U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA)

Customer Service Plan

October 24, 2011

Executive Summary

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) acts as a guarantor of small business loans and provides management and technical assistance and contracting opportunities to small businesses. The Agency also provides disaster assistance through direct loans in communities that have undergone catastrophes with the intention of rebuilding the devastated economy and community simultaneously.

Moreover, as the only federal government agency with "small business" in its name and our credibility with entrepreneurs and small businesses throughout the country, SBA is often turned to for advice and guidance beyond our specific program areas. Recognition of this reality and adapting our service offerings as an agency has been an essential component of improving customer service across our agency.

During the last fiscal year SBA backed loans went to over 60,000 small businesses. Tens of thousands of small businesses received federal government contracts. And over 1 million small businesses were counseled by our resource partners. Each of those businesses was directly impacted by an SBA program – but they are far from the extent of our reach into the community of entrepreneurs across America.

Over the last 12 months approximately 9 million individuals have visited our agency web site.

In other words, every two and a half days more people visit www.SBA.gov than get an SBA backed loan in an entire year!

As SBA's senior leadership team has considered our reach and impact on small businesses, our priority has always been on improving customer service. For example, turnaround times between receipt of an application and decision on approval for direct loans made by our Office of Disaster Assistance consistently averages lower than the 14-18 day goal established in consultation with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

That commitment to more quickly and efficiently delivering our programs to small businesses will continue across the agency. When considering potential impact on signature customer service initiatives – it is clear from the sheer volume of traffic to our web site that the greatest opportunities for improving customer service exist online.

Therefore, SBA will focus primarily on a series of improvements to online tools and services in accordance with the principles and objectives of the Customer Service initiative. Additional customer service enhancements are informed by ongoing input from a wide range of stakeholder groups, including small business owners and entrepreneurs of all stages of the business life cycle.

SIGNATURE INITIATIVE: SBA DIRECT 2.0
Overview: SBA Direct (www.sba.gov/direct) provides customized search results for users through three simple questions – "where are you?", "what are you looking for?" and "who are you?" These three simple questions make it much simpler for users to find the answers and information they are looking for quickly. SBA Direct was launched in December, 2010 as the cornerstone of the agency's new web site and includes information about everything from licenses and permits to financial assistance and even how to start and manage a business. The next generation of SBA Direct will attract more users, provide more types of content to users, and allow greater customization based on individual users.

Timing:
- Throughout: Refine search results and taxonomy to continually improve search results
- Winter 2011: Make SBA Direct widgets available to third party web sites to introduce more users into the SBA Direct environment
- Summer 2012: Integrate SBA Community content into SBA Direct search results – greatly broadening the scope of answers and information available to users of SBA Direct.

SERVICE 1: SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAM FINDER

Overview: During the Startup America: Reducing Barriers Roundtables held earlier this calendar year, the most common frustration among participating entrepreneurs and small businesses was about the need for new program X or service Y through the Federal Government. Fortunately, in most cases, the Federal Government had a program – similar or otherwise – in place, but the Federal Government does an unsatisfactory job in making programs and services for small businesses easily accessible and understandable through normal means. With the relaunch of SBA.gob site in Winter 2011 and related functionality in SBA Direct, the Small Business Program Finder makes it easier to find the appropriate programs for a small business through basic questions about the small business.

Key Customer Groups: Any entrepreneur or small business owner interested in learning more about Federal, State, and Local programs available according to their interests.

Challenges: The major challenge to this initiative is the maintenance of the database of relevant Federal, State, and Local program to keep its relevance and accuracy. Currently, the database focus is relatively narrow, and will gradually broaden upon subsequent releases. The SBA will move to develop a regular update process to maintain its accuracy and relevancy of the database. Realistically, the tool will be as current and accurate, as its use will be by the small business community reporting errors and inaccuracies.

Featured Action: The SBA plans to unveil a first generation of the Small Business Program Finder by the end of the November 2011. Subsequent releases will take place quickly thereafter. The SBA is also exploring the opportunity to make the core tool extensible to related initiatives, such as BusinessUSA.

