



Tara H. Jackson
Acting County Executive



PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY CUSTOMER SERVICE THINK TANK STANDARDIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS

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Appointed Agency Representation:

Central Services
County Executive
Community Relations
Environment
Health
Homeland Security
Housing & Community Development
Information Technology
Integrity, Compliance, and Police Accountability
Permitting, Inspections, & Enforcement
Police
Procurement
Public Works & Transportation
Redevelopment Authority
Revenue Authority
Social Services



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Introduction & Executive Summary

Purpose

This report by the Customer Service Think Tank presents a framework for standardizing customer service across Prince George's County agencies, aiming to deliver consistent, high-quality service to enhance resident satisfaction and operational efficiency.

Objective

The primary goal is to set minimum standards for managing customer inquiries via telephone, thereby ensuring prompt, professional, and accessible interactions. This initiative targets four key areas: direct phone interactions, interactive voice response (IVR) systems, voicemail protocols, and follow-up communication standards. Ultimately, the goal is to improve responsiveness, clarity, and customer satisfaction by defining best practices for each interaction type.

Scope

Customer service can be a complex and multifaceted operation, with customer interactions occurring across numerous touchpoints. To ensure a comprehensive understanding and optimization of the customer experience, it is essential to analyze the various entry points through which customers engage with the County's support services. These entry points can broadly be categorized into four primary areas, each with its unique set of challenges and opportunities for improvement:

Live Representative Connection: This encompasses all interactions where a customer successfully connects with a human agent, whether through phone, chat, email, or in-person channels. Key considerations for this entry point include agent training, knowledge base accessibility, call routing efficiency, wait times, and overall customer satisfaction with the interaction.

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Systems: IVR systems are automated phone systems that guide customers through a series of menu options using voice or keypad inputs. While designed to streamline call routing and provide self-service options, IVR systems can often be frustrating for customers due to confusing menus, long wait times, or difficulty reaching a live agent. Optimizing IVR systems requires careful design, clear menu options, and efficient call routing to ensure a positive customer experience.

Voicemail Access: Voicemail systems provide customers with a way to leave a message for an agency representative when they are unable to reach a live person. While voicemail can be a convenient option for customers, it is crucial to ensure that messages are checked regularly, responded to promptly, and that the voicemail system itself is easy to navigate and use.

Returned Voicemail Messages: When an agency representative returns a customer's

voicemail message, it presents an opportunity to resolve the customer's issue and demonstrate a commitment to customer service. However, it is important to ensure that returned calls are handled professionally, that the agency representative is prepared to address the customer's issue, and that the customer's callback request is resolved in a timely and satisfactory manner.

Background

In October 2024, the Prince George's County Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), Tara H. Jackson, issued an audit report detailing the findings of an internal customer service audit. The audit was conducted to assess customer experience when contacting County agencies. A total of 159 calls were placed to 10 distinct Prince George's County agencies, with each call evaluated based on the customer service interaction type: successful connection with a representative, interaction with an interactive voice response (IVR) system, access to voicemail, or receipt of a returned voicemail message.

The audit revealed considerable variation in customer service across County agencies. This inconsistency was observed in several aspects, including inconsistent service quality, varying levels of accessibility and responsiveness, and a lack of standardized procedures and protocols. These discrepancies may cause confusion and frustration for residents, potentially resulting in vastly different experiences depending on the specific agency or department contacted. Moreover, the absence of a unified approach to customer service may create obstacles for individuals with disabilities or limited English proficiency, impeding their access to essential services and information.

To address the issues identified in the audit, CAO Jackson convened a Customer Service Think Tank Team. This team commenced meetings in November 2024 with the objective of developing recommended customer service standards for implementation across the County.

Section 1: Direct Caller-Reaches-Representative Standards

1. *Objective*

The goal of establishing minimum standards for direct interaction with callers is to ensure that all Prince George's County Government employees and representatives deliver exceptional customer service by providing prompt, professional, and helpful assistance. Through active listening, clear communication, and a commitment to finding solutions, employees will foster trust and confidence with callers, ensuring they feel valued and supported. By adhering to these standards, the County aims to create a positive and welcoming experience for all who interact with its representatives, regardless of the nature of their inquiry.

