

Swiss Post: Servicing Citizens or Consumers?

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, consumers and citizens have mutated: they are now better informed, more active and reactive and represent an increasingly enigmatic actor for businesses and public organisations. This is a period of flux for organisations and individuals as new realities have led to new possibilities. These new realities, be they economic, technological, social or political have opened up a range of new possibilities for the relationship between individuals and organisations – greater participation, choice, voice, etc. Present in both public- and private-sector relationships, these dynamics have pressured organisations and individuals to reflect on their respective roles and expectations.

These interrogations have been particularly salient at the international level when addressing the particular context of the citizen's interactions with public administrations. These new possibilities are effectively re-shaping public sector organisations and the relationships they build with citizens. Concomitantly, citizens are adapting to these realities either by embracing, resisting or even initiating some of these new possibilities.

The different types of relationships and roles for citizens – through the terminologies of the user, the administered, the consumer or the partner – are now accepted by both citizens and administrations as possibilities even if not as concrete realities yet. Public organisations working at the interface of both public and private sector realities have particularly felt the tensions and impacts associated with this transformation of the actor.

This article focuses on one organisation, SwissPost. From an administrative point of view, it analyses the perceptions of citizens as to the nature of their relationships with SwissPost. How do citizens define themselves? How do they feel treated? How do they evaluate the performance this relationship?

The paper's first section looks at the traditional model as it stood for both organisations and citizens. A second section looks at the emergence of the individual and its impact in the movement away from the traditional model, namely in the shape of the New Public Management and Democratic Governance approaches. In opening up possibilities, these two dynamics have also opened room for this debate to take place. A third section presents the results of the study focusing on "self-definition", "perceived strategy" and "relational performance". The last section analyses some of the results and answers obtained all the while outlining the questions they raise.

2. Changing Relationships

For a long time, the relationship between citizens and public administrations has been rooted in the traditional or bureaucratic model (Chevallier 1983; Emery and Giauque 2005) developed by Max Weber (1922). This ideal-type model, even if not uniformly and entirely applied¹, gives a rather clear image of the main characteristics of public-sector organisations and the roles and attributes of citizens in Western liberal democracies. This particular image, termed the "administrated", is still valid in many ways to this day and has been at the heart of most reflections on citizens and public organisations until the last few decades.

This model is rooted in the "pré-éminence du droit" (Chevallier 2002). A high degree of legal formalism taints the internal structure of public administrations, the possibilities and realities of citizens, but also the modes of relation they develop between them. In this model, public administrations are characterised by the concepts of professionalism, hierarchy and unity while the citizen is in a relationship that is characterised by the notions of distance and authority (Weber 1971 (1922); Chevallier 2002).

The current debate is moving beyond this traditional model of the passive² citizen (in the relationship with the administrative sphere). It is this passive attitude, and the limited possibilities for citizens in a Weberian model that have for a long time restrained the demand for more accommodating and flexible types of relationships with public administrations.

A central transformation has made the current debate on the role of the citizen both possible and important: the rise in influence of the individual in the considerations of public administrations (Epstein et al. 2000; Lodge 2000; Moro 2001; UNDP 2002; Mayne 2004; OECD 2005; OECD 2005).³ Defined and circumscribed in its role as a beneficiary of public services and provider of political legitimacy, the citizen has seen his position in the relationship with public organisations move from the periphery to the centre. This centrality has meant a focus on and by the citizen in defining and evaluating the various services provided by public organisations.

1 A distinction is generally made in the literature between the models evolving in liberal democratic systems and those in systems representing different power structures (dictatorships, authoritarianism, collectivism, etc.) or levels of economic development.

3 The term «passive attitude» has to be put in the context of an overall transformation of the role of the citizen and does not imply that demands were not issued to the authorities or that pressures were not exerted. We are simply contrasting it here with the recent and rather rapid adaptations, at the very least officially, of the possible relationships between citizens and organisations.

3 This is not, by far, the only element present in this particular picture, but it does represent the most cogent aspect underlining the development of new possibilities for citizens and public organisations.

