



Driving Change—It's about Customer Service!

By P.J. Wilkins and Dotty Drinkwater

If you're a toll operations professional, you've encountered your fair share of consumer complaints about your state's toll system, some of which can reach as far as the governor's office. You've probably also wondered what your agency can do to minimize such complaints. The answer may lie in reexamining the service levels you offer and redefining the performance standards you set to ensure you meet your objectives.

Sometimes our industry focuses too much attention on the technological aspects of our business, trying to determine what new gizmo will help us collect tolls faster, better, or more effectively. And while technology is important, we tend to forget about another, equally vital part of our work: customer service.

We do customer service the way we've always done it, don't we? Yet the old way of doing things may be inadequate to meet the needs and demands of today's ultra-busy consumers. Just as the marketplace changes, so must we. We need to be more efficient to satisfy the 21st-century motorist. Establishing a more accessible and service-oriented toll operation isn't impossible, not if one thinks outside the box. Thinking outside the traditional "government box" entails defining a transportation department not as a static public entity but as a responsive, service-providing business with the taxpayer as its customer.

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Consumers of any product or service expect to receive professional delivery of the best product, at a reasonable price, and in a timely fashion. If the customer discovers a defect in the product after purchase, he or she understandably expects prompt and satisfactory resolution. If the buyer receives resolution, customer complaints are dramatically reduced, and so are the provider’s costs for processing and resolving such complaints. The end result is a pleased customer and a successful, efficient, cost-effective, business.

Raising the Performance Bar

After years of dealing with time-consuming and costly customer frustrations and complaints, in May 2003 the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) decided to tackle the issue head-on. In so doing, DelDOT first defined the mission of its business: to provide the highest-quality services to its toll-road travelers, promptly and with skill and courtesy. Instead of having the goal of satisfying government, DelDOT aimed to satisfy the customer. The keys to our success were establishing—and enforcing—a set of strong but reasonable performance standards that were customer-friendly and customer focused.

DelDOT implemented the E-ZPass electronic toll collection system as part of its effort to be accessible, responsive, and efficient, recognizing that a customer’s time is valuable. The agency took this approach a step further by being one of the first public transportation agencies in the country to

enact nonstop, high-speed E-ZPass toll collection on its roadway. No more waiting in line to pay tolls. And no more waiting for change—the customer would already have a prepaid toll account, which functions similarly to popularly used debit cards.



But the E-ZPass product DelDOT wanted to provide didn't stop with ease of use. In Delaware, the product motorists are buying isn't just the use of the roadway but the continued satisfactory performance of the roadway and the mechanism used to pay for it. That mechanism, in the form of E-ZPass accounts, entrusts DelDOT with the care of taxpayer funds to be used when the customer decides to purchase the "product," which in this case is the ability to drive on one of DelDOT's toll roads. And as with any other marketplace purchase, E-ZPass customers are entitled to a prompt, accurate, and full accounting of the handling of their money, including quick and courteous resolution of any problems that arise.

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Delaware's two toll roads, the Delaware Turnpike on I-95 and SR-1, run most of the length and width of Delaware and are used by more than 60 million commuters, shoppers, and recreational travelers each year. DelDOT implemented E-ZPass in November 1998 to relieve congestion and facilitate payment of tolls along the roads. The resulting benefits to both the agency and motorists have been obvious: congestion at toll plazas has been relieved, safety has improved, and travel has been expedited.

Here, DelDOT's purpose was to provide an efficient and accurate service to help speed travelers along. But there's nothing more frustrating to a customer at a grocery store, for example, than waiting in line for what seems like an eternity just to make a purchase. Customers of a toll road are no different: they would much rather travel unimpeded than wait in line to pay a toll.

The 24/7 Solution

For all its benefits, uninterrupted travel is only one part of a successful E-ZPass system; another, equally essential ingredient is a customer-centered focus.