SERVICE 2: ONLINE TRACKING – SMALL BUSINESS CONTRACTING PROGRAM CERTIFICATION

Overview: Applying for and being approved into SBA's small business contracting certificationprograms – 8(a) and HUBZone may seem an overwhelming task to a small business juggling multiple priorities. Establishing online tracking of a small businesses application will improve customer satisfaction and free up valuable labor hours by government employees to process applications.

Key Customer Groups: Disadvantaged small businesses seeking access to business development programs and greater access to federal contracts.

Challenges: Establishing online tracking requires re-engineering current application review processes and poses security risks due to the necessity of protecting PII.

Featured Action: SBA is in the process of developing a new system to improve the 8(a) and HUBZone application process and plans to launch a test pilot of the online tracking system before the end of fiscal year 2012.

SERVICE 3: SMALL BUSINESS "DATA LOCKER"
Overview: Distinct, separate Customer Relationship Management systems (CRMs) at each different federal agency lead to frustration on the part of small businesses seeking to utilize services and programs across the federal government. Agency CRMs do not talk to one another – resulting in business owners spending valuable time repeating information to government officials. Establishing a "data locker" that allows federal agency CRMs to "talk to each other" will minimize lost time for small businesses and the government alike – ensuring the focus is on answering a business owners question or connecting them with the service they need rather than filling out another form similar to the one they just completed for a different agency.   **Key Customer Groups**: Small businesses interested in beginning to export or expand their exporting operation – a key audience segment that this initiative will target in phase.   **Challenges:** Current CRMs utilized by federal agencies are developed and maintained by distinct industry leaders in the area of information technology – posing significant challenges to an integrated environment where the CRMs can "communicate" and share information.   **Featured Action:** Before the end of calendar year 2011 SBA will host a workshop featuring senior leaders from across the government to establish requirements and a work plan for completing the data locker.

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Additional Information

- While approximately 750,000 users visit www.SBA.gov each month – only approximately 10% of current users utilize SBA Direct.
- Overall customer satisfaction with www.sba.gov measures 69 – but among users utilizing SBA Direct satisfaction stands at 83.
- SBA Direct satisfaction underscores the ease of use and availability of relevant information for users, emphasizing the importance of increasing use of this signature tool.

Continually refining and improving taxonomy and search results to ensure accurate, timely, and relevant information for small businesses can be found is essential to maintaining and improving satisfaction with SBA Direct. To that end, SBA Direct 2.0 will feature next generation taxonomy consistent with standards currently being developed on a interagency basis. This consistency across federal agency web sites will allow agencies to leverage SBA Direct and more efficiently share content across federal web sites – ensuring that there is "no wrong door" small business owners can choose when turning to the federal government for assistance.

Development and distribution of SBA Direct widgets will increase the points of entry into the successful SBA Direct environment. SBA intends to make these widgets available to federal government partners, as well as third party, non-governmental web sites utilized by small business owners and entrepreneurs to encourage use of SBA Direct.

The SBA Community, an online, user-focused community of over 25,000 individuals hosts a wealth of information for small business owners outside the traditional focus on government programs prevalent on most government agency web sites. Integrating SBA Community content into SBA Direct search results will greatly expand the types of information available to small business owners and invite greater collaboration from users.

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Additional Information

The Small Business Program Finder is an interactive, online tool supported by a database of Federal, State and Local programs that quickly narrows an individual small business owner or entrepreneur's quest to find a relevant federal program that could suit their needs. The questions asked of the small business include size, ownership, location, industry sector, and interests. The tool lists the programs and provides them in a downloadable format for further viewing and study, after the small business exits the tool.

Currently, version 1 includes over 400 loan and grant programs at the Federal, State, Local levels with the Federal contracting certifications for small businesses. Version 2 will include other resources, such as education, training, and technical assistances for small businesses. Version 3 will include search functionality relevant for small businesses of other publicly available information, such as FedBizOpps.gov, Grants.gov, FederalRegister.gov, and others. Advanced functionality will include the widgetization of the tool for use on other government and private sites. Additionally, the base data will be made available through a commonly-used web services API.