2. *Minimum Recommended Standards*

To ensure quality customer service, all agencies should:

- a. Strive to answer desk calls within “3” to “4” rings.
- b. If an employee is participating in the Telework Agreement Program (Administrative Procedure 226), they must adhere to the roles and responsibilities of the agreement, especially regarding responsiveness while working remotely.
- c. All Prince George's County Government employees or representatives should greet each caller professionally, providing their agency name, individual name, and department. These minimum standards also apply to employees with County-issued cell phones.
- d. Every representative should inquire how they can assist the caller and actively listen to understand the reason for the call. This practice helps establish trust and assures the caller that they are not being rushed.
- e. Whenever possible, representatives should act on the caller's request. If unable to do so, they should provide alternative options, such as transferring the call, taking a message, or arranging a callback.
- f. All employees should ensure that the information provided to customers is accurate. If a caller reaches the wrong office, they should be directed to someone who can assist them or provided with direct resources, such as a website or a live person. Representatives should minimize the number of transfers whenever possible.
- g. To promote language accessibility, all agencies should have the capability to provide language assistance through the language access line or the TTY access line. Engage the Language Access Compliance Program, managed by the Office of Human Rights (OHR) to review and provide options for this language inclusivity starting with Spanish and their recommendation for subsequent language options.

3. *Training Recommendations*

Periodic Comprehensive Customer Service Training: To enhance the overall quality of interactions between Prince George's County Government employees and the public they serve, it should be a mandatory requirement for all County employees representing the Prince George's County Government to undergo comprehensive Customer Service Training. This training should encompass not only core customer service skills but also effective conflict resolution strategies. To ensure quality and a standardized approach, this training should be facilitated through an independent contractor, via the Office of Human Resource Management (OHRM) and/or the Maryland Department of Human Services (DHS).

4. *Summary: Direct Caller-Reaches-Representative Standards*

Goal: Exceptional customer service through prompt, professional, and helpful telephone assistance.

Key standards:

- Answering calls within “3” to “4” rings
- Adhering to telework agreement responsibilities
- Greeting callers professionally with agency and personal information
- Actively listening to understand the reason for the call
- Acting on requests or providing alternatives
- Ensuring information accuracy and minimizing transfers
- Providing language and TTY access

Section 2: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Standards

1. *Objective*

The goal of establishing clear IVR standards for service-based agencies in Prince George’s County is to improve communication outcomes, enhance the customer experience, minimize frustration, and promote effective self-service options. By providing intuitive and user-friendly IVR systems, agencies can meet the needs of callers promptly, reduce the need for live representative involvement, and optimize resources, ensuring high-quality customer service. These standards also prioritize language accessibility to ensure all residents, including those with limited English proficiency, can easily access County services.

2. *Minimum Recommended Standards*

a. **Menu Design**

Clarity and Simplicity: Menus should be structured to be easily understood by all callers, with simple and clear language used for each option. Avoid overly complex submenus, limiting the number of choices at each step to no more than 3-5 options. This ensures users are not overwhelmed by too many choices and can quickly find the information they need.

Relevance: Ensure that menu options reflect the most common needs of callers. For example, frequently requested services, such as “Press 1 for emergency services,” should appear at the beginning of the menu to streamline the caller’s experience. This helps reduce the time callers spend navigating the system.

Consistency: Maintain consistency in terminology and structure across all menus and prompts to help callers easily anticipate and navigate through options. This is important for both regular users and new callers who may not be familiar with the IVR system.

b. **Efficiency**

Direct Access to Representatives: IVR systems should allow users to reach a live representative within 2-3 menu selections if their needs cannot be met through automated self-service. This reduces caller frustration and ensures that users who require assistance are not left waiting too long.

Wait Times and Access to Representatives

Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems are designed to streamline customer service and efficiently address user inquiries. However, it's crucial to recognize that not all user needs can be adequately met through automated self-service options. To optimize the user experience and ensure customer satisfaction, IVR

systems should incorporate a clear and easily accessible pathway for users to connect with a live representative.

