

Enhancing the Veteran Experience

Timely, relevant, and empathetic information can guide veterans to better use their benefits

Introduction

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is a complex and dynamic agency, charged with supplying services for every aspect of the post-service life of 21 million vets and their families. The VA's 412,892 employees within 27 offices and administrations handle implementing thousands of missions, programs, and services ranging from primary care to cemetery upkeep. Like many government agencies, each service of the VA interacts with veterans and beneficiaries at sensitive, critical times in their lives. The VA sees each touchpoint, communication, and interaction as an opportunity to extend empathy, strengthen its foundation of lasting trust, and improve service delivery.



Gaining Momentum

The VA uses an ecosystem of continuous innovation to provide the best-in-class services and customer experience (CX) outcomes for veterans. In recent years, remarkable changes have improved outcomes across the VA. By many measures, the VA is trending upward. For example, the VA outperformed¹ private sector organizations in wait times, and 90% of participants would recommend VA care to other veterans. The overall trust score increased from 60 to 72%, while trust in the care received increased to 87.8% by 2019.² The VA has clearly maximized the momentum from the PREVENTS and MISSION Act(s), which effectively reduced suicide rates among homeless veterans and expanded care offerings across the organization.

As the VA matures its customer experience initiatives and deploys new strategies to engage this nation's veterans, our experience serving the VA and 5500 other government organizations around the world suggests the following trends can inform the journey:

1. Mission-driven solutions matter. The government mission is vastly different from the missions of commercial enterprises. The VA will continue to benefit from mission-driven services and solutions designed exclusively for government complexities.

2. Technology is necessary but not sufficient.

Understanding and applying technology's capabilities to an individual's need will differentiate the great customer experiences from the mediocre.

3. Data must drive the quest for improved experiences. Measuring engagement rates, for example, and understanding why they are important are critical factors in government's ability to meet rising constituent expectations.

For years, Granicus has supported the VA's mission and has helped refine its audience outreach. Through billions of targeted messages spanning thousands of topics, Granicus has served as VA's partner on a journey toward deeper personalization, tailored experiences, and improved audience engagement. Granicus' data-driven understanding of the interactions people have with government at all levels drives our vision for government-only solutions and will enhance the VA's efforts to put veterans first.

*"The HIRE Vets Medallion Award program within the U.S. Department of Labor is dedicated to recognizing employers that recruit, employ and retain veterans. With the help of the Granicus Experience Group (GXG) and communication tool govDelivery, the program experienced a **127% increase in applications from employers from its first year in 2017 and a 58% increase in program revenue.**" – [from the HireVets success story](#)*

Achieving Maturity

Leading the Charge

As one of the earliest agencies to align strategic outcomes to CX and patient experience, the VA and its customer-facing components continue to push the standards of what can be carried out, even within rigid bureaucratic silos. Many federal agencies will follow the VA's example to set up their own governance and scope of work. The VEO, as well as other components of the VA, is expected to use the momentum from Executive Order 14058, as well as the overarching President's Management Agenda (PMA) in 2022 to enhance its focus on CX. Prominent VA stakeholders now expect that technology will further mature the VA's scope and ability to take on transformations toward a modern and seamless experience.

Meeting Veterans with Critical Information they want, where they want

In crises, people seek leadership. In times of unrest, that leadership comes in the form of prompt, authoritative, and trustworthy information to help people make vital decisions. At all phases of the government's COVID response, local, state, and federal agencies relied on the power of digital communication channels to deliver life-saving information effectively. Campaigns that consider marketing, messaging, and targeting succeed in engaging customers to use their programs and services. Like the payoff experienced by agencies that invested in teleworking infrastructure, agencies that nurtured and matured their communications were able to achieve quicker mission success.

"In 2019, the Center launched a partnership with GXG and began leveraging its email, text, and social software tool called govDelivery. Working as an extension of the Center's team, digital experts at GXG were able to interview Veterans and stakeholders to better understand their needs and motivations. Armed with that information, the GXG team built a series of campaigns that could include messaging more tailored to the different audience types." – from the [National Center for PTSD, Department of Veterans Affairs](#) success story



Life-Saving Information Delivery

Today, the VA's govDelivery network has 16.5 million opt-in subscribers. Opt-in subscribers describe a database of email addresses, phone numbers, and other contact information for those who have voluntarily requested to receive communications from the agency. The VA boasts one of the federal government's most formidable and loyal subscriber base, and the efficacy of its govDelivery installation is showed by high delivery and click rates, which contributed to the success of the agency's COVID response. Specifically, the VA has sent 1.3 trillion emails since 2019. In 2021, the VA sent 2.1 billion messages on 3,239 topics; 960.5 million messages were on the topic of COVID alone. Subscribers received critical email and SMS communications, which directed them to available food, shelter, medical care, and vaccines. The efficacy of the VA's digital campaigns influenced decisions veterans had to make during this time. For example:

VA COVID Response and Impact³

- 1701%** Increase in telehealth & off-site visits
- 201K+** Weekly at-home visits
- 350K+** VA employees vaccinated
- 4M+** VA with at least 1 dose
- 67%** of overall VA vaccinated

For the next phase in CX maturity at the VA, we can find guidance by analyzing the elements consumers desire from communications. **In a study by Campaign Monitor, email was determined to be the highest ROI across all other investments in digital channels, including TV, radio, and social media. Specifically, the return was about \$38 (or 3,800%) for every \$1 spent.** One barrier to these investments may be the federal government's propensity to segregate strategic communications – the “marketing,” of services – from customer experience. Email is the single most important aspect of guiding a digital journey. However, technology alone will not improve the journey.

Government Operates Differently from the Private Sector

Government services are far more complex than those services designed for commercial needs. An online retailer controls an entire supply chain and buying process. A few clicks will send a pair of new shoes to your doorstep within days. Government services, however, span across multiple agencies and levels of government and the individual is often left to navigate these complex interrelationships alone. In 2019 the GAO was unable to count the number of federal services offered to citizens and residents. HHS alone has more than 100 mainstream services. When local, state, and federal agencies are included, there are hundreds of thousands of services available. Often, these services directly affect eligible recipients' lives.

Navigating government's inherent complexity boils down to four core tenets:

1. Government services come in more shapes and sizes compared to commercial services
2. Citizens and residents receive multiple related services from multiple agencies
3. Agencies at all levels are willing to collaborate to improve services
4. Data driven personalization is the key to connecting the right people to the right services

Surveys continue to prove that email is considered the most preferred form of communication by a large margin (72% by U.S. adults), with postal mail preferred second best at 48% ⁴, a critical data point to remember. This was true across all demographics surveyed, with one exception: females 65 or older preferred email 64% and postal mail 65%.

Guiding the Journey/Marking the Path

Guiding the journey of the customer is a core characteristic of impactful CX initiatives. For example, the "Red Jacket," program at the VA responded to the need to guide the journeys of any veterans entering a care facility for the first time. This extraordinarily successful program enhanced the patient's experience with a friendly volunteer or staff member who helped navigate the complex corridors of medical centers. The conceptually simple program works to extend empathy and uphold dignity during a vulnerable time, ensuring improved experiences.

The journey to receiving care or services can sometimes be mentally and physically daunting. As a result, the government may be at risk of under communicating. Not unique to the VA, government services require an often-necessary amount of documentation needed to verify identification, supply legality, or geographic information. Documenting heavy processes is one of the biggest burdens for customers. To extend the metaphor of a customer or patient journey, government experiences are mired in opaque processes or difficult paths, without meaningful consideration for the role of human-centric communication design. As governments look to improve the journey, there are many that can alleviate the anxiety of a difficult path using communications that predict areas of confusion and guide each customer with empathy.

Fortunately, organizations can quickly scale guiding the journey through meaningful and empathetic communications to achieve a wide range of desired outcomes. Retailers, for example, use email to remind shoppers about items left abandoned in their carts or offer discounts to incentivize purchases. Similarly, the private sector uses strategic digital campaigns to recommend related items based on interest and past transactions. Augmenting strategic communications with human-centric design is a low-risk investment to aid the customer's journey through troubleshooting, navigation, and completion.

"All metrics show that the more engaged they are with the VA, the better their life outcomes."

Before they became Veterans, they were active-duty service members. Transitioning from a highly structured and regimented life—whose basic services and guidance come in the form of very specific orders, to a civilian life can understandably be fraught with anxiety. To address this time of uncertainty and guide the journey, the VA Benefits Administration (VBA) worked with Granicus to establish the VA Solid Start Program with the mission: Establish key first contact with Transition Service Members to create a lifelong connection to the VA. The program is designed to contact Vets through phone and email channels in a strategic cadence the first year of their journey with benefit, service, and resource information to help navigate a wide range of challenges.

The Granicus team worked closely with the VBA to ramp up a program that successfully eliminates the risk of under-communicating critical guidance and information, as well as extend empathy and encourage a sense of community. Granicus leveraged data and human-centered design to build targeted campaigns to successfully engage 192,000 new subscribers in three major segments, resulting in a 66% topic engagement rate and 550,000 digital impressions. These numbers represent the lifesaving use of technology and empathy to help customers, patients, and their families navigate a complex and sensitive time of transition.



