

Changing Business Perception Through Enhanced Customer Service

Montgomery County Business Service Advisory Group on Customer Service





November 15, 2017

TO: County Executive Leggett

FROM: Business Service Advisory Group on Customer Service

RE: Report with Next Steps

The Business Service Advisory Group (BSAG) submits the following report with next steps for improving the level of customer service provided to businesses in Montgomery County for your consideration.

It has been a pleasure to participate on the BSAG and we appreciate the opportunity to present our findings. We believe that improving customer service for any of our constituents will improve customer service for all our constituents.

BSAG members represent major business-facing departments and a variety of experience and backgrounds. Department directors, deputy directors, managers and senior staff worked on this initiative. Long-time employees joined with newcomers to brainstorm and explore best practices in government customer service.

Your support of this initiative is vital to success and we ask that you encourage department directors to actively engage in the individual initiatives as appropriate.

Sincerely,

Montgomery County Government
Business Service Advisory Group

Business Service Advisory Group Members

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Introduction

This administration has made it an urgent priority to enhance the ability of businesses to start, grow and thrive in Montgomery County.

Accomplishments toward this objective include: streamlining the permitting process; establishing a public-private partnership for economic development and workforce services; and launching the Montgomery County Business Portal.

Despite these efforts, the ongoing perception that Montgomery County is not business friendly threatens our underlying economic stability.

The County conducted an in-depth survey of the business community in the summer of 2016. Businesses communicated clearly that the County's customer service falls short of expectations.

The Business Service Advisory Group (BSAG) formed to research best practices for excellence in customer service and to recommend specific improvements.

Meeting from July-November 2017, the BSAG considered a range of topics from the current state of customer service in the County to the ideal state and how to get from here to there.

This report presents "quick wins" for immediate improvements; cultural change initiatives requiring additional effort and delivering substantial impact; and long-term initiatives to ensure a legacy of excellence in customer service.

The Business Solutions Group, working with appropriate department representatives and unions, will undertake the next steps recommended by the BSAG.

Section I: Quick Wins

This section identifies actions with immediate impact to build momentum.



Instill a culture of
customer service
(responsiveness,
understanding
needs/perspective,
solution oriented)

Montgomery County
Business Survey



Customer Service Promise

Customer service matters, even for government. While it may not feel as though the government has competition, the truth is that residents and businesses can choose to relocate elsewhere. If interacting with local government becomes too difficult, businesses will leave, taking tax revenue with them. A shrinking tax base leads to difficult decisions for local government. And, poor customer service increases costs and has a negative effect on employee morale.¹

Improving the quality of customer service provided to the County's business constituents requires that we define what customers can rightfully expect from County employees. While government operates under constraints – policies are based on specific laws and regulations – how service is delivered can make the customer's experience positive or dreadful.

The first step is to reinforce the message that Montgomery County cares about the companies that do business here.

The BSAG proposes a simple, inspirational message that sets the vision for how County employees approach business customers. (See Appendix 1)

Next Step

- 1) County leaders endorse the customer service message for use by all business-facing departments.

¹ Micah Solomon, "Why Customer Service Matters, Even For A Government Agency Or Other Sole Provider" *Forbes*, 12/7/14. Accessed 11/14/17.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/micahsolomon/2014/12/07/why-customer-service-matters-even-in-government-agencies-and-other-monopolies/#2b18becb3c5a>

Names front and center

The gold standard for customer service, Disney Parks & Resorts, focuses on little things that enhance a guest's experience. One of those little things is employee nametags that create personal interactions and generate an emotional connection. Employees receive their nametags on their first day of work and receive guidance on what to include on the nametag and how the tag is worn.²

Next Steps

- 1) Employees that interact face-to-face with the public will have their names on a badge, embroidered on their shirts or on a name plate.
- 2) Departments will have flexibility on how information is presented within defined standards.
- 3) Consideration will be given to security and privacy concerns.

Customer satisfaction surveys

According to a McKinsie & Company on-line survey of 17,000 US citizens, customer service expectations are increasing as technology advances. McKinsie recommends that government measure citizen satisfaction regularly.

"Given the increasing relevance and power of the citizen experience, we have seen that successful government leaders regularly measure the satisfaction of citizens with state services, to set priorities and reinvigorate or adapt efforts over time, as needs change. Best-in-class organizations track citizen satisfaction nearly in real time to observe changes in levels, to identify pain points, and to gather the reactions of citizens to proposed incremental improvements."³

The 2016 Montgomery County Business Survey gives us a baseline for understanding how businesses feel about the customer service they receive from County employees. The Montgomery County Business Portal, developed in response to concerns expressed in the business survey, includes an on-going survey that will allow us to track performance over time. Once the Customer Service Promise is finalized, County departments should solicit customer feedback based on those standards.

