to handle unexpected circumstances, special needs and angry customers. No wonder everyone at the Department of Motor Vehicles is in a bad mood. The public waits for hours and is met with employees who have had all they can take of angry, frustrated people. It has become a vicious circle that repeats itself hourly, daily and monthly.

*What if governmental institutions became known for efficiency, ease and service to the public?*

*Easy Action Steps:* How can you streamline services within your institution? What process is costing taxpayers more than saving them because “we’ve always done it that way?” Remember that your method of solving problems may not always be the best way. How can you involve creative people in solutions more? When was the last time you trained your employees and staff to respond to special, frustrated and angry “customers?”
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