Channel Shift Case Study

Guidance Area #3:   Communicate Effectively
Provided By: Chelmsford City Council
Sector: Local Government
Service: Parking Permits

Chelmsford's Parking Permit process allows customers to renew their Parking Permits and/or order Visitor Tickets online. Parking Permits and Visitor Tickets are required in certain zoned areas of the City centre. Following completion of the online application a paper copy of the Parking Permit can be printed, this is valid for 28 days, pending the postal despatch of the official Parking Permit. Visitor Tickets cannot be printed but are sent out the same day if the application is received before noon or otherwise the following day.

Chelmsford's Parking Permits and Visitor Tickets services handle about 725 transactions per month. It is not an end-to-end online service – applications for Parking Permits and Visitor Tickets still have to be manually entered into the back office system for processing whichever channel is used.

What They Did:

Customers were complaining about the need to visit the customer service centre (to provide proof of residence) and the length of time it took to get seen when they made the visit. Some customers were also asking why they could not apply online. Therefore, Chelmsford, knew the *potential benefits for users in transacting digitally* had to include removing the need to provide evidence of residence every time residents renewed their Parking Permits. Working with back office staff, as an internal *delivery partner*, Chelmsford decided that – where evidence already existed and there was no change in circumstances – they would no longer ask for that evidence to be re-submitted. This decision removed a *perceived barrier* (evidence is not always required) to creating an online service.

Chelmsford did not undertake any detailed customer research – they knew the demand for online service existed from existing customer feedback. They also knew that Chelmsford has good broadband infrastructure and, with low levels of unemployment, high levels internet access. Rather than re-engineer their back office processing, Chelmsford opted to create an online process that replaced the need for paper-based applications and launched the online application in October 2012.

Without specific information about potential usage, Chelmsford could only set a 'best estimate' target of 40% take-up by the end of the first year – but within three months that target had been exceeded. Chelmsford has not set any new targets because they are looking at integrating the online application into the back office systems to offer an end-to-end automated service. New take-up targets will be decided when back office integration is completed.

Chelmsford *provided information about their new online service via digital and non-digital channels* – this included *creating a memorable URL* (www.chelmsford.go.uk/parkingpermits) for the service. They also produced a step-by-step *jargon free* and illustrated guide to explain how customers could now apply online. Chelmsford sends the guide to all Parking Permit holders shortly before existing permits are due for renewal.

After offering an online service for one-year; 48% of applications are now being made online, with the remainder being made either face-to-face (44%) or by post (8%).

Lessons Learnt:

Chelmsford developed the service because they knew there was a demand for an online service and because there is good broadband infrastructure in the area. The popularity of mobile devices has helped with take-up and mobile devices now account for about one-third of the connections to the website.

Chelmsford did not undertake any specific customer research for this project and, therefore, did not fully understand customer needs when designing the process. As the result the online service did not fully reflect customer needs – especially when purchasing visitor tickets separately from the parking permit. This caused some confusion and Chelmsford have now recognised the need to offer separate or combined services, depending on customer needs.

Chelmsford only undertook limited user testing with their citizen panel, not with the service users. As a result, modifications have had to be made to the online service in response to customer comments. Chelmsford now recognise that involving service users (especially the more vociferous users) in developing the project would have helped to create a more streamlined and less clunky service.

The current online service still requires rekeying data into the back office system and this has limited the opportunity to the realise efficiency savings that a fully automated end-to-end service would offer. Chelmsford are now looking at integrating the online service into the back office system.