

# Reducing sludge on the phone and face-to-face





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Behavioural Insights in Action

## Reducing sludge on the phone and face-to-face

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This guide was created by the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit, with assistance from the Behavioural Insights Team, the Reading Writing Hotline and NSW Government partners.

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# Reducing sludge on the phone and face-to-face

Phone calls and face-to-face interactions present the ‘face’ of government to our customers and can leave a lasting impression. It’s important that we make sure that it’s a positive one.

Customers call us and have face-to-face conversations with us to get their questions answered, get help with problems, and access services they need. It’s our responsibility to ensure that all our customers interactions are as simple, easy, and effective as possible. Phone calls and face-to-face interactions should leave customers with the information they need and feeling ready to act on it.

This guide will help you reduce sludge in your phone and face-to-face interactions.

# Where to begin

There are four key elements to think about when identifying and removing sludge from phone calls and face-to-face interactions.

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## 1. Pre-interaction and readiness

- Are customers prepared for the interaction?
- Can the customer choose when to have the phone or face-to-face interaction?
- Can the customer be supported to undertake the process online?



## 2. Engagement and empathy

- Is the support tailored to the customer's situation?



## 3. Systems and processes

- Can relevant personal information be quickly provided to the customer?



## 4. Outcome and feedback

- Are customers supported to use online self-service?
- Is there an opportunity for the customer to provide feedback?

# Removing sludge in phone and face-to-face interactions

## Quick reference guide

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### 1. Pre-interaction and access

- ✓ **Are customers prepared for the interaction? (e.g., What do they need to bring? Where do they need to go?)**

Explain what customers require for the phone or face-to-face interaction

- Remove frictions by making pre-interaction information easy to find
- Make the pre-interaction guidance easy to read and relevant
- Use a checklist to signal the required documents and necessary actions

- ✓ **Can the customer choose when to have the phone or face-to-face interaction?**

Reduce psychological costs by increasing transparency of the process and giving the customer more control

- Allow the customer to choose when to have the phone or face-to-face interaction
- Use timely reminders to confirm the details of scheduled interactions
- Tell customers what will happen next and how long it will take

- ✓ **Can the customer be supported to undertake the process online?**

Encourage use of online systems where possible

- Use gain or loss framing to emphasise the greater efficiency of online interactions
- Direct attention towards online systems in other communications
- Draw on social norms to highlight interactions that the majority of customers successfully complete online



## 2. Engagement and empathy



### Is the support tailored to the customer's situation?

Use personalisation to engage the customer as an individual

- Using relevant and personalised information about the recipient
- Adopting active listening strategies
- Humanise customer-facing staff to increase positive customer interactions



## 3. Systems and processes



### Can relevant personal information be quickly provided to the customer?

Create checklists and data systems that support quick, consistent and personal interactions

- Regularly optimise and update staff Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and knowledge base
- Create decision aids for staff members to help them easily guide the customer
- Leverage digital-form elements to make staff forms easier to use and more efficient



## 4. Outcome and feedback



### Are customers supported to use online self-services?

Help customers follow through by guiding them through the next step in the process

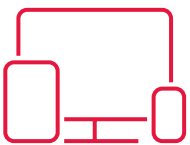
- Direct customers to self-serve options and instructions on your website



### Are customers able to give feedback?

Monitor customer engagement and provide customers with the opportunity to give feedback

- Provide a way for customers to share their experience in real-time



# 1. Pre-interaction and access

In this section

[Remove frictions by making key information easy to find](#)

[Explain what customers require for the phone or face-to-face interaction](#)