Managing Expectations

Good service experiences have some universal traits. The customer should feel remembered, valued, and respected. With the available data surrounding consumer preferences, we can expect that preventing miscommunications, sending reminders, and easing processes would extend to veterans' expectations. However, one-way push communication, preferred by the government, ranges from harmlessly irrelevant (e.g., newsletters) to downright insufficient. Sending a thoughtful newsletter is one positive tool, but when it comes to service maturity, guiding the customer through a challenging online process is far more advanced. By developing and introducing empathetic communications campaigns before, during, and after a process, agencies can maximize their digital experience investments.

For the veteran population, the journey to receiving health care is one with several points of risk in managing expectations. In their former military point of reference, clear and concise communication could have been a matter of life and death. For that reason, under-communicating can create a myriad of challenges. To illustrate the point, in an industry survey of American adults, a majority (63%) of people wanted to receive emails about changes of plans, 56% wanted delivery or arrival notifications, and 53% appointment reminders or confirmations. Relatedly, in a global consumer study conducted by Twilio,⁵ 83% of consumers preferred to receive typical

communications from businesses via email, while text messages are 2.5x more preferred than email for urgent matters.

Managing expectations through empathy-driven communications is a low-risk investment for a very high return. To depict a scenario, simply sending a veteran a reminder about the time and location of their appointment via their preferred the digital channel (text message, email, etc.) can improve outcomes by reducing no-shows or late arrivals and avoiding the delay of care. In most private sector healthcare settings, it is common to receive email, phone, or SMS confirmations of an appointment. The risk of cascading events if a veteran or patient accidentally shows up on the wrong day

is not trivial. The patient may have taken steps to arrange childcare for that specific timeframe or driven a significant distance to their local facility, and may therefore leave in anger, be unable to receive care, or even avoid returning for future appointments. In the same vein, the provider would not be able to give ad hoc care without affecting the coordination of all other patients, and thus reject the walk-in. Communication to remind, though simple, lowers the likelihood of mistakes, and helps to ensure success for both provider and recipient.

Amplifying Success and Managing Risks

Through the work of many initiatives, the VHA's scores have been ascending steadily, often exceeding industry standards. Maturing the agency's communication strategy toward desired outcomes may serve as a critical part that can amplify the agency's successes, reduce risk, and emit incremental and impactful services that ease an overall increased satisfaction in the employee and customer experience. For service providers, pivoting from reactive to a more proactive communication strategy is foundational for those undergoing significant CX transformation. There are three (3) major outcomes of a well-coordinated strategic communication plan that reflect the program's needs.

First, a strategic communications plan embedded into CX can result in better understanding of customers. By designing campaigns to capture data, insight, and analytics through 2-way communication methods and a well-architected campaign plan, the agency can quickly capture preferences and behaviors. For example, net promoter scores (NPS) are used to show the likelihood of recommending a service or product to someone else. NPS scores are often collected via email, since it is the most successful marketing channel.⁶ These metrics are all part of the growing demand used by CX leaders to achieve executive buy-in, influence data-driven decisions, and improve collective understanding of performance. This insight provides invaluable information to decision makers and enables the government

to segment and target customers with critical or life-saving information.

Second, transparent, and frequent communications to employees serve as a cornerstone of successful digital transformation and reduces the risks of change management. More communications that predict recipient questions and supply context can help reduce risks of stakeholder fatigue during major change projects.

Finally, in the private sector, the CX function and leadership organically rises out of marketing departments. Since the Federal Government is subject to compliance when requesting information from the public due to the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA), it is critical to grow organically using opt-in features and nurture engagement. This way, the agency can increase its number of responsive subscribers. It also supplies a preferred alternative to buying contact lists, which not only violates laws like the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), but also neglects best practice for keeping an active and engaged customer base. Therefore, keeping in touch proactively helps retain valuable customer engagement, reduce overall program risk, and lower the cost of customer acquisitions.



Granicus serves the people who serve the people

The private sector has focused on customer experience for years, but what has worked for commercial organizations is not enough for the complexity of government services. Many commercial organizations, even large well-known ones, have chosen not to invest in basic security and accessibility features. The government does not have that option.

Government agencies must ensure access and transparency for EVERYONE – every age, every ethnicity, in every location, and every language – while also delivering on the public’s high expectations for security and rebuilding trust. Government needs technologies that are purpose-built for those complexities, and CX solutions that incorporate a deep understanding of how data, security, opt-in, scale, and transparency deliver impact, outcomes, and mission success.

Granicus delivers.

¹ jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2720917?guestAccessKey=05b5223a-1756-4852-bd4f-f66f53d44e77

² blogs.va.gov/VAntage/69768/va-2019-year-improvements-continued-progress/

³ va.gov/health/docs/VA_COVID_Response.pdf

⁴ marketingsherpa.com/article/case-study/customer-communication-by-channel

⁵ bit.ly/twilio-case-study

⁶ entrepreneur.com/article/314359