

Keeping It Public: Defending Public Service Values in a Customer Service Age

New Ideas for Improving Public Administration

Notwithstanding the persistence and proliferation of calls to serve “customers,” these relationships incorporate distinctively public priorities and performance expectations—priorities and expectations often shaped by a desire to reduce customer vulnerabilities and prevent seller strategies that are deemed unacceptable. The authors examine these distinctively public relationships—between professionals and clients, guardians and wards, facilitators and citizens, and regulators and subjects. By acknowledging that public administration often involves relationships with multiple constituencies and that opportunities to serve them are bounded by particular legal and institutional contexts, this essay provides a pragmatic account of strategic opportunities to defend public service values.

Public administrators continue to be bombarded with calls to serve their “customers.” Despite the considerable literature explaining the conceptual and ethical problems with this metaphor (see, e.g., Box et al. 2001; Carroll 1995; deLeon and Denhardt 2000; Frederickson 1996; King, Feltey, and Susel 1998; Moe 1994; Moe and Gilmour 1995; Piotrowski and Rosenbloom 2002; Terry 1993), the idea that public administrators should relate to the public as “customers” persists and proliferates. The Internal Revenue Service conducts a routine “customer satisfaction survey” of those who contact the Taxpayer Advocate Service (see FCB and Russell Research 2005). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers conducts a Customer Service Survey, with most responses coming from permit applicants (Connolly 2007). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is now reporting “customer satisfaction” for hospitals (<http://www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov/>). More broadly, the American Customer Satisfaction Index reports on measures of customer satisfaction for selected government functions.¹ The customer metaphor was recently stretched

to the breaking point with a RAND Corporation study that exhorted the military to engage in “customer-informed decision-making” and to work on instilling “customer satisfaction” in Afghanistan (Helmus, Paul, and Glenn 2007).

The persistence of the customer metaphor in the face of substantial criticism suggests that a far more fundamental reassessment of the relationship between public administrators and those they serve is required. Our examination finds that the vulnerabilities of those treated as “customers,” and the problems raised by common seller strategies, are more serious than is typically understood, and they often require political and administrative remedies. The very origins of government and governance

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lie in the legal and ethical alternatives to customer relationships. These alternatives produce interactions—between those we will characterize as professionals and clients, guardians and wards, facilitators and citizens, regulators and subjects—that incorporate distinctively public values, priorities, and performance expectations. Our analysis concludes by exploring strategic opportunities for defending these values in an increasingly market-oriented public service.

The Realities of Transactions between Customers and Sellers

The well-established literature examining the operation of an unfettered marketplace (see, e.g., Kuttner 1999) documents many constraints on consumer choice (e.g., imperfect information, a lack of customer mobility) and seller behaviors that undermine efficiency (e.g., adverse selection, price fixing, vertical integration, and limited disclosure; see Milgrom 2008). Despite this, as Lowery (1998, 161) has observed, advocates of quasi-market strategies for providing public goods and services (e.g., vouchers, contracting,

Philip H. Jos is a professor of political science at the College of Charleston. He received his doctorate from the University of South Carolina and his master's and bachelor's degrees from Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. His published work has appeared in journals such as *Administration & Society*, *Public Administration Review*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, and the *American Review of Public Administration*.
E-mail: jos@cofc.edu

Mark E. Tompkins is an associate professor of political science at the University of South Carolina, where he has served as adjunct faculty in the School of the Environment, School of Medicine, and School of Public Health. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Minnesota. His work has appeared in journals such as *Public Administration Review*, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, *American Journal of Public Health*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Coastal Management*.
E-mail: tompkins.mark@sc.edu

facilitating interjurisdictional competition) rarely examine the actual behavior and preferences of participants. Many of these behaviors and preferences are unacceptable in the pursuit of public values.

Sellers undertake many strategies to maximize their advantages in market transactions, extending well beyond efforts to collude with other participants in the marketplace. They may conceal adverse information, inducing demand (Underhill 1999) and perhaps even marketing products of little value (Danziger 2004),² while neglecting the interests of third parties. As semi-autonomous agents, sellers can manipulate the price, quality, and accessibility of a good or service, thereby choosing the market niche they wish to serve. In many newer industries, such as cable, cell phone, and software networks, successful firms attract growing numbers of buyers, magnifying the value of their network but reducing the choices available to consumers, as less successful companies are diminished by their shrinking market share (Shapiro and Varian 1998).