3. Two Approaches : Citizen and/or Consumer

Over the past decades, two movements have, at varying degrees, changed the dynamics and functioning of public administrations: New Public Management (Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1993) and the "Democratic Governance" agenda (Hirst 2000; Vigoda 2002; UNDP 2003). These two approaches hold different conceptions of public action, its values and motives and the environment in which it is embedded. They also hold different definition of the role of the citizen in his relation with administrations. These two conceptualisations of publicness in general and public sector interactions in particular are, in many ways, antagonistic (Vigoda 2002). This is most evident in the way they embed/disembed the individual as the primary focus of public-sector activity.

Whereas the NPM literature has repositioned the citizen as a client or even a consumer, emphasising the reactivity to its needs and desires by a managerial and economic logic (Needham 2003; Clarke 2004), Democratic Governance has tried to underline its nature as a citizen, transforming him into an effective co-producer of policies and services (Pflieger 2003; Spanou 2003). Both movements give an increasingly important role to the individual, but they do it in fairly different ways, emphasising different aspects. In presenting their alternative vision of the citizen they have positioned him in different conceptual locations. It is the double dynamic, "separate but interconnected" (Bovaird and Löffler 2003), of these concepts, rather than their simple opposition, that makes them interesting objects of study.

This situation raises the question of defining and understanding the current framework of the relationship between citizens and public organizations. How do citizens define themselves? How do they feel treated? In what general conceptualisation is this relationship taking place? These questions, fundamental to any proper understanding of the nature of citizenship and to any attempt at properly defining and managing public services, remains underdeveloped. This exercise becomes even more important in the case of organisations that have felt, at the structural level, the transformation from a traditional system to one rooted in the market-like dynamics of the Universal Service and international competition. One such organisation is SwissPost.

4. The Case of SwissPost

The Swiss Federal Postal system was established in 1849. From the start its mission has been to carry mail, packages and passengers. Throughout its history, La Poste, like similar institutions around the world, has built a national reputation by its reach and presence in every corner of the country.⁴ This "Géant Jaune" is even considered by some an historical and almost mythical organisation, with a certain level of emotional undertone: "our Post" (Durieux and Jourdain 2000; Leuenberger 2008).

⁴ La Poste has 2348 offices in Switzerland (La Poste 2009).

Over the last few years, in Switzerland and across Europe, postal institutions have had to adapt their institutional structures to face the increasing demand for competition. Today, the Swiss Postal system is an «entreprise de droit public» owned by the Confederation. One major transformation has been the developing competition for the delivery of packages and the eventual opening of competition for letters below 50g (La Poste 2009). It is in part this change, moving towards a more private sector style competitive environment, that has led the postal system to increasingly address citizens as consumers of services (Finger 2001).

This makes SwissPost an interesting case for evaluating the perceptions of citizens as to their roles. The analytical elements presented below are part of a larger project analysing the evolutions of citizens' relationships with public administrations. This representative survey was carried-out in the French part of Switzerland (n=301). In analysing relationships at SwissPost, 3 elements were targeted: a) Self-Definition, how do people define themselves; b) Perceived Strategy, how do they feel treated and; c) Relational Performance, how do they evaluate the relationship. A preliminary test was done to ascertain the respondent's understanding of the terminologies used (Administered, Consumer and Citizen-partner) and was found statistically significant and concluding.⁵

5. Analysing Relationships

The actor's point of view is central to this approach. Having briefly outlined the evolution of the roles of the citizen, a first step will be to gauge the roles that they feel they are embodying in their relationships with public administrations. Which of the possible roles are they using, and with what intensity?

Roles can be identified at different junctures in a relationship. One can identify the role the citizen plays, the roles the organisation ascribes to him, the role he feels he is made to play, the role other actors ascribe to him, etc. This analysis, centered on the perceptions of the citizen, focuses on two key aspects of the roles of the actor: the self-definition and perceived strategy.

The self-definition is the definition the citizen gives to his role in the relationship. It is his own perception of the role he has. This aspect is relatively easy to evaluate in a survey by directly putting forward the question. The perceived strategy refers to the message the actor feels he is receiving from the organisation. Does he feel treated like a citizen-partner, a consumer or an administered in the relationship? This is about the 'message' the citizen perceives coming from the organisation. It is felt that these two particular elements are central to the citizen's perceptions of roles.

