In today’s world, Americans expect excellent customer service during their everyday experiences. They expect to find the product or information they need quickly, to be provided simple instructions on completing a task and receive confirmation of its completion. This includes the voting process—particularly for military and overseas voters.

Most people do not think of the Department of Defense, or DoD, when discussing the topic of voting. It may not even occur to some service members that DOD’s Federal Voting Assistance Program, or FVAP, exists to provide voting assistance to military personnel, their eligible family members and overseas citizens. FVAP works to ensure that they are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to successfully do so from anywhere in the world.

**Unique Challenges**

What is particular about this set of voters and the assistance they require? Military and overseas voters face unique challenges, namely: mobility, time and complexity.

Military families are highly mobile. They might move every two or three years, and submitting a new registration and ballot request may not top their list of priorities. FVAP has inserted address-update reminders into the automated change-of-duty-station process and is working continually to improve education and outreach efforts informing these citizens of the importance of keeping their contact information current with election officials. FVAP also has created videos aimed at younger voters to educate them on the importance of updating their address regularly.

While the 2009 amendments to the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, or UOCAVA, largely addressed the time issue by requiring states to offer electronic blank ballot delivery—cutting the round-trip transit time of mailed ballot delivery in half—complexity remains an obstacle. The process is relatively simple for an individual voter, but can be complex when considering the absentee voting system as a whole. Every state and territory has different requirements and deadlines regarding the treatment and processing of applications and ballots. That is why it is important FVAP continues its work with election officials. A successfully cast ballot is a transaction between the voter and his or her local or state government—and focusing on one without the other does not make sense. FVAP maintains current state information and policies on its website, FVAP.gov.

**Absentee Ballots Don’t Count?**

FVAP conducts surveys of active duty military members following each regularly scheduled general election. The 2014 data indicate that 67 percent of military personnel were not confident that their ballot would be counted during the election, and 35 percent thought the voting process was too hard or did not know how to get their ballot.\(^1\) FVAP’s qualitative research efforts also validate that key finding: many voters believe that either their ballot will not count once it arrives, or that it will not actually make it to its destination. This perception is exaggerated among overseas voters who feel more disconnected from the U.S. and find it hard to believe that their ballot will make it all the way back home and will actually be counted.\(^2\) FVAP and the election community must do more to dispel myths surrounding absentee voting.

**Take a Lesson from Online Retail**

The American public expects customer service, especially online. It is not even something that consumers consider to be extraordinary; it is simply an expectation. Americans expect to find the product or information they need quickly, to be provided simple instructions on completing their order, and receive status updates and confirmation of its completion. Military and overseas voters are accustomed...
to this level of service as well and can become frustrated when states and localities do not communicate throughout the absentee voting process.

Zappos, an online shoe retailer, provides exceptional customer service. Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos, created the “WOW” philosophy—providing excellent customer service to everyone, every time, so they know exactly what to expect. Communicating to customers is one aspect of this strategy. When customers order a pair of shoes, they receive status confirmations throughout the process: receipt of the order, when the order is shipped and when the shoes have been delivered.

What if the election community applied this notion of voters-as-consumers to its own business rules and processes? The data show that military and overseas voters have serious doubts about their ability to successfully participate in the country’s electoral process. Why should they bother with the seemingly challenging steps if they do not believe their vote will ultimately count? The lack of confirmation within the absentee voting process itself perpetuates this misconception; however, through a little extra effort, the election community has a real opportunity to dispel this myth and increase voter confidence.

**Communication is the Key**

Could simply providing updates on voters’ progress during the absentee voting process assuage doubts? Would that in turn increase motivation to participate?

There are several opportunities to communicate—and instill confidence—to military and overseas voters:

- At the start of an election cycle;
- When the election office has received the Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA;
- When the election office has processed the FPCA;

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**FIGURE A**

**CONSUMER MARKETPLACE WORKFLOW**

**VOTER AS A CONSUMER FLOW**

August 12, 2015, EAC Election Data Summit, Matt Boehmer, “Be a Shoe Company—Serving voters like our customers.”
MILITARY AND OVERSEAS VOTING

- When the voter can expect to receive the blank ballot;
- When the election office has mailed/sent the blank ballot;
- When the election office receives voted ballot; and
- When the vote has been counted.

The principles of consumer behavior need to be incorporated beyond the state level, and FVAP has renewed its own focus on customer service. Historically, FVAP has leveraged DoD’s network of voting assistance officers. FVAP continues to work closely with the military services to train and inform voting assistance officers but it also is attempting to bridge a wide gap by communicating directly with individual voters. Rather than relying solely on the services to reach voters, FVAP created a suite of marketing and outreach materials, conducts communication campaigns and operates an internal call center. Following the 2014 election, FVAP conducted a systematic review of its materials to identify potential challenges with the language, design and organization of content. The majority of the military population is under the age of 30. To reach and communicate more effectively with this demographic, FVAP created new content tailored specifically for a generation that primarily interacts through digital and social media platforms.