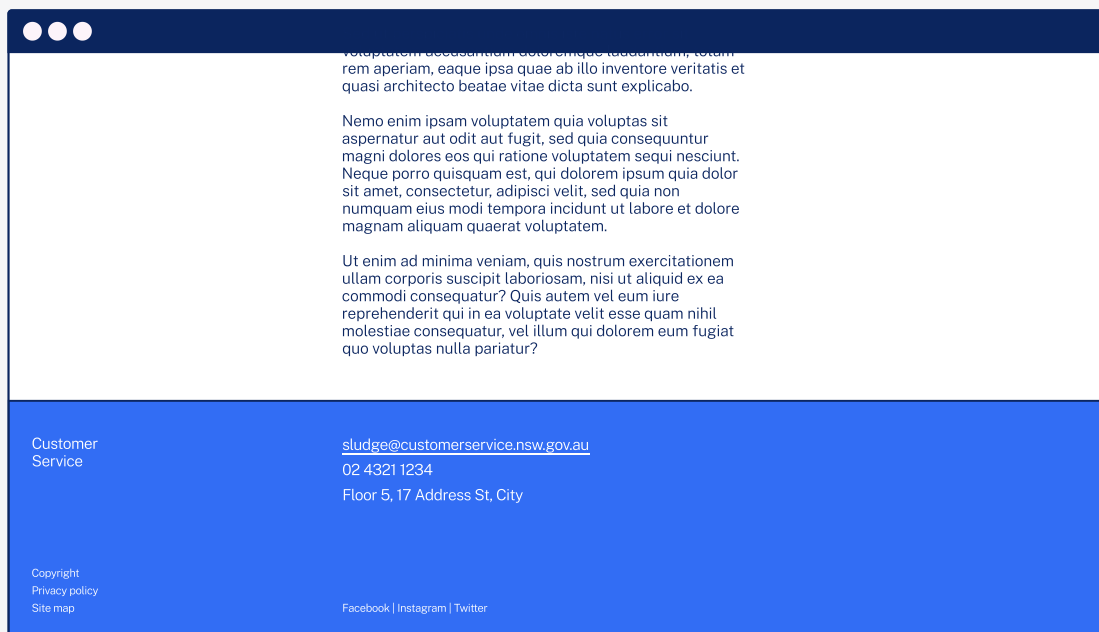
[Reduce psychological costs by increasing transparency](#)

[Encourage use of online systems where appropriate](#)



# Remove frictions by making key information easy to find.

## Example



Customers should not have any difficulty finding the phone numbers and addresses they need. The longer a customer must look for your phone number, the more likely they are to give up on it. Contact information, business hours, and information about what customers need before a phone or face-to-face interaction should be easy to find on the relevant government website, and easily located using popular search engines.

Evidence from eye-tracking studies shows that customers expect to be able to find contact details in the typical 'bottom of the screen' location – so make sure they are prominently displayed where customers will expect them to be.<sup>11</sup> See our guide on how to reduce sludge on websites for more information.

# Explain what customers require for the phone or face-to-face interaction.

Example

Your upcoming phone appointment

From: sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au  
To: You

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo.

To prepare for your phone appointment, please have these documents ready:

- Driver's license
- Passport
- Bank statements

[See what else you can do to prepare](#)

Phone calls and face-to-face interactions are often on complex matters, involving at least two government processes. For this reason, customers will often need to refer to documents and correspondence over the course of the interaction.

It's critical that customers understand what they can prepare in advance. This includes any personal information, supporting documents, and an estimate of how long they will need to complete the interaction.

This 'pre-interaction guidance' should be made available to your customers in multiple formats, including your website as well as at physical locations (using leaflets, advertisements etc). Do not assume that all your customers will be able to access and navigate your website.



## 1. Pre-interaction and access

# How do I do this?

Make the pre-interaction guidance easy to read and relevant.

Example

Lorem ipsum dolor sit  
From: sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au  
To: You

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The most important information should appear in the centre of the page:

- or at the top of a list
- with each following item
- less important than the previous.

Place the most important information at the top of the pre-interaction guidance, as our attention naturally gravitates toward the top of a page or list<sup>2</sup>. You can also divide the text of the guidance into chunks, as it is easier to read information that makes effective use of spacing, dot points, meaningful subheadings, and logically organised content<sup>3</sup>.


