Future generation customer service: How agencies can evolve customer satisfaction with technology
Gone are the days of proprietary, rigid customer service and back-office systems that have looked the same for decades—WSP USA is building solutions for next generation tolling customer service. As our industry evolves, we incorporate best-in-class technology using cloud-based systems from Amazon, Oracle, Cisco and other providers. Proprietary elements can still be included, but the cloud-based systems offer toll operators power and flexibility they’ve never had with on-premise systems, including better data storage and report generation capabilities.

When WSP set out to change the customer service center (CSC) industry, we knew better technology was key to customer convenience and satisfaction while building agency trust. We wanted to make it easier than ever for customers to access their information via mobile devices, or reach customer service specialists easily via phone, chat, email and online applications. Updates to interactive voice recognition (IVR) systems and the use of artificial intelligence chat bots or social media platforms let customers easily address common problems.
High-quality customer interaction is critical because today’s tolling customers expect their experiences to be convenient and hassle-free. They want to access tolling services their way, with the devices they prefer to use and payment channel that fits their lifestyle. Moreover, they expect agencies to proactively identify and meet their needs on a regular basis.

As toll road owners began to unbundle previous turnkey methodologies in favor of a smorgasbord of systems, people and processes in the 1990s, WSP instituted its operations service integrator (OSI) approach, along with more traditional “road mapping” of technical solutions, referred to as active technology management. The OSI approach leads new operating paradigms by focusing on seven pillars that enable clients to better manage extreme change and business disruptions. They are:

- **Agility** – We take initiative and exercise our expertise, experience and judgment to adapt for the benefit of client and their customers.
- **Quality** – We actively measure performance against standards, whether from defined outcomes, customer satisfaction or client requirements and ensure all stakeholders are satisfied. Even with 99.8% customer satisfaction, we still take steps to continually improve results even when standards are being met.
- **Transparency** – Client owners have access and insight into all we do. We share all information with clients through regular reports and meetings, ongoing metrics and annual performance reviews.
- **Reliability** – We deliver the predictability, consistency and experience that clients expect for engaging their customers, as we have done for San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority’s Clipper program using new technologies, such as chat bots and speech-enabled interactive voice technology to immediately add value and convenience.
- **Veracity** – The OSI approach helps us develop an in-depth understanding of multi-vendor communications to establish a baseline for accuracy and truthfulness of results. Building upon this baseline, WSP’s customer contact omni-channel solution adds to this enterprise view of customer engagement by recording customer interactions and data system reporting.
- **Accountability** – We are accountable for overall performance for our customer service and operating contracts. It is our cultural and operational goal to be seen as our clients’ trusted partner, often with client staff not able to distinguish our staff from their own.
- **Credibility** – Our reputation is the measure of success which is demonstrated regularly by customer satisfaction scores well into the 90th percentile, originating across CSCs.
How WSP addresses customers

Our proactive team members recognize situations and craft solutions that achieve our customers’ visions. As our work and service evolves, we look forward to opportunities to help clients with their full continuous improvements and innovation lifecycles. By offering forward-looking strategic recommendations on technology, we can become even more valued as a full-service provider.

We expect clients’ customers to have positive tolling experiences, so WSP measures itself against key contractual performance indicators including customer satisfaction and first-call resolution. Both are measured through customer surveys and consistently exceed expectations.

**WSP’s contractual key performance indicators highlight excellence in customer service:**

- **Customer satisfaction**
- **First-call resolution**

This approach works. For example, WSP’s service on Colorado’s E-470 Public Highway Authority has regularly scored a 98-plus percent customer satisfaction (CSAT) for the past five years. In addition, E-470 is in the 90th percentile for CSAT performance when measured by a third-party. As of Q1 2022, its customer CSAT rating was 98.8 percent. Compare this to CSAT ratings for other industries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry CSAT*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Energy Utilities</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telecommunications and info</td>
<td>77.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health care and social assistance</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public administration/government</td>
<td>63.8%</td>
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*Research from American Customer Satisfaction Index, April 2021

The E-470 workload is significant. In 2021, WSP:

- Handled more than 850,000 calls
- Processed more than 90,000 emails
- Fulfilled 515,000 transponders
- Processed more than 29 million images

While superior customer service is paramount for all agencies we support, creating an environment where employees want to work and thrive also is critical. CSC employees are empowered to make decisions and recognized for their superior work. They are given honest feedback and easy access to ask questions. WSP rewards call center employees with incentive bonuses, company benefits, training and advancement opportunities for stepping up to satisfactorily solve customers’ challenges during the first call, promptly respond to emails and process transponders efficiently.

Longevity also is recognized. For example, six WSP employees who work in the New York State Department of Transportation INFORM traffic management center — mission control for commuters and visitors on Long Island, New York — were individually honored recently for their 20-plus years of dedicated service.
Exemplary customer service comes about with proper employee training and ongoing education. Cross training is one way to help people understand the different aspects of the business and their relevance. Practically, it gives agencies the human resources to fill voids or to move staff to various positions during busy periods so that customers’ needs are met without interruption. It also allows employees to share best practices and tips with one another. More importantly, if employees understand the workload and challenges of their peers, they are less likely to pass unresolved issues to others and solve customer problems themselves.

