Designing government services for citizens

By Thick

For Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government (Australia)

Overview

There are literally hundreds of life events that require citizens to transact with the Victorian state government (one of six states in Australia). Each transaction has the potential to make a citizen's life more difficult than it should be and often when they need it least. With services spread across so many different government departments, it can be a confusing and frustrating experience.

Many governments around the world are transitioning to a 'digital first' service model, providing an online experience that can scale cheaply and provide a great experience for citizens, including Victoria. In building a better service experience for all citizens, the Victorian Government were eager to understand the needs of those who might need more support—such as the elderly, citizens with disability, recent migrants and those with low technology proficiency.

Our brief was to improve the way every Victorian citizen interacts with the state government by creating and monitoring a fully functioning service centre. We were to create two trial service centres – one in Melbourne city and another in Shepparton, a major regional town in Victoria. We designed the service centres to weave survey information, customer behaviour and digital analytics into a complete view of each individual service experience.

In order to achieve accurate and meaningful feedback, the centres were designed and constructed in a way that made them feel authentic – like a 'real' Victorian Government customer service centre might.

Process

Contextual Inquiries

We conducted one-on-one interviews with more than 30 Victorian citizens to discover their relationship with the Victorian government, their understanding of government transactions and the decision-making process they go through each time they need to transact with government.

Group workshops were conducted to discover group perception of government services and their relationship with the public sector. These workshops are used as a way to stimulate thought amongst the group and to gather both assenting and dissenting views. They also allow us to validate insights gathered during one-on-one interviews and speak with a larger number of people.

Throughout the project we immersed ourselves in government service centres in Melbourne to observe behaviour and chat to people as they queued, or on their way out. We also looked at comparative service centres to observe things like traffic flow, self-service and assistance models in operation.

Process Mapping

With more than 200 transactions inside the scope of the trial, our team undertook an exercise in process mapping. By defining the process flow of each transaction we could then build an understanding of the relative complexity of individual transactions, find commonalities and design an optimised flow through each.

We also defined transaction dependencies like needing to print something out, having to get documents witnessed or having to provide different types of identification. From here we could figure out what needed to be measured in a physical or digital sense, and design an appropriately thorough system of analytics.

Service Prototype

We built a full-scale service centre in our studio, made with cardboard, to allow us to test and learn quickly. The aim was to develop a sense of how customers would flow through the space, allowing us to change layouts and test new ideas quickly and easily. Using service walkthroughs and scenario role playing, we were able to identify and eliminate potential pain points.

The layout needed to support the digital-assisted model, as well as support the transactions identified in process mapping.

Digital Prototype

At the same time as building the physical prototype, we began creating a digital one. We built a portal to allow customers to quickly locate and understand the available digital transactions across departments. Our digital prototype was as much about gathering analytics as it was about the front-end experience. The back-end of the system was built to combine analytics from across the existing government services, and tie them into the in-experience data we collected.

We conducted several service enactments, refining and improving the physical and digital design as we went. Service deficiencies and customer pain points were identified quickly and addressed in near real-time – decisions were made in a far more 'real' context and environment.

Brand Experience

A complete customer and brand experience was designed from scratch. From the way people flow through the space, the information architecture of digital touchpoints, to furniture design, fabrication and install.

All aspects of the storefront fitouts were designed to be completely modular. Having a modular signage and furniture system allowed us to move elements around the space and test different service flows based on customer feedback.

Integrated Service Analytics

We placed a number of research tools at different touchpoints within the trial service centres. These included one-on-one questionnaires, digital surveys, rapid ten-question interviews, digital user journey tracking and real-time concierge feedback. Surveys were conducted at different stages of the customer journey enabling expectations, impressions and results to be measured to support what was learnt from the other research methods.

Our approach to analytics meshed what we were learning about people's experiences in the service centres with advanced digital measurement techniques. We developed a tracking system which allowed us to electronically follow customers from their initial entry survey though our portal, across the destination website and back to their exit survey. This gave us the ability to take a deep look at all the factors involved in an individual transaction, from the user's emotional state to performance of third party websites.

Benefits

The trial allowed us to gather deep insights on the preferences, behaviours and circumstances of citizens, in order to provide a solid base to design a better experience. The trial is an important first step in a much larger project to reduce the complexity involved in interacting with the government and create a relevant, digital-first public service experience.

During the trial we learnt that Victorians see government very differently to the private sector. They value certainty, consistency, predictability and speed. Government transactions are often time consuming and frustrating to complete, and if provided with the choice, citizens would prefer to avoid them. What we designed needed to meet these expectations for citizens, both to provide the best experience possible, but most importantly to provide the Victorian Government with a clear picture of a truly citizen-centric service offering.

To provide that clear picture, we delivered two key tools: the evaluation model and seven service design principles.

The evaluation model can be used to assess the key factors that impact a citizen's decision-making process when interacting with the government. The model has been designed to provide insight into citizens' expectations and behaviours, and be used as a design tool to ensure government service flows are designed to provide an optimal, low-barrier, frictionless experience.

The seven service design principles translate the needs and preferences of Victorian citizens into an actionable list. The principles outline how citizens want to engage, communicate and transact with the government. A citizen-centric approach to designing government transactions not only ensures transactions are easier to complete but also creates more independent and empowered citizens.

There are enormous environmental and fiscal benefits to building more efficient modes of service provision for the Victorian Government. Although this project was a short term trial, further financial and environmental modeling will take place over the coming months.

A digital-first focus has not only provided a picture of a more streamlined and cost efficient service delivery, it will also allow citizens to interact with low interaction and low interference, if they prefer.

Most importantly, our team has introduced an agile, efficient and lean methodology into the ranks of government. By working in this manner on more and more projects, government can make better decisions in the interest of its citizens, at far lower cost and for greater societal benefit.

Effects

The Victorian Government Customer Service Centre Trial is one of the largest and most significant surveys of Victorians' preferences ever undertaken.

In total, 3,052 people visited the centres over the 83 days it was open. The centres allowed citizens to complete 198 different transactions across 4 government departments. In total, 902 transactions were completed.

By measuring the service preferences of thousands of citizens we were able to form a much more realistic picture of how and where to improve the current mode of service delivery. These results form part of a business case for the State of Victoria to proceed with a service capability that is far more efficient for the people of Victoria.

There is potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in savings to be gained by designing a more efficient and enjoyable way to transact with the government. The outcomes have also lead to a new government department, Services Victoria, established in May 2015. The department has received $15 million in funding to invest in ongoing and future projects.

Insights into citizen's decision-making factors and the service design principles have also been used across different Victorian Government departments to create new service centres. For example, learnings from the trial and the service design principles were used to inform the design and execution of customer centres for VicRoads, called Digital Self Service Offering.