

Original article

Customer as the recipient of the public administration services

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INFORMATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the way of perceiving the public administration recipient in the context of services provided by this administration. The authors pay special attention to changes taking place in public institutions, resulting in a change in the perception of a recipient of public services. The work also presents the specifics of the public administration customer, applying a comparison to the company's customer.

KEYWORDS

public services, customer, suppliant, public administration



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Introduction

Until recently, the public sector constituted a closed system in which officials decided on the scope and level of service provision, as only they had the necessary knowledge about the needs, priorities, resources and policies. A distanced approach to human beings was justified by the necessity of observing the law in the field of equal and impartial treatment of all citizens. Currently, managers of public institutions seek to use from the management concepts applied in enterprises. Changes in offices, resulting from the way of managing these institutions, can be observed more and more frequently. However, do these changes in some way translate into the quality of life of this part of society, which is the recipient of services offered by public administration? Do they have a significant impact on customer satisfaction? Is it still that the recipient of services is “on the other side of the barricade” and is treated as a “necessary evil” by officials? Here are the questions this article attempts to answer.

For a very long time, people dealing with their official matters in public institutions used to be called petitioners. “A petitioner” (Latin *petitio* means a petition, an application) is a person who is a customer at the office. According to Kopaliński, a petitioner is one who asks or demands; this is “a person applying for something, submitting his/her request, application at the office, court, etc.” [Kopaliński 1990, p. 392]. However, the word *a petitioner* has rather negative connotations (it is associated badly with unkind service in offices) and it can be derived from the above definitions that the auxiliary role, which

should be assumed by an official towards a client, refers more to the petitioner than to an official.

The aim of the article is to present clients of public administration as recipients of public services, as well as to identify problems related to the need to change the perception of recipients of services provided by public administration offices.

2. Public tasks vs public services

From the point of view of the considerations, it is important to assume the municipal offices' affiliation to the services sector (in particular public services). The tasks implemented by the municipalities will play herein an important role.

The tasks of local self-governments at all levels, i.e. the municipality, powiat and voivodships, are specified in detail in the Act of 8 March 1990 on municipal self-government (Journal of Laws of 2016, item 446, as amended), the Act of 5 June 1998 on powiat self-government (Journal of Laws of 2016, item 814, as amended) and the Act of 5 June 1998 on the self-government of the voivodship (Journal of Laws of 2016 item 486, with later amendments).

The task of offices is, among others, to create local legal regulations, enforcing their application, providing services in the field of public transport, water supply, collection and utilization of waste, education, recreation, culture, sports, issuing administrative decisions, and many others.

A service in the public sector is a function of the public task (e.g. a function in the field of physical culture is the construction of a sports center that allows the use of various forms of recreation). Public services refer to tasks carried out by a municipality and are used by members of a given local community.

Due to the functional nature, the implementation of the municipality's own tasks from the point of view of a member of the community manifests itself in the provision of public services [Borowiec 2007, p. 40]. Table 1 presents the general characteristics of public services, as well as the possibility of commissioning the implementation of some of them to economic entities. Increasingly, municipal offices use outsourcing in relation to some services, since, as can be seen from the table, not all of them can be commissioned to other entities. Outsourcing in the public finance sector is mainly limited by legal conditions [Cf. Chrisidu-Budnik 2012, p. 186]. However, in relation to some municipality's tasks, and in particular to the social services described in Table 1, this tool may bring benefits to both parties – a municipality office and a contractor.

As can be seen from the table above, in the provision of services, defined as administrative, municipal offices play the role of a monopolist. The same applies to some municipal services. However, not all of these services, such as social services, are reserved only for institutions. In this case, various private sector entities – entrepreneurs, as well as the so-called third sector entities – non-governmental organizations, foundations, associations, clubs, etc., has taken over some of the services listed and thus can play a competitive role in this respect in relation to commune offices. Therefore, a customer has a cer-

tain freedom to choose his/her service provider, he/she does not have to use the services offered by the municipality office.

Table 1. Characteristics of public services

COMMUNAL SERVICES (TECHNICAL)			
Service category	Possibilities of shaping standards	Possibilities of shaping the market of service providers	Comments
housing	significant	full	the availability of premises is limited due to finances
water and sewage	significant	none – natural monopoly	restrictions of sanitary regulations and environmental protection law
maintenance of cleanliness	significant	full	they are usually carried out by external entities
cemetery services	significant	none	there are local markets services related to cemeteries; problems with burial places in cities
energy supply	obligation to determine	none – natural monopoly	municipality's tasks concern coordination issues (planning and implementation)
public greenery	full	none	lack of opportunities to create a market offering public greenery
SOCIAL SERVICES			
health care	limited	limited	financial barrier in access to paid services, opportunities arise in the case of co-financing of services
education	limited	limited	possibilities of shaping through co-financing in the infrastructure
culture	significant	significant	possibilities arise from the fact that the municipality decides how to provide the service implementation
physical culture and recreation	significant	significant	possibilities arise from the fact that the municipality decides on the manner of service provision
social assistance	limited	significant	standards are defined by law
security	limited	none	standards are defined by law
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES			
record services	limited	none	standards are defined by law
issuing decisions	limited	none	standards are defined by law
tax service at the level	limited	none	standards are defined by law

Source: [Own study based on: [Borowiec 2007, p. 46]].

