



It's the customer,



Now is the time to invest in meaningful channel shift, **Simon Bailey** advises, if the customer really is king ■

During the USA presidential race of 1992, there was a big sign in the campaign headquarters of Bill Clinton that read, **"It's the economy, stupid"**. The phrase was widely used during Clinton's successful bid for the presidency against President George H W Bush. The phrase highlighted the fact that Bush was looking at all the wrong issues, and the most important concern, namely the state of the economy, was being missed. Clinton went on to win that election as America was in recession, and the topic that mattered the most to the people was the economy.

So what's this got to do with digital engagement? I think that local authorities should put up big posters when they are developing alternative access channels. The message should read **"It's the customer, stupid"**. Why? Well, recent conversations in relation to access channels that I have been party to seem to have been about cost

savings, increased performance, better use of resources, return on investment, etc. This is fine, but I think sometimes we are missing the point. It is not really about those things, it is about getting it right for the customer. After all, isn't that why local authorities are here?

At one authority I visited, there was a queue of people so long it was almost out of the door. Admittedly it wasn't far between the door and the reception, but the people looked so fed up, claspings bits of paper which appeared to be benefit notification letters or council tax demands. Nobody looked as though they appeared to be enjoying their time in the queue.

These weren't people who were digitally excluded either. I sat and watched as time after time the customers would play with their smart phones, looking as though they were checking their emails, twittering, or perhaps interacting on Facebook. One customer even had a tablet computer! If that isn't a digitally engaged population, then I don't know what is!

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These customers were just the sort of people that would have been able to use the internet or the web to interact with their local authority. If this was the case, why were they queuing up on a wet winter's day in a place where they didn't want to be?

The answer was that it was the only way they could access information. Or was it? The authority's web site was rich in information, and had quite a lot of self-service pages, including viewing benefit claims, etc. But are authorities only giving people what they want to give, subject to the limitations imposed by their software provider, or are they actually giving the customer what they want? Did the people queuing up know that they could go to the website for some information?

I'm not trying to be critical of one local authority – this type of scenario is synonymous with local authorities up and down the country.

Most authorities should by now have a channel strategy. What's a channel strategy? It can best be described as an organisation's plan for the channels it will use to deliver services to, and interact with, its customers. A channel strategy explains how an organisation will meet the contact demands of its customers, using the resources it has available bearing in mind the needs of the customer.

The key words here are 'interact with its customers' and 'bearing in mind the needs of the customer'. It doesn't mention anything about cost reduction or the need to reduce the budget spend in XY department.

Yes, savings are of course important, but they are not ultimately the reason why the channel strategy is there.

It is important to remember that a channel strategy is not simply a plan to move service

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stupid

provision to online channels. This is perhaps where it has gone wrong over the last ten years. Labour's plan, **'Implementing Electronic Government (IEG)'** was to encourage (with money) local authorities to put their services on line. Most authorities did that, but I remember one headline in a technology magazine highlighted the fact that *"all local government services are now on line, but will the public use them?"*, which is very true. It is probably easy to put a benefit calculator on line, but does anyone actually use it or even know of its existence.

Moving customers to alternative channels is called 'channel shifting'. Channel shift is the process by which organisations seek to encourage customers to access or interact with services via channels other than those which they would normally choose, i.e. queuing up at a reception point.

Deliberate channel shift is the design and marketing of effective and efficient channels because they are the most appropriate channels for the type of contact, customer and organisation in question. Channel shift forms one part of an overall channel strategy, and implemented well it can lower costs, build reputation, empower the citizen, and improve the overall service provision. Shifting customers to particular channels involves behaviour change on the citizen's part, but once they are aware of the channels available, they will use the one that works best for them. Remember, no-one will use an access channel that is difficult for them to navigate.

There are reasons why some people may not channel shift, one of the main ones being that they need reassurance that something is happening with their claim or their account. A good example I picked up from a channel

strategy document is that of a person who has received a bailiff letter telling them to pay a bill or expect a visit from the bailiff. They have just paid the bill and now want reassurance that their personal belongings are safe. They are unlikely to log on and have a look at the organisation's website's FAQ page for reassurance, but may be more inclined to ring up the contact centre to request a letter confirming that matters are in hand. In this example, there may be a case for having online FAQs relating to debt recovery in terms of best practice, but there is probably little chance of shifting this individual's contact online. Or is there? Maybe that's why all these people queue up in local authority receptions – perhaps they just want reassurance.

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If they have just paid on line, why should the customer be forced to switch access channels from web to telephone to check that the bailiffs have been cancelled? An example of an alternative solution may be to use live chat. After all, the customer is already on the website paying. Some authorities are already using live chat to improve the service to their customers.

Trafford Council has the following information on its website in relation to its new live chat service – *"The new development*

is part of our commitment to improving services for our customers and adds another easy way for you to access information and advice. You will be able to ask our advisors questions ranging from how to apply for benefits to booking social services assessment. It will save the council money as we will be able to deal with more than one query at once and it will save you the price of a phone call".

Live chat is communication between two users via a computer. Once a chat has been initiated, either user can enter text by typing on the keyboard and the entered text will appear on the other user's monitor. It's a bit like MSN, but you could be chatting with a local authority representative.

The real time nature of the live chat experience can help ease a customer's worries using the web. It has the additional advantages of being able to share documentation to illustrate a point or clarify instructions. More and more people are using messaging services in their daily lives, and perhaps authorities should look to live chat as an alternative access channel. I can see so many benefits.

The fact remains that we must give the customer what they want, and not what we want to give them. The next time I hear somebody say how much they can save by moving customers to a cheaper channel I will think, *"It's the customer, stupid"*. That's what really matters!

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