Develop One-Stop-Shops and Express Lanes at City Hall

Waiting in line, miscommunication between departments, and unclear guidelines are all common frustrations that small businesses face when working with a city to obtain licenses, permits, or to solve other issues. Red tape and inefficiency are problematic for business owners because they waste time and resources that should be spent building their enterprise. While not every city hall is full of administrative gridlock and long lines, most cities could reorganize their staff, departments, or resources in some way that will streamline interactions with small business owners and offer better customer service.
One-stop-shops serve the purpose of centralizing and streamlining the interface between small businesses and city hall. Housing all small business-related city services in one location helps eliminate duplicative efforts and is the foundation for providing a more comprehensive support system to small business owners.

The city of Chicago recently restructured its approach to serving small business by launching the Small Business Center, including an Express Lane service. These initiatives optimize business owners’ time at Chicago City Hall by providing access to staff from various functions at one time, and by better prioritizing requests based on the specific business needs.

Chicago: A One-Stop Small Business Center

At more than a dozen roundtable discussions across Chicago, small business owners and entrepreneurs expressed frustration that there was no single destination at the city where they could take care of all city processes efficiently.

As a result, the city of Chicago created a Small Business Center (SBC) as the centerpiece of its small business services overhaul to cut red tape and improve service delivery. Small business owners and entrepreneurs now have a “one-stop-shop” and dedicated staff working with them every step of the way to support their success.

Mayor Emanuel took several steps to deliver on the promise of a “one-stop shop.” First, key small business personnel were co-located in the SBC, including zoning reviewers and food inspection experts. The staff moved toward a case management model to ensure businesses experienced a consistent and streamlined approach. Lastly, the city introduced the new position of Chief Small Business Officer to act as an advocate for small businesses.

SBC employees established a set of professional standards demonstrating their commitment to delivering world-class customer service. The staff developed a common purpose statement to define the SBC’s primary role and service standards to ensure consistent, high-quality customer service experiences. These are distributed to every business owner who walks through the door, and the SBC’s commitment came full circle with a new recognition program for businesses to thank SBC staff for exceeding these standards.

To drive improved service delivery, the SBC instituted weekly professional development workshops for its staff, which both improved knowledge about small business processes and provided opportunities to build customer service and teamwork skills. The SBC also developed a new website to provide businesses an online one-stop-shop for all city resources across departments, and to centralize information about small business opportunities like financial assistance and workshops.

Establishing an Express Lane

The SBC went beyond creating a one-stop-shop - it also reduced the amount of time businesses need to wait at City Hall.

The SBC launched an Express Lane in May 2013 to better triage its customers, ensuring those with simple requests don’t have to wait behind someone looking for a comprehensive building consultation. The new Express Lane serves 25% of all clients in 15 or fewer minutes. Overall wait times at the SBC have also come down by 50% since April 2013. Prior to this effort, some clients waited over an hour for a five minute transaction. Some of the services handled in the Express Lane include: updating account information, printing a new license, renewing a license, and applying for seasonal licenses.

The SBC staff was continually engaged in the process and helped make the Express Lane the success that it is today.