Consumers want to be able to resolve any problem with the products they buy easily and conveniently, and with today's hectic schedules, they want to be able to manage their accounts any time of day. For example, when you're reviewing your monthly bill at 8 o'clock in the evening and you

discover an error, you don't want to wait until the next day to resolve the problem during "normal" business hours. That's frustrating. So in Delaware, we decided to redefine "normal" business hours. We implemented an E-ZPass service center that's open 24 hours a day seven days a week—with people, not automated answering systems—to address customer inquiries. No other electronic toll operation in the country provides this 24-hour personal-access service to its customers.

All calls to the center are answered by a knowledgeable and courteous customer service representative, not a mechanized answering system, within three rings. That's right, three rings—by a human being! After more than two years of operation, the center's average call-response time is now one second. Previously, and as is still the case with most credit card, supplier, or other business service centers, callers had to wait 5 to 10 minutes, if not far longer, while listening to elevator music before being able to actually speak with a "live" customer service representative. And that typically occurred after several minutes of plowing through "press 1 for questions about your account, press 2 for a copy of your billing statement, press 3 for your current account balance," and so on.

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If an E-ZPass customer elects to inquire about a problem by mail or e-mail rather than by phone, the DelDOT service center processes the request and sends a response to the customer within three days, with most responses sent out the same day. Whether by phone, in

person for walk-in visitors, or via the Web, Delaware's customer service performance standards are geared for accessibility, responsiveness, and efficiency.

Getting to this point took some thoughtful examination. Fully aware of the old rule of thumb that 5 percent of the inquiries cause 95 percent of the work and that inadequate response rates frequently are a prime source of customer complaints, the state analyzed its customer base, inquiry volume, and associated workload factors, such as balancing non-customer-contact work (including account transaction research) with call-center response requirements. DelDOT then worked with its customer service center vendor, TransCore, to develop the new center's staffing levels, response and processing standards, and hours of operation to enable the



Delaware's E-ZPass store.

center to respond immediately and efficiently to all customer inquiries, both the mundane and the extraordinary.

To determine these performance requirements, a special DelDOT customer service team actively engaged all stakeholders in each step of the project. This team considered an array of operational topics, including the number and content of customer service complaints. The team categorized the issues and recommended solutions, which were subsequently incorporated into the new service center contract. For example, the team analyzed historical inbound call volumes and patterns to determine exactly when customers were calling or attempting to call DelDOT. Such statistics are easily obtained from most standard network telephone systems.

The team determined that although 75 to 80 percent of inbound calls came in from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (“normal” business hours), 20 to 25 percent of the call volume occurred during mid- to late-evening and very-early-morning hours. They also found holiday volume was about 35 percent of the normal daily call volume. Further, customers very much disliked being transferred around to various customer service representatives and having to repeat themselves several times.

The ability to resolve customer problems promptly was another area of study. The team looked at the potential of offering the customer a “one-stop” answer point as opposed to first screening for content and then transferring the call to another department.



Customer service reps at DelDOT are trained to recognize that friendly and accessible customer service is key.

All of these factors resulted in performance standards that called for a service center staffed with cross-trained workers that would be open 24/7 throughout the year except on four holidays (New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas).

Ever since the center opened in October 2003, customers have reacted with delight. They frequently relate their surprise that they could reach and speak with a human being to resolve an issue at the customer's preferred time and get their questions answered right then and there. Or that if they wanted to visit the service center in person to obtain a transponder or make a cash payment, they could do so at 10 o'clock on a Sunday night if they so desired.

Interstate Access

Knowing that certain customers such as commercial trucking companies would require more-specific industry expertise in account handling, Delaware established a dedicated, industry-knowledgeable unit to service commercial-vehicle operators. Similarly, the agency realized that certain customer inquiries would require resolution with other states' E-ZPass agencies, because E-ZPass is an interjurisdictional payment mechanism that can be used on highways, bridges, and tunnels along the East Coast and in certain Central states.

To ensure that Delaware customers' satisfaction would be maintained even when they were driving on another state's facilities, DelDOT dedi-

cated part of its customer service group to research and adjustment activities to provide full and timely resolution of any issues its customers might face. For example, when a Delaware E-ZPass customer has a question about a toll rate on a neighboring state’s roadway, the Delaware customer service center, armed with information about all other jurisdictions’ facilities, can immediately and accurately respond and, if appropriate, process any disputed toll with the other agency and post a credit to the customer’s account. In short, DelDOT offers a “one-stop” response to the customer’s call.