Companies are free to pursue “value-extracting strategies” for themselves rather than “value-adding” strategies for consumers. For example, overly complex product and pricing options take advantage of how difficult it is for customers to predict their needs, such as how many cell phone minutes they will use each month, and make it hard for them to choose the right product. Similarly, penalties and fees, which may have been instituted to offset the costs of undesirable customer behavior, such as bouncing checks, turn out to be very profitable. As a result, companies have no incentive to help customers avoid them. Service contracts may offer no protection against falling out of favor with a seller (McGovern and Moon 2007).

Recent literature also demonstrates that it is consistent with market incentives for sellers to discriminate among buyers, avoiding those who cost more than they are worth to serve (Frei 2006; Gabaix and Laibson 2006; Van Hoek and Evans 2005; Johnson and Selnes 2005). Sellers are free to “cream” customers, serving only those who are the most lucrative, or “throttle” them by restricting service to less profitable customers (Van Hoek and Evans 2005; Wagner 2006; see also Frei 2006). Sellers may also be in a position to “dump” demanding customers with a consultant industry that thrives by advising sellers on how to separate and encourage their “angel” customers while discouraging, or “firing,” their “demon” customers (e.g., Selden and Colvin 2003). Large retailers develop customer profiles that enable them to focus on especially desirable shoppers and discourage unprofitable relationships. Complicating the picture even further is the fact that even seemingly neutral electronic agents that provide personalized product recommendations to online shoppers can shape preferences in ways that benefit the seller—but not necessarily the buyer (Häubl and Murray 2006).

In some cases, sellers offer customers very few choices by design (Which cable option would you like?), creating exchange asymmetries by the choices offered and denied to customers (see Kelly 2005; Lowery 1998, 142–47). On the other hand, customers may be offered an overwhelming array of choices (Which chips should I buy? Which jeans are best for me?), creating a “paradox of choice” (Schwartz 2004)—which also allows sellers to manipulate preferences.

Not surprisingly, efforts to create “quasi-markets” for public goods and services, such as public utilities, exhibit many of these seller, or

rather “provider,” behaviors. Robust competition among providers is seldom found in sparsely populated areas (Warner 2006), and quasi-markets for local government services are seldom truly competitive (Lowery 1998; Smith and Smyth 1996). In other cases, the choices can overwhelm consumers, so that the benefits of competition are not fully realized. Consider, for example, that in the Washington, D.C., area, the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan offered 26 benefit options to participants in 2008 (OPM 2008)—although the “paradox of choice” was triggered by only 20 possibilities (Schwartz 2004).

The most obvious consequence of many of these seller or provider strategies is to constrain and shape the choices available to consumers. Not only are choices limited, but also the customer preferences are to some extent endogenous, influenced by the marketplace rather than reflecting independent and stable preferences (Bowles 1998; Lowery 1998; Rieskamp, Busemeyer, and Mellers 2006).³ Moreover, some market transactions take place in “two-sided markets” (Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne 2006) in which “customers” do not deal directly with “original producers,” but rather with intermediaries who act as brokers by identifying, aggregating, and offering services provided by someone else.⁴ For example, large retailers have for many years used product placement to shape customer choices in ways that help some suppliers and hurt others. Similarly, third-party payers, such as health insurers, or retailers such as Amazon.com, also serve as “brokers,” offering products, ratings of those products, and steering their customers to some products over others for reasons that buyers cannot easily apprehend.

Public Transactions: Beyond Customer Service

Whenever we are not content to rely on the self-correcting tendencies of markets, relying on the pressure from especially well-informed consumers, or the entrepreneurialism of sellers, the result is public action that moves beyond the customer/seller exchange. In large part, the history of the administrative state, including its recent turn toward contracting out, is written by these decisions. Contracting out for service means that choices will often be managed by third parties, such as private contractors, acting as intermediaries between the public funding source and those being served. These arrangements are seldom fluid and may be characterized by “stickiness” (Borenstein and Shepard 2002; Shapiro and Varian 1998, Van Slyke 2007) that binds buyers to ongoing relationships that offer little opportunity to exercise sovereignty (Smith and Smyth 1996). The use of contracting out, voucher systems, or overlapping governmental jurisdictions “creates two sets of consumers—those who make the collective decision to provide a public good or service and those who consume what is functionally a private good within the quasi-market. Both must be satisfied to provide for consumer sovereignty” (Lowery 1998). Hence, both the set of elected and administrative officials who structure a contracting process and those who are served by the contractor are making consumption decisions, and their interests may or may not be aligned (Brown, Potoski, and Van Slyke 2006; Van Slyke 2007). For example, Lowery notes that parents of school-age children may demand that elected officials provide a quality education regardless of race and social class but act on their individual preference for a neighborhood that results in segregated schools (see Lowery 1998, 161–65; Smith and Meier 1995).