Ideally, this escalation to a live agent should be achievable within 2-3 steps from the initial IVR menu. This strikes a balance between allowing the IVR system to handle routine inquiries and ensuring that users who require personalized assistance are not subjected to excessive wait times or frustrating navigation through endless menus. By providing a prompt and seamless connection to a live representative, IVR systems can effectively mitigate caller frustration, enhance the overall customer service experience, and demonstrate a commitment to meeting diverse user needs.

If callers choose to speak with a live agent, the IVR system should offer an estimated wait time. This enables callers to decide whether to remain on hold or seek alternative self-service options, improving overall customer satisfaction.

Additionally, incorporating features such as clear menu options, concise prompts, and intelligent call routing can further improve the efficiency and user-friendliness of the IVR system. By prioritizing the needs of the user and recognizing the limitations of automated self-service, IVR systems can play a valuable role in delivering a positive and effective customer service experience.

c. **Information Accuracy**

Current and Correct Information: Recorded information in the IVR system should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure it is accurate and reflects any changes in procedures, contact details, or services. This is particularly important for services that are time-sensitive, such as public safety updates.

Continuous Updates: As services or procedures change, promptly update the IVR menu to prevent callers from receiving outdated or misleading information. This is crucial to maintaining trust with the community and ensuring smooth service delivery.

d. **Tone and Language**

Positive and Clear Language: IVR prompts should be spoken in a friendly, professional tone using clear and concise language that all callers can understand. The language should be direct yet welcoming to ensure a positive caller experience.

Inclusive Language: Use language that accommodates a diverse audience, ensuring that all callers, regardless of their background, can easily understand the

options. Avoid complex phrases or technical jargon that might confuse callers unfamiliar with public service terminology.

- e. **Language Access:** Given the diverse population of Prince George’s County, language accessibility must be a priority:

Multilingual Options: At the initial greeting, the IVR must offer callers the ability to select their preferred language. The system should include options for the most commonly spoken languages in the County, including Spanish, Amharic, French, and others. The team suggests increased engagement with the Office of Information Technology (OIT) and the Language Access Compliance Program, managed by the Office of Human Rights (OHR) to review and provide options for this language inclusivity starting with Spanish and their recommendation for subsequent language options.

IVR Prompt Example :

“For English, press 1. Para Español, presione 2. Pour le Français, appuyez sur 3.”

Language Switching: Agencies that utilize the language line should have prompts making callers aware of additional language options. Users should be able to switch languages at any point during the call, offering flexibility to callers who may want to change languages mid-conversation.

Live Translation and Bilingual Support: When necessary, callers should have the option to speak with bilingual staff or access live translation services to bridge communication gaps. The IVR system should provide an option for this at any step.

- f. **Periodic Review and Improvement**

Regular Performance Assessments: Agencies should regularly review their IVR system’s performance, tracking metrics such as call abandonment rates, average wait times, and customer satisfaction. This will help identify areas for improvement and ensure the system remains user-friendly and effective.

Incorporate Caller Feedback: After a call, callers should be encouraged to provide feedback on their IVR experience. This feedback should be reviewed regularly to make evidence-based adjustments to the system.

Testing for Improvement: Conduct pilot programs or testing to evaluate different IVR scripts and menu structures. The data gathered from these tests

should inform continuous improvements and optimizations based on caller behavior and satisfaction.

g. IVR Welcome Message and Menu Option Examples

Key Points of Clarity and Simplicity:

Limited Choices per Menu Level: Each main menu has no more than 4-5 options, avoiding overwhelming the caller with too many choices.

Logical Grouping and Clear Labels: Options are grouped logically (e.g., all information-related inquiries under “General Information”) and use straightforward language, making it easy for callers to understand and remember.

Direct Navigation: Callers can easily return to the main menu or access a representative at any stage by pressing a designated number. This adds flexibility without requiring them to re-navigate from the beginning.

Welcome Message Example:

“Thank you for calling the Prince George’s County Public Safety and Community Services. Please listen carefully to the following options so we can assist you promptly.”

