

Customer Service Tips

ASAP FOIA and Privacy Workshop
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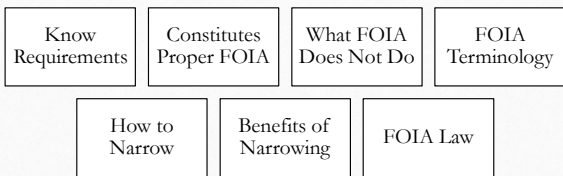
Why Should You Care About Customer Service?

- Can reduce the likelihood of appeals and litigation.
- Can decrease the processing times and volume of work.
- Strengthens the working relationships of program offices and FOIA Offices.

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The Target Audience: (they are not FOIA Experts).

Things to consider:



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Customer Service / Customer Experience

Customer service is about assisting the customer with a particular need in a specific circumstance.

Customer experience refers to the whole customer journey and beyond, from the moment they look for information on how to file a FOIA to resolution of the FOIA request.

- FOIA Website - Is the information comprehensive and accurate?
- Portal - Is the portal user friendly?
- Correspondence - Plain language? Accurate? Comprehensive?
- Phone - Functional? Monitored?
- Email - Do you have a public email address and is it monitored.

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Model Determination Letter

Advisory Committee Recommendation 2024-01:

The Office of Information Policy should issue a draft model determination letter written and endorsed by the FOIA Advisory Committee as a best practice reference for agencies.

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Who are FOIA Customers?

FOIA Requesters (external)

Agency Colleagues / Program Offices (internal and external)

Partnership Agencies (external)

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Tips

General Customer Service Tips

- Consider the perspective of the requester – Experience and Interest
- Ask questions
 - Ask clarifying questions if you are unclear of the scope of the request.
 - Provide alternative ways to respond to the request.
- Set expectations on how the request will be processed (don't be afraid to give bad news).
- Not every effort will be successful; but enough will.

Agency Staff Customer Service Tip

- Aim to reduce the amount required staff time to respond to a request.
- Be flexible with how you engage each program office.
- Do not make them responsible for the final determination.

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Communication:

- Be clear and specific regarding:
 - what the communication is about
 - what actions you are taking
 - what actions you need the requester to take
 - what documents you need, such as proof of ID
 - what the suspense is if any
 - what action will happen if suspense isn't met (i.e. request closed)



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Scenario: First party Requester

J. D. Samples
 123 Anywhere Ave
 Hometown, US 88888

Under FOIA, I am requesting the following documents. Everything the facility has in record format from 1 Jan 2023 through 30 Sep 2023 regarding myself. I want this by next Tuesday and I should not have to pay.



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Scenario: Journalist 1

You've been assigned a FOIA request from a reporter with the Washington Toast, a DC food-focused news outlet. The request seeks records from a two-year time period relating to a specific food safety inspection form. The request has already been pending for 13 months. After looking into it, you realize your agency changed the database used to track these forms halfway through the time period identified in the request. Getting the forms from the current database isn't hard, but the forms from the old database weren't imported when your agency switched over. There's a backup of the old database, but it will require assistance of your IT department to access. How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Journalist 2

A reporter from the New York Rhymes has reached out, asking for help in crafting a FOIA request for information from an SQL database your agency maintains. The database includes the names and email addresses for each political appointee in your agency, along with nicknames they're given by staff. Each nickname is (for some reason) linked to other nicknames in the database that rhyme with it. For example, the database contains the following entry: "William Jones," "william.jones@agency.gov," "Bill." That entry is linked to the entries for both "Phil" and "Zill." The reporter is interested in doing data analyses on nickname rhymes at your agency. How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Agency Colleagues



A request comes in for all records pertaining to the development of a certain policy. The search indicates that there are a number of offices that may hold responsive records and some of these offices are reluctant to share them with you for processing - How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Advocacy Organization

A requester is asking for emails from your Chief Financial Officer (responsive date range: 2019-2023) regarding funding for each of your agency's components. The requester is asking for a fee waiver because they are "trying to determine why HQ offices received more funding than field offices." How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Commercial Requester

A commercial requester stated that they are willing to pay up to \$200 for their request. However, upon initial review of the request you foresee the cost being at least three times what they are willing to pay. How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Journalist

A media requester is asking for a spreadsheet of data for a story they are publishing in 3 weeks. The responsive date range is 2020-present. You just recently responded to a similar request, but the responsive date range for that request is 2020-2022. The program office can pull the data for 2023. But it would take them 3 weeks. How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Agency Colleagues/Requester

You are processing a request with a number of consultations for other agencies that need to be processed. Before you can finish processing the request you need the results of these consultations. Some of the agencies are not responding to your status inquiries. Further, the requestor is seeking the status of its request which has been pending for some time past the statutory deadline. How could you proceed?

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Scenario: Individual

A requester by the name of John Smith is seeking email communication and text messages between "Program Analyst Jane Smith and a gentleman named Michael." The responsive date range is Jan 2022 - present. The requester does not know Michael's last name but stated "Mike works for the agency." The requester also requested expedited processing because the information is "critical for pending litigation." How could you proceed?

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Case File Record Keeping:

- All correspondence
- - Include typed memos summarizing phone conversations
- - this will provide anyone viewing the case a clear picture
- - can be significant in appeal/litigations



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Customer Service Benefit and Tips

- **General Customer Service Benefits**
 - Can reduce the likelihood of appeals and litigations
 - Can decrease the processing times
 - Strengthens the working relationship of the program offices and FOIA Offices
 - Aim to satisfy the reason for the request
 - Provide alternative ways to respond to the request
 - Set expectations how the request will be processed

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Comments or Questions?

- Thank you for your time
- Presenters:
 - Ginger Quintero-McCall
 - Tammy Wray

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