In sum, it is certainly the case that some publicly provided goods and services are broadly similar to those in the private sector, but

the transaction is significantly, perhaps fundamentally, different. As Kettl observes, the choices of those served and those providing services are constrained, meaning that “many government services do not share the basic customer-provider relationship” (2005, 52). Still, these similarities explain why, in government, “customer service” is so often a broad and symbolically appealing goal (Kettl 2005, 52). Like calls for “fairness” and “efficiency,” it is subject to myriad qualifications and multiple interpretations. As Kelly points out, merely applying the “private sector definition of customer satisfaction requires some assumptions that are violated in the public sector” (2005, 79). We cannot assume that the transaction is voluntary, that residents pay only for the services that they consume, or that those receiving the service are indifferent to the benefits that others receive or to the costs they pay (Kelly 2005, 79). Moreover, choices and information may be limited, and the resulting outcomes may be valued in diverse ways by different stakeholders.

As Alford has convincingly argued, “[W]hat is needed, therefore, is to disentangle the essentially useful notion of exchange from the distinctively private-sector confines of the market” (2002, 340). To appreciate these different kinds of transactions is to see that the very origins of government and governance lie in the transformation of private exchanges. We offer the following typology without presuming that the categories are mutually exclusive or that agencies and nonprofits engage in only one form of exchange.

Professional/Client Transactions

In most public transactions, it is inappropriate for providers to selectively serve (or “cream”) those who seek goods and services or to otherwise restrict their access. Nonetheless, when social service agencies pursue “efficiency” by discouraging program enrollment and using sanctions selectively to reduce caseloads, the neediest clients are those most likely to be harmed by the resulting barriers to participation, as the First Folk Theorem of the Welfare State suggests (Brodtkin 1986; Physician Taskforce on Hunger in America 1985). This dilemma evokes professional obligations to those they serve that are not captured by the customer metaphor. Instead, we expect them to be treated as “clients.”

Clients are individuals who receive benefits in asymmetric exchanges. In professional/client transactions, the provider brings special knowledge, awareness, and/or standing to the transaction. They may have special knowledge about some of their client’s needs (as do professionals such as doctors, lawyers, or accountants), and, as a result, their situation is privileged in some important way (see, e.g., Emanuel 1999). By contrast, clients are seldom well informed about the services they seek and the provider choices they face. As a result, as Alford points out, “government agencies have no financial incentive to pay attention to clients’ needs” and “no vested interest in doing anything for them beyond their legislative mandate and administrative rules” (2002, 342). The risk of paternalism or, worse, self-regarding behavior, is great when clients are poorly equipped to challenge professional discretion. As a result, the public conferring of such discretion (through licensing, for instance) generally imposes ethical and, in many cases, legal duties on professionals. Professional training and codes of ethics become especially important because clients are “free” to choose their provider, but their choices are likely to be circumscribed by information (about competence and appropriateness), by supply (there is no reason to assume that

there will be many providers, so there may be few choices among specialized providers), and by opportunity.⁵ These vulnerabilities impose distinctive ethical and performance obligations on the administrator of these professional services beyond what we expect of a seller/consumer relationship.

Guardian/Ward Transactions

In other settings, administrators serve those with even more circumscribed options. Alford reminds us of those he calls “obligatees” (2002, 342–32), who receive “goods” that are restrictive or even coercive, such as those that Schneider and Ingram (1993) characterize as “dependents” and “deviants.” The idea of “customer satisfaction” as it is ordinarily construed cannot be reasonably applied to these relationships. So, Niven’s claim that law enforcement officers could plausibly consider criminals to be their “customers” (2003, 34) ignores the way in which the transaction is shaped by the limited autonomy of those being “served.” Society views some people as lacking standing to shape their relationship to the service provider. For those whom Schneider and Ingram (1993) classify as “deviants” (e.g., prisoners), society is led to treat them as “wards,” who lose some of the privileges ordinarily available to the typical citizen. Some others are viewed as “incompetent” and therefore “dependent” (Schneider and Ingram 1993), ranging from the very young to the mentally ill. In these guardian/ward transactions, “wards” of the state are not permitted to manage their own affairs. Decisions about who will provide services, what will be provided, or how the providers will be compensated are wholly controlled by others. If these wards are fortunate,⁶ third parties will supervise those providing services (Teaster 2002; see also Van Slyke 2007), legislators will exercise oversight, professional communities will establish standards of practice, and citizen groups will actively supervise these institutions. In each case, however, wards depend on others for protection and cannot be considered “customers” in any meaningful sense.

