8.5 Customer Service

8.5.1 Introduction

The Customer Service Center ("CSC") was initially launched to provide support to potential applicants and applicants of the New gTLD Program. Overtime, the CSC evolved into a Global Support function, providing customer support not only to applicants of the Program, but also to contracted parties resulting from the New gTLD Program, and other members of the ICANN community. This section of the Program Implementation Review report discusses the following aspects of Customer Service:

- New gTLD Program's Impact on Customer Service
- Ongoing Improvements

8.5.2 Relevant Guidance

The following guidance is relevant to the topic of Customer Service and will be discussed in further detail in Sections 8.5.3 and 8.5.4 of this report:

- GNSO Implementation Guideline O: "ICANN may put in place systems that could provide information about the gTLD process in major languages other than English, for example, in the six working languages of the United Nations."[469]
- Applicant Guidebook, Section 1.4.2: Customer Service during the Application Process[470]

8.5.3 Background

Per GNSO Implementation Guideline O, the AGB provided for a customer service function during the new gTLD application process. Prior to the ICANN Board's approval of the New gTLD Program and along with it the AGB, ICANN made the email address newgtld@icann.org available to the general public for any inquiries relating to the New gTLD Program. This email box was monitored by ICANN staff and responses to inquiries were provided; however, as this was an email box, mechanisms for tracking and reporting of inquiries were lacking. Upon the ICANN's Board approval of the New gTLD Program and the AGB on 20 June 2011, ICANN began work on launching an improved Customer Service Center (CSC) to provide additional support capabilities.

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[469] ICANN. (8 August 2007) ICANN Generic Names Supporting Organization Final Report Introduction of New Generic Top-Level Domains, Part A. Retrieved from http://gnso.icann.org/en/issues/new-gtlds/pdp-dec05-fr-parta-08aug07.htm
[470] ICANN. (4 June 2012) gTLD Applicant Guidebook Version 2012-06-04. Retrieved from http://newgtlds.icann.org/en/applicants/agb/guidebook-full-04jun12-en.pdf

On 21 November 2011, the CSC was launched with a new customer service platform that allowed for submission of inquiries in the six UN languages and a knowledge base with 250 articles in six UN languages. The customer service platform also allowed better tracking and reporting of statistics such as the number and type of inquiries submitted and response time.

As the Program launched and progressed, the CSC continued to expand and improve its services. During the application window between January and May 2012, the CSC processed application change requests and refund requests. After the application window closed, the CSC supported the administrative completeness check of applications in preparation for Reveal Day (see Section 1.1: Application Submission of this report). In 2013, ICANN launched a new and improved Customer Portal and began supporting Registry Operators as applicants completed the Program and signed Registry Agreements. In 2014, the CSC began standardizing a set of customer service metrics, which it published in 2015. In 2015, in an effort to better support ICANN's global customers, the CSC began offering 24/5 support by staff located in ICANN hub offices. Language support also expanded through third-party phone translations for languages beyond the six UN languages. A customer satisfaction survey was also implemented in July 2015 to gather feedback and improve services.
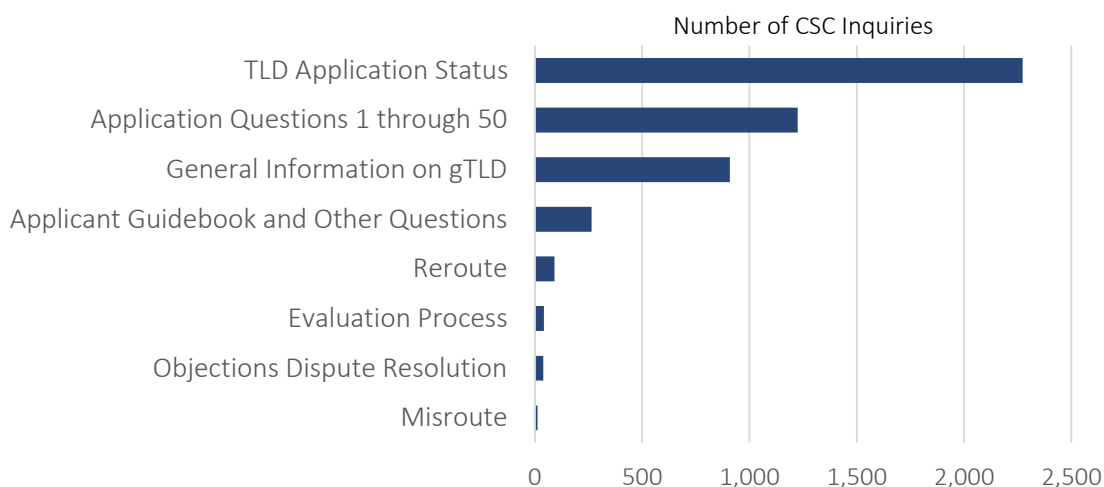
8.5.4 Assessment