Try framing subheadings as questions written in the first person.

Example



Required documentation

- Lorem ipsum
- Dolor sit amet
- Nemo inam sit ipsum



What documentation do I need to provide?

- Lorem ipsum
- Dolor sit amet
- Nemo inam sit ipsum

such as “When do I need to call customer service?” and “What documentation do I need to have at hand?” This technique has been found to increase comprehension of contractual terms and privacy policies relative to the use of topics (e.g., “Required documentation”) as headings<sup>4</sup>.

Use a checklist to signal the required documents and necessary actions.

Example

Complete this checklist and you will be ready for your appointment.

- Driver's license
- Passport
- Bank statements
- A notepad and pen to note important info
- A cup of tea, the call can take 15 minutes

Checklists enable customers to take in the requirements at a glance and to keep track of completed actions. For example, one study showed that a checklist of key actions led to a 7-8 percent boost in online license plate renewals, translating to around 9,000 additional online renewals<sup>5</sup>.

**Literacy and digital literacy:**

**Literacy:**

Navigating websites and accessing digital tools can be very challenging for some customers.

Approximately 34% of Australians aged 50 years and over (about 2.7 million people) had either low digital literacy levels or did not use digital devices or the internet <sup>6</sup>.

For these customers in particular, phone and face-to-face options will always be crucial service channels.



# Reduce psychological costs by increasing transparency of the process and giving the customer more control.

## Example

Your upcoming phone appointment

From: sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au  
To: You

Thank you for beginning your application with us, we will be in contact to confirm next steps in the next 2–3 business days.

In the meantime, you can view the status and details of your application here

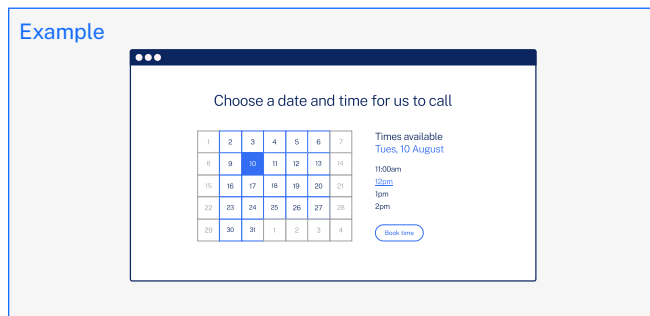
[View application status](#)

The costs associated with sludge include more than just customer time and resources. They can also be psychological: needlessly lengthy processes can cause anxiety, shame, or embarrassment for customers. Some of these psychological costs can be reduced when there is more transparency around the process, and when the customer has greater agency.



# How do I do this?

Allow the customer to choose when to have the phone or face-to-face interaction.



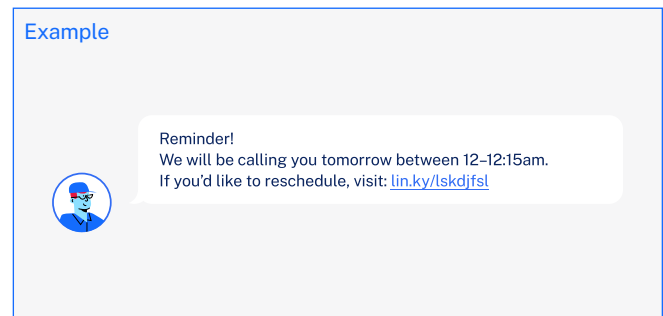
giving your customers this choice, you make it easier for them to arrange the most appropriate time to be contacted. Encouraging people to plan in advance can help them to accurately estimate the resources (such as time or level of commitment) they need to meet their goals. This increases their ability to follow through and complete the process.

Providing an online booking function also allows customers to manage their appointment and reschedule if necessary, thus reducing non-attendance rates and the associated administrative burden. Finally, offering call-back services for phone interactions allows customers to avoid being unnecessarily occupied while on hold.