Menu Options Example:

1. For Emergency Services or Urgent Assistance, press 1.

- This option routes directly to a live representative for critical issues, ensuring immediate assistance.

2. For General Information on Our Services, press 2.

- Sub-menu:
 - *For police reports, press 1.*
 - *For public records requests, press 2.*
 - *For community program information, press 3.*
 - *To return to the main menu, press 9.*

3. To Make a Complaint or File a Report, press 3.

- Sub-menu:
 - *For complaints against a public safety officer, press 1.*
 - *To report a crime, press 2.*

- *To return to the main menu, press 9.*

4. *To Speak with a Representative, press 0.*

- A direct option to access live support if needed.

3. *Summary: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Standards*

Goal: The minimum recommended standards for Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems aim to balance automated self-service with easy access to live representatives to avoid caller frustration and promote effective self-service.

Key standards:

- **Menu Design:** Clear, simple language; limited choices (3-5 per level); relevant options based on common needs; consistent terminology.
- **Efficiency:** Direct access to a live representative within 2-3 steps; estimated wait times provided; clear menu options and intelligent call routing.
- **Information Accuracy:** Current and correct information; continuous updates as services change.
- **Tone and Language:** Positive, clear, and inclusive language that accommodates a diverse audience.
- **Language Access:** Multilingual options at the initial greeting (including Spanish, Amharic, and French); language switching options; access to bilingual staff or live translation.
- **Periodic Review and Improvement:** Regular performance assessments (tracking call abandonment rates, wait times, and customer satisfaction); incorporating caller feedback; testing for improvement.

NOTE: Estimated Costs: IVR system costs per County agency should be incorporated into the decision-making. The rough order of magnitude depending on specific IVR requirements using Enterprise-wide IVR from AWS Connect could be \$14,400/yr (+/-) per agency. This estimate is based on costs paid to date by DPIE for IVR. Estimate could increase/decrease based on specific requirements.

Section 3: Voicemail Standards

1. *Objective*

The goal of establishing minimum standards for Prince George's County's voicemail is to improve the overall customer experience and ensure that all callers, including those with disabilities, can easily navigate and access the voicemail system. These standards will provide guidelines for creating clear and concise voicemail prompts, structuring menu options and flow in a logical and user-friendly manner, ensuring comprehensive accessibility, implementing regular testing, and optimization to identify and address any potential issues. By adhering to these standards, Prince George's County aims to enhance communication, foster inclusivity, and uphold a high level of professionalism in its interactions with residents and stakeholders.

2. *Minimum Recommended Standards*

- a. **Message Prompt:** Voicemail prompts are an important tool to provide exemplary customer service when agency staff members are unreachable via telephone. It is important for voicemail prompt language to be consistent across agencies in terms of the information it provides to constituents. The following are guidelines for the delivery of effective voicemail prompts:

Clear and concise: For main numbers, identify the agency the caller has reached, share office hours, and why team members are unavailable. For staff telephone lines, identify the name of the employee who has been reached.

Response Time: Answer calls within a specific time (3 rings) when agency is open. When the agency is closed, an automatic voicemail will roll over to voicemail which should state a standard response time (e.g., within 1 – 2 business days).

Pleasant: Ensure that a friendly tone of voice is utilized in the delivery of the prompt. Be expressive and avoid being monotone.

Explanatory: Inform the caller on other details pertinent to the agency including location, telephone, and Agency email address.

Helpful: Provide options for how the caller can get the information they need in lieu of an Agency representative not being reached.

Instructional: Instruct the caller on what information is required for the Agency to respond to their inquiry appropriately.

b. Template Script Example

To promote consistency between agencies, the County should provide a recommended voicemail script. Below is an example of a voicemail prompt that aligns with these established guidelines:

Thank you for calling the Prince George's County Office of xxxx. You have reached our main number. We are currently unavailable to take your call right now; however, your satisfaction is important to us. At the tone, please leave your name, contact information and a brief message of your inquiry. Your call will be returned within two business days. Our office hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Thank you for making our County great.

*It is recommended to have a menu to direct the caller to programmatic options instead of directly to employees.