² The Disney Look Book. Accessed 11/14/17.
https://disneycasting.net/downloads/wdpr/Disney_Look_Book.pdf

³ Aamer Baig, André Dua, and Vivian Riefberg, "How US state governments can improve customer service." McKinsey & Company, December 2014. Accessed 11/14/17.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/how-us-state-governments-can-improve-customer-service>

Next Steps

- 1) Customer Satisfaction Surveys will be posted in an easily-accessible manner at all business-facing counters and web sites.
- 2) CountyStat will track survey results and communicate feedback to departments.
- 3) Departments will establish Customer Service Improvements Teams to evaluate feedback and identify improvements.

Wayfinding Signs

County staff spends time helping customers who are in the wrong building or office and need directions. This is non-productive for employees and frustrating for the public. Customers would be more likely to feel that the County is ready to serve them if offices were clearly identified.

Just as Montgomery County promotes walkable communities and alternative forms of transportation by investing in transit and making biking safe and convenient, it should create signage in public spaces and buildings that are inviting and accessible. This is particularly true where multiple departments and/or offices are co-located in space shared by other organizations and embedded in a larger community such as the Rockville core campus.



Next Steps

- 1) Identify specific county offices that would benefit from wayfinding signs.
- 2) Coordinate with other jurisdictions to develop a strategy within any applicable standards.

Coordinated Outreach

BSAG members note that employees don't understand the work and priorities of other departments. Sharing information consistently across the organization will help county employees communicate a positive message about the County's ongoing work. Long-term recommendations will be covered in the next section, but a first step is to identify and create a community of departmental outreach coordinators.

Next Steps

- 1) Departments will submit a list of staff members that provide outreach services.
- 2) Create SharePoint team site for outreach coordinators to post projects, outreach events and documents.

Budget Considerations

The recommendations in Section I require a minimal investment of cost and time. Costs can be covered by funds appropriated for the Business Solutions Group which also will take the lead on coordinating the work required to deliver these objectives.

Section II: Cultural Change Initiatives

In addition to the quick wins listed in the previous section, the BSAG is providing a list of initiatives that will require additional time and effort and have a significant impact on Montgomery County Government's customer service delivery.

These initiatives address institutional obstacles to creating a culture of excellence in customer service. The BSAG team recommends that cross-functional workgroups be created to research best practices and recommend strategies to address each of these organizational goals.

Topics provided for each initiative are based on recommendations from the BSAG and are intended to provide a starting point for discussion.

The Business Solutions Group will coordinate with appropriate County Departments to identify representatives for workgroups.

Initiative 1: Develop and Strengthen Customer Service Competency



Before embarking on a transformational intervention, you really need to have a strong voice from the top that both offers a carrot and a holds a stick. That voice has to cheerlead and provide substantive reinforcement for positive change while holding people accountable for a change in performance, however you measure that change.

John H. Fleming, Ph.D.

Coauthor of Human Sigma: Managing
the Employee-Customer Encounter



Cultural change cannot be simply mandated from the top. Leadership sets the vision and expectations for all levels of the organization, and managers must be given the tools to gain buy-in from the workforce. The following recommendations are specifically for employees that interact with the public – **including businesses**. Considering both internal and external customers, the BSAG feels strongly that good customer service starts with engaged and empowered employees. There must also be clear measures of success grounded in customer satisfaction.

Topics for Consideration

- Hire and Manage for Customer Service
 - Hiring – Ensure that Montgomery County fosters a culture of excellence in customer service by identifying and using best practices for hiring employees with excellent customer service skills. Employees are increasingly interested in mission-driven employment options and this should be emphasized in hiring those with a passion for public service.
 - Training – Recommend training to reinforce customer service skills for existing employees and those that are moved into customer-facing roles. Employees that are well-trained and knowledgeable about their work and the work of the county can assist customers quickly and competently.
 - Performance Management – Determine what performance management measures should be implemented for customer-facing positions and manage to those measures.
 - Incentives – Explore options for rewarding employees who demonstrate a high level of excellence in customer service.

- Measure Customer Satisfaction. In addition to customer satisfaction surveys, explore other ways for businesses to provide feedback on performance, and implement systems for responding to feedback.
 - Public computers – Make it easy for the public to provide immediate feedback by placing workstations and kiosks in areas where the public interacts directly with County employees.
 - Develop a response mechanism (e.g.: Quality Improvement Teams – review feedback monthly and develop a response).

Initiative 2: Improve MC311 for Business

MC311 is a valuable tool for handling routine questions effectively and efficiently, however, businesses feel this system does not adequately meet their needs.

Businesses provided clear feedback on MC311 through the Montgomery County Business Survey. Businesses say MC311 causes an unacceptable time lag between submission and response. BSAG members from large County departments that interact extensively with the public also feel that MC311 is not the best way to respond to businesses.

An initial review of how other jurisdictions use 311 shows that businesses are given the option of communicating directly with the appropriate business-facing departments without having to submit a service request through 311. One example is [Orange County, Florida](#), which offers 311 services via phone, web chats, online requests and a smartphone app, and provides direct access with e-mail and phone numbers for business requests.