Tell customers what will happen next and how long it will take.

People prefer outcomes that are certain over those that are uncertain. This is known as the ambiguity effect.<sup>8</sup> Research shows that public transport users are less concerned about late service if they are provided with a realistic estimation of the wait time.<sup>9</sup> For instance, customers can now view the current wait time at their local Service NSW centre in real time, enabling them to plan visits when most convenient<sup>10</sup>.

Use timely reminders to confirm the details of scheduled interactions.



Send an email or SMS in advance confirming the time and (if physical) place of the interaction. This will give your customers a prompt to anticipate and plan for the interaction. If people are avoiding a task that they perceive is too difficult, a timely reminder may serve as an effective prompt for them to re-engage with the task.

For example, the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit conducted a text messaging trial with the goal of reducing missed appointments at St Vincent's Hospital. The best performing two messages led to a 19.4% and 18.1% reduction in Do Not Attend (DNA) rates compared to the control message, respectively. This amounts to cost savings of \$66,000 per year for the hospital.<sup>7</sup>



# Encourage use of online systems where appropriate for customers.

## Example

### Your upcoming appointment

From: sludge@customerservice.nsw.gov.au  
To: You

Appointment confirmed for  
12pm Tues, 10 August

Don't want to wait? You can  
complete your application online  
instead.

[Complete application online](#)

Phone and face-to-face interactions can be more costly and burdensome for customers than online services. If a customer prefers a face-to-face or phone interaction then they should be able to have it, but all customers should be aware of online options. Keeping customers aware of online services can save time and effort for the customer and be more cost-effective for the NSW government.




## 1. Pre-interaction and access

# How do I do this?


Use gain or loss framing to emphasise the greater efficiency of online interactions.

**Example**



**Gain**

You will save an average of 10 minutes if you lodge your application online.



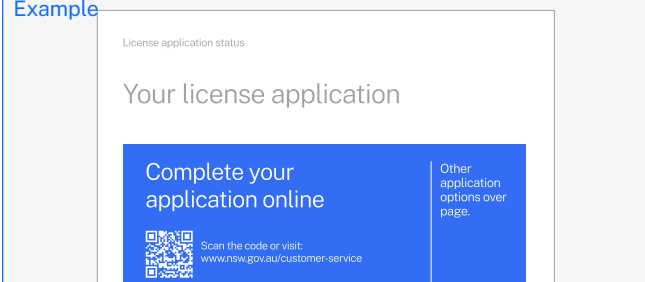
**Loss**

You will spend an average of 2 more hours if you lodge your application in person.

Framing is a behavioural technique in which a choice or outcome is described in terms of its positive (“gain”) or negative (“loss”) features<sup>11</sup>. An example of a way to frame the use of online systems as a gain is “You will save an average of 10 minutes if you lodge your application online.” An example of loss framing to achieve the same outcome is “You will spend an average of 2 more hours if you lodge your application in person.”

Direct attention towards online systems in other communications.

**Example**



Government agencies often use letters and emails to tell customers about actions they need to take, and which channels are available to them to do so (e.g., online, phone, or in-person). We can make the online option more prominent by placing this option on the front page of a letter and placing instructions for making phone or in-person inquiries on the back page of the letter.

Draw on social norms to highlight interactions that most customers successfully complete online.

**What you need**

- the Request for a Modified Licence form
- your current driver licence
- your proof of identity
- your concession details (if applicable).

The Service NSW page on requesting a modified driver’s license outlines what the customer needs to bring to the service centre in a clear, simple, dot point list.

**Example**

The most common way to lodge the application is online. However, phone and in-person options are available.

Lodge online

Book a phone or in-person appointment

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo. Nemo enim ipsam voluptatem quia voluptas sit aspernatur aut odit aut fugit, sed quia consequuntur

People are socially orientated: we like to do what others are doing and to behave in ways that conform to others’ expectations<sup>12</sup>. If most customers are completing a process online, highlight this to encourage other customers to do the same.

