

Big G in Conversation: Service in the 21st Century: November 12, 2020

Transcript

Host: Wendy King

Stephen O'Brien, General Manager of the City's Clerk's Office

Sasha Einwechter, General Manager of the City's Information Technology Services

Karen Newland, Manager of Finance Client Services

Wendy King 0:00

Welcome to Big G in Conversation, the podcast from inside Guelph City Hall. Hi, I'm Wendy King. And on today's show, we're talking about customer service in the 21st century, and how Guelph plans to modernize what it offers to residents and businesses. I love good customer service. So let's get started.

Wendy King 0:21

Big G in Conversation. It's where we talk all things city of Guelph and budget. And today, it's all about service for the 21st century customer service. So, joining me is Stephen O'Brien, the general manager of the city's clerk's office. Welcome to the show, Steven.

Stephen O'Brien 0:38

Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy King 0:39

Also, Sasha Einwechter, GM of the city's Information Technology Department. Great to have you, Sasha.

Sasha Einwechter 0:45

Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy King 0:46

And a big part of the podcast is how we all these great city initiatives related to budget, so please welcome Karen Newland, who is the manager of finance Client Services.

Karen Newland 0:57

Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy King 0:58

So Stephen, you know, your customer service. And it's so important, I think even more so now than in the past. I don't know about you, but I expect really good customer service. So how does that actually react? I mean, we know what it's like at a store. We know what good customer service is as a restaurant. But what about for a city?

Stephen O'Brien 1:23

Well, I think I think you're spot on. I think I think your your analogy that Wendy is is really on point in the sense that that people have customer service interactions through their daily lives. And that doesn't change for government, they come to government to access services, and they expect a level or a degree of customer service, that's probably the same and in some ways, probably even greater than they receive, you know, to your to your point at a at a restaurant, or if they're if they're elsewhere online. So I think I think that's very much, that's very much the case for everybody's perception of where they want to be with respect to customer service.

Wendy King 1:56

And Sasha, when we refer to modernizing, which I'm assuming we're talking about today, modernizing customer service, does that necessarily mean technology?

Sasha Einwechter 2:07

Well, some of its technology. In IT, we have a saying we talk about people process and technology and basically need all three to make something really happen. But really, what we're looking at is increasing our digital tools to really provide access to city services. And to be really honest, we know our systems aren't as advanced, as you see in other levels of government or even in the private sector. And especially when we look at what you can do from your home. So we've seen a

through this pandemic, an increase of digital services used by people, we are now ordering our meals through our cell phones, and we're looking to do the same with the government services.

Wendy King 2:51

And Stephen just for an overview, where would you say the city is in terms of its customer service?

Stephen O'Brien 2:58

Yeah, I mean, I think I think, you know, I'll use I'll use another analogy, or people think of the term modernization and government and they may not be in the same sentence, they may not be akin people might not sort of link those two things. But Guelph is a place that is that is, I believe, seem to be as innovative and progressive. It's a place where, where people enjoy, you know, doing doing business and living in a place that's innovative and progressive in that regard. And so, in that same way, we we are sort of pushing that envelope of modernization and innovation at the government service level and in through the services we deliver to the community. And so, yeah, we're pushing that envelope, and we're trying to make we're trying to we're trying to be better to do better at customer service. And so that's, that's certainly a goal for Sasha myself, but really, you know, all city staff across all departments.

Wendy King 3:50

And obviously, none of this happens overnight. I'm sure you've been planning all this stuff for a long, long time. But Karen, how does it impact budget planning?

Karen Newland 4:01

So, with all of our projects council uses the budget set the pace of when we implement new services, processes or projects like this one. In the budget we're about to present to Council on November 17, the investment to improve and modernize how we deliver service to our customers is included in the budget under digital tools and advanced technology. And we're really happy to be able to be moving these projects forward and modernizing the city.

Wendy King 4:30

So I know the city has its Community Plan and strategic plan in place. And we've talked in earlier podcasts about how budget items align with strategic priorities. So what new customer service initiatives are you looking at? And how do those kind of line up with what you have planned?

Stephen O'Brien 4:49

Maybe I'll jump in Wendy. We have we have what I think are some some pretty innovative and interesting changes that we hope will certainly make it easier for people to access services. Some of these initiatives are underway. Some of them are yet to yet to come online and will be advanced as funding and resources become available. You know, a big concept. And, you know, Sasha alluded to it, but is the idea of online self service, people want to be able to go online to access services on their own at their own time, they might want to do it later in the evening after kids are in bed, or whatever their life situation permits.

Stephen O'Brien 5:26

And one example I can give you is property taxes, you know, we'd love to have the ability for for individuals to look up property tax information online, you can't do that right now you can't look at your your tax file online. So that's an example of something that we'd like to fix. And ideally, new property tax billing software will come online, and will allow property owners, both residential and commercial, to view their bill, and do things online. And that might not seem incredibly innovative. Because, again, I come back to what I said earlier, you've got folks that are doing this in other areas of their life, they're looking at their banking information online, they should be able to do the same thing with respect to property taxes. And so, you know, in some ways, we're catching up. And in a lot of ways, it's actually leading edge and innovative in our sector. There's not many places where you can do that, and many communities where you can do that.