Regulator/Subject Transactions

While wards are especially powerless, the legitimate use of coercion is essential to a wide variety of government endeavors. As Mintzberg observes, even in democratic states, “one way or another we all remain subjects of our governments—when we pay taxes, allow ourselves to be drafted into armies, or respect government regulations for the sake of order” (1989, 77). Administrators who serve in regulatory roles are expected to engage those they regulate as “subjects” with defined rights and responsibilities under the law, rather than as customers in need of satisfaction, clients in need of professional help, or wards in need of caretaking. Administrators must also avoid being overly responsive to private parties whose actions may produce negative externalities (e.g., seeking rents and engaging in “ticket fixing”), while taking into account the interests of those not represented, such as future generations and less tangible, “fragile” values (Tribe 1976).

Facilitator/Citizen Transactions

All of the foregoing transactions constitute a form of “generalized exchange” (Alford 2002; Levi-Strauss 1949) in that the value of the transaction goes beyond one-on-one reciprocity. Welfare clients, for example, may receive benefits or be required to make constructive lifestyle changes, but the negative consequences of poverty for the larger public may be mitigated (Alford 2002, 342). Many, perhaps most, administrative transactions affect the good of the community

and not just specific individuals and groups. While customers may be unwilling or unable to contribute to a community good, we define the citizen's responsibilities to the community (e.g., paying taxes) to avoid free riders while providing these goods (e.g., national defense). In meeting these community obligations, our expectations for the transaction become broader and richer than simple "satisfaction" (Kelly 2005, 79).

Sometimes, administrators are engaged more directly with citizens. These facilitator/citizen transactions occur "at every level of government—federal, state, and local—people in public agencies not only deliver services but also serve as facilitators, interpreters, and mediators of public action" (Box et al. 2001, 615). The particular kind of interaction between public servant and citizen is shaped, as Fung (2006) notes, by the way in which participants are selected, the modes of communication used, and degree to which citizens exert authority and power. Diverse patterns of citizen participation produce "mini-publics," some of whom self-select into participating groups, whereas others are recruited and some are randomly selected (Fung 2003). Those who work in areas such as public low-income housing, sustainable development, and watershed planning often help coordinate extensive partnerships with a variety of community groups. In such circumstances, the interaction with citizens is direct, and the aim is not so much to provide a service or to protect individual rights as it is to foster decisions in the interest of the community as a whole. In these transactions, instrumental rewards (electricity provided, drug treatment administered) are often no more important than the benefits of the process itself (e.g., building trust in government that may be useful in future transactions).

In short, whenever we take deliberate action to alter customer relationships and legally define the prerogatives of providers and those they serve, we are, quite literally, engaging in governance.

Moreover, administrators are playing an increasingly important role as "choice architects" (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), and as "public information brokers," who design, develop, and distribute information products that facilitate citizen choice (see also Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007). These roles require administrators to develop programs that facilitate good citizen choices, based on an understanding of their best interests and their true desires (which may not be clearly evident to a citizen who is immersed in the hurly-burly confusion of daily life). As Thaler and Sunstein have it, citizens should be "free to choose," but they should be assisted in making good choices. Incentives and "nudges" are the key tools, while direct coercion is not embraced.

In short, whenever we take deliberate action to alter customer relationships and legally define the prerogatives of providers and those they serve, we are, quite literally, engaging in governance. The decisions about the duties of providers, whom they serve, and the kinds of wants or demands they should and should not respond to are public determinations that establish new rules, processes, and ethical norms. These new expectations not only govern specific transactions with particular citizens, clients, and wards, but also establish obligations to act on the behalf of publics who are unable to enter into transactions for themselves, such as future generations with an interest in environmental quality or income security.

Multiple Publics and Diverse Administrative Settings

The practical application of our typology must acknowledge that there are many constituencies, some specific and some diffuse, that an administrator might serve, and that many administrators will serve more than one such constituency. They

Table 1. Public Transactions and the Public Service Values at Stake

	Professional/Client	Guardian/ Ward	Facilitator/Citizen	Regulator/Subject
Primary performance expectations	Provide appropriate professional services to individuals (e.g., drug treatment or legal aid for the indigent)	Control individual behavior, protect broader public (e.g., corrections officer)	Broker information, foster and mediate individual and community participation (e.g., land use planning, watershed management)	Protect the interests of unrepresented, "fragile values" (e.g., environmental protection, social insurance, capital investment)
Inappropriate market behaviors in providing services	"Creaming" desirables, "dumping" undesirables, avoiding "demon" customers	Creaming, dumping, avoiding particular individuals	Concealing adverse information, inducing demand, manipulating preferences, reducing collective goods to individual preferences.	Interest group liberalism, heavily discounting the future, generating negative externalities
Primary values (ASPA Code of Ethics)	II.1. Understand and apply relevant legislation and regulations	II.1. Understand and apply relevant legislation and regulations	I.3. Support the public's right to know	I.8. Be prepared to make decisions that may not be popular
	II.2. Respect and protect privileged information	II.7. Promote constitutional principles: equality, fairness, due process.	I.4. Involve citizens in policy making	II.1. Understand and apply relevant legislation and regulations
	II.7. Promote Constitutional principles: equality, fairness, due process.	I.5. Exercise compassion, benevolence, fairness, optimism	I.6. Respond to the public in ways that are clear, complete, and easy to understand	III.3. Zealously guard against conflicts of interest
	I.5. Exercise compassion, benevolence, fairness, optimism		I.7. Assist citizens in dealing with their government. III.3. Zealously guard against conflicts of interest	