3. A customer as the recipient of public services

A customer is the recipient of all kinds of services, including public ones. In public administration there are also such terms as: a petitioner (mentioned at the beginning), a client or a party.

Acts regulating the functioning of economic entities in various areas also include the definition of a customer, however they are limited to services being the subject of regulation. The Act of 29 August 1997 on tourist services defines a client as “a person who intends to conclude or has concluded a contract for the provision of tourist services to his/her benefit or for another person’s, and the conclusion of this contract is not the object of his/her business activity, and a person for whom benefit the contract has been concluded, as well as a person to whom the right to use tourist services covered by the previously concluded contract has been transferred”.¹ The Ordinance of the Minister of Finance of 1 October 2010 on special accounting principles for banks as a client indicates “a legal person, a natural person or an organizational unit without legal personality using the services provided by the bank under a contract, whereas a bank or a brokerage house concluding transactions using affiliation (intermediation in entering into transactions on the market regulated by a bank) is not considered a customer”.² Therefore, it will be right to recognize that a customer is the services receiver – a recipient. It does not matter if it is a natural person, a legal person or an organizational unit without legal personality. The word “customer” is used in a simplified way in relation to a person purchasing a product, service. An applicant is the one who uses the services, who deals with some matter, for example in an office. In everyday language, an applicant has a business to do, wants to handle some matter, discuss it.

Officials also use the term “party”, which is contributed by the Code of Administrative Procedure, according to which “a party is everyone whose legal interest or obligation is concerned by the proceedings, or who demands the body’s activities due to his/her legal interest or obligation. Parties may include natural persons and legal persons, and when it comes to state and local organizational units and social organizations – also entities without legal personality”.³ Such an approach to an applicant is, in the opinion of the authors, impersonal, favoring the mechanical treatment of those who use public administration services [Cf. Bugdol 2011, p. 266]. On the other hand, such an impersonal, impartial approach to an applicant may eliminate the arbitrariness and discretion of the official apparatus, in accordance with the theory of bureaucracy presented by M. Weber [Hausner 2008, p. 15].

It is generally assumed that if services are provided by any of the offices (municipalities, marshal, voivodship, etc.) they are free of charge. This is not completely true, as the services specified in Table 1 as administrative are paid for from public funds (the so-called

¹ Article 3 (11) of the Act of 29 August 1997 on tourist services (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2016, item 187, as amended).

² § 2 (31) of the Decree of the Minister of Finance of 1 October 2010 on special accounting principles for banks (Journal of Laws of 2013, item 329).

³ The Act of June 14, 1960. The Code of Administrative Procedure, i.e. Journal of Laws of 1960 No. 30 item 168 with amendments, Article 28 and 29.

general payment), while social and municipal services are partly paid by service recipients and partly financed from public funds. It is therefore hard to speak of about free services. The office's employees, as well as the institution itself, are maintained from public money, coming from taxpayers (taxes are part of budget revenues from which an office is maintained in the *Public Administration* section, as well as wages for the work of officials are paid).

Summing up the above considerations one can assume that a member of a given local self-government community is a customer, since by dealing with any matter in the office – he/she purchased a service (along with others) due to paying taxes⁴ and paying other local fees. For this reason, it is right to treat him/her as a customer, with all the consequences that this has. In such management concepts as *New Public Management* [Opol-ski and Modzelewski 2012, p. 36], quality management in accordance with ISO standards or in Total Quality Management [Szczepanska 2010, p. 195], a customer (external or internal) can be referred to. According to PN-EN ISO 9000:2015-10, a customer is an organization or a person that receives a product, which means that someone who uses the services provided by public administration is a customer. The term "customer" is divided into two terms: internal and external. An internal customer is an employee of a given entity using the services of his/her co-worker, i.e. from the effects of his/her work. An external client is every person or organization using the services of a public institution.

Treating the public service recipient as a customer is almost a necessity in the public sector, where it is more and more frequent that attempts are being made to transfer the management concepts to public administration, which until now have only been used in economic organizations. Customer orientation can be an example of promoting the private sector's experience in the public sector. This is especially important from the point of view of the services recipients.