During this process, DelDOT realized that E-ZPass customers might occasionally forget to place their transponders in their vehicles before traveling through E-ZPass toll lanes. Drivers can detach the Velcro-affixed transponder from their windshield and store it in the glove compartment or a briefcase after parking the vehicle. If the driver forgets to reaffix the transponder to the windshield, electronic toll collection lanes, depending on the installation, will record a violation. So DelDOT adopted a system whereby we review our license plate numbers to determine whether a violating vehicle holds a plate associated with an E-ZPass account. If it does, DelDOT automatically bills the customer for the toll rather than sending out a violation notice.

DelDOT took another aggressive step in defining its new customer service-oriented standards by requiring that every violation notice be personally researched by a service center staff member to ensure that no violations are issued to Delaware E-ZPass accountholders in good standing. The agency adopted the rule to allow for customers who might purchase a new vehicle but forget to add the new plate number to their E-ZPass accounts. These strong, but reasonable, response and resolution performance standards have been in place since the service center’s inception.

Getting Everyone Onboard

Performance standards are all well and good on paper, but they’re meaningless if no one—from the lowest to the highest levels—abides by them. Accordingly, DelDOT makes sure each E-ZPass service center staff member fully understands the reasons for the center’s operational procedures and activities. When staff are educated about why they are being asked to abide by certain standards, they can see for themselves that the standards actually help them, too, by helping to stop a problem before it starts.



DelDOT customer service reps at work.

For example, if a customer's call is answered by an automated system and two minutes later the customer is put on hold for 10 minutes before finally being connected to a human being, the customer's attitude usually reflects his or her built-up frustration from the call's first 12 minutes. DelDOT's performance standard that inbound calls are to be answered within three rings may sound very strict to a customer service representative initially, but when that representative is greeted by a customer who is delighted that the phone was answered so rapidly, the rep quickly recognizes the benefit of having set "the opening stage" for customer satisfaction.

The key here is commitment and shared vision. The entire DelDOT team is committed to providing a high-quality customer service experience, and positive, real-time customer feedback reinforces that commitment, as do our operational policies. For example, many call centers institute a maximum call length their customer service reps must follow. We decided, however, that such a rule wasn't in keeping with our customer focus. Instead, we measure the quality of the call, not its length. Interestingly, our average call length is still consistent with the industry norm.

DelDOT closely and regularly monitors its performance standards, and, if something is amiss, it immediately acts to correct the situation by defining and implementing a customer-oriented solution, with the primary goal of making sure the solution's benefit is readily apparent to the customer. During our four holiday closings each year, for instance, the service cen-

ter uses an automated voice response system to inform the customer that the center is closed while simultaneously offering basic account inquiry capabilities. If the customer still needs immediate attention, he or she is directed to call one of our open service centers located at each of the toll plazas.

When we planned to launch the automated holiday system, we first tested it to make sure it worked properly and found it still had a few flaws. We recognized that the system wouldn't meet customers' needs in that condition and postponed its introduction. In the meantime, we remained open for the first holiday after the center's debut.

What does all of this cost? A 24/7 customer service operation with the tough performance standards DelDOT stipulates could be an extremely expensive proposition. But it doesn't have to be, not if you think outside the box and use creativity, imagination, and innovation to improve your operations. For example, Delaware created a process whereby normal service center functions are spread throughout the 24-hour day, using the full abilities of the staff and enacting cross-training of all employees. Nonverbal customer contact activities, such as violations image reviews or Web inquiry responses, can be conducted by call-center representatives during overnight hours, when inbound call volume is lower than at more peak times of day.

Each staff member is considered a customer service representative regardless of his or her primary function—a radically different concept when it comes to government service operations.

Though, most often, transportation service centers have certain staff perform only certain functions, DelDOT's approach to cross-train staff in all operational functions enables that staff to be fully employed day or night. First and foremost, each staff member is considered a customer service representative regardless of his or her primary function—a radically different concept when it comes to government service operations. In this way, and regardless of operational time of day, the service center is well-equipped to provide solutions to any customer problem.