may even serve individuals in multiple capacities, as individuals are, for example, often simultaneously “subjects” (e.g., revenue sources) and citizens (e.g., legal residents). The role played by any particular administrator will be circumscribed by the legal, institutional, and ethical expectations and boundaries specific to his or her administrative position.

In delivering public assistance, for example, frontline workers adopt a *professional* role in treating recipients as *clients* needing professional services such as parenting skills, training opportunities and work-force preparation, and life management skills for most recipients. The worker brings his or her professional knowledge to the relationship, but the client’s needs and wants are also valued. At the same time, however, workers act as guardians for their *wards*, who are understood to require direction and oversight. In this role, the worker articulates requirements and expectations that the client must follow in order to avoid penalties and sanctions. Work and behavior requirements are not negotiable—they are part of the public assistance transaction. The role of managers in public assistance programs is defined by a different set of expectations—expectations that call for them to facilitate policy deliberation through their interactions with *citizens*, where they need to understand the social and economic contexts that shape the needs of recipients and bring that understanding to bear in building ties to community groups. These interactions may shape policy, and they may shape its implementation in the community through the development of opportunities for those receiving assistance. These managers may also serve as *regulators*, formulating and administering regulations and rules about time limits, work requirements, and sanctioned behavior (e.g., when criminal conduct also affects the availability of assistance). Violations can lead to the application of sanctions to the *subjects* of these regulations.

Similarly, public health outreach workers act as *professionals*, advising their *clients* about desirable vaccinations, sanitation, safe sex practices, and so on. They must understand and work with their public clients, but workers are presumed to bring special knowledge and understandings to these exchanges that create asymmetries in power and influence. In some exchanges, however, the public health worker adopts the role of guardian, where, for example, in the case of a drug resistant infection, the worker “knows best” and is empowered by the community to require their *ward’s* compliance with an aggressive drug therapy. Public health also involves *regulatory* work, where workers administer sanitary regulations to *subjects* such as restaurants and grocery stores. Managerial positions in public health often require administrators to *facilitate* public discussion of these policies and their application. For example, the community must develop appropriate responses to principled noncompliance with vaccination policies (are these to be sanctioned as a threat to the health of the broader community, are they to be allowed as expressions of individual conscience, or should they be taken as evidence of a changing community view of the appropriateness of a particular vaccination?).

Local land use planners also adopt multiple roles. As *professionals*, they guide *clients* in the appropriate use of their land. They bring special knowledge and understanding of local conditions to their exchanges, but their *clients* bring their own needs and wants to this conversation. Still, they also act as *regulators*, enforcing community

zoning and other land use regulations on sometimes recalcitrant *subjects*, the local property owners. Land use planning incorporates a public conversation, however, as evolving community challenges and opportunities confront changing community values—here, the land use planner must step back to *facilitate* a conversation among *citizens* rather than impose expectations.

Administrators serving in many capacities are increasingly responsible for designing what Thaler and Sunstein (2008) call the “architecture of choice.” Educators provide report cards on schools, employee benefit managers provide guidebooks for the selection of benefit packages, health program administrators issue report cards on providers, and social insurance program managers provide materials that facilitate the selection of retirement programs. In these roles, administrators act as *professionals*, bringing their knowledge and understanding to the process of developing appropriate indicators, managing the scope and number of these indicators to avoid information overload, and providing material in an accessible format—all in service to the needs and preferences of the *client*. At the same time, these public servants understand their role as guardians. The guardian remains responsible for adapting to the paradox of choice (Schwartz 2004) by designing a limited number of accessible options for his or her wards. This role also includes a regulatory function, requiring disclosure (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007) and information products that guide choices, and ensuring the integrity of the information they report. Guardians are also responsible for the architecture of the choice environment—when choices will be made, what choices are possible, and how choices will be managed. In short, these “choice architects,” and those who play the more specific role of public information brokers, find themselves in multiple roles as public servants, engaging the public in diverse relationships that entail different responsibilities. The customer metaphor obscures our understanding and blinds us to these diverse and important responsibilities.

