

6 Best Practices

of the Most User-Friendly Government Agencies – and how to apply them to the unemployment customer process



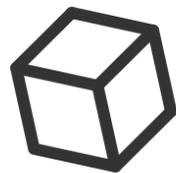
1 Introduction

It is no secret, Americans have been, and are becoming, progressively frustrated with the customer service they experience when interacting with government entities. The coronavirus crisis has exacerbated an already fragile infrastructure, with the public facing reduced service from federal and state agencies. State labor offices have become particularly dire when it comes to unemployment benefits, with tens of thousands of calls to centers remaining unanswered.

But while the latest figures on the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) are down when it comes to federal government services, there are still some great examples of excellent customer experience out there.



For the US government to become more efficient and effective, it will need to invest in advanced technology and implement best practices.



The latest figures show a 1.2% drop to 68.1% on the ACSI's 100-point scale, but some areas have held firm. Here, we look at the best examples of customer service in federal and state government and reveal what other departments can learn from them – particularly those that handle unemployment benefits.

This eBook was designed to provide an overview of what excellent customer service could look like for all US government sectors. We know that private sector experiences make citizens expect more from their engagements with the government. For the US government to become more efficient and effective, it will need to invest in advanced technology and implement best practices from collaborations with tech leaders.



1 Engaging students through the right channels

myStudentAid

With its rating of 88, myStudentAid surpasses all private sector companies measured by the ACSI. And it's not hard to understand why – it enables its audience to interact with the Department of Education both when they want and using the medium they prefer. Forty-five percent of current students received a mobile service plan when they were between the ages of 10-12, so it makes sense that the service evolved to be managed by a mobile app rather than paper forms or even websites.

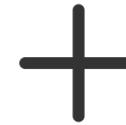
But the medium isn't the whole story; crucially, the app brings everything that a student needs together in one place. Students can even apply for student financing through the app's easy-to-navigate displays and simple design.



Other federal services can learn from this example by thinking about who uses their service and communicating with them on their terms. The creators behind the app understand that students are busy people, and this enables them to manage their needs at a time and in a way that is convenient for them.

The same logic should be applied to unemployment. When people are out of work and rely on insurance payments, they want to receive updates and related information in real-time and be able to make changes or submissions immediately. Could an unemployment benefit app with automatic notifications and upload capabilities help?

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2 Prioritizing functionality

