



LINE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM
Innovative Customer Service Delivery

BY AMY MEEKER-BERG

Note: The Johnson County, Kansas, Treasurer's Department received the GFOA's 2010 Award for Excellence in the e-Government and Technology category.

Everyone has experienced the frustration of a long wait in line, and many people have had such an experience at a department of motor vehicles (DMV) office. The Johnson County, Kansas, Treasurer's Department decided to address this issue through its line management program. The program is an innovative concept that uses text messaging, online reservations, touch screen monitors, and television displays to enhance the customer service delivery at the Johnson County, Kansas motor vehicle offices.

In Kansas, county motor vehicle operations act as agents of the state, processing renewals, titles, and other types of motor vehicle-related transactions. Johnson County has two motor vehicle locations with approximately 60 full-time employees. Vehicle registrations are due the last day of each month, based on the first letter of one's last name. Even though the state provides online registration renewals on most transactions, and the county uses a lockbox for processing mail payments, customers typically wait until the last day of each month to pay (see Exhibit 1). These customers must go to one of the locations and pick up a plate or decal in order to legally operate their vehicles.

The title and registration division of the Kansas Department of Revenue establishes the rules and regulations that guide the motor vehicle process, along with providing a statewide mainframe computer system. To gain operational efficiencies and effectiveness in Johnson County's business operations, the county looked at the processes within its control — and customer service delivery was one of those processes.

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

In an effort to manage customer lines, the county had begun using a manual push-button ticket dispenser in 2002, providing customers with a numbered ticket that indicated their place in line. In conjunction with the ticket dispenser, cashiers used an audio alert to call the ticket numbers. Customers would crowd into the lobbies, sitting in the available seating. When all the

seating was taken, they would stand or sit on the floor in the lobby area to ensure they did not miss their turn in line when called. If customers needed to obtain additional information to complete their transactions, they were forced to leave the office, losing their place in line. Also, there was no monitor for customers to view how many people were in line and when their turn was coming up. During peak business volume at the end of the month, waiting times can vary from 90 minutes to two hours (see Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 1: Motor Vehicle Walk-In Transactions

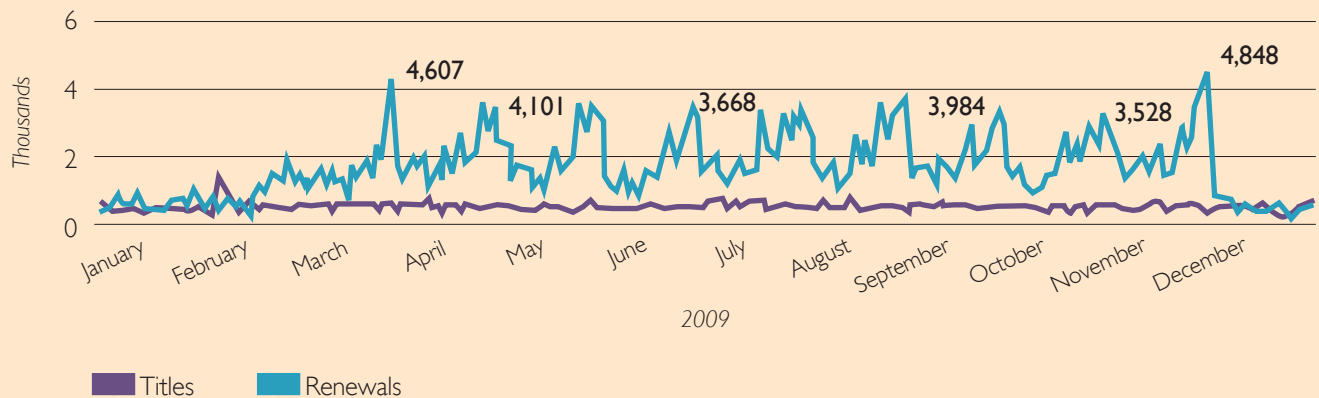
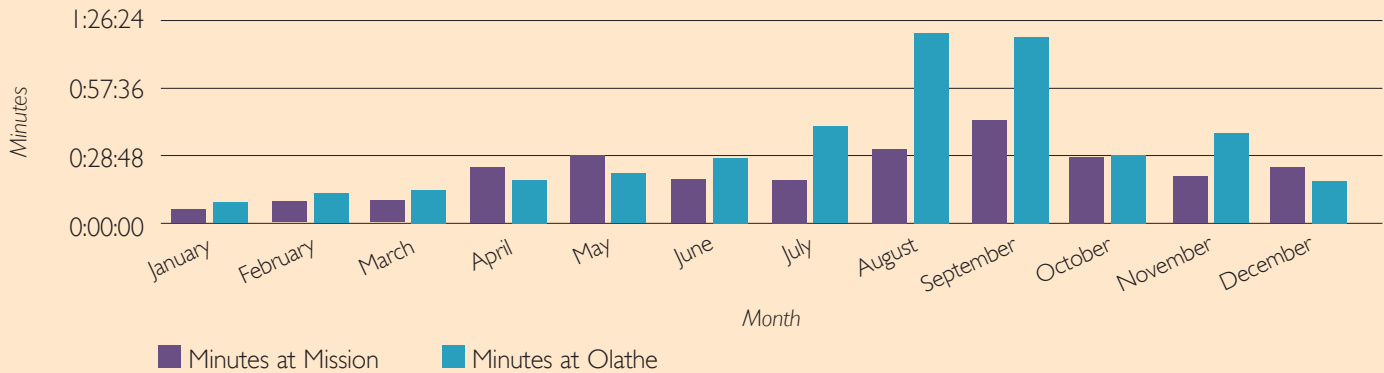