Notwithstanding the complex array of administrative positions that combine various roles and responsibilities to various constituencies, distinguishing between different sorts of transactions and relationships to those served “offers a more structured way of comprehending them than merely seeing them as amorphous ‘stakeholders’” (Alford 2002, 344). By building on previous typologies (e.g., Alford 2002; deLeon and Denhardt 2000; Mintzberg 1989), we can more carefully demonstrate the distinctive performance expectations and ethical obligations associated with a range of administrative transactions, and this, in turn, will show that each offers very different strategic opportunities to defend public service values against encroachment.

Protecting Public Service Values: Opportunities and Strategies

A comprehensive account of these opportunities and strategies would be a massive undertaking, and so we will briefly describe several tools that are available to administrators for defending public service values reflected in the Code of Ethics of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). The tools that we offer allow us to undertake a more focused and practical discussion of the public service values that are at stake in each relationship, and the strategies that administrators can use to preserve these values—as well as the dilemmas entailed.

Rules and Coercive Controls

Notwithstanding the rise of network management, the development, application, and enforcement of formal rules is an essential component of managing the internal workings of organizations and shaping the behavior of the organization's clients, wards, and subjects. Hence, the development and enforcement of rules remains an essential tool of administrators who seek to defend fragile values and protect the interests of those who lack an organized constituency (e.g., marginalized groups and future generations). In serving these interests, formal rules constrain the behavior of *subjects*, such as polluting industries, plants that operate without regard for worker safety, or financial institutions that provide false or misleading information. In these contexts, an understanding of these legal constraints and their limits (section II.1 of the ASPA Code of Ethics) is essential, as is a willingness to make unpopular decisions (I.8) and taking care to avoid conflicts of interest (III.3).

Consider also the interpretation of rules on behalf of clients. The professional/client relationship is built on a foundation of particular obligations and expectations, defined by both law and professional socialization and training. In these settings, the administrator serves as an executor of public law who nonetheless has a special obligation to the best interests of clients. Indeed, one mark of the professional is the "role differentiated morality" (Wasserstrom 1988) that elevates certain kinds of concerns (patient well-being) over others (the profit/loss statements of insurance companies). This kind of administrative transaction between professional and client allows the opportunity to advance public service values by protecting the individual rights and interests of extremely vulnerable members of the political community (ASPA Code II.7).

The opportunity arises because "street-level bureaucrats," such as physicians, are likely to have knowledge and information that are unavailable to elected officials (Lipsky 1980), an asset that Weber believed to be critical in assessing bureaucratic power (Weber 1968, 991–92). Obligations to clients must often be weighed against the demands of both political and bureaucratic superiors, whose interpretations of existing law may go under the banner of administrative reform to enhance efficiency but carry a particular policy agenda that may or may not uphold broader substantive and procedural obligations. In such circumstances, the application of general rules to particular cases involves administering a kind of "local justice" whereby administrators allocate scarce goods and necessary burdens (Elster 1993) in ways that ensure fairness (ASPA Code I.5, II.7).

The administrator in this context is making difficult judgments about the purposes of rules and their applicability to a particular case, and only some of these judgments will be scrutinized by political and judicial officials. The kind of discretion in this particular sort of transaction, therefore, allows the opportunity to advance public service values by selective enforcement of agency rules. A professional's ability to defend the client's interests despite contrary political or

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organizational pressures will vary greatly. The degree of external scrutiny, prevailing social attitudes towards those being served (Schneider and Ingram 1993), public confidence in the authority of the profession (Hargrove and Glidewell 1990), and the administrative professional's tolerance for risk taking will all play a role.

Citizen Access and Information Products

Traditional public administration tended to see the general public as potentially "meddlesome" (Wilson 1887) and needing education that would channel their energies toward electoral politics. In this view, the protection of public service values relied heavily on rules grounded in public law. The idea of directly engaging citizens in governance has gained considerable currency, however. In circumstances in which citizens are being inappropriately treated as passive "subjects," the provision of more and better information

can advance public service values by involving citizens in policy making (ASPA Code I.4). The ASPA Code's encouragement of "supporting the public's right to know" and assisting citizens in their dealings with government (I.3, I.7) provides a rationale for a range of tools that seek to expand the opportunities for more direct citizen participation, including facilitating group access to administrative processes, developing neighborhood action councils, and addressing information deficits of citizens by way of user guides and organizational report cards.