Topics for Consideration

- Research how other jurisdictions handle questions from businesses that cannot wait days for an answer.
- Explore ways to ensure that 311 staff are fully-versed on business topics.
- Identify departmental outreach coordinators as a resource for 311.

Initiative 3: Enhance Communications



At the very least, government should be structured to ensure that people working in various silos are working together, communicating and pursuing broader goals together.

Governing.com



The BSAG recommends a review of organizational communication to help employees understand the County's overall goals, objectives and activities. The need is to improve both internal and external communications.

The Alliance for Workplace Excellence 2017 Employee Voice Survey reflected a desire for more communications from, and interactions with, management.

The Montgomery County Business Survey captured feedback on improving communications – especially on changes that impact business operations.

Topics for Consideration

- **Internal Communications** – improve flow of information vertically and horizontally.
 - Staff does not understand what is going on organizationally.
 - Explore strategies for ensuring that employees at all levels understand organizational priorities and objectives.
 - Communications on what is being done in other departments is limited.
 - Montgomery County 101 for employees.
 - Develop Knowledge base (SharePoint) to help employees identify appropriate contacts and share expertise.
 - Promote success stories, current issues and general information about other departments.
 - Consider a county-wide communication tool, considering best practices and technologies available to ensure effective and valuable messaging.

- **External Communications** – Montgomery County Government needs to do a better job of telling its story.
 - Develop communication strategy for business outreach – businesses feel that communication is lacking on policy and regulatory changes that impact them.
 - Public relations campaign to promote the work being done to improve & streamline – consistently, across the board, departments feel that they don't get recognition for the work they're doing.
 - Don't let the perfect get in the way of the good.
 - Prepare to deal with negative feedback.
 - Highlight how Montgomery County itself creates an advantage for business.
 - Incorporate testimonials into departmental web sites.
 - Identify datasets that can be added to dataMontgomery to make information more readily available (improves transparency and reduces inquiries).
 - Develop automated messaging that confirms receipt of a form submitted electronically and communicates next steps.
 - Develop standards and guidelines for County outreach staff to include ethics, best practices, etiquette, liability issues, personal security, etc. Ensure that all staff that conducts business outreach has training on these standards and guidelines.



“Bag tax, Styrofoam ban, minimum wage date change information on these not sent out to businesses. We had to research and often got conflicting info on Internet.”

Montgomery County Business
Survey



Budget Considerations

It is anticipated that recommendations in Section II will require an investment of time and money. The initial need will be to identify cross-functional teams to study each area of opportunity and develop additional recommendations including fiscal impact.

Section 3: Long-term Initiatives for Organizational Change

The Business Service Advisory Group suggests initiatives that will lead to sustained improvement to the customer experience and require a significant investment in time and effort. This section focuses on recommendations that will take the County's organizational culture to the next level. These areas of focus will need additional work on scope and objectives.



The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.

Definition of Social Equity
National Association of Public
Administration



Principles of Equity – Building on the work of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the BSAG recommends an aspirational goal of developing Principles of Equity for Montgomery County Government. These principles, once developed, should be incorporated into hiring, on-boarding and performance standards. Subject matter experts would be developed as a resource in each department to help guide employee actions.

Proactive Processes – Identify common issues faced by businesses and find ways to address those issues before they happen. For example, the Department of Permitting Services uses the Preliminary Design Consultation to bring all appropriate regulatory representatives into the room to review plans and identify and address questions and concerns at the beginning of a project.

Standard Definitions – Identify and resolve instances where agencies have inconsistent definitions that cause confusion for businesses (i.e. definition of small business, minority, senior, etc.).

Continuous Process Improvement – Use customer and employee feedback to identify processes to be improved. Build on the work the CountyStat has initiated to train a cohort of County Employees in Lean Six Sigma. Lean equips employees with the tools to assess, standardize, and speed up business processes from the bottom-up by systematically eliminating waste and inefficiencies for improved service delivery. Lean focuses on continuous improvement guided by the voice of the customer.

Budget Considerations

Recommendations in Section III represent long-term efforts and will have budgetary and staffing requirement. External resources are likely to be needed to achieve these objectives. The Business Solutions Group will monitor progress on the quick hits and cultural change initiatives and recommend moving forward on these longer-term programs as appropriate.

Conclusion

The BSAG hopes the findings and next steps offered in this report are supported by the County Executive.

Recommendations in this report start with quick wins that can be used to make immediate improvements and gain momentum. The suggestions included in Section II would have added impact and the ideas provided in Section III would potentially move the county to an elite level among local governments.

Montgomery County Government has shown a commitment to improving relations with the business community. Armed with knowledge and empowered by leadership, Montgomery County can truly be the best location for a business to start, grow and thrive.

We are attaching a draft memo that would go out under your signature asking department directors to support these efforts

Appendix I



The County That Cares