

# Customer Service is Not Customer Experience

*Why the Distinction Matters — and What It Means for How Municipalities Serve Residents*

## THE CENTRAL ARGUMENT

# Excellent customer service delivered inside a poor customer experience still produces a poor outcome.



### Customer Service

An event — bounded by a single interaction. What happens when a resident contacts their municipality.

vs.



### Customer Experience

A relationship — the full arc of every interaction before, during, and after contact. Shaped by system design, not just staff behaviour.

## HOW THEY DIFFER

# Six Organizational Dimensions

|                       | Customer Service                   | Customer Experience                                   |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| SCOPE                 | Single interaction or touchpoint   | Full arc of the resident relationship                 |
| TIMEFRAME             | Bounded — starts/ends with contact | Continuous — accumulates over time                    |
| PRIMARY DRIVER        | Staff behaviour & training         | System design & organizational alignment              |
| MEASUREMENT           | Interaction satisfaction (CSAT)    | Trust, ease, equity, perceived value                  |
| WHERE PROBLEMS APPEAR | At point of contact                | Across the journey — invisible handoffs, no follow-up |
| OWNERSHIP             | Frontline staff & supervisors      | Whole organization — senior leadership required       |

## Three Structural Causes



### Departmental Accountability

Each department is accountable for its own service delivery — but no single department is accountable for the resident's overall experience. When accountability is departmental, experience is accidental.



### What Gets Measured Gets Managed

CSAT scores on individual interactions don't capture hold times, contradictory information, or unacknowledged submissions. Municipalities optimizing for service metrics remain confused when trust continues to lag.



### The Training Mismatch

Investment flows to frontline training — but you cannot train your way to a good CX. If the portal is confusing, the website contradicts the phone rep, or data is collected three times — courtesy cannot compensate.

## Three Consequences for Municipalities



### Misallocated Investment

Resources flow to frontline improvements while structural experience problems go unaddressed. Every dollar spent training staff to be courteous in a confusing process is a dollar not spent redesigning that process.



### Persistent Trust Gaps

Trust is shaped by cumulative experience. One excellent service interaction cannot undo three frustrating journeys. When municipalities optimize for interaction quality and neglect journey quality, trust remains stubbornly low.



### Equity Blind Spots

CX failures are not equally distributed. Digital barriers, business-hours processes, and Grade 12 reading levels disproportionately harm residents with less time, English proficiency, or digital confidence. These are invisible to service-only metrics.

## Six Shifts from Service to Experience

**1** *Interaction* → **Journey**

Map full service journeys. Find where residents disengage or give up.

**2** *Departmental Accountability* → **Cross-Functional**

Assign end-to-end journey owners who span departments.

**3** *Satisfaction* → **Trust**

Measure trust, perceived fairness, and resident effort — not just CSAT.

**4** *Training* → **Redesign**

Fix systems and processes, not just the people operating them.

**5** *Reactive* → **Proactive Communication**

Proactively update residents on status. Remove the need to follow up.

**6** *Aggregate Metrics* → **Disaggregated Data**

Segment by demographics to uncover hidden equity gaps.

## CX is not a project. It is an organizational commitment.



### CAOs & Directors

Ask not just 'Did we process the applications?'  
— but 'What was it like to be the applicant?'



### Council Members

Hold administration accountable for resident  
experience metrics alongside financial and  
operational metrics.



### Budget Processes

Treat journey redesign as a legitimate  
investment category, not a discretionary  
enhancement.



### Culture

Culture follows accountability. Accountability  
follows what leadership chooses to measure  
and reward.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

# Customer service is a floor, not a ceiling.

### Customer Service

- Describes the minimum standard of conduct
- Necessary — but not sufficient
- Optimizing here without CX: misses the point

### Customer Experience

- Shapes how residents feel about their municipality
- Drives trust, engagement, and willingness to participate
- Requires expanding from interaction → journey → organization

*Customer service is how you treat people at the door. Customer experience is whether the door was in the right place, the hallway made sense, and the room was worth entering.*