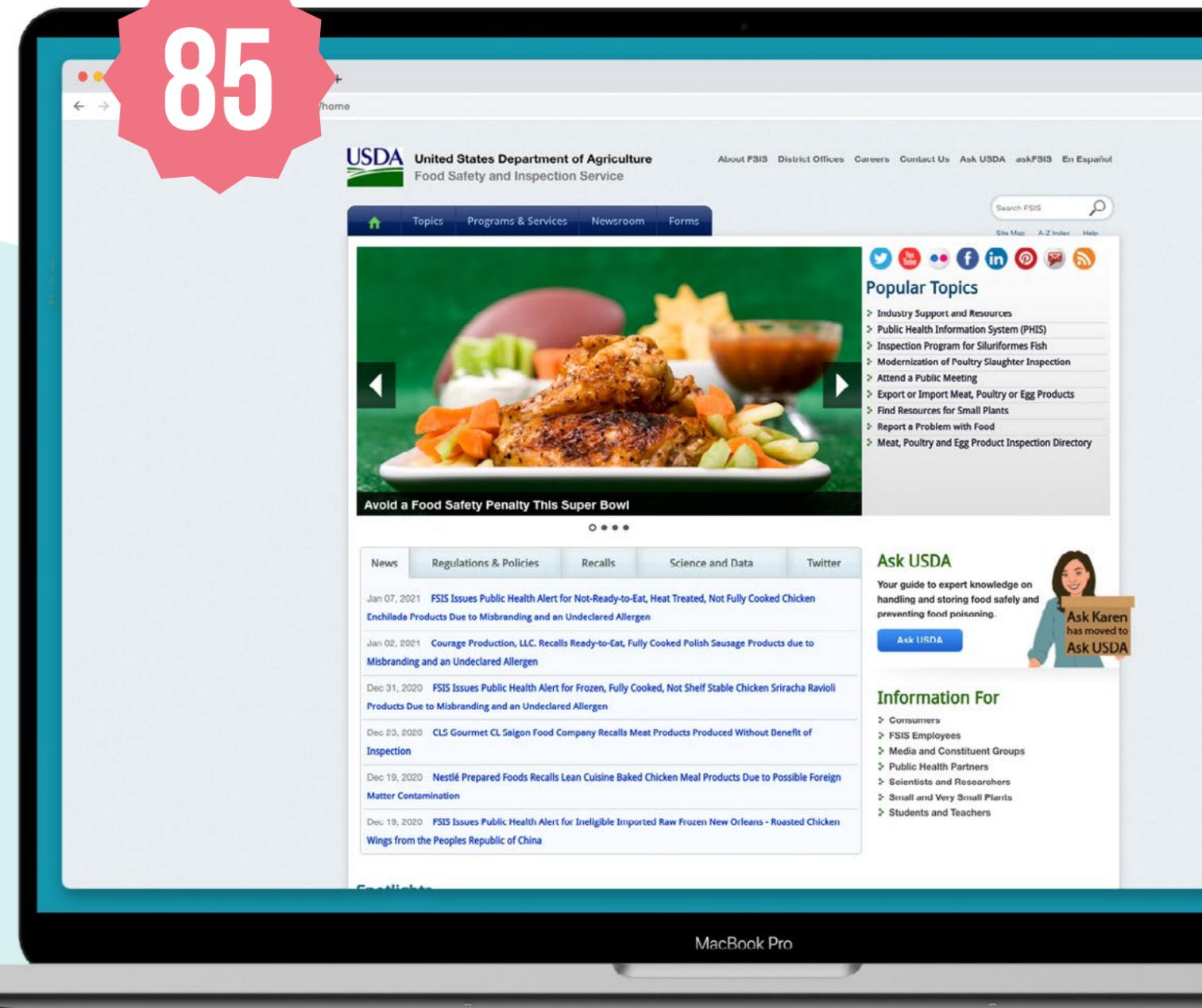
Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Inspection Service

Scoring 85 out of 100 from users of its Office of the Chief Information Officer Service Desk, the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) website is a textbook example of the value of functionality. Compared to other departments which experienced a decline in customer functionality, website quality was one of the areas that held firm, and it's easy to understand why. It's not pretty, but it's straightforward and easy to navigate so you can quickly find what you are looking for. All the forms people could ever need are stored in one location and are easy to fill out and submit.



RATING

85





This attitude towards functionality stretches towards the FSIS's application of social media too. It's all about choosing the right medium and the right timing for each of its social accounts. Twitter is employed for shareable graphics and news stories to best utilize a medium popular with journalists. Facebook posts are for more general interest guidelines and longer posts packed with information. Pinterest hosts downloadable tools, including food safety posters that can help businesses educate their staff.

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The lesson from this is to always think about your end-user and prioritize a simple experience above visual gimmicks. Simplicity is key to providing great service.

This is of particular importance to processing unemployment benefits. Filing for unemployment benefits can be scary and stressful. Instead of leaving people to self-navigate the process across several web links and portals, offer a more user-friendly experience such as an app or straightforward web experience.