Wendy King 6:16

Yeah, I love what you said about any hour in any day, because I think some of us are still kind of stuck in that nine to five, you know, in our head, it's got Oh, can't call City Hall, you know, unless it's Monday to Friday, between certain hours, whereas that's really not true anymore. For anything, right.

Stephen O'Brien 6:32

Yeah. And I think there's a lot of people in that in that sort of same boat that are that are that experienced that, you know, we've got other enhancements that are

coming, appointment bookings, lots of people come to city hall for various number of things. And sometimes you have to come to city hall to access a service, it's just the nature of the beast, you need to have a document that has to be signed or commissioned, for example. And so there is a need to be at City Hall. And and I think COVID has forced us to also think about service enhancements, and an example I can use as appointment booking software and solutions. So, to manage the flow of traffic to City Hall, we're going to be standing up and bringing online and appointment booking system so that people can sign up for a time slot to come in for things like marriage license, I mentioned, you know, having documents formerly commission. So we're all we're sort of being cognizant and aware of public health guidelines. But we're also enhancing that service because you could be after hours not have to be on the phone to wait to book a time you can use your device, find a time in the next day or two that works for your schedule, book that time and know that we'll be ready and waiting and happy to serve you when you arrive.

Wendy King 7:45

I'm not sure who to direct this to but just jump in. You know, we're not all super tech savvy speaking for myself. So can you are you going to help people? I mean, is it really so easy? We're just going to be able to figure it out? Or, you know, as the transition happens, will you be assisting people?

Sasha Einwechter 8:02

As all jump in here? Yeah, not everyone has the same level of technology expertise. No. And not everyone has the same level of technology comfort. So we'd like to ease into things. So definitely, it'll be available. And if you are comfortable, you can dive right in and just start using. However, if you're not, there's gonna be some tools, whether that be a video that we post online, that walks you through the steps. And in some cases, that what we've done successfully in the past is we have people in line or as you're queued up, showing you what the digital experience could be like. So in no way does in opening up a digital channel, close our other service channels. But it's just another option. And we want to make sure that people feel comfortable. So there is always an option to gain assistance on how to use that, that service and how to use that digital channel more effectively.

Stephen O'Brien 9:00

Even just to get just to build on exactly what Sasha said it comes down to a couple things is people are expecting more channels to be able to access services. So we've all been to websites where the little chat window pops out that you know those kind of levels of service are things that we are contemplating were looking at

we are considering it doesn't mean we we cut the phone cord and not have a phone line system available as well. It's just another channel through which people can access it. And I think most importantly, those folks that are digitally savvy can pick things up fairly quickly. But the reality too is we've got we've got to be able to make sure the services we deliver that are digital are very intuitive and easy for people to pick up and use on their own. And so that you I'm sure we'll get to it, but concepts of user design and user centric design thinking in that way is really important as well for us.

Wendy King 9:48

I thought it was interesting when you said like some of the stuff that you would be implementing. It seems so obvious to us now. So my question is, why hasn't some of this already been done?

Stephen O'Brien 10:00

I can Yeah, go ahead, Sasha.

Sasha Einwechter 10:02

All right, well, so I was gonna say some of it has. So it maybe hasn't been done on the grand scale that we're looking to embark in now. But we have some digital services that, you know, if I look at our waste collection app, our snowplow app, which hopefully we're not using too soon, but the we have those digital services, but they're not the whole breadth of the services that the city provides. So there are some out there, but I think there there are definitely more areas to explore. Steven, do you want to add anything there?

Stephen O'Brien 10:37

Yeah, I mean, I would say, you know, we were thinking about how COVID has played a role in kind of speeding things up and moving these these these sort of things along. You know, there's, there's that sort of saying that necessity is the mother of invention. So Sasha is quite right, we have a lot of these things that we're we've already been thinking about, we've already been contemplating. But in a lot of ways, we've been sort of thrust into it. Because of COVID. It's not all because of COVID. But again, I come back to that necessity is a mother invention. You know, one area that's really close to me, and folks might not think of it as sort of customer service or a kin to customer service and the way they normally think about things. But we have an obligation to deliver the ability for residents to see and understand and, and know that their democracy at the local level is working.

And the way we do that is, is making council meetings accessible and visible and apparent to people, pre COVID, you would come in, you could watch a meeting, the doors were open at City Hall, anybody could walk in, quite frankly, the most open level of government, I think in in, in Canada is the municipal level, we've changed that we've had to go digital. And so those virtual meetings that we now have, I'm really proud to say that, you know, it's a really strong demonstration of us being innovative. We were one of the first municipalities to host virtual council meetings. And that's, that's a really neat example of digital customer service, where anyone in the world can watch meetings from anywhere they can be in their living room, they can be overseas, while maybe not overseas, nowadays, but they can, you know, they can do it at a time that's convenient for them.

Wendy King 12:12

Yeah, I think that's amazing. Because Don't we all just want convenience, right? You want to be able to do it at your convenience, obviously, which is exactly what you guys are trying to do. And I was curious, I mentioned about COVID I feel like myself, I have a list of things that I was kind of forced to do or learn during COVID. So it's actually kind of been a benefit. There has been, you know, a couple of things that have been good about this pandemic. And you do get more self sufficient, I think.