Exhibit 2: DMV Average Customer Wait Times



Since the business flow of motor vehicles is not evenly distributed throughout the year, and the county knows that customers wait until the last day of each month to renew, Johnson County wanted to give its customers the freedom to manage their own time and schedules.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

The line management program was initiated in September 2008, based on ideas and concepts used in the restaurant industry. Thinking that they could tailor the restaurant paging concept to meet service needs, staff in the Treasurer's Department discovered that it would be possible to use customers' cell phones instead of giving them pagers, which are cumbersome to carry and have limited range. The department tested the program in one location in July 2009. When the test site proved successful, the department launched the online reservations feature at another location in October 2009. During the project development phase, the department worked extensively with a virtual queue management firm and its programmer/analyst to enhance their product so it would meet the county's business needs. The entire project team consisted of seven members of the information technology services and treasurer's departments.

The line management program uses the vendor's hosted service and is accessed through an Internet connection. The hosted service is simple for users and requires minimal training for front line staff who summon the customers. The system also has useful features that include automatically

expiring reservations for customers who do not arrive within a prescribed timeframe, allowing staff to add notes about a specific customer; and allowing staff to have a customer rejoin the line based on the first come, first served basis. The system also provides a wealth of information regarding business cycles and average customer wait times. The reports used most frequently are average service wait, service transactions, queue length, service transactions by cashier, and outcomes. This provides data the department can use for forecasting customer volumes, understanding staffing requirements, and making budget projections, along with predicting future resource needs and infrastructure requests.

The line management system has several points of entry for customers: through online reservations at the Treasurer's Web site; touch screen monitors in each motor vehicle office; phone reservations through 1-888-9-JOCO-KS, and then indicating the motor vehicle office; texting 310-740-7906; or having a motor vehicle information specialist enter the customer into the system. The main feature of the program is the ability for a customer to "put themselves in line" by providing their cell phone number, which is an entirely new approach for the public sector. This feature enables customers to request and receive status updates by text or voice message at any time regarding their (virtual) place in line.

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GETTING IN LINE

To get in line online, customers simply go to the Treasurer's Web site at <http://treasurer.jocogov.org>, go to the "Get in Line at DMV" icon, and click on the

motor office of choice, based on location or estimated wait time (see Exhibit 3). An information disclaimer page appears and describes the system, listing office hours and informing customers that standard text messaging rates may apply when using this service, based on their service provider.

Through all points of entry, customers have the option of receiving information in English or Spanish. They can also choose to be directed to a wheelchair-accessible station for service. The department was not able to provide either of these services before. The Treasurer's Department recognized the need to accommodate both the area's growing Hispanic population and its constituents who desire a wheelchair-accessible cashier station.