3 Start-up mindset

State-specific Covid exposure apps

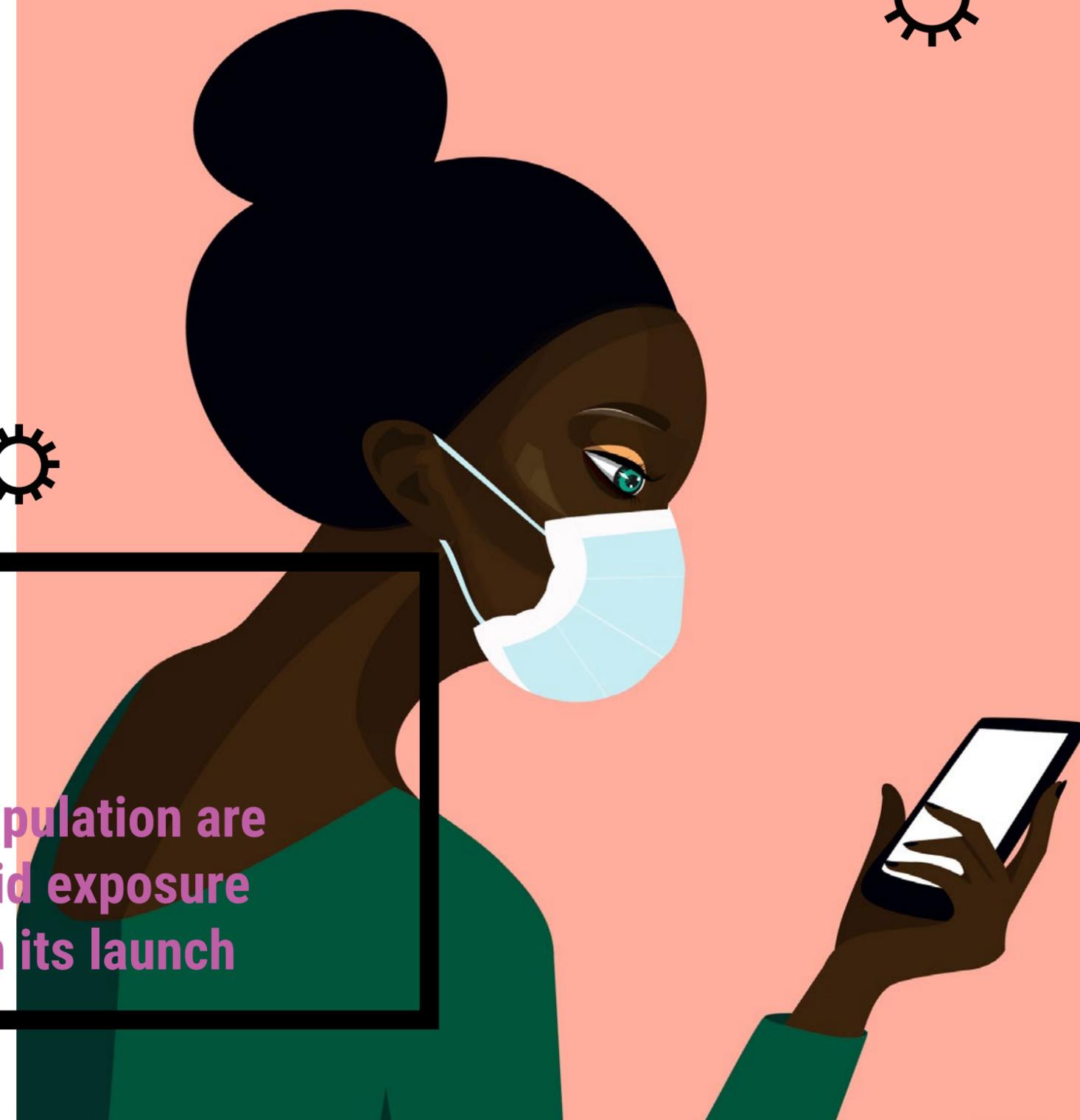
Technology has become central to the US response to Covid-19. Once the importance of contact tracing was realized in spring 2020, it wasn't long before states began launching apps to collect and manage all this data. However, uptake has been slow, to say the least. By October 2020, only a fifth of states had successfully launched apps, but even more frustrating was the lack of users.



For example, only 4.6% of Alabama's adult population are actively using its app four months from its launch in August. Privacy concerns and a clunky user experience have been blamed for its lackluster success over the summer of 2020.

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*As of December 2020





Getting millions of people to download a government app was always going to be an uphill battle.

So how have Covid exposure apps earned their place in this eBook? Because the tide is now turning, and finally, citizens are engaging with them. Big technology has been involved since the start, but by launching fast and adjusting as they learn, Apple and Google have stumbled upon a new protocol – Exposure Notifications Express (EN Express) – which can send push notifications encouraging residents to opt-in. Colorado launched EN Express in late October and signed up 28% of its citizens by the end of November.

Getting millions of people to download a government app was always going to be an uphill battle. But this exercise is a great example of what can be achieved when government collaborates with experts in the private sector and uses a start-up mindset to get the job done right. By continually adjusting and developing, these apps can now reach their potential and make a real difference. We expect to see much more of this in 2021.