- The Small Business Program Finder represents an improvement of a currently available tool at SBA.gov – the "Loans & Grants" tool.
- The datasets which currently power the above mentioned tools are featured datasets made available by SBA through the Open Government initiative.
- The "Loans & Grants tool" currently receives approximately 70,000 page views per month.

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Challenges: Establishing online tracking requires re-engineering current application review processes and poses security risks due to the necessity of protecting PII.
Featured Action: SBA is in the process of developing a new system to improve the 8(a) and HUBZone application process and plans to launch a test pilot of the online tracking system before the end of fiscal year 2012.

Additional Information

- SBA receives approximately 3,000 applications each year for the 8(a) business development program and graduates an average of 500 firms from the 8(a) program each year.
- In the last fiscal year, 8(a) firms received just under $18.5 billion in federal contracts.
- SBA receives on average 3,550 applications each year for the HUBZone program.
- In the last fiscal year, HUBZone firms received just shy of $12 billion in federal contracts.

The 8(a) Business Development and HUBZone programs provide opportunities for small businesses to compete for and win federal contracts. By law, 23% of all federal contract dollars are required to go to small businesses. A record, nearly $100 billion were awarded to small businesses in FY 2010, which is 22.7 percent of government contracting dollars. This increase marks the largest two-year increase in over a decade. For the second consecutive year, federal prime contracting dollars to small businesses have increased after 3 years of decline.

SBA has made tremendous strides in re-engineering the certification process and cutting down the time between receipt of a small businesses application and determination of eligibility for/acceptance into these programs.

This decrease represents a significant customer service improvement on the part of our Office of Government Contracting and Business Development. The next evolution in continuing to improve this process is to allow business owners with applications pending to view the status of their application in a secure environment online at www.sba.gov.

SERVICE 3: SMALL BUSINESS "DATA LOCKER"

Overview: SBA seeks to increase the value of government interactions with small business by improving the way information is entered, stored, shared and used. Currently, small businesses must create a distinct, separate user profile at each different federal agency they encounter. In areas where many agencies are involved, such as exporting, this leads to frustration on the part of small businesses seeking to utilize services and programs across the federal government. Establishing a method that allows businesses to control their profiles and enables federal agency systems to "talk to each other" will minimize lost time for small businesses and the government alike – ensuring that pertinent information and services are delivered to business in a timely way.

Key Customer Groups: Small businesses interested in beginning to export or expand their exporting operation – a key audience segment that this initiative will target in phase.

Additional Information

- Multiple agencies play critical role in preparing small businesses to export their goods or services, including, but not limited to: SBA, Department of Commerce, Exim Bank, Department of Agriculture, and the Department of State.
- In 2009, President Obama called for a doubling of exports over the next 5 years. Central to reaching that goal is supporting small business exports.
- Currently, small firms must "re-introduce" themselves to each agency that offers export assistance when they initially contact an agency producing tens of thousands of duplicate records annually and wasting valuable time of both the business owner and the federal employee.

The private sector has streamlined the customer service experience for small business owners. For example, if a small business owner purchases electronic equipment from a retailer on one side of town, the purchase history, warranty information and other relevant details can quickly be accessed by the same retailer in a different location on the other side of town. Increasingly retailers, like Amazon, "push" information to their customers based on previous interactions.

The federal government can, and should, be able to replicate that type of customer service experience for small business owners. Doing so requires cooperation among agencies, allowing distinct agencies to talk to each other and share information. The technical challenges to doing so are not complicated. The policy, organizational and legal questions pose the greatest risk to the success of this effort.

In his 2010 State of the Union Address the President articulated his plan to double exports by 2014. The National Export Initiative instructed federal agencies to work together to reach this goal. Building upon the collegial working relationship of the trade agencies lead by the Trade Promotion Coordinating Committee, SBA is currently planning a multi-day workshop to address existing challenges and agree to an achievable workplan. Initial feedback from TPCC member agencies is positive, and SBA hopes to have the workplan in place next year.