

A single point of contact for fast, accurate answers



Call for change

A customer-focused mindset

The [U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\)](#) is entrusted with helping agricultural producers nourish people here and around the world, conserving our Nation's natural resources, and providing opportunities for rural communities to thrive.

USDA's customers include people in rural communities, consumers with general questions about topics like food safety, agricultural producers like farmers and ranchers, commercial food and beverage producers, and regulators. Being responsive to such a diverse group requires timely, consistent answers to a wide range of questions, simplifying the customer experience and allowing customers to choose their preferred communication method.

To serve these diverse stakeholders, the agency has embraced a data-driven, customer-centric approach designed to make it easier than ever for people to interact with the agency and ensure their needs are quickly met.

USDA had previously established a number of contact centers to help customers access information on a variety of USDA-related subjects. However, these Contact Centers were often siloed with limited service channel offerings spanning several agencies and programs, were not integrated, and their underlying technologies and knowledge bases were often disconnected.

Knowing that customers today are accustomed to getting answers in various ways—including email correspondence or live chat—USDA was looking for a solution that would integrate the different communication channels into a single user experience. They also sought a better understanding of customer behavior and wanted robust analytics to track metrics tied to improved customer experience.



When tech meets human ingenuity

Building a connected customer experience

Mindful of their mission to make it easier than ever for customers to interact with the department, USDA partnered with Accenture Federal Services (Accenture) on the AskUSDA project.

The goal was to create an online customer portal, or “single front door,” through which customers would interact with the agency online to get fast, accurate answers to their questions. USDA wanted to improve the customer experience by giving them a choice in obtaining information through their preferred channel or method, be it a phone call, live chat, or expanded self-help options, such as email correspondence, knowledge articles, or webforms.

In creating AskUSDA, Accenture developed a best-in-class integrated contact center solution with centralized knowledge management, standardized operating procedures, surveys, and detailed reporting to enable data-driven decision making. This required consolidating customer support from 15 disparate contact centers supporting 22 departmental program or mission areas into a single communications channel, Ask.USDA.gov, that could provide standard, consistent responses for both Tier 0 and Tier 1 inquiries. This allowed Specialized Tier 2 Contact Centers to focus their time and attention on more complex requests requiring a more personalized or detailed response. By breaking down customer service siloes across the department, Accenture provided access to more comprehensive analytics and visualization tools for data-driven insights.

When tech meets human ingenuity

Accenture built AskUSDA on a Salesforce Service Cloud Customer Relationship Management solution. The team implemented the platform's Interactive Voice Response and Computer Technology Integration connector technologies and Customer Survey solutions to handle Tier 0, Tier 1, and Tier 2 inquiries and collect customer feedback on those experiences. These combined capabilities enabled customers to receive answers to common questions through a streamlined omnichannel solution (phone, live chat, email correspondence, form requests) that contains thousands of knowledge articles.

Striving to provide superior customer service is a critical element of USDA's culture. To that end, Accenture worked closely with USDA to design, build, and deliver the initial Tier 0/Tier 1 contact center solution and to seamlessly transition the day-to-day maintenance and operations of certain components to USDA's in-house IT teams. Accenture also worked with newly onboarded contact centers to ensure successful adoption of the AskUSDA solution by providing instructor-led training sessions, user guides, and other change management activities.

A valuable difference

Faster, better service

AskUSDA now offers a centralized knowledge base that provides consistent, up-to-date information for all of USDA's customer service channels, including self-service.

With AskUSDA, customers can access a variety of information, from how long eggs will stay fresh when left outside the refrigerator to how to apply for a farm loan with USDA's Farm Service Agency. In customer surveys, AskUSDA.com received high ratings for overall satisfaction as well as the relevancy and usefulness of knowledge articles accessible on the site.

USDA now resolves customer inquiries much more efficiently. After deploying AskUSDA, the department significantly improved first-contact resolution for calls, email inquiries, web form inquiries, and live chat inquiries. Further, USDA customers making telephone inquiries no longer must call different specialized call centers; all they have to do is call AskUSDA.

During the first 12 months after launch, AskUSDA deflected thousands of calls from specialized call centers and decreased response times for customer inquiries across all channels. This performance exceeded expectations and industry benchmarks.

With 5,400 articles and more being added as programs are added or expanded, AskUSDA's centralized knowledge database offers an easy self-service portal for customers, receiving more than 1.1 million article-page views since launch. Finally, with robust customer analytics supporting AskUSDA, such as enhanced Cisco/IVR reporting metrics and custom Einstein Analytics and Tableau dashboards, the agency has the deep insights to continuously improve the customer experience, staying true to their goal of being unrelentingly customer-focused.



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