Remember to be as specific as possible (i.e., stating a percentage if you have the data, rather than just saying “a majority”) and accurate (i.e., the percentage must be a true statement, which you can derive from your administrative data). For example, automated messages on a phone service could say, “72% of customers find this process easy to complete online. Visit [website] and follow our step-by-step guide.”



## 2. Engagement and empathy

In this section

[Use personalisation to engage the customer as an individual](#)



# Use personalisation to engage the customer as an individual.

## Example



Hello there, I am wanting to begin an application before I leave for work.

Hello Ashley, I can see you are in a rush, this process takes 10–15 minutes for most customers, do you have this time available? If not we can reschedule or I can provide you with access to complete an online lodgement.

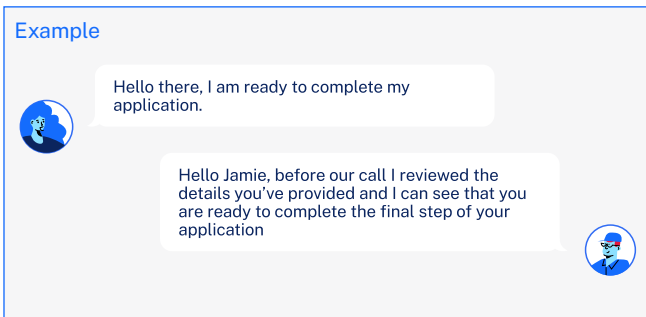


Thank you for that. I have 15 minutes, let's do it.

Customers who feel valued and listened to have a better experience. Customer facing staff can be supported to offer a personalised service to each customer and demonstrate compassion and empathy for customers' individual situations.

# How do I do this?

## Using relevant and personalised information about the recipient.



Personalising the level of service shows customers that you understand their needs and have made the effort to engage with their specific case. A simple way to personalise a customer's experience is to call the customer by their preferred name, additionally, staff should draw on information that the service/system holds on that customer so that they don't have to repeat their story or request.

## Adopting active listening strategies.

Active listening is the process of receiving and responding to spoken and nonverbal messages in a way which demonstrates attention and empathy. Techniques include asking clarifying questions, giving the customer time to speak, and checking that you have understood the speaker by paraphrasing their query and confirming your understanding.

If someone is actively listening to you, you feel heard. Active listening strategies have been found to help staff increase customer trust and satisfaction with phone and face-to-face interactions<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>14</sup>For example, if the staff member does not understand what a customer is asking for, they could say "I'm not sure I understand, do you mean [staff interpretation of customers enquiry]".

Customer-facing staff should be trained to adopt active listening strategies including maintaining eye contact with the customer, directing themselves toward the customer, paying attention to what's being said and responding and providing feedback.

## Consider your customers' needs

When we design or update customer interaction processes in government, we must think about the diversity of customers we are designing for.