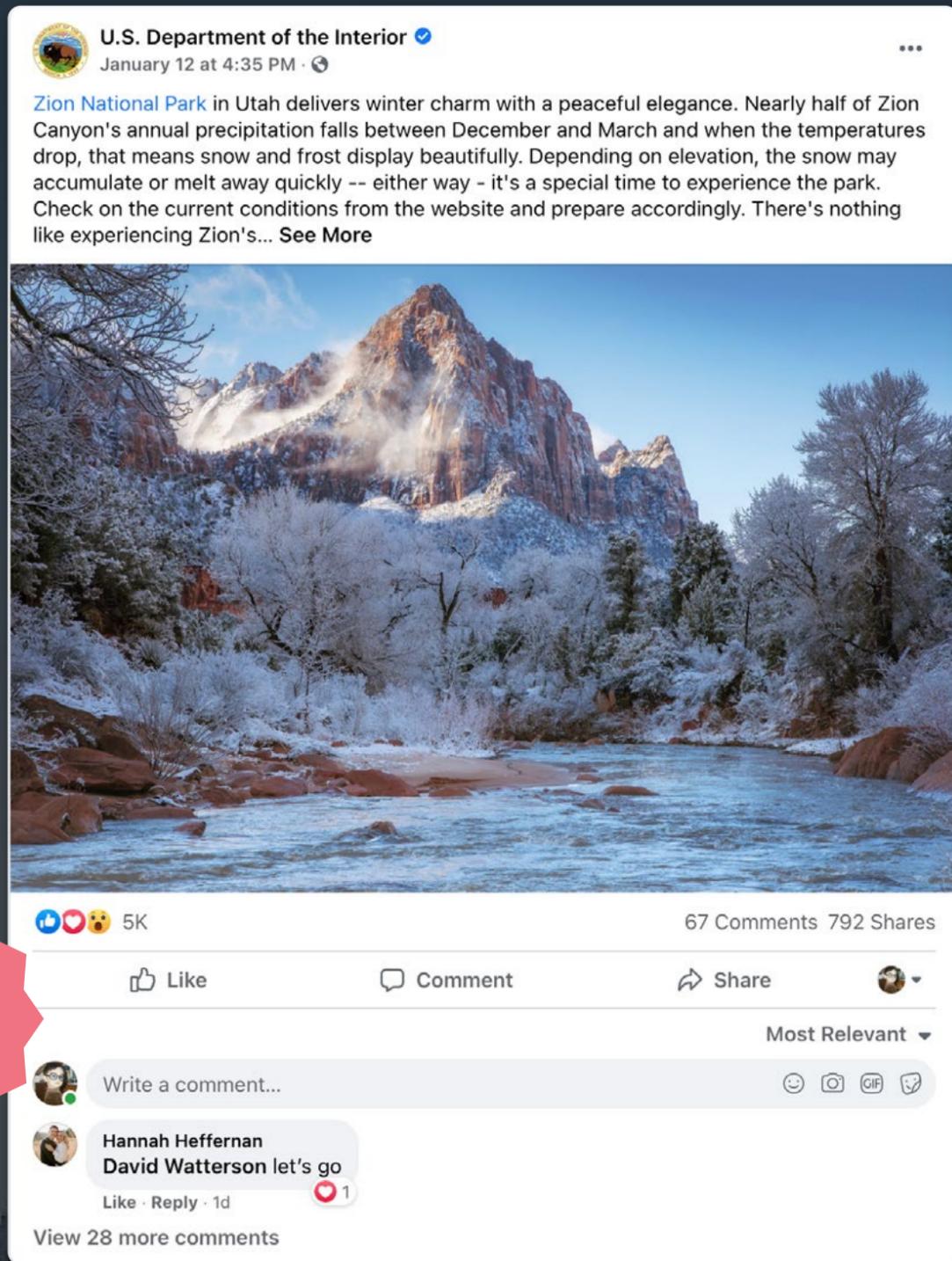
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Investing in quality customer experience

The Department of the Interior

With an ACSI satisfaction rating of 78, the Department of the Interior is cruising at the top of the leader board compared to other federal departments, as it has done for many years. Social media may hold clues as to why. With 5 million followers on Twitter, the Department of the Interior has one of the largest fanbases out of all departments, but it's not just about the followers. Photos of sprawling mountains in North Carolina, Wolf Creek Falls in Oregon and a frozen Dream Lake in Colorado regularly receive upwards of 1,000 likes and retweets. The public is happy to engage with the department, which focuses on aspirational content.