4. Specificity of a customer in the public administration

A customer plays an extremely important role in every company. It provides cash inflows and other values. These values allow companies to deepen relationships with other market participants, such as shareholders, suppliers or employees. As a consequence, customers are increasingly perceived as an asset of a company whose value is measured and maximized [Doligalski 2013]. A customer is associated with the customer orientation, particularly in the concept of the customer value management. J. Brilman describes it as a conviction that customer's needs and satisfaction are the most important for a company, as a result of which resources and processes in the company should be subordinated to creating value for the customer [Brilman 2003, p. 88]. According to K. Mazurek-Łopacińska, customer orientation is based, among others, on listening to customers and getting information from them; providing customers with the values they require; building relationships with clients (especially key ones); participation of employ-

⁴ The authors mean the so-called general payment, which is based on the fact that tax revenues are allocated to finance public services provided to the public.

ees in creating growing values for the customer and measuring the level of services provided and customer satisfaction [Mazurek-Lopacinska 2002, p. 18].

However, when using the term “customer” in relation to a member of a given local self-government community, it should borne in mind that he/she is not a typical customer on the market, because he/she fulfills a number of roles, such as:⁵

- a citizen influencing decision-making processes,
- a taxpayer,
- a voter,
- a consumer of public services,
- a controller.

Customer orientation constitutes a classic example of promoting the private sector's experience in the public sector, primarily in terms of treating service recipients properly. In the Polish local self-government, the legal prerequisites for undertaking actions in the area of customer orientation can be found among the provisions of the Act on municipal self-government and the Act on powiat self-government [Zawicki 2011, p. 127]. Public consultation is one of the forms of conducting analyzes of public service recipients' opinions.⁶ The Local Government Act imposes an obligation to conduct public consultations in the following cases: creation, merger, division and liquidation of municipalities and establishing their boundaries, granting urban status to municipalities or towns, establishing or changing the name of the municipalities and the seat of their authorities, setting up the auxiliary unit (administrative structures in villages, districts, housing estates and others). In addition, municipalities (also poviats) are entitled to organize consultations with residents on matters important to them. The constitutive body (e.g. the municipal council) decides which of these cases will be considered valid and which of them can be subjected to an opinion poll.

The constituting body also defines the rules and procedure for conducting public consultations. The administrative (supervisory) jurisdiction emphasizes the necessity of a real and not only formal nature of consultations, stating that “the requirement to adopt resolutions after consultation with residents” should be understood as not only organizing a number of meetings and recognition, regardless of the number of participants in these meetings, the consultation requirement as fulfilled but as a real discussion with the residents about the proposed changes and expressing their opinions” [Szewc et al. 2012, p. 34]. It should be remembered, however, that consultations are of opinion-making nature and their result is not binding.

Municipal offices often examine the opinions of service recipients using questionnaires for surveys. These studies most often concern the directions of the municipality's development, the principles of providing municipal services, the entrepreneurial climate, ethical attitudes, the risk of corruption, assessment of the level of education in schools, etc.

⁵ Prepared on the basis of the Act of 8 March 1990 on municipal self-government (Journal of Laws of 2016, item 446 with later amendments).

⁶ Article 5 et seq. of the Act of 8 March 1990 on municipal government (consolidated text: Journal of Laws of 2016, item 446 with later amendments).

Customer orientation is also reflected in the creation of the so-called customer service offices (various names are used, including: applicants, residents, taxpayers) in municipal offices. In larger offices, offices are created, however in smaller – positions. Employees of these cells deal with providing information to customers, accepting documents, directing to the right positions, issuing documents or prints to be completed, often indicate how to fill in the documents correctly. The whole office is often perceived through-out the prism of these positions.

The entry into force of the Act on access to public information⁷ was also to contribute to improving the accessibility of public services. Under this Act, the offices were obliged to: allow access to meetings of constituting bodies (municipal councils), publish the Public Information Bulletin (BIP)⁸, provide information at a written request or in other forms. Part of information about municipalities must be made available in the Public Information Bulletin, in particular: information about internal and foreign policy, about persons representing, rules of functioning, content of official documents (including administrative acts), information on the course and effects of controls, speeches, public property.⁹ The detailed scope of information that must be made public on the Public Information Bulletin page is specified in Article 6 of the Act on access to public information. In addition, this Act indicates the possibility of access to meetings of municipal councils. In some communes there is the possibility of observing a council session via the Internet (transmission of sessions is carried out in the “online” mode). The offices also record the proceedings of the councils and draws up a detailed report on the proceedings. Providing information on request is used in cases where the requested information has not been made available in the Public Information Bulletin. The regulations adopted in this Act are aimed at ensuring the principle of publicity, transparency and better information on matters related to municipalities.

