



Georgia praised for customer service

By [Aaron Gould Sheinin](#)
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State bureaucrats are often faceless cogs blandly derided as incompetent and insufferable. But a number of national publications and experts, including the founder of Craigslist and White House officials, have lauded Georgia state government's efforts at improving customer service.

Gov. Sonny Perdue has long preached the need to improve how the state treats its customers — that is, citizens of the state — and made that service a benchmark of his administration. Others are starting to take notice.

“This kind of thing is much bigger than one might think at first. It's about reinventing government from the bottom up,” Craigslist founder Craig Newmark wrote in his blog earlier this year, a sentiment he repeated in his nationally syndicated column.

Another syndicated columnist named Dale Dauten, who writes as the “corporate curmudgeon,” has likewise made note of it. And Perdue's customer service guru, Joe Doyle, has had his brain picked by the Obama administration, other governments and private companies.

So what's the big deal? Doyle, the former owner of the After Hours Formal Wear chain, said Georgia is the only state in the country targeting customer service across the entire bureaucracy. While there are states that have set a goal of improving service at individual agencies — often driver's license agencies — Georgia is alone in going whole-hog.

“There has never been an initiative with specific strategies and tactics and long-term commitment like Governor Perdue has had to remake the entirety of state government,” Doyle said.

The praise of Georgia's efforts is nice, Doyle knows, but the only thing that matters is whether it's made a difference. Perdue said it has.

“You don't win the Super Bowl with just a good game plan,” Perdue said last week. “You need great talent on the field, and Joe Doyle is our customer service quarterback and our most valuable player. His enthusiasm has literally changed the culture of state government.”

At Child Support Services, the governor said in 2009, the time between a parent's first contact with the agency and meeting a caseworker went from a 30-day wait to often same-day service. It used to take a prospective teacher an average of nine minutes to speak with a live person at the Professional Standards Commission. Now it takes eight seconds. Medicaid approval went from nine weeks to 12 days.

Newmark, the Internet entrepreneur who almost single-handedly changed how people buy and sell things on the Web, said in an e-mail interview that Georgia has the right idea.

The state, he said, “has public servants working together in ways that all organizations talk about, but are rarely serious about.”

The governor’s focus on customer service began in earnest four years ago when he signed an executive order creating the Governor’s Office of Customer Service. It began a process that Doyle said was more than flipping a switch and making it happen.

Trust was key, he said, because while the governor wanted to transform customer service in state government, he wanted it to happen without spending an additional dime. That meant no expensive outside consultants, little in the way of new equipment and no new hires that weren’t already planned.

“When we first started, someone mentioned to me that you first have to have a training program that teaches people how to smile and be courteous,” Doyle said.

Instead, Doyle put on street clothes and hung around various state agencies that deal directly with the public. What he found was a nightmare for everyone involved: the taxpayer — who, in this case, is usually the customer — and the employees. Lines were huge and inefficient. Of course, people weren’t smiling, he said.

The key was getting employees to buy into the system. Each agency wrote customer service improvement plans. Doyle’s new office developed tools to gather and rate customer feedback and created employee recognition programs and trained frontline employees and managers.

Perhaps most importantly, they did it quietly to prevent expectations from getting too high too fast.

Still, word of their efforts began to “seep out,” he said. The Pew Center on the States gave Georgia one of its highest grades in its 2008 Government Performance Project. Other states saw that and began to call. Soon, Doyle was making presentations to the Council of State Governments and the National Governors Association. He spoke at the University of Maryland and the University of Arizona, two universities that have a program devoted to “service excellence.”

He’s fielded calls from government officials in Thailand, Australia, Switzerland and Hungary. Just last month, Doyle was in Washington meeting with Aneesh Chopra, President Barack Obama’s chief technology officer.

The state’s improvements in customer service have a human face, too. Consider the story of Christopher Bloor of Milton. He and his wife met a family who was fostering a young girl in Cherokee County. Bloor and his wife ultimately decided to try to adopt young Jasmine.

The Bloors had to deal with the Department of Family and Children Services in both Fulton County, where they live, and Cherokee County, where Jasmine was a ward of the state.

“We had not the easiest experience, per se, but a very positive one,” Bloor said in an interview. “We were very pleased. It couldn’t have gone better.”

But Doyle also knows nothing is perfect, and he knows that someone out there — likely many people — will

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read this and scoff. They'll remember a recent bad experience and complain that this is all spin.

"That's always going to be true," he said, noting that he had bad service recently at a Ritz-Carlton hotel.

"But, what do you do about it?" Doyle said. "I want to know about the people who complain because without their feedback, we cannot drive continuous improvement."

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