RATING
78

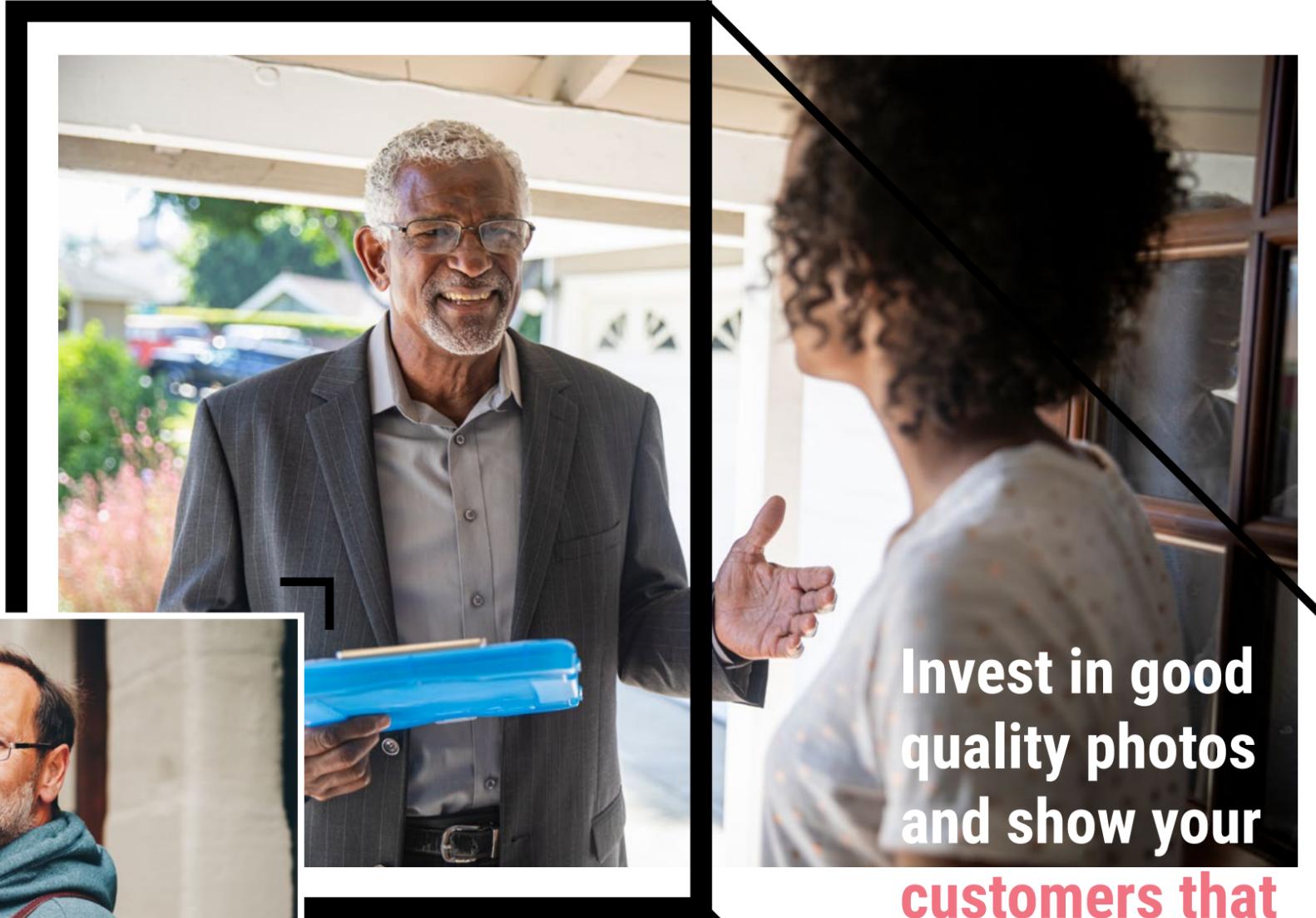




Here, the message is simple: Whatever you do, do it well, be proud of it and shout about it. While not every federal department benefits from beautiful scenery, they all do crucial work that helps society – even on an abstract level. Invest in good quality photos and show your customers that you offer a consistent and quality service.