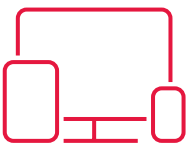
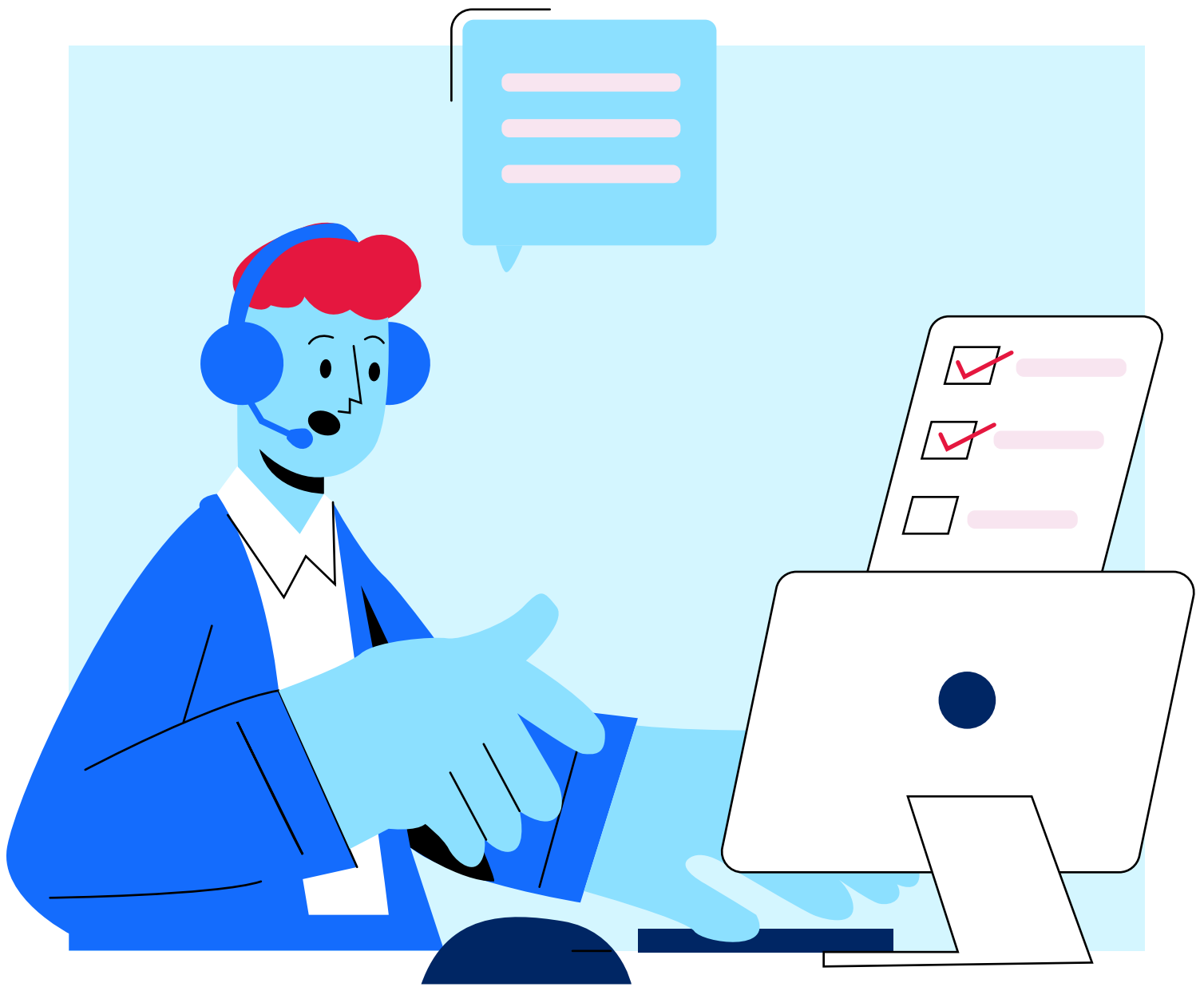
Consider that your customers are people with different literacy levels, people who find government processes confusing, people who are time poor and people who are stressed.

Consider that a quarter of people in NSW speak a language other than English at home and that we live in a multilingual state.

We should not think of these things as deficits but as factors to plan for. Ask yourself: given our audience, what do we need to do for them?

For example, there may be times where a customer may need to engage an interpreter. You should think about how to make these arrangements easy for your customers.

Make sure you make use of existing government resources to support your customers. In this example, the NSW Language Services Guidelines provide a framework for NSW Government staff.



