The tide is shifting in both the private and public sectors as organizations discover they must focus on the customer experience to be successful.

“The last best experience that anyone has anywhere, becomes the minimum expectation for the experience they want everywhere,” says Bridget Van Kralingen, Senior Vice President for Industry Platforms at IBM.

Industry statistics illustrate the importance of this new reality. More than two-thirds of marketers at commercial organizations say their firms compete primarily on the quality of the customer experiences they provide, according to Gartner. By next year, 81 percent of marketers expect to compete “mostly or completely” through these experiences.

While government agencies have made major strides in leveraging technology to enhance the relationship between agencies and citizens over the past 20 years, they often focus on the solution, rather than the experience, when implementing new services.

Forward-looking agencies understand that end-user experiences are key to knowing what new services constituents need, as well as learning how to design and continuously improve those services. To accomplish this, governments are turning to
design thinking. Following are three examples of governments realizing success with this approach.

**Design Thinking Shortens Procurement Timeframes in New York City**

It’s just a little more than a year old, but NYCx — New York City’s civic tech initiative where entrepreneurs, technologists and tech professionals participate in challenges to solve a specific problem of urban life and where solutions are presented by startups as well as established companies — is already impacting residents. Based in the Mayor’s Office of the CTO, the team uses design thinking and close collaboration with neighborhood partners to identify priorities, and then works with residents, city departments and outside organizations to address these issues.

Current projects include “Moonshots,” which address large-scale urban problems, such as internet connectivity and the impact of climate change. Other efforts, known as “Co-Labs,” forge partnerships with residents and community groups in neighborhoods throughout the city to tackle local issues, such as zero-waste initiatives and nighttime safety.

“In both our Moonshots and Co-Labs programming, user-centered design is a critical part of our methodology,” says Deputy Chief Technology Officer Jeremy M. Goldberg. “It deepens our focus and commitment on providing more responsive government to New Yorkers.”

This approach had a positive impact on a recent push to bring broadband connectivity to Governors Island. Design thinking compressed the time needed to scope the problem, brainstorm solutions, and present a challenge to entrepreneurs and technologists, Goldberg explains. Essentially, the Moonshot program methodology helped streamline efforts to publish the challenge, lead to the contracting between the vendor and Governors Island, and schedule the implementation of the chosen solution.

In total, the city received over 25 responses to the Governors Island Connectivity Challenge, more than the replies generated by a previous request. The challenge was issued in fall 2017; finalists were notified in February 2018; the winner was selected in April; and the broadband network was in place as of July 1.

**Austin Uses Design Thinking to Tackle High-Impact Problems**

When Austin’s recycling program wasn’t meeting expectations early this decade, upfront research and in-depth conversations with citizens revealed several issues. Confusion arose over Austin’s single-stream recycling strategy, which commingled all recyclable materials in the same bins. People understood that glass, aluminum cans and paper were recyclable, but hesitated when deciding whether other materials were trash or recyclables.

“Understanding those kinds of questions from a user’s point of view was critical for devising new ideas to help people improve their recycling efforts,” says Austin’s Chief Innovation Officer Kerry O’Connor.

The city got creative in finding resources to conduct in-home interviews with 53 citizens, which effectively illuminated underlying problems. Recognizing that Austin has a
a wellspring of professionals willing to take a sabbatical to work for civic good, O’Connor promoted a one-year fellowship program to attract researchers, content strategists, data analysts and other specialties vital for design research.

Based on the citizen insights gathered by these representatives, Austin developed a series of personas to help understand nuances to the recycling challenges. For example, one persona was the lone recycler — someone who is enthusiastic about proper disposal techniques but lives with roommates or family members who aren’t interested in recycling. Another persona is someone coping with new pressures in his or her life, such as caring for a new baby or working multiple jobs.

“These personas helped teams examine a range of challenges and look for new ways to address them,” O’Connor says. “Organizations of all types need to think outside their day-to-day operations, take in new perspectives and then learn how to act on those new ways of seeing. We think of the process as co-creation — together we’ll unpack the challenge and come up with a new way to solve a problem.”

The results seen with the recycling program convinced city officials to transform the fellowship program into a permanent city resource called the Office of Design and Delivery. Its members are now redesigning the city’s website to improve digital service delivery. In addition, the group is using a Bloomberg philanthropic grant to apply design thinking and tackle another multifaceted challenge: reducing homelessness in the city.

**Design Thinking Helps Georgia Entrepreneurs Find Information Quickly**

When the state of Georgia needed to update its flagship website, Georgia.gov, it naturally turned to design thinking methodologies for help.

“The first step in our design thinking process wasn’t to ‘redesign’ the visuals of the website or add new technology. Instead, we asked ourselves, ‘What is it that our constituents are looking for? How are they being served, and where are the gaps?’” says Nikhil Deshpande, Georgia’s Chief Digital Officer.

This led to the realization that the majority of citizens sought only about 10 to 15 percent of the information posted on the version of the website back then.

“Knowing that was important to help us focus our editorial efforts on the highly sought information. We needed to get rid of the rest and curate the important content to ensure we were truly helping our citizens.”

To determine which content was most valuable, Deshpande and his staff used analytics, heat maps and search data that show traffic patterns and what content items received the highest number of clicks. Content analysis tools revealed how people found the website and what search terms led them there.

Based on the upfront research into constituent behavior, Deshpande’s team created a list of 50 high-priority topics and then closely grouped all the content related to each topic. For example, people who want to register a new business see information consolidated from multiple agency websites. Because the content displays on a single
page, entrepreneurs don’t have to click to various destinations to find everything they need.

“We now offer a one-stop shop when it comes to the information people need to transact with the state,” he says.

The efforts are paying off. Dwell times on webpages are growing, which show people spend more time reading information rather than searching for it, Deshpande says.

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