Every unemployed American supported by state benefits is a success story. Imagine if the Labor Department could use its social media accounts to help remove the stigma that comes with asking for help when it is needed.



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5 Human support

US Citizenship and Immigration Services' EMMA

Named after Emma Lazarus, the poet famous for 'The New Colossus,' the poem inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, the EMMA chatbot handles 1 million interactions every month from people looking for assistance from immigration services.

The bot can answer questions about any service the department offers and is fluent in Spanish and English. Users can use their own words – without relying on government specialist terminology – to get answers about green cards, passports and much more.

EMMA
chatbot handles
1 million
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¿Como puedo ayudarte?



But on the occasion that citizens need to speak to a real person, this is where EMMA comes into 'her' own. When typing a variant of 'Can I speak to a real person,' EMMA asks a few questions about the topic you need to talk about, handles the basics of the interaction (such as asking for the user's receipt number) and connects you seamlessly to a person via live chat.

It's a great example of humans and technology working hand in glove, allowing both sides to do what they do best. This is a critical lesson for customer experience technology. At ContactEngine we know that if you get the conversation right – at the right time, using the right medium and the right language – then people are happy to complete the whole interaction with automated technology. However, success levels go through the roof when the customer knows there are humans there, even if they don't end up speaking to them. If you use technology for speed and accuracy and connect to humans for emotions, understanding and rapport, you will have a winning formula for customer service.

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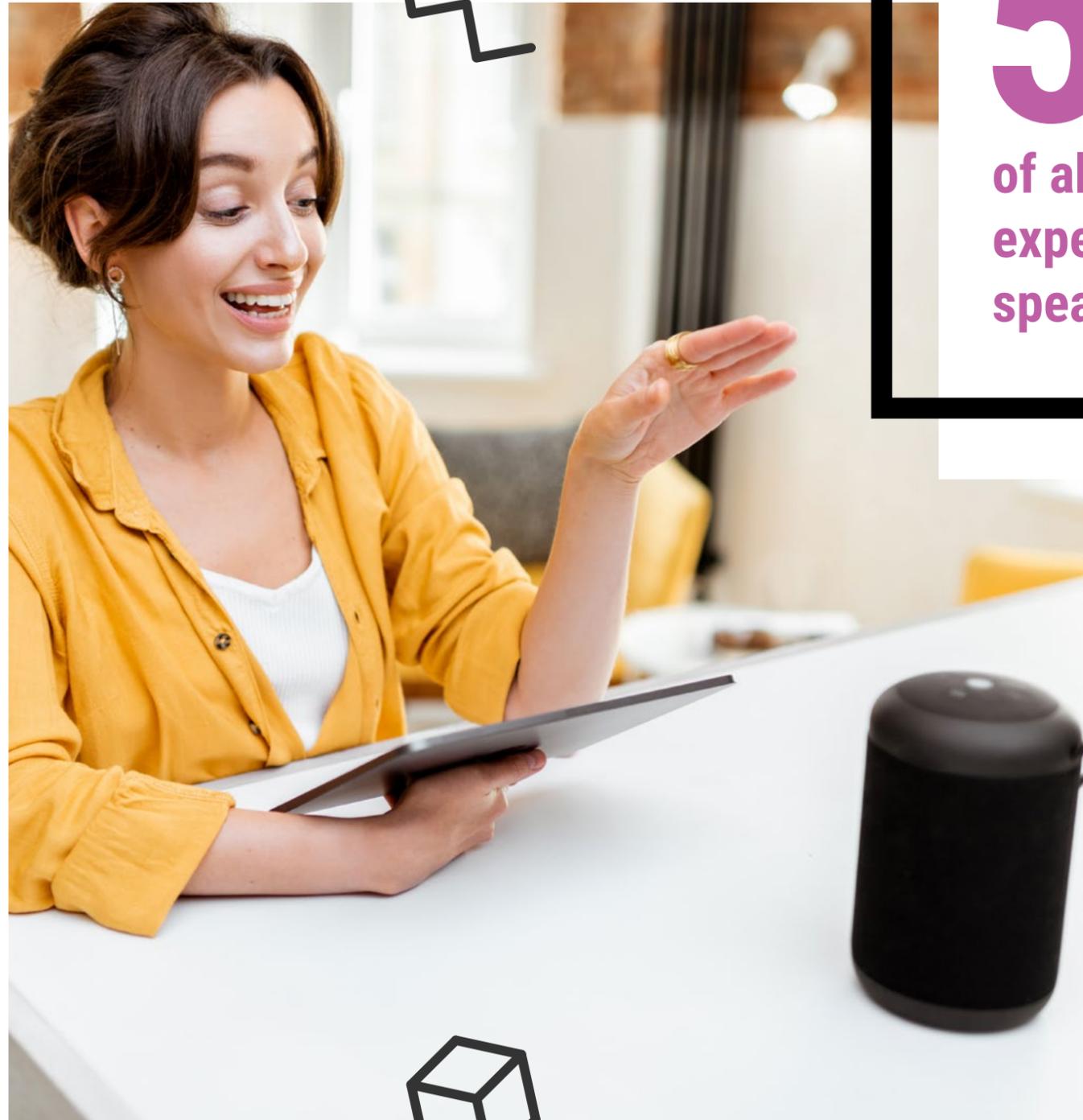
Ease of access