A customer is given the estimated wait time for service and can then choose to enter his or her cell phone numbers. A customer who is in the motor vehicle office can choose to receive a paper ticket in lieu of entering a cell phone number. Once a cell phone number is entered, the customer

receives a text message confirming his or her place in line. Online customers entering the line through the Internet receive a printable confirmation sheet containing information about the documentation that is required for motor vehicle transactions. Customers can use the following keys: S or 1 for status updates, L or 3 to leave the line, H for help, M or 2 for more time, or J to join the line if the customer left. The online reservation feature is only available during the hours the office accepts customers and when the office is open for business. Both locations stay open until they have served all the customers who were placed in the queue by 4:30 p.m., so staff often works until 5:30 or later during peak times.

The department also determined that it was not efficient to allow customers to schedule a block of time or make appointments. Using the just-in-time reservation concept helped the department avoid wasting time because of no-shows or late appointments. Customers who do not arrive at the station within the prescribed timeframe will be skipped over but can rejoin the line within the same day. In both locations, customers can watch multiple monitors displaying their place in line and which station they are being called to which coincides with the audio alert.

The system also allows staff to filter walk-in customers by transaction types such as titles or renewals. When the estimated wait time exceeds 30 to 40 minutes, staff can activate the review queue option for title work. This gives staff the ability to call customers with title work and review their paperwork to make sure they have everything necessary to complete their transactions.

COSTS AND RECEPTION

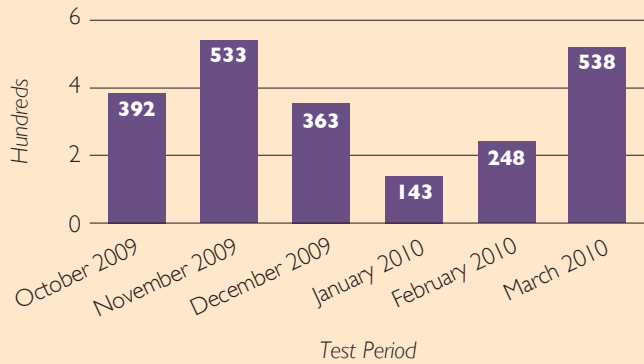
The total cost of the line management program was estimated at \$40,000, consisting of software enhancements and hardware such as touch screen monitors, ticket dispensers, television display monitors, and cabling for existing infrastructure. The ongoing costs associated with the program are the monthly charges for customer use of the cell phone option, a hosting fee for each location, and minimal hardware replacement, scheduled for every four years.

The results of the program are that 22 percent of customers use the text messaging feature. Since the implementation of the online reservation feature in October, there have been 5,718 hits to the online reservation link, resulting in 2,237 reservations (see Exhibit 4). It is interesting to note that the

Exhibit 3: Getting in Line, Online



Exhibit 4: Online Reservations



number of actual reservations versus the hits on the link — at almost 40 percent — is higher than walk-in customer use of the cell phone option (Exhibit 5). The department sees this option as the future and ultimate level of service delivery, since it allows customers to arrive at the location only when they are ready to be served.

Customer response to the line management program has been overwhelmingly positive. Several local television stations have mentioned the program during their evening news, and an article was published in the Kansas City Star newspaper. The department has received numerous e-mails and personal comments about the system. One customer told a motor vehicle specialist that he had gone into the office and decided to leave until his number was called. When he received the text message letting him know that he had 15 minutes until he reached the front of the line, he was stuck in traffic. But he was able to reply to the text and request more

time so he could be served when he got to the office, not losing his place in line. Another customer sent the following text message: “Arrived at DMV at 10:45. Bruce is now at window 13. We have left. Picked up tile. Delivered tile. Had lunch. Installed 20 percent of tile. Picked up Taylor at OE can (go) back to DMV. Government-run organization at its best!” And still another customer mentioned that it was nice that the new system will text customers on their cells as their turn in line approaches. This customer said the experience was as good as car registration may get, and that it was much better than going to the dentist.

CONCLUSIONS

The line management program — a partnership between the Johnson County Treasurer’s Department and a private-sector company — is an example of how jurisdictions can provide options to waiting in line by using text messaging and online reservations. The line management program empowers customers and gives them the ability to manage their own time. When current systems and constraints do not provide an opportunity for change, organizations can look for other ways to provide a better customer experience. ■

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Exhibit 5: Text Messaging Feature