*When a call is answered after hours by a voicemail, the voicemail will prompt the caller to press a number to select the appropriate agency.

c. Language Options

Translated voicemail prompt: Voicemail prompt should be delivered in the language selected at the beginning of the call.

Pre-recorded scripts: Ensure translations are culturally appropriate, accurately representing the original content.

d. Capacity Management

Ensure voicemail boxes have adequate space to prevent “full” messages.

e. Structuring Options and Flow

Limit Menu Choices: Industry best practices suggest a maximum of 3–5 options per menu level. Too many choices can overwhelm callers.

Use Clear and Specific Wording: Avoid ambiguous terms. Each option should clearly guide the customer to the intended service or information.

Prioritize Common Requests: Place the most frequently used options early in the menu to streamline access.

Provide an "Escape" Option: Include a “speak to an agent” or “return to the main menu” option to help users exit or reorient if they’ve chosen the wrong option.

f. Reducing Frustration

Avoid Deep Menu Layers: Limit depth to a maximum of 2–3 levels. Deeper levels increase abandonment rates and customer frustration.

Intelligent Routing: For returning customers, use data analytics to prioritize relevant options based on past interactions, helping customers navigate faster.

Minimize Wait Times: For complex queries that require an agent, design the IVR to identify these early on and route the caller directly to an agent queue.

g. Testing and Optimization

Regular Feedback and Adjustment: Monitor call logs and customer feedback to see where the user drops-off or struggle with the options to then adjust the IVR system accordingly.

Testing for Improvement: Test different menu structures, phrasing, and order to determine which configurations enhance user experience.

Avoid Over-Automation: Some queries are best handled by humans. Let the IVR triage common requests but give users a quick route to an agent when necessary.

h. Consider Multichannel Integration

Offer Digital Alternatives: IVRs should work in tandem with online, text, or app-based solutions where customers might find self-service more convenient.

Seamless Handover Between Channels: Allow customers to switch channels without starting over (e.g., continuing a call inquiry via text) for a smoother experience.

i. Consider ADA Accessible Voicemail Options

ADA accessible voicemail options include:

- Providing a visual voicemail interface with text transcripts of messages
- Allowing access to a telecommunications relay service (TRS) by dialing 7-1-1 for users with hearing or speech impairments
- Offering the ability to leave and listen to messages via text-to-speech functionality
- Ensuring clear and concise voicemail prompts with options to repeat or navigate menus easily

Key features for ADA accessible voicemail:

- Visual voicemail: A visual interface where users can read the text transcription of a voicemail message instead of solely listening to it.
- TTY access: Integration with a telecommunications relay service (TRS) allowing users with hearing or speech impairments to communicate via text-based communication by dialing 7-1-1.
- Text-to-speech functionality

3. Summary: Voicemail Standards

Goal: Recommended minimum voicemail standards emphasize consistency across agencies, a user-friendly approach, and accessibility for all callers, including those with disabilities.

Key Standards:

- **Message Prompts:** Clear, concise, pleasant, explanatory, helpful, and instructional prompts with a standard script example. Response time should be within 3 rings when open and include a standard response time message when closed (1-2 business days).
- **Language Options:** Translated prompts, culturally appropriate pre-recorded scripts, and consideration for languages selected at the beginning of the call
- **Capacity Management:** Adequate voicemail box space to prevent "full" messages
- **Structuring Options and Flow:** Limiting menu choices (3-5 per level), clear and specific wording, prioritizing common requests, and providing an "escape" option
- **Reducing Frustration:** Limiting menu depth (2-3 levels), intelligent routing for returning customers, and minimizing wait times
- **Testing and Optimization:** Regular feedback and adjustment, A/B testing, and avoiding over-automation
- **Multichannel Integration:** Consideration for integrating voicemail with other communication channels
- **ADA Accessibility:** Providing visual voicemail, TTY access via 7-1-1, text-to-speech functionality, and clear prompts with easy navigation

Section 4: Return-to-Voicemail Standards

1. *Objective:*

The implementation of standardized minimum requirements for voicemail messages left by customer service representatives during follow-up attempts is a crucial step in guaranteeing that our valued customers receive clear, consistent, and professional communication, regardless of the specific agent they reach or the time of their call. This initiative aims to eliminate confusion and frustration by setting a baseline for the essential information that must be included in every voicemail message, such as the caller's name, a clear and concise reason for the call, the name and contact information of the agent, and a specific timeframe for the next follow-up attempt or expected response. By establishing these minimum standards, we can ensure that our customers feel valued and heard, even when they are unable to reach a live representative, and that they have the information they need to take the next step in resolving their issue.