As Bingham, Nabatchi, and O'Leary note with respect to citizen participation, public administration as a field is just beginning to sort out "how, when, and whom to engage" (2005, 550) in administrative processes. In similar fashion, those exploring environmental governance recognize the need to take stock of previous efforts to allow for the "strategic deployment of deliberative mechanisms" (Meadowcroft 2004). Criteria are emerging for identifying when administrators can significantly advance public interest values, although important limitations and trade-offs are becoming apparent. For example, John (204, 231) sees the frontline staff of administrative agencies as critical to the success of civic environmentalism but also points out that success may require a "shadow community" of professionals who can develop a shared vision, a formulation that compromises the goal of engaging the broader public. Similarly, Beierle and Cayford (2003) surveyed 239 cases that encompassed a wide variety of efforts to involve the public in dispute resolution and concluded that such efforts are most likely to be successful in mediating conflict between private interests, rather than broader public interests, and when representatives of these interests can be gathered in small groups

Finally, while the aim of neighborhood action councils is typically the improvement of service delivery, in essence, organizing citizens to prompt a government monopoly to provide better customer service, they are an excellent example of practical administrative efforts to advance public service values (see Kathi and Cooper 2005). Consumers who might have been taken for granted, or taken

advantage of, qua consumer, are given voice through participation, a process that may well produce other benefits for the citizens and the community.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that collaborating with the public is an opportunity that emerges only in specific kinds of settings. Box observes that while many public employees do interact directly with citizens, others “carry out technical and professional tasks within public organizations, tasks that are important to the public welfare but do not offer opportunities for the sort of collaboration discussed here” (Box et al. 2001, 616). The citizen engagement strategy also seems to require administrative authority to craft and implement solutions developed by way of citizen collaboration (Irvin and Stansbury 2004, 59; Smith and McDonough 2001), and the costs of citizen participation may outweigh the benefits when the decision-making group lacks the authority to implement policy (Irvin and Stansbury 2004, 62). Similarly, a recent review of participatory techniques in environmental governance shows that many allow for little, if any, role in the execution of policy (Meadowcroft 2004, 192), and the history of mandated citizen participation is less than inspiring partly because citizen input was often disregarded (Kathi and Cooper 2005, 562).

A very different but equally provocative approach to giving voice to those who receive public services is to address the informational deficits of citizens. Where “transparency” was once understood as simply reducing restrictions on access to classified documents, new strategies affirm the importance of “targeted transparency,” where information about specific products or practices is developed to further public purposes (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007, 6). The potential of tools such as user guides and report cards for “assisting citizens in dealing with their government” (ASPA Code I.7) by expanding their ability to make meaningful choices about public services is significant (Gormley and Weimer 1999) but not yet fully realized. Just as administrative authority is often required to foster direct participation by citizen groups, targeted transparency often requires explicit government regulatory action (Fung, Graham, and Weil 2007, 6). For example, Herzlinger (2004) argues that health reform should be promoted through the provision of information about health care services—supported by a public regulatory body that would oversee the development and publication of these products, modeled on the Securities and Exchange Commission.

In some cases, those receiving public services are able to choose among providers directly. Here, public servants have a responsibility to provide accessible, complete, informative, and timely user guides to facilitate good choices. The growing importance of employee benefit plans illustrates the challenges associated with meeting this responsibility. The number of benefit plans has grown and user guides are becoming increasingly elaborate, so the benefits administrator now has an especially important role in facilitating “good choices” by providing information that is “clear, complete, and easy to understand” (ASPA Code I.6). Administrators must balance the risks of

paternalistic oversimplification against the need to accurately reflect complexity—in a format that provides accountability, without prompting “the paradox of choice” and “information overload.” For example, Iyengar, Huberman and Jiang (2004) demonstrate that providing employees with more retirement plan choices actually lowered participation in any retirement plan.

Often, administrators are making choices on behalf of clients, wards, and unrepresented interests. In these cases, what is needed is the sort of information that will allow the public and its representatives to review those choices and their consequences. Here, more detailed “report cards” can facilitate both informed parental choice and broader public debate and oversight (Karsten, Visscher, and De Jong 2001). Ideally, these report cards provide a foundation for accountability by articulating appropriate standards and permitting comparisons over time and across settings. As Lerner and Tetlock (1999) show, this can foster improved decision making by stabilizing and clarifying expectations. High performance can be rewarded, while low performance can spark attention to neglected issues and in extreme circumstances, highlight dysfunction. Arguments for an improved “architecture of choice” for individuals (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) are insufficient as a result—these information products must also play an important role in governance and oversight, so their design and execution must reflect these broader purposes.