If customer demands require greater attention to inbound mail, and inbound call volume is being processed well within our standards, call-center staff responsibilities are shifted to include such activities as programming and issuing transponders or formulating responses to mailed-in

customer inquiries. Conversely, if the call volume spikes unexpectedly, virtually everyone in the center is trained and ready to take phone calls, doubling the staff available to answer calls within a minute or two.

The examples go on and on, but the underlying theme is the same: Serve the customer. The result is that the cost to DelDOT to operate 24/7 versus during “normal” business hours was less than a 10-percent premium—a small price to pay for the added benefit of exceptional availability. It’s reasonable to impose strict performance standards for product or service delivery. If doing so costs slightly more than average product service, so be it. In the end, DelDOT has experienced a net savings.

Impressive Results

So what are the results of these efforts? Previously Delaware logged many written and verbal customer complaints, with, on average, 10 to 15 complaints a month reaching the governor’s office and state legislators. Now, in the two years since service center operations began, the agency has received only one customer complaint. And upon investigation, DelDOT found that that one customer was from a state other than Delaware. This customer ended up being so pleased with the way DelDOT’s service center responded to his concerns that he immediately switched his E-ZPass account to Delaware.

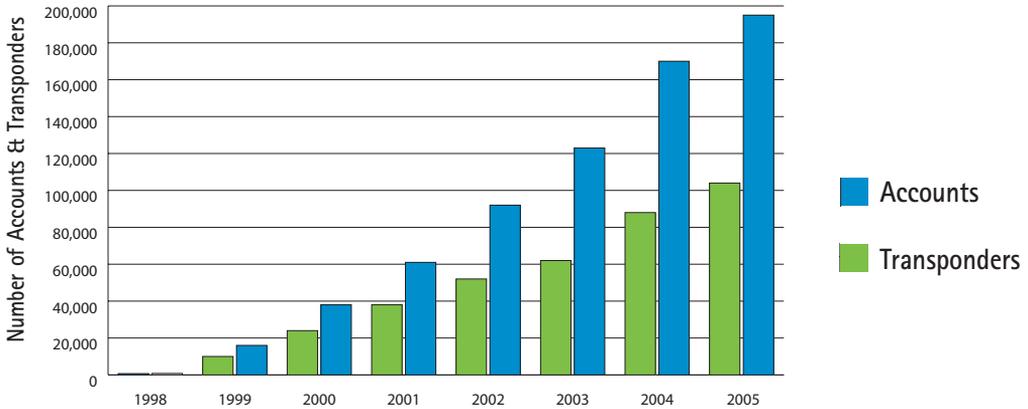
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E-ZPass customers may enroll in any E-ZPass-participating state, though they are encouraged to enroll in their home state and, for convenience, usually do. Because of the relatively small geographic distance between Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, customers may live in one of these states but travel through the others frequently, making enrollment in one’s home state less of an issue. There is no penalty for enrolling in

a state other than one’s home state. Currently, in addition to the states noted above, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, West Virginia, Virginia, and Illinois participate in the E-ZPass system.

Instead of customer complaints, in the form of weekly letters, calls, and e-mails, DelDOT now receives numerous weekly compliments about its service. Indeed, Delaware customers have recognized, and are acknowledging, that the state has changed the way it does business with its E-

Account and Transponder Growth



In the two years after implementing its customer service center in 2003, the Delaware Department of Transportation nearly doubled the number of its E-ZPass accounts from the previous five years.

ZPass customers. DelDOT has actually received several thank-you letters from toll violators, which had never happened before. It seems that even they appreciate fast, friendly, courteous service.

Ultimately, Delaware has changed the way citizens think of the customer service they receive from a government agency, so much so that DelDOT has been asked to help other agencies improve the services they offer. DelDOT is currently working with the state's motor vehicle division, for example, using the lessons we have learned to help the division increase customer service and satisfaction. Several U.S. toll authorities have also asked DelDOT how they could benefit from similar initiatives.

Does the above sound interesting? If so, perhaps it's time for your organization to get refocused on putting the service back into customer service.

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