These two elements cover, from the actor's perspective, the citizen and the organisation; the two parts in the relationship. Other aspects could have been integrated, but would have added to the complexity of the analysis without necessarily adding to its strengths.

⁵ Figures not shown.

One key element to note in looking at the perception of roles is the perceptual element. This study focuses on the citizen's perceptions of the relationship rather than on more objective measures defined by technical and bureaucratic standards of evaluation. The perceptual approach is central for two main reasons: the emergence of the individual in public management gives the citizen's voice an increasing weight in any evaluation of the relationship; and numerous studies have underlined the difficulty for actors to judge "objectively" (that is non-perceptually) the quality, performance, effectiveness and efficiency of the relationships they have with public organisations (Percy 1986; van de Walle and Bouckaert 2005).⁶

Having looked at the perceptions the actor has of the roles he plays in the relationship, this study shall now look at the evaluation the actor makes of these relationships, introducing the concept of relational performance, the performance of the relationship as seen from the perspective of the citizen.

5.1 Self-Definition

The way individuals define themselves in their relationships with an organisation are important inasmuch as it orients the ensuing expectations for that same relationship. As presented above, this particular interrogation only makes sense in a movement away from the traditional relationship based on imposition and authority.

Respondents were asked to evaluate, on a 5 point Likert scale, their self-definition as an administered, consumer and citizen-partner at SwissPost. Three questions were asked separately as to the strength of their self-definition for each of these roles, with 3 as the neutral answer. An either/or approach was deemed insufficient to account for the complexity of identities and roles in the relationship.

	Administered	Consumer	Citizen-partner
Average	2.38	4.58	2.64
Median	2.00	5.00	2.00

Table 1: Self-Definition at SwissPost

⁶ The differences noted between administrative performance as defined by bureaucratic standards and perceptions of this performance by citizens (van de Walle and Bouckaert 2005) have often been rejected by administrations as nothing more than erroneous perceptions on their part (Percy 1986). This reaction nuances the effective willingness of organisations to effectively reposition the citizen at the center of their preoccupations; it also underlines the importance of evaluating the impact of these perceptions of the management of the relationship.

The significance of these various averages was calculated using a paired T test- analysis. This allows the evaluation of the level of significance of the variations in the various scores. The tests were all significant at the 0.01 level**. Based on these results it appears that the consumer model was favoured (x= 4.58) while the average for both the administered and the citizen-partner are in negative territory (x= 2.38 and 2.64). It is to note that results were controlled for gender, age, political orientation and educational level. This means that respondents predominantly identify themselves as consumers and do not define themselves as either administered or citizen-partners at SwissPost.

These responses are of course to be put into perspective with the way individuals define themselves in a more generic public administration relationship. For that purpose a similar set of question were put as to a generic non-defined relationship with the public sector.

	Administered	Consumer	Citizen-partner
Mean	3.57	3.17	3.86
Median	4.00	3.00	4.00

Table 2: General Self-Definition

The mean is highest for the citizen-partner (x= 3.86) and the median positive for administered and citizen-partner but negative for consumer. These two tables seem to indicate both a clear definition of relationship for individuals but also the specific nature of the relationship with SwissPost.

5.2 Perceived Strategy

Perceived strategy refers to the way in which respondents feel treated by the organisation. Do they feel treated as administered, as consumers or as citizen-partners. The perceived strategy question was structured differently than the previous question. In this particular case it was decided to oblige the respondents to select a specific model and not to grade all of them on a Likert scale as was the case for the self-definition and later the relational performance aspects. This decision was made to simplify the survey and to force the respondents to clearly position their perceptions.

	Percent
Administered	3.3
Consumer	92.6
Citizen-partner	4.1

Table 3: Perceived Strategy.

The numbers here, validated as with Table 1, are clear. Respondents feel predominantly treated as consumers at SwissPost.

5.3 Relational Performance

Relational performance refers to the performance of the relationships evaluated along the lines of "Trust", "Perceived Efficiency" and "Satisfaction". These three elements were deemed to refer to the various aspects of the relationship. It was evaluated using a 5 point Likert scale. The results presented in Table 4 show that (4) is, across the board, the median answer. Averages vary but are all between (x= 3.76 and 3.88.).