Creating a culture that ensures comprehensive initial training, followed by ongoing refresher sessions and updates is critical. WSP has proven success in managing on-site staff, remote work or a hybrid approach, depending on the agency requirements.

As a best practice, WSP call center employees will periodically work and train from home to ensure work continues to flow during emergencies.

For those working from home, managers increase intentional communications through regularly scheduled meetings, online channels and video calls to supplant office interactions. Our team members understand their primary mission is to ensure tolling customers have great experiences delivered through ongoing manager reviews, customer ratings and two-way communications.
Next-generation technology fuels customer center success

Technology will continue to drive customer service innovation, thus the importance of an omnichannel telephony strategy. This is critical as a recent National Retail Federation study showed 85 percent of shoppers get frustrated if they must switch channels or leave a platform they’re currently using to get support. Plus, 84 percent of them get frustrated if they must repeat information to customer service. Toll customers are no different.

WSP continuously leads clients to incorporate best-in-class technology that exceeds customers’ needs and interacts with them through their choice of contact. Plus, the rate of change that occurs with telephony is fast compared to account management and accounting-related systems. This makes decoupling a must in today’s customer environment where new communications methods are created annually.

Omnichannel strategy key
A strong omnichannel telephony strategy lets customers connect with tolling agencies however and whenever they want, be it phone, website, smartphone app, chat or email. WSP takes on the responsibility of ensuring agencies’ systems are operating with leading edge technology and can accommodate technological advances quickly. This translates into stewardship of the most important relationships agencies have with their customers, a privilege we don’t take lightly. We serve clients best by delivering great customer service experiences which reflect positively on agencies and their staff.

Virtualized network and storage infrastructures will help agencies continue to meet customer needs. These systems reduce overhead associated with installing, configuring and maintaining physical infrastructure. Plus, they’re proven and fully available via the cloud.
A WSP best practice is to maintain commercial agreements with major providers to examine innovations as they come along.

Artificial intelligence (AI) assists customers

The automation these systems deliver uses AI to facilitate speech-enabled interactive voice response that communicates with customers in a free-form, free-flowing manner with the purpose of understanding why a customer is calling. Early on, they map out customer intent. Based on this intent, such as opening a new account or adding a payment method, there are a variety of self-service options that facilitate the task and integrate it with the customer contact center’s IVR and back-office system.

Take California’s Orange County, 405 Express Lanes program for example. When a customer visits its site, chat bots are triggered to offer help. When the customer enters a response, a bot will point them to the appropriate link on the website. This is essentially the same infrastructure used for voice interactions through IVR and the same back-end integration on chat and mobile to share information with them and get their information. We expect a 60 percent to 75 percent call deflection target after year one as it takes time for the system to mature and for engineers to fine tune the service.

These bots, which customers are familiar with in other industries, have the capability to run analytics. This allows us to capture each customer’s intent and sentiment and then run machine-learning algorithms over them, so the bots continue to learn, mature and evolve. This makes them more effective over time based on real-time data they receive from customers, creating overwhelmingly positive customer service experiences as rated in ongoing customer surveys.

Like all technology, ongoing improvement is the norm. A WSP best practice is to maintain commercial agreements with major providers to examine innovations as they come along. We regularly meet with large-scale and smaller software developers, equipment manufacturers and toll agency leaders from around the world to examine trends, new products and look at new products in development. We have commercial agreements with Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, Cisco and others. In addition, we review constantly CSC operations in other industries so that we deliver solutions that are leading edge and proven. The innovation life cycle is predominantly driven by gaining workflow efficiencies and ensuring positive customer service experiences for clients and their customers.
Pair tradition and future to meet our clients’ needs now

For nearly 30 years WSP has delivered world-class, hands-on operations and management of CSC, transportation management centers and travelers’ information centers. Since 1997, WSP has operated the highly regarded E-470 communications center. More recently, the Orange County Transportation Authority in California awarded WSP a back-office system and CSC operations services contract for its 405 Express lanes. Our work also extends to transit call centers.

Much of this award-winning success in operations can be attributed to our roots in transportation and toll roads and prominent foundational partnerships with New Jersey’s Garden State Parkway, Virginia’s Petersburg-Richmond Turnpike, Oklahoma’s Turner Turnpike, the New York State Thruway and Virginia’s Dulles Toll Road Extension.

Today’s tolling customers constantly remind us they appreciate technological solutions to handle their day-to-day needs, provide better, faster and more consistent service with the ability to handle workload spikes. It is our responsibility to deliver best-in-class tech tools and operations to them as conveniently as possible.

Future-generation technology will continue to evolve to serve tolling customers’ increasing needs. WSP will continue to push the industry by offering improved solutions that handle increasing call volumes; providing seamless customer interactions; and striving for full and quick issue resolution via automation and supporting tools. While we continue to refine best practices, agencies will continue to build trust and grow satisfaction.
WSP USA is the U.S. operating company of WSP, one of the world’s leading engineering and professional services firms. Dedicated to serving local communities, we are engineers, planners, technical experts, strategic advisors and construction management professionals. WSP designs lasting solutions in the buildings, transportation, energy, water and environment markets. With more than 12,000 employees in over 200 offices across the U.S., we partner with our clients to help communities prosper.

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