

Touchpoint

THE JOURNAL OF SERVICE DESIGN



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Better Services for the People

Engaging Policy Makers in Improving Public-sector Service Delivery



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Government agencies may perceive a need for better customer relations but often respond with isolated remedies. Their goals rarely include integrated and more engaging service delivery. Designers have an opportunity to foster change, both within civic agencies and in society at large, by increasing awareness of the power of design to build public services that work.

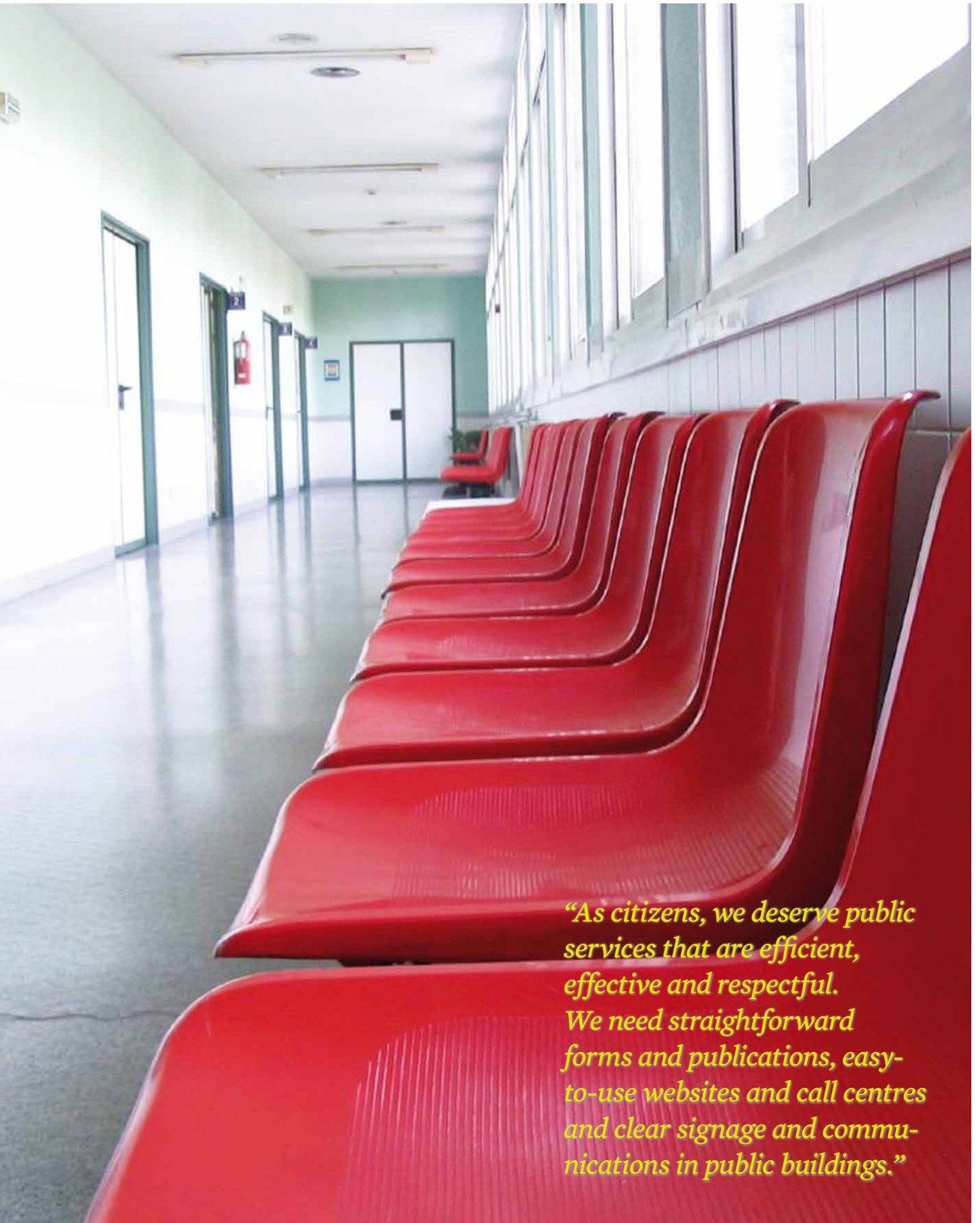
More and more companies are evolving to provide their customers with user-centred products and services. Today it is easy, and even enjoyable, to track a package, bank online, or shop for a smartphone. In contrast, using our most vital public services can be time-consuming and frustrating.

As citizens, we deserve public services that are efficient, effective and respectful. We need straightforward forms and publications, easy-to-use websites and call centres and clear signage and communications in public buildings. This is not just about making things look pretty: well-designed communications and services enhance understanding and increase citizen participation. They also lower cost, reduce errors and encourage compliance. Most crucially, they deliver necessary assistance to our children, our veterans, our elders and other vulnerable populations.

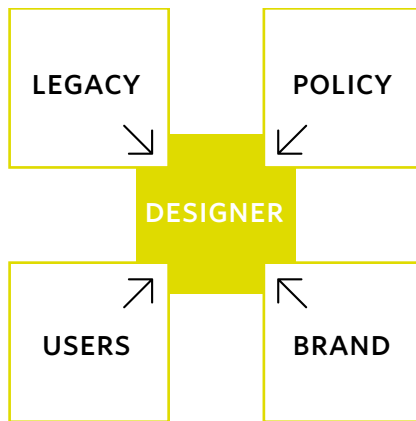
We have had the opportunity to work with agencies in New York City and at the national level of the United States government and are happy to report that many in government service are working hard to be responsive to citizens' needs. Unfortunately, we have also noticed several institutional barriers to designing satisfying services.