Nonetheless, these tools may foster selection, some of it adverse, as those scoring poorly are encouraged to improve—or exit. Report cards can undermine public service values whenever invalid or inadequate measures of performance create misleading guidance, gaps in the report cards’ scope lead to neglected values, misaligned measures across the levels of the organization confuse accountability, measures of trivial or secondary concerns redirect programmatic energy away from core concerns, and “fragile,” difficult-to-measure objectives are neglected (Coe and Burnett 2006; Karsten, Visscher, and De Jong 2001; Niven 2003; Tribe 1976).

The balanced score card movement raises many issues, first among them the difficulty of identifying who is being served and what is to be “scored” (Niven 2003), but there is also considerable potential for promoting citizen engagement and accountability. As with the more familiar strategies of rule enforcement and citizen mobilization, promoting public service values means going well beyond “customer satisfaction” as it is ordinarily understood; it requires “stepping outside the managerial zone of control into territory where the relationship between what providers do and what citizens want is unknown, and trying to create value there” (Kelly 2005, 82; see also Niven 2003).

Conclusion

It is clearly a mistake to conceive of the public solely as customers, not merely because some public organizations do not deliver tangible goods and services or because market models assume self-interest, but because public servants are involved in several distinctive relationships with those they serve that are not appropriately characterized by the customer

It is clearly a mistake to conceive of the public solely as customers, not merely because some public organizations do not deliver tangible goods and services or because market models assume self-interest, but because public servants are involved in several distinctive relationships with those they serve that are not appropriately characterized by the customer metaphor.

metaphor. “Public” action is characterized by the assertion of values that transcend individual interests (Bozeman 1987), unlike simple transactions in the marketplace. These “public” values include open access to some goods and services, assertions of individual rights and responsibilities, and the desirability of promoting community participation in determining public purposes (Bozeman and Bretschneider 1994; Haque 2001).

Attending to these relationships is an important contribution to the field’s long-standing concern with the distinction between public and private administration (Bozeman 1987; Rainey and Bozeman 2000), but it also has practical import for the complex ethical obligations of public service. Public administrators enter into a variety of transactions; enforcing rules on those subject to law, providing expertise to clients and services to wards of the state, and facilitating citizen participation in decision making. To the extent that the public manager’s role includes multiple tasks and objectives, he or she may be required to engage in more than one kind of transaction. Indeed, transactions with a single constituency may contain elements of more than one transaction type. Rightly or wrongly, public policy often requires administrators to serve the same person or group in different ways that reflect these multiple roles. Social workers must provide both professional job referrals and sanction those who violate rules; regulators must treat the regulated as both regulated subjects and citizen stakeholders cooperatively engaged in voluntary self-policing. Understanding and balancing the demands of multiple transactions is arguably one of the most difficult managerial tasks, reflected in the broad sweep of ethical concerns represented in the ASPA Code of Ethics. Stretching the customer metaphor in a failed attempt to capture these distinctively public roles will obscure the diverse obligations of public management. In so doing, we confuse both our students and the general public, and we are less likely to recognize the ways in which tools originally conceived as part of a critique of government action in favor of market solutions, such as targeted transparency, report cards, and other strategies for enhancing choice, can be used to advance public service values.

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Notes

1. These include various categories of tax filers, those regulated by public agencies (notably commercial pilots regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration), program beneficiaries (Social Security beneficiaries, Medicare recipients, and Veterans Administration patients), users of selected services (e.g., users of NASA’s EOSDIS, passport applicants, and recreational visitors to Corps of Engineers sites), as well as some purchasers of government products (e.g., commemorative coins) and quasi-public services (the Postal Service) (American Customer Satisfaction Index 2007).
2. Inducing demand ranges from the benign (Don’t forget to get some salsa to go with those chips) to the problematic (Here, at the checkout stand, is the candy your child wants), to the point that it suggests a form of market failure (Yes, this seemingly useless product will make you more handsome and desirable).
3. Rieskamp, Busemeyer, and Mellers point out in their recent summary of the literature that “choices do more than reveal preferences; they

also reflect subtle, yet often quite reasonable dependencies on the environment,” and “the evidence suggests that people construct or discover their preferences when presented with option sets” (2006, 631, 652).

4. Consider the case of the family practice physician, who offers patients both an initial diagnosis and a referral based on the diagnosis (Emanuel 1999).
5. Clients are likely to find specialized providers by convenience and referral, not by “shopping”—the complex agency problems that this creates are well known but not easily resolved (e.g., Finlayson et al. 1999; Schneider and Lieberman 2001).
6. See Teaster (2002) on the problem of oversight. The litigation over the treatment of prisoners serves as an obvious example—and the challenge of prison health care offers a particularly poignant example of the problem.

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