It should be remembered that public services, in particular those defined by the authors as administrative, are characterized by a specific inequality of parties. It is often the case that a service recipient does not know or does not completely understand the regulations in force and does not quite know what the service will exactly consist in. In turn, the service provider, i.e. an official acting on behalf of the municipality, can stand in the position of the so-called a professional who is versed in the rules and has high competences, and frequently, but not always, outperforms his/her customer in this respect. Therefore, a trust between a service recipient and a service provider is necessary.

Another type of the self-government unit’s customer is enterprises for which it is the closest neighborhood. Local self-governments can create favorable conditions for business, and due to their location, the tasks and character are potentially a natural, institu-

⁷ The Act of 6 September 2001 on access to public information (Journal of Laws of 2015, item 2058, as amended).

⁸ The scope and mode of transmission of information through the BIP as well as standards for the structure of BIP websites are set out in the Ordinance of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration of 18 January 2007 regarding the Public Information Bulletin (Journal of Laws from 2007 No. 10 item 68).

⁹ Based on Article 6 of the Act of 6 September 2001 on access to public information (Journal of Laws of 2015, item 2058, as amended).

tional ally for all entrepreneurship. An important role might be played here by the development strategies of municipalities, in which managers, when stating the basic directions of communal development, take into account the development of entrepreneurship in a given territory. Acquiring, searching for and bringing as many investors as possible to the area of a given municipality are the most beneficial for it. Table 2 presents the characteristics of a company's customer and a customer of an office of the local government unit. Such a description takes into account the diversity of stakeholders, and thus the multiplicity of roles presented by the authors at the beginning of this chapter.

Table 2. Characteristics of customers of an office and an enterprise

Enterprise's customer	Office's customer
A customer is each (individual or institutional) recipient of a product/ /service	1) residents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) residents of a given municipality, b) residents of surrounding municipalities as potential recipients of services, c) potential settlers; 2) enterprises: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) enterprises conducting business activity in the municipality where they have their seats, b) enterprises conducting business activity in the municipality, having their registered offices outside its area; 3) tourists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) people passing through the municipality (up to 1 day), b) persons staying longer than one day; 4) various institutions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) public administration institutions, e.g. the Regional Audit Chamber, the Supreme Audit Office, other local government units, etc., b) non-profit institutions, e.g. associations, foundations, clubs, public benefit organizations, etc.

Source: [Own study based on: [Papaj 2008, pp. 19 and 41]].

In addition to the division of enterprises, presented in the above table, commune enterprises that also carry out public tasks and are under the indirect influence of the self-government should also be mentioned. Relations between a local self-government and enterprises are very complex, taking into account the differences of interest and operating conditions [Cf. Wojciechowski 2012, pp. 64-65]. Some companies provide public services, while others are their recipients. All this is included in a complex system of dependencies and financial settlements.

A significant difference between customers of other service organizations and public administration customers is that the latter may feel co-owners of public institutions (e.g. offices). By paying taxes, as well as other local charges, customers become somewhat co-owners, hence they have the right to influence their functioning directly. In the case of enterprises, the client does not simultaneously play such roles as the role of the taxpayer, voter or citizen who can influence the decision-making processes.

Consumer behavior on the market may have some impact on decisions taken at the strategic level in an enterprise, however it is not as visible and direct as it is in the case of public administration customers. Moreover, the role of a controller does not apply to the enterprise's customer, however, when taking into account the corporate social responsibility, it can be indicated here. Similarly, in the case of companies a customer does not fulfill the role of a taxpayer, a voter or a citizen who can influence decision-making processes at the same time.

Conclusion

The classical concept of management in public administration, based on the bureaucracy embodying public authority, ceased to be adequate to the challenges facing modern administration. The *New Public Management* concept is based on the assumption that public administration is a provider of specific services and can perform at least a part of its activities on the basis of competitiveness. This concept introduces to the public administration the language and principles of business in which a customer is the end recipient of products or services.

More and more municipal offices use pro-quality and pro-client orientation of management systems. The work of offices is improved based on customer satisfaction management, and its result is primarily to obtain a positive image of the office in the citizen's opinion. A customer is to receive the best quality services as well as be a member of the society entitled to participate in public decisions. A recipient of public services is now treated as a customer whose needs are important, not as an intrusive petitioner, who takes up the valuable time of an official. There are more and more comfortable physical conditions for customers in offices and training for officials is being carried out.

Contemporary public institutions are increasingly changing into external oriented organizations, developing various types of interaction and relations with stakeholders. They take care of getting familiar with them and adapting their activities to the recipients. It helps to exert a positive influence on the quality of life of the society. Increased citizens' awareness, and as a consequence, the increase of their demands, even imposes the obligation to adapt offices to the requirements of service recipients – customers.

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The author declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

ORCID

Agnieszka Stronska-Rembisz – The author declared that she has no ORCID ID's

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