	Satisfaction	Perceived Efficiency	Trust
Average	3.80	3.88	3.76
Median	4.00	4.00	4.00

Table 4: Relational Performance at SwissPost

In Table 5 the same evaluation is obtained but this time for a generic encounter with a public sector organisation. It tests a generic public sector encounter just as it was done in the evaluation of the self-definition.

	Satisfaction	Perceived Efficiency	Trust
Average	3.19	3.34	3.27
Median	3.00	4.00	3.00

Table 5: General Relational Performance

The average response in the evaluation of the relational performance in a generic organisational setting is lower, in all instances, to the specific question asked regarding SwissPost. This would tend to confirm the analysis claiming that while people are generally dissatisfied with "the public service" they are to the contrary often satisfied with specific real encounters.⁷ Paired T-test comparing means were done and revealed significant at the 0.01 level**.

⁷ See for example the analysis of Van de Walle (2004).

6. Answers or Questions?

The descriptive results presented above mainly show the level of intensity of responses. Respondents define themselves and feel treated predominantly as consumers and have a relatively high level of relational performance. These descriptive results do point to an effective move of SwissPost away from the traditional model of organisation-citizen relationship towards a more consumer-like model; at least, from the point of view of citizens. But, any finer interpretation would require further analyses and cross-evaluations with other public sector organisations. For now, one of the central interest of those results are the research options they make possible.

This research is only the first step in a much wider analysis; the analysis of the causal relationships between the definition of the role of the citizen and his evaluation of the relationship with public organisations. The next step would lead us to evaluate the impact of defining oneself as a consumer or as a citizen-partner. What of the impact on relational performance? Is it higher or lower, and if so is the impact different on trust than it is on satisfaction? The questions keep piling-on.

Of immediate interest to public managers, policy makers and scholars is the impact the transformation of the role of the citizen in his relationships with public organisations will have. That transformation has the potential of impacting the development of services, their delivery and the general management of public sector organisations.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel diskutiert die Wandlung der Rolle des Bürgers in seiner Beziehung mit öffentlichen Organisationen. Namentlich evaluiert er die in der heutigen Zeit diversifizierten Rollen vom Bürger als Verwalteter, Konsument oder Bürger-Partner. Diese Forschung basiert auf einer Umfrage im französischen Teil der Schweiz (n=301) und beleuchtet die unterschiedlichen Rollen in Beziehung zur Schweizer Post. Die Zielpersonen wurden unter anderem gefragt, in welcher Rolle sie sich in Bezug zu der Post sehen, wie sie sich durch die Post behandelt fühlen und wie sie die Beziehung hinsichtlich "Vertrauen"; "Zufriedenheit" beurteilen. Ein bestimmtes Augenmerk dieser Forschung ist die Dualität der Schweizer Post als eine konsumenten-orientierte Organisation, welche immer noch über eine prägende Public Sector Identität verfügt. Die Frage die sich somit stellt ist inwieweit sich diese Identität geändert hat. Sind wir in der Post nun Bürger oder Konsumenten...?

Résumé

Cet article aborde les transformations du rôle du citoyen dans ses relations avec les organisations publiques. De manière plus spécifique, il tente d'évaluer la diversification de ses rôles en tant qu' "administré", "consommateur" ou "citoyen-partenaire". Cette recherche est basée sur une enquête effectuée en Suisse Romande (n=301) et cible une relation particulière, celle avec la Poste. Les répondants ont été interrogés sur leur identification propre parmi ces rôles, comment ils se sentent traités par la Poste et comment ils évaluent cette relation en termes de "confiance", de "satisfaction" et "d'efficience perçue". Un des aspects intéressant de cette recherche est la dualité de la Poste comme organisation orientée vers les consommateurs et qui néanmoins retient une identité publique forte. La question devient donc d'évaluer le changement de cette identité. A la Poste, sommes-nous citoyens ou consommateurs...?

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Tables

Table 1: Self-Definition at SwissPost

Table 2: General Self-Definition

Table 3: Perceived Strategy

Table 4: Relational Performance at SwissPost

Table 5: General Relational Performance