Government of Mississippi State's MISSI



Having two examples of chatbots in this list might appear like overkill, but what makes MISSI so interesting is its integration with Amazon's Alexa. Users that download the 'Ask Mississippi' skill can ask Alexa for current news, random facts, or traffic reports. By linking it to your MyMS account, you can ask Alexa personal questions like 'When does my driver's license expire?'





55%

of all US households are expected to own a smart speaker by 2022.

Voice assistants need to be part of every engagement strategy. Forty million Americans own a smart speaker, with 55% of all US households expected to own one by 2022. When it comes to staring at screens all day borne out of the increase in working from home, an aging population and general

fatigue will only spur citizens' affinity to carry out their admin by voice. It's accessible, it's convenient and it's easy to use.

It also makes government engagement more intrinsic to people's lives. If they can quickly check when their license expires, then they can prepare to renew it further in advance, without suddenly feeling like they are weighed down by admin when it's too late. You can create a scenario where citizens are happy to have ongoing conversations with the government rather than it feeling like a chore that continually falls down the list.

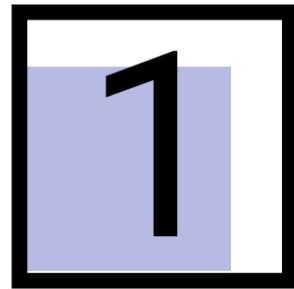


7 Conclusion – Citizens will engage where customer experience excels

Americans are becoming less satisfied with governmental services every year, but it doesn't have to be this way. The six examples here prove that there are ways to create government services that customers genuinely enjoy using and take pride in supporting. All the cases selected here use relevant technology to connect with their audience. These are lessons that the majority of government services all over the world can learn from.

The US has a long, rich history of making bold and entrepreneurial decisions and putting customers at the heart of profitable investments. There is an opportunity for state governments to be a shining example of customer service for many years to come.

8 Five Key Lessons



Use a medium that is right for your audience

An omnichannel approach is the only way to be sure that you are reaching everyone in a way that is convenient and accessible to them.



Share your success

Take your users along the journey with you, communicate what you are doing well and instill pride in living in a country with such an effective and successful government.



Don't forget voice

There is no easier way of communicating for many Americans than speech, so make sure that your service is accessible to voice assistants like Alexa and continually updated with new features and improvements.



Use humans when necessary

Technology alone cannot provide faultless customer service but using it to take care of the basics can create a more rewarding job for your call center staff and a better user experience. This will help increase response times and success rates.



Collaborate with the private sector

Customer service is a crucial differentiator for most businesses, with many great examples of how to do this effectively. You don't need to start from square one to bring an effective customer experience to your department. There's plenty of great technology already in existence that can help make meaningful change quickly.



About ContactEngine

ContactEngine is a Conversational AI technology that enables agencies to proactively engage citizens in conversations that fulfil government objectives. ContactEngine automates outbound citizen engagement across all channels and generates unique insights into the changing patterns of communication by applying demographic and intent analysis, linguistics and ground-breaking artificial intelligence principles to mass volumes of raw data. For more information about ContactEngine, please visit www.contactengine.com/government