Citizens and Service Channels: Channel Choice and Channel Management Implications

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of electronic channels in the 1990s has had a huge impact on governmental service delivery. The new channels have led to many new opportunities to improve public service delivery, not only in terms of citizen satisfaction, but also in cost reduction for governmental agencies. However, until now these promises of e-government have not been met. In general the use of the traditional channels remains high and the costs of introducing and maintaining the electronic channels have merely been additional costs. These observations call for a deeper understanding of the behavior of citizens. Why do citizens choose the channels they use to obtain services? Furthermore, how should knowledge about these behaviors be used to improve governmental multi-channel service strategies and marketing activities? In this article, citizens’ channel behavior will be analyzed while channel usage will be discussed. The authors will explore the channel choices of citizens and further converse on how these findings may help in improving channel strategies and marketing and thus help in improving citizen satisfaction and reduce cost of governmental service delivery.

Keywords: Channel Behavior, Channel Choice, Channel Usage, e-Government, Multi-Channel Management, Public Service Delivery, Service Channels

INTRODUCTION

Citizens and governmental agencies interact through various channels. For example, a governmental agency may send me a letter telling me to pay my taxes and I may phone the tax agency to ask them why. A governmental agency has full control over the information it sends out, in terms of the channels they deploy to do so. However, in most situations, citizens are free to choose their channels if they need governmental services. Yet, governmental agencies try to influence the behavior of their citizens. Service delivery is expensive and, given budgetary constraints, governments need to optimize their service policies and service channel management. In order to do so, governments need to understand why citizens use the channels they choose for their contacts with governmental agencies.

Further, a number of important developments have altered the service channel landscape fundamentally in the past decades. The first development is the change in governmental agencies themselves: the shift from bureaucracy to customer centeredness. Nowadays, governmental agencies pay loads of attention to public services and the improvement of the
services (Bekkers, van Duivenboden, & Lips, 2005). However, this is no common situation. Before thinking about services became popular, governmental agencies were merely occupied with the implementation of policies and maintenance of the law (Bekkers et al., 2005). Where governmental agencies until the 1970’s could be characterized as Weberian bureaucracies (see below), influences such as the New Public Management (NPM) caused governmental agencies to start thinking about services and paying attention to the demand of citizens. For a long time, governmental agencies thought in terms of supply, rather than demand (van Dijk & van Deursen, 2006). Changes in management approach caused organizations to think more in terms of the needs of their citizens, rather than merely the supply of services. This development caused governmental agencies to develop specific (multi)channel strategies and determine largely how services and channels are perceived by the public sector.

A second development is the impact of ICT in governmental agencies. ICT did not only impact organizational aspects of the public sector, such as new ways of information handling and new work tools that affected how service provision is organized, but, more important, ICT has given us new service channels, such as the World Wide Web, e-mail and more recently chat and SMS. The arrival of these new channels has led to more thought about the different characteristics of service channels and the ways in which channels are positioned in an ideal service channel mix.

It appears that the service channel landscape has changed enormously in the past decades. But what insights have the developments led to? And have the developments actually improved service delivery? The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the relevant developments in public service delivery and to determine whether those developments have affected a) service channel strategies and b) actual citizens’ behavior. Hereby we draw insights from various relevant domains on service delivery and service channels, such as the e-Government literature, marketing and information science (Pieterson & van Dijk, 2007).

First, we discuss the background of the topic. The current status quo is largely determined by developments such as the arrival of the NPM and the birth of new (electronic) service channels in the 1990’s. Next, we discuss citizens’ channel behavior and channel management strategies. Based on the analysis of the current situation, we present some suggestions for future research and we finish the paper with a number of concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND

Usually, governmental organizations are seen as “bureaucratic” organizations. This Weberian type of organization focuses on such aspects as departmentalization, specialization, standardization and routinization of the production process (Simon, 1976). Consequence of this focus is that “cost-efficiency” is a central goal of bureaucratic governmental organizations (Tat-Kei Ho, 2002). This primary focus on internal processes and procedures led to a low service orientation in the public sector until the 1970’s. As a consequence, within the public sector, there was little attention for the relationship with its environment; why ask citizens about their needs if you are able to assess those needs yourself?

This perception changed slightly in the 1970’s, when the traditional Weberian bureaucracy became increasingly criticized. Main points of critique on the Weberian bureaucracy are that it is a rigid organization type characterized by proceduralism and the incapability to treat customers as humans who have preferences and feelings (Bozeman, 2000). At the same time, external influences also put pressures on governmental agencies, there were economic and fiscal pressures, due to budget deficits. In addition, citizens and businesses increasingly demanded good services, resulting from service delivery developments in the private sector. Hence, a shift started towards a customer orientation in the public sector,
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