Stephen O'Brien 12:45

Yeah, for sure. I think you're spot on. Yeah.

Wendy King 12:48

So all of these initiatives sound great. But like literally the work get done?

Sasha Einwechter 12:58

Well, I think it's, it's a collection of people at the city. I mean, it's easy to probably think, Well, you know, what, it's it's digital. That's technology. That's IT. Cool. But we know that it takes more than that. The technology piece, the solution piece is often, quite frankly, the easier piece there is that, as I say before kind of that people process and technology. So we have to change the way we do business. And we have to change the way we think about how we how we process and how we we serve our end customers, which in this case, are citizens. So I think it takes a few people. And Karen, do you want to jump?

Karen Newland 13:40

Yeah, I was just gonna say that. You know, even this year, our budget documents are going to be online and have a more online focus. In the past, we produced several budget documents, budget books that were printed. They were very, very large documents. And this year, we were moving the budget document online, we were starting to talk about it as early as January of this year before COVID. Hit that, how can we get the document online make it more interactive, more intuitive for the citizens to be able to see what the budget is and where the budget dollars are and what is included in the budget. And so we were working with communications, and IT to review how we can make this happen. And I'm really excited that the project has come together and tomorrow we will be releasing the budget. And all of the budget documents are on the website interactive. And there's tables that will be there for the people who like to look at things more in a table format. And then there's also some charts that are very intuitive to help people who are more visual to see what the budget being presented to the to them includes. So, there's no more paper. And we're supporting our green initiatives.

Stephen O'Brien 15:03

And yeah, and I'm gonna jump on that. And that's a really good example of exactly what sort of Sasha was talking about, about people in process. So we're taking that approach and how we tackle ideas of modernizing service. In the case of Karen's example, the budget documentation, which can be very complex. And we're taking a page from other public sector organizations by forming a Guelph digital service. And so that digital Guelph digital service is really a collaboration or a group of colleagues from across various city departments in the organization to look at Big Picture problems.

Wendy King 15:37

Yeah, I'm glad you talked about that, cuz it was one of our first podcasts, we talked about how there were no more giant binders of paper, you know, this year. So it's very interesting how that's all shaped up. So Karen does going digital mean savings?

Karen Newland 15:53

It doesn't necessarily mean savings. It could be that by going digital, we freed up time for other staff members to be doing other value added work. So by moving the property tax billing online, that you can go online and see your bill, that and staff aren't answering the phone calls, they're able to do other projects within the city that add extra value.

Wendy King 16:19

So if I'm hearing you all correctly, it's basically not a want to list it's a have to list really.

Guests 16:26

Yeah, yes. Yeah.

Wendy King 16:29

And also do it now. Like it's not something that we can maybe put off again, like we're, you need to do it pretty soon.

Karen Newland 16:37

Yeah, these are all things that we really need to be tackling. And the city is growing. And so the demands on our customer services increasing. So from us finding efficiencies internally, through leveraging technology and customer service, we're able to serve more customers with lower staff investment.

Wendy King 16:59

Do you actually have timelines for all of this? or most of this?

Sasha Einwechter 17:05

Yeah, I would say we have, you know, starting off with the budget that is presented, we do kind of have some timelines. Now some of those have been affected by other priorities, with COVID hitting us, but I think we do have a general timeline in place. Stephen did you want to add?

Stephen O'Brien 17:23

Yeah, the one thing I would add to that is that, you know, I mentioned that Guelph Digital Service. So they're going to be looking at those, those the breadth of digital tools and upgrades that can be available to benefit, you know, the entire city and the residents and citizens of Guelph. And so some of those are things that are that are really important, you know, Single Sign On, on the city's website, you go to a

you go to your banking application, you don't sign into view your checking account, and then sign into view and investment account and sign in to check you know, your mortgage status and things like that you log in once. That's something that we want for customers so that they can log in, for example, in our case, register for a rec program and pay a tax bill and do those things. Those are fundamental parts of things that we need to do sooner than later. And the Guelph Digital Service, in addition to things like the budget, which obviously sets the pace of when investments are made, those kind of teams and collaborations and guiding principles or guiding documents like the budget, help us establish, what's the priority now to deliver the next digital service? What's the next digital thing we need to do? To get ourselves you know, to be more modern, and to modernize our service?

Wendy King 18:28

You're gonna let me just remember one password. I love you. Bane of my existence is what's my password for that? No, that's great, everybody. I can see I better brush up on my technology. But this is really going to be great for your residents. It's not the way the future, the way the right now. So thank you to you all, for all the great information Stephen, Sasha and Karen, great information about customer service. That's about all we have time for today. But thank you all for your time.

Guests 19:03

Thanks, Wendy.

Wendy King 19:07

I'm Wendy King with the city of Guelph Big G in Conversation podcast. Thanks for joining me. If you have ideas for a show or comments, you can email me at bigGpodcast@guelph.ca. Until next time, take care and let's keep the conversation going.