There Is No Design There

Government services are insulated from the market pressures that drive private-sector firms to focus on customer satisfaction, and many public agencies have little motivation to improve user experience. While larger agencies may invest in user research, that research typically uses focus groups to elicit user preference: co-design exercises intended to involve users in the design of their own public services are rare. In fact, 'user experience' and service design are not typically identified as



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Successful public-sector design initiatives must recognise that user needs are only one part of the picture: organisational needs, along with systems and production requirements, have an even greater impact than in most private-sector projects.

a focus for staff attention and effort. In-house design staff may be limited and training and professional development in service design is typically non-existent. Instead, many design responsibilities are delegated to professional contractors, and the highly trained service designers that craft great corporate service experiences are rarely included in federal and local governments' contracting pool.

Inside the Box

In addition to its lack of exposure to design, the public sector's work culture is highly conservative. As a recent report issued by the non-profit Partnership for Public Service and design firm IDEO put it, "Rewards most often go to those who meet or exceed 'safe' expectations, not those who establish entirely new levels of expectations based on their ingenuity. As a result, federal employees often find it better to stick to the standard operating procedures than to stick their necks out and try something new."¹

Efforts to introduce services that speak to user experiences and needs often run head-on into institutional roadblocks. Legislative requirements,

complex procurement rules, expensive (and outsourced) legacy systems, media scrutiny and lack of budget or internal procedures for speculative work all conspire to create an environment that is change-averse.

The Power Gap

Finally, individual working groups within agencies are often quite isolated: the staff tasked with carrying out a given design project may have little or no contact with other groups handling different aspects of the same task, cannot authorise or implement work that deviates from accepted in-house practices and may have little authority to reach out to colleagues or even up their own reporting chain.

Design innovation therefore requires advance buy-in and authorisation from top-tier management: often political appointees with short tenures at the agency, limited familiarity with nut-and-bolts operational issues and schedules booked months in advance.

Not Just Designers, But Educators

The barriers described above are not insignificant. However, we have had

some success in engaging policy makers in improving the delivery of public services. Because design thinking is unfamiliar to many government staffers, when designers join public-service improvement teams, they inadvertently perform the role of educator. Once at the table, designers have the opportunity to demonstrate the power of creative problem solving and to lay the intellectual groundwork for future

user-centred design processes. When a firm is choosing whom to assign to public-service teams, it is crucial to pick staff who are not just creative stars, but also comfortable in the more nuanced role of thought leader and educator. On the very practical side we've also found it remarkably effective to engage in-house administrative staff in design exercises as a prelude to suggesting that their citizen-users participate in similar activities. Even asking staff to physically annotate paper mock-ups can have an electrifying effect compared to the more typical (and more passive) presentation of slides.



Engaging in-house administrative staff in design exercises and workshops introduces them to concepts of participatory design.

Negotiating Institutional Change

Designers need to be flexible enough to negotiate and influence the requirements of a public-sector environment. The simplest change – for instance, the redesign of a single form – may be constrained by congressional mandates, extensive internal review and legacy technology. As much as we might prefer to focus purely on a design solution, we have had better outcomes by assessing the back-end systems and the forces that influence the design environment, while trying to respect their motivation: those barriers are often put in place to safeguard public resources.

To be successful, the designer must become the architect of a context-appropriate change process, not just the creator of an excellent product or service. This, along with the utmost patience and equanimity, is a critical quality that can lead to success rather than frustration.



A before-and-after visualisation of the pink slip for package redelivery that the U.S. Postal Service leaves at the door of millions of Americans. This simple and compelling speculative redesign impressed the Post Master, who asked his staff to get the ball rolling on changing this iconic service touchpoint.

Start at the Top

While it may always be challenging to introduce design-driven improvements into government, the process is vastly easier if an organisation's senior leadership mandates change from the top. We have had significant success in engaging civic leaders through quickly drawn-up examples of design-driven solutions for civic communications problems. Designers are averse to creating work on spec, but when it comes to the public sector, the impact of seeing a vastly improved service can create the necessary impetus to commit funds and staff toward actually developing innovative solutions.

Next Steps for Public-Sector Designers

As much as we believe that design education plays a crucial role, it would be foolish to ignore the impact of the political climate on the uptake of innovative design processes. It is a welcome sign that the current U.S. administration has issued several challenges to improve access and transparency within federal agencies.

But on both the national and local level economic constraints will require designers to stretch their skills. We must not only offer great design products, but also articulate how user-centred services can save money and make internal government processes

more efficient, while improving public perception of government.

The design community should continue to educate receptive government staff: by conducting design-thinking workshops, publishing articles in the press outlets that policy-makers read, and visualising great-but-feasible service redesigns, while also investing more to document the financial and experiential impact of service improvements. We need metrics that

speak to policy-makers. That way, when the political climate for investment is right, leaders will be familiar with the value of good design. At that point both political will and design skill may align, resulting in great services. ●

References

¹Partnership for Public Service and IDEO (2011). "Innovation in Government" [Online]. Retrieved February 25, 2011, from <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=155>



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This year's Service Design Conference will take place at San Francisco, California, USA. The topic *From Sketchbook to Spreadsheet* is about exploring the critical relationship between service design and business. The call for contribution is open now! Watch the SDN website to stay updated!

Photo: Calibos, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Golden_Gate_Bridge_pillar.jpg

About Service Design Network

The Service Design Network is a forum for practitioners and academics to advance the nascent field of service design. Our purpose is to develop and strengthen the knowledge and expertise in the science and practise of innovation.

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