## 3. Systems and processes

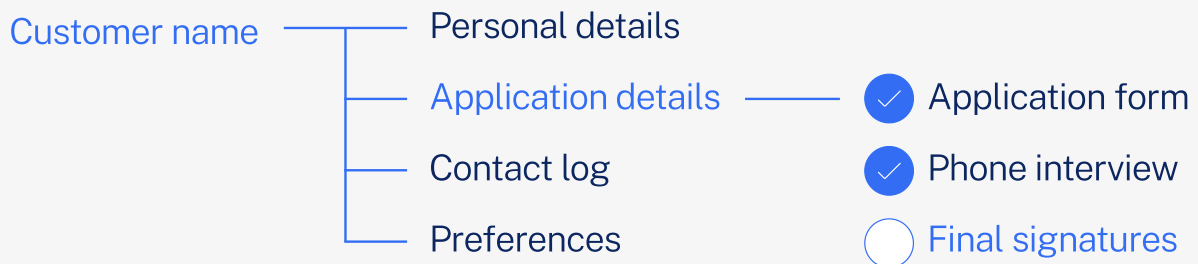
In this section

Create checklists and data systems that support quick, consistent and personal interactions



# Create checklists and data systems that support quick, consistent and personal interactions.

Example

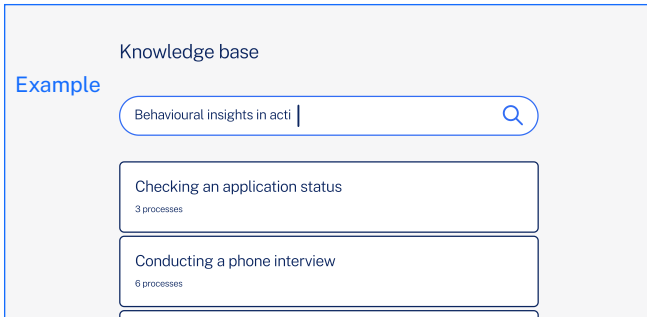


The systems and processes that support customer-facing staff have a huge influence on the customer experience. For instance, the systems staff use should easily capture customer information and keep accessible records so the customer doesn't have to start from scratch each time they call or visit.



# How do I do this?

## Regularly optimise and update staff Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and knowledge base.



SOPs are step-by-step instructions compiled by an organisation to help staff carry out routine interactions and operations. A knowledge base is an online library of information about an organisation's products, services, structures, and policies (e.g., how to respond to different issues and FAQs).

Having an efficient and effective knowledge base and SOPs ensures staff have quick and easy access to relevant information to respond to customers' needs and inquiries.

Teams should make sure to draw on these knowledge bases when responding to crises. Managers can use knowledge bases to inform timely briefings on emerging issues driving additional call volume (for example, an IT outage).

The SOPs and knowledge base should be updated regularly as new policies and decisions are made, and rare cases are resolved.

## Use digital-form elements to make staff forms easier to use and more efficient.

There are many digital design techniques which you can use to help your staff efficiently navigate and complete forms on behalf of their customers. For instance, forms can be pre-filled with customer information, saving time and effort, as well as help both parties complete the form accurately.

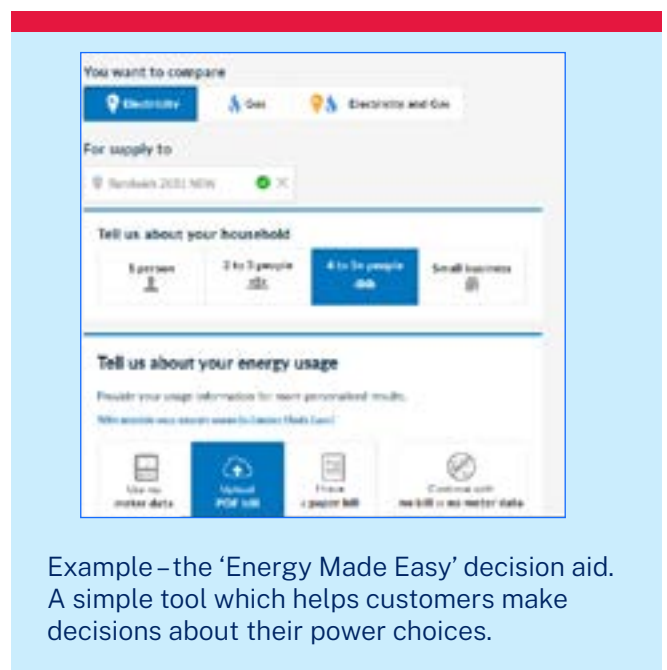
Consult our guide 'reducing sludge on forms' for more information and other form elements which can be used to make staff forms easier to use.