2. *Minimum Recommended Standards:*

- a. **Be proactive in reaching out to callers:** Taking the initiative to contact customers shows them that their needs are a priority and that you value their time. This can help build trust and loyalty.
- b. **Use a professional and courteous tone:** Maintaining a professional and respectful demeanor creates a positive impression and helps customers feel comfortable and valued.
- c. **Follow up in a timely manner:** Responding promptly to customer inquiries demonstrates that you are committed to providing excellent service and that you respect their time.
- d. **If you reach voicemail, leave a clear and concise message that includes the following information:**
 - i. **Your name, title, and department; acknowledge the original voicemail:** This helps the customer identify who you are and why you are calling.
 - ii. **A brief explanation of the reason for your call:** This gives the customer context and helps them understand the purpose of your call.
 - iii. **The answer to the caller's question, or the required next steps:** Providing this information upfront can save the customer time and frustration.
 - iv. **Alternative contact options, such as email or text message:** Offering multiple ways to get in touch gives the customer flexibility and convenience.
 - v. **End with thank you for the caller's time.**

- e. **Document all return call attempts for reference:** Keeping a record of your interactions with customers helps ensure that nothing falls through the cracks and allows for continuity of service.
- f. **Make a minimum of three follow-up attempts:** Persistence in reaching out to customers shows that you are dedicated to resolving their issues and providing support.
- g. **Return Message within two business days:** Make follow-up attempts no more than two business days from the time of the original voicemail message.

3. *Summary Return-to-Voicemail Standards*

Goal: Ensure agency representatives leave clear, consistent, and professional messages containing the information requested and/or necessary next steps in resolving their issue.

Key Standards:

- Being proactive
- Using a professional tone
- Following up promptly
- Leaving clear, concise messages containing:
 - The representative's name, title, and department
 - The reason for the call
 - The answer to the customer's question or next steps
 - Alternative contact options
 - A thank you
- Representatives should also:
 - Document all call attempts
 - Make a minimum of three follow-up attempts

Recommendations for Ongoing Improvement

- **Feedback Collection:** Develop a system for collecting resident feedback on their phone experience.
- **Regular Training:** Provide continual training to reinforce customer service principles.
- **Technology Upgrades:** Ensure systems supporting customer interactions are up-to-date and efficient.
- **Performance Tracking:** Develop key metrics for assessing adherence to standards and customer satisfaction.
- **Customer Service Pledge:** Create a Prince George's Customer Service Pledge to further set enterprise-wide tone and expectation of providing exemplary customer service.

Conclusion

The standardization of customer practices across Prince George's County Government agencies represents a critical step toward improving resident satisfaction, enhancing accessibility, and fostering operational efficiency. By implementing the recommended minimum standards for direct phone interactions, interactive voice response (IVR) systems, voicemail protocols, and return-to-voicemail practices, the County can ensure consistent and professional service delivery that meets the needs of a diverse population.

This framework addresses the current gaps identified in the 2024 internal customer service audit, offering clear, actionable guidelines that prioritize clarity, responsiveness, and inclusivity. Additionally, the inclusion of ongoing feedback mechanisms, regular training, technology upgrades, and performance tracking will enable continuous improvement, ensuring the framework evolves alongside the community's needs.

Ultimately, this initiative underscores the County's commitment to delivering exceptional customer service, reaffirming its dedication to creating a more connected and satisfied community. By adopting these standards, Prince George's County can establish itself as a model for effective and equitable public service, paving the way for a stronger, more engaged relationship with its residents.

References and Thought Partners

Administrative Procedure 226

Community Relations, PGC311 Team

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