

'A terrible experience': The CRA asked Canadians to assess its customer service — and they didn't hold back

Jamie Golombek: 83% of respondents had an experience that didn't meet their needs, and of those, 84% ranked their interactions as 'poor'

If you've ever been frustrated in your dealings with the Canada Revenue Agency, you're not alone. A new report, made public in December, summarizes the findings and conclusions from the spring 2019 "Serving Canadians Better" consultations with individual taxpayers.

The report was prepared for the chief service officer of the CRA. The CSO was introduced in 2018 to help the CRA focus "on better understanding people's needs and expectations in order to improve service experience and deliver better outcomes for Canadians."

The consultations focused on three areas: service experiences, service improvements and the CRA's future direction. The CSO led a consultation process between April and June 2019 that included an online consultation and seven facilitated in-person sessions. The in-person sessions, which were held across Canada, included members of the general public as well as agencies that support and advocate for vulnerable Canadians. Canadians from various walks of life were recruited by a neutral, third-party to participate in these discussions.

Canadians were also invited to participate in online consultations through social media posts and various press releases, which were picked up by some tax columns. The online consultation received 3,330 submissions and consisted of three questionnaires, each focusing on one of the three core areas. Of most interest to many of us are the responses to the online questionnaire about Canadians' service experience in dealing with the CRA.

Of the respondents who completed this survey, 92 per cent had had at least one or more interactions with the CRA in the previous 12 months. Respondents were asked whether their interactions with the CRA had met their needs or not, their level of satisfaction with these interactions, what worked well and what needed improvement.

Approximately 83 per cent of respondents had had an experience with the CRA that did not meet their needs. Of those, a total of 84 per cent of respondents ranked their interactions as "poor" (between 1 and 3) on a scale of 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent).

According to nearly a third of respondents, the most commonly discussed negative experiences were related to waiting on the telephone on hold for long periods of time (“often about 45 minutes and sometimes over an hour”), as well as issues with calls dropping and being forced to start all over again. Being asked to call again at a later time, rather than having the option to leave your contact information to be called back, was viewed as “poor customer service.”

The report quotes various respondents, with one explaining that they “waited one hour and thirty three minutes to speak with someone and one minute into the call he hung up on us.” Another wrote that they “couldn’t get through to even wait for an agent by phone for days. Then when I finally did, I waited 22 minutes and got dropped off the line. Called back again to ‘lines are all full’ message again.”

Long wait times are nothing new. A 2017 Office of the Auditor General report found that call-centre agents answered only about one-third of calls to the CRA’s call centre, with more than half the calls it received blocked because it could not handle the volume.

Another respondent kept notes on their interactions with the CRA, writing, “I sat on hold for more than 45 minutes and then got a message saying that all agents were busy and to call back another time. I got this message five times a day for a week.” Tax professionals also weighed in, with one writing, “The telephone wait times are ridiculous.... We can’t bill this time back to the client. Dealing with CRA is just a terrible experience.”

Nearly one third of respondents stated that a reduction in wait times would improve their experience with the CRA, with five to ten minutes being often suggested as the maximum acceptable wait time. In order to achieve this, respondents suggested the CRA hire more agents for the call centre, provide more information online to prevent the need to call, extend call centre hours beyond the normal work day, and upgrade the phone system to handle a larger volume of calls. It was also suggested that the CRA’s phone system provide updates while on hold about expected wait times.

Another common theme for more than a quarter of respondents was that their interaction with the CRA had not gone well because employees were rude or unhelpful. Many discussed agents

being aggressive, unfriendly, indifferent, and lacking empathy, with one respondent expressing that the CRA agent “could not have cared less about my concerns.” Another characterized a CRA agent as “argumentative, aggressive and badgering.”

One woman contacted the CRA because its documentation showed an incorrect date of death for her 19-year-old son. The woman wanted it corrected, yet the agent said the wrong date “didn’t make any difference.” The woman described the agent’s tone as “dismissive,” adding, “To a mother who had just lost her son it was horrible.”

Another concern, raised by nearly 20 per cent of respondents, was surrounding CRA’s processing times. Many discussed waiting several months for a file, such as a reassessment, to be assigned or reviewed. Several indicated that they ultimately reached out to their local Member of Parliament in order to have an outstanding issue with the CRA resolved. (A better option may be to submit a complaint to the Office of the Taxpayers’ Ombudsman.)

One respondent pointed out a glaring inconsistency in response times between how fast taxpayers are required to respond to a request for information from the CRA, compared to how long it takes for the CRA to get back to the taxpayer once the information has been provided. As one respondent wrote, “Over six months since information provid(ed) and still CRA has not got around to looking at it.” Readers may recall it took this author ten months to get his \$112 transit pass tax credit approved.

Slow processing times were seen as “a significant barrier to having successful interactions with the CRA.”

In response to the report, the CRA announced that it is committed to three main outcomes: making information more helpful and easier to understand, providing more convenient access to services and support, and ensuring that Canadians feel understood, respected, and valued.

All worthy New Year’s resolutions for 2020.

Jamie Golombek, CPA, CA, CFP, CLU, TEP is the Managing Director, Tax & Estate Planning with CIBC Financial Planning & Advice Group in Toronto. Jamie.Golombek@cibc.com

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