## Create decision aids for staff members to help them easily guide the customer.

Decision aids are tools that help people make choices, especially in contexts where there's a lot of information to take in. One common form of decision aid is a 'fast and frugal tree'. This is a simple flow chart style diagram which pares back a situation to some key choices, allowing people to get past the information overload and make a quick and accurate decision.

Customer-facing staff could be offered 'fast and frugal tree' guidance to help them easily guide customer decisions; "You've chosen option B so now you can do X or Y". Fast and frugal trees are regularly used in medical triage situations to help clinician's select an optimal treatment path.

We can use decision aids in government as well. The Federal Government provides a free energy comparison service called Energy Made Easy<sup>15</sup>. Customers answer a few questions about their household, upload a bill, and see whether there's any better deals on offer in the power space. By using this interactive format, which only asks a few key questions, the task of comparing power companies is made significantly easier for customers.



Example – the 'Energy Made Easy' decision aid. A simple tool which helps customers make decisions about their power choices.



## 4. Outcome and feedback

In this section

[Help customers follow through](#)

[Monitor customer engagement](#)



# Help customers follow through by guiding them through the next step in the process.

Staff should provide clear and helpful instructions, set realistic customer expectations about timeframes, and provide easy to follow directions to necessary resources.

## How do I do this?

Direct customers to self-serve options and instructions on your website.

**Example**

Hello there, I am ready to complete my application.

Wonderful, we can do this face-to-face, or I can walk you through doing it yourself at our computer here?

Many customers prefer to use self-service websites compared to phone or face-to-face services. In order to do that customers need to be aware that such services exist and understand how to use them. During phone and face-to-face interactions, staff can promote the self-service options available, explain how to use them and direct customers to online self-service guidance documents.

For example, at Service NSW Centres staff regularly offer to take in-person customers to a computer to show them how to complete a process online. This familiarises the customer with the online service and gives them a chance to ask any questions in the moment.



# Monitor customer engagement and provide customers with the opportunity to give feedback.

In doing so, you can collect important insights and feedback to inform ongoing service and customer interaction improvements.

## How do I do this

### Provide a way for customers to share their experience in real-time.

Digital kiosks in customer service environments can enable easy collection of in the moment customer feedback. This has been widely implemented in Service NSW centres. Service NSW staff invite customers to provide quick and easy feedback at digital kiosks as they exit the service centre after a customer service interaction.

After a phone call, customers could be sent a short SMS survey, or be directed to a feedback email address or online feedback collection form. Collecting real-time feedback can inform improvements to the customer experience.

### How to test whether changes to your Phone or Face to Face interaction processes work.

What works is not always consistent or certain. Even when we use evidence-based behavioural insights, we cannot always be sure what will work and what will not in a particular context. Testing proposed changes to your phone and face-to-face interactions is a critical step because it:

- Enables you to be confident that your changes yield the desired benefits
- Helps you minimise unintended consequences
- Helps you maximise cost-benefit because you will only implement and scale the changes that are proven to work.

The easiest way to test changes to your phone/face-to-face processes is by testing different scripts, standard operating processes and –for phone interactions–IVR systems.

To learn more about testing and find out how to do it, read our guide to testing [here](#).



# Endnotes

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# We want to hear from you!

If you have comments, questions, or feedback  
on the guides get in touch with us at  
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Behavioural Insights in Action

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