Collaborating to Find Real Solutions

While FVAP has made great strides in improving its education and outreach efforts to date, it relies on collaboration with its many stakeholders to identify solutions to improve the absentee voting process. FVAP entered into a cooperative agreement in September 2013 with The Council of State Governments, or CSG, in an effort to identify ways to improve the absentee voting process and build state election administrators’ and policymakers’ awareness and understanding of their UOCAVA responsibilities as well as DoD’s voting assistance mission. The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative was formed through the agreement and is charged with developing targeted and actionable improvements to the voting process for military and overseas citizen voters.

The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative, or OVI, created two primary working groups consisting of state and local election officials:

1. As a starting point to identify improvements, the OVI Policy Working Group examined the Presidential Commission on Election Administra-

2. The OVI Technology Working Group is exploring the areas of performance metrics, data standardization, best practices with processing of UOCAVA ballots and the possibility for acceptance of electronic signatures from the DoD Common Access Card during the registration process. FVAP anticipates recommendations and best practices from this group following the completion of pilots and research done during the 2016 election.

When adopted by states and localities, these recommendations will have a hugely positive impact on the absentee voting process for military members, their families and overseas citizens.

One of the recommendations is directly aligned with providing customer service to voters by seizing real and immediate opportunities to improve voter communication, such as:

- Using plain language—clear, concise and accessible written and verbal communications targeting military and overseas voters at every step of the voting process;
- Using election websites and social media effectively to reach and educate these unique voters on the opportunity to vote;
- Using simple instructions on how to assemble a voted ballot package, delivered to the voter online, for return by mail to the election official. These origami-type return envelope instructions can be confusing, especially for first-time voters.
- Communicating to voters about when the ballot application is received and accepted goes a long way to easing voter concerns about their status in the process.

Better Data Equals Better Elections

Retailers like Zappos collect customer service data. Following the completion of the transaction, a consumer will receive a customer satisfaction survey that says, “Tell me about your experience as a customer. Did we deliver? Did the product meet expectation? And did we, as a company and as a brand, meet those expectations to you?”

Those in the election community are no strangers to data. Election practitioners and researchers may have different viewpoints on how to interpret data,
how to collect it and the various methods for improving its quality, but everyone shares the ultimate goal: using sound data to improve elections.

Pulling together information in response to the Election Assistance Commission’s Election Administration and Voting Survey, or EAVS, may initially prove challenging, but there is no question it is a critically important tool for collecting transactional data. These data need to be accurate, with emphasis placed on a common data format and data standardization. To address this, CSG has created an additional working group of election officials, the EAC and FVAP to explore content and process improvements specifically for the EAVS UOCAVA data section. Given this, however, the election community’s survey repertoire is missing a key data set—attitudinal data. Knowing the quality of voters’ experiences is crucial to improving them. Collecting this data provides an exciting opportunity—the coupling of transactional and attitudinal data to tell the full story that the elections community needs to hear in order to make improvements that are meaningful to voters.

At its core, the incorporation of customer service into systems also has the potential to improve the process. If customer service management systems enable the election official to understand, communicate and pull data, then they can understand the problems faced by consumers and address them in real time instead of waiting until the next election cycle to incorporate change.

We Can Do More

The election community is doing great things to reach military and overseas voters, but there is always more we can do and challenges to overcome. The election community has three distinct opportunities:

1. Educate—show the voters how to complete their absentee vote, in simple steps, delivered right to them.
2. Collect customer service data to understand the voter’s experience.
3. Include customer service touchpoints during the creation of systems so that information is pushed out to the voter as much as possible during the absentee voting process.

In the consumer product brand market, if people are unsatisfied with one brand, they have the ability to simply switch to another. In the case of military and overseas voting, there is no opportunity to switch providers. If these citizens do not receive an acceptable level of assistance, the probable outcome is that they will say it is too difficult and not vote at all. The men and women who protect and serve our country—which allows the American public to enjoy their freedoms—deserve the WOW experience, and the election community has the ability to instill confidence within the democratic process these brave citizens fight proudly to defend. We simply need to treat them like the valued customers they are.

Notes


About the Author

Matt Boehmer is director of the Department of Defense’s Federal Voting Assistance Program. He administers the federal responsibilities of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act for the secretary of defense. With a focus on marketing communications and outreach, he works to ensure that military personnel, their families and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the tools to successfully do so—from anywhere in the world.