8.5.4.1 EVOLUTION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

The New gTLD Program has many phases, including the application window, the publication of applied-for strings, application evaluation, objections and GAC Advice, contention resolution, contracting, and delegation. Each phase of the Program has its own set of requirements that directly influenced applicants' customer support needs. To meet these needs, the CSC had to evolve throughout the life of the Program.

Leading up to and during the application window, the CSC received approximately 5,000 inquiries. Figure 8.5.i shows a breakdown of CSC inquiries during the application window by category.

Figure 8.5.i: Breakdown of CSC inquiries during the application window by category

Number of CSC Inquiries

Category	
TLD Application Status	▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇▇
Application Questions 1 through 50	▇▇▇▇▇
General Information on gTLD	▇▇▇▇
Applicant Guidebook and Other Questions	▇
Reroute	▏
Evaluation Process	▏
Objections Dispute Resolution	▏
Misroute	

0   500   1,000   1,500   2,000   2,500

Section 1.6 of the AGB stated: "To provide all applicants equitable access to information, ICANN [would] make all questions and answers publicly available." The knowledge base that the CSC made available to applicants and potential applicants of the Program served the dual purpose of providing applicants and potential applicants with a self-service tool to get information regarding the Program and satisfying the criteria of Section 1.6 of the AGB.

To achieve the goal of equitable access to information, ICANN created knowledge base articles based on inquiries submitted. Responses to inquiries then pointed applicants and potential applicants to published knowledge base materials. Although this approach allowed for ICANN to publish the inquiries and the responses provided in a form that ensured confidentiality of the applicant and potential applicant, it created a longer response time because the knowledge base articles had to be created and translated before the responses could be provided.

Once the application window closed and applicants began moving into other phases of the Program, there were primarily two types of inquiries submitted, inquiries regarding status of specific applications and inquiries regarding upcoming Program processes. Because inquiries regarding application statuses were confidential and ICANN began to provide information regarding upcoming Program processes via webinars, FAQs, Advisories, and updates on the New gTLD microsite (see Section 8.4: Communications of this report), the knowledge base became less relevant after the close of the application window.

In August of 2013, as Initial Evaluation came to an end and Extended Evaluation began, ICANN began to offer applicants the ability to schedule phone calls with ICANN staff to discuss specific issues regarding their applications. Up until this time, all questions regarding specific applications and Program requirements and criteria were required to be submitted via the Customer Service Portal. This change allowed a more direct and effective channel for ICANN and applicants that had complex issues preventing them from moving forward in the Program to communicate. Phone communications were only used in cases where there were issues impacting a specific application. Information that would impact all applicants was disseminated via the New gTLD microsite or

webinars to continue to ensure equal access of information to all applicants. On 22 June 2015, ICANN began offering phone support to all applicants. To continue providing equal access of information to applicants, an internal knowledge base was created to support resolution of inquiries via phone. The internal knowledge base contained standardized answers to frequently asked questions, and all CSC resources had access to the knowledge base.

Not only did the nature of the inquiries change as the Program progressed, the volume of questions received by the CSC also increased over the life of the Program. Figure 8.5.ii shows the annual volume of cases received by the customer service team from the launch of the CSC in 2011 through the end of calendar year 2014.

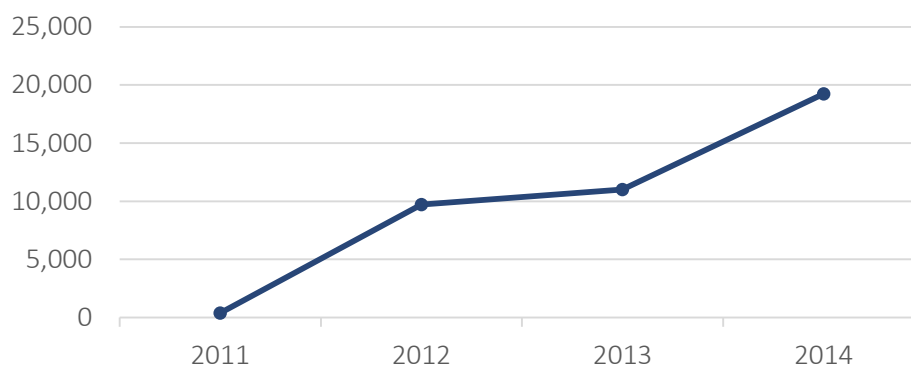*Figure 8.5.ii: Annual Volume of CSC Cases*

Figure 8.5.ii above shows a small increase in the number of CSC cases from 2012 to 2013. The majority of the CSC cases received in 2012 were during the application window. As evaluation began during the second half of 2012, the inquiries received were primarily regarding upcoming processes such as contention resolution and objections. In 2013, the volume of inquiries represented application change requests as applicants received CQs, and COIs as applicants started contracting.

8.5.4.2 ONGOING IMPROVEMENTS

In the time after its launch in November 2011, the CSC implemented system upgrades and put in places new processes to increase its efficiency and effectiveness while improving the service that it delivered.

On 17 April 2013, ICANN launched a new and improved Customer Portal. The new Customer Portal continued to provide applicants with the ability to manage their customer service cases and provided the added benefit of allowing applicants to access their application information in the same Portal. Previously, applicants had to access their application information in a separate system, TAS (see Section 1.1: Application Submission of this report).

In mid-2014, ICANN began to work on standardizing metrics and service level targets for those metrics. To support transparency, in January 2015, ICANN began publishing the customer service metrics and service level targets. The metrics that ICANN reported on included number of days to last response, number of days to case closure, and percentage of cases resolved by Tier 1 customer service. Figures 8.5.iii, 8.5.iv, and 8.5.v show these metrics for the period between July 2014 and April 2015, respectively.

*Figure 8.5.iii: Number of Days to Last Response*
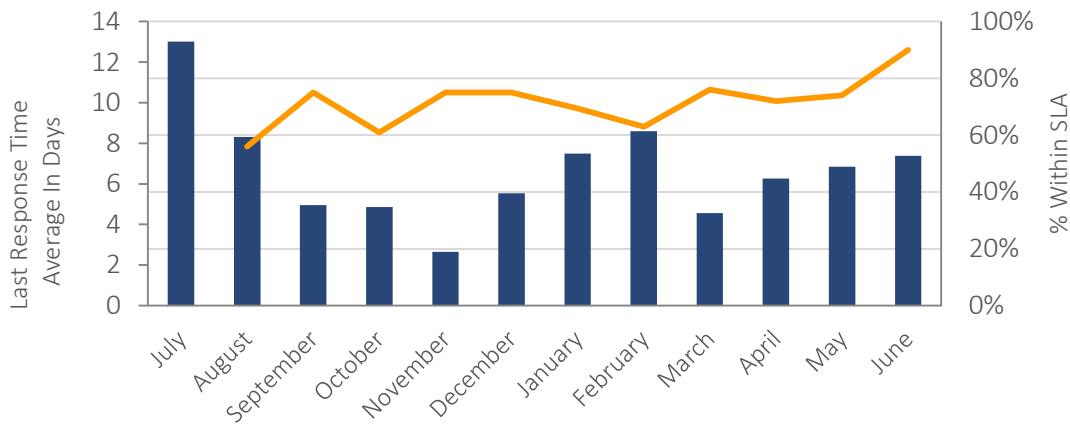
The Number of Days to Last Response metric measured the percentage of cases that received a communication from ICANN within the number of days specified by the service level target from the date of the last communication. The service level target for this metric was for Customer Service to provide a communication to applicants within seven days of the last communication. The team saw a positive trend in this area and regularly met or exceeded the service level target at least 70% of the time between November 2014 and July 2015.

Figure 8.5.iv: Number of Days to Case Closure
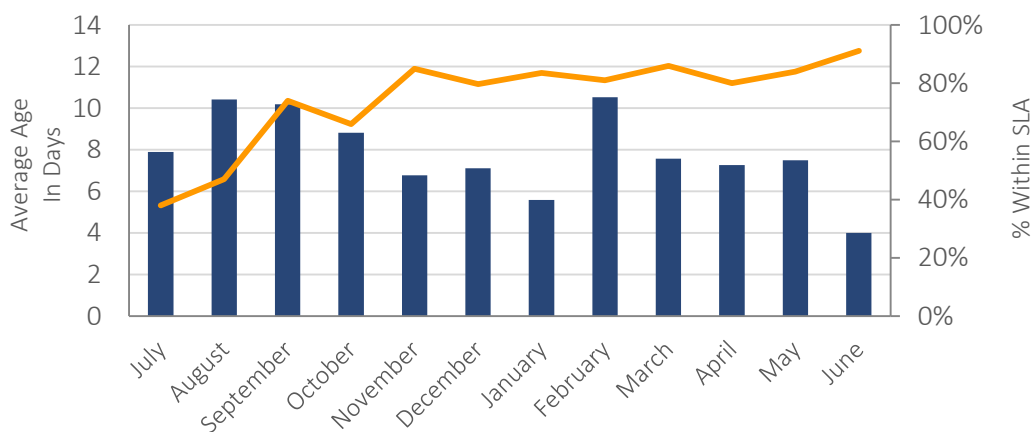
The Number of Days to Case Closure metric measured the percentage of cases resolved within the number of days specified by their service level targets. The service level target for this metric was for customer service to resolve cases within seven days of their submission. The team met this service level target at least 80 percent of time between November 2014 and July 2015.

Figure 8.5.v: Percentage of Cases Resolved by Tier 1 Customer Service
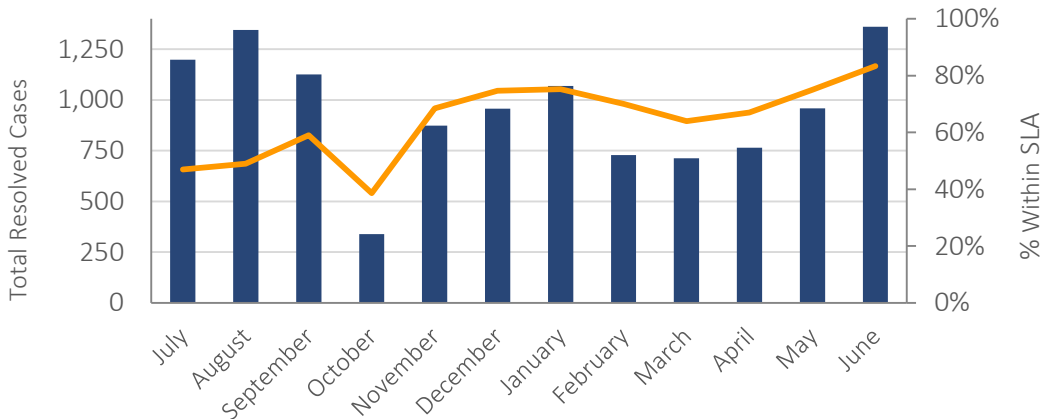
The Percentage of Cases Resolved by Tier 1 Customer Service metric measured the percentage of cases resolved without escalation outside of the customer service team. The service level target for this metric was for customer service to resolve 60% of the cases submitted. The tea consistently met this service level target between November 2014 and July 2015.

In May 2015, the CSC began to offer voice support to incoming calls and expanded its support hours to 24/5. Additional staff was also added in 2015 in the ICANN Los Angeles and Singapore hub offices in order to provide adequate coverage for the expanded support provided. To support the growing global staff and to ensure consistent and quality of responses, an internal knowledge base was implemented in January 2015. This knowledge base is integrated into the Customer Portal's case management functionality and provides the customer service team with trusted responses to ongoing customer inquiries as well as "how-to" documentation for case-related processes. It is anticipated that as new team members are added to ICANN hub offices, the knowledge base will expedite the onboarding process and provide them with clear, accurate, and consistent information to resolve cases.

Also implemented in 2015 was enhanced language support. Voice support for incoming calls included "real-time meaning-to-meaning" translation services for languages beyond the six UN languages. The addition of Customer Service staff in ICANN's hub offices that can speak both English and the local language is also underway in 2015 to further enhance the breadth of languages supported.

Also launched in 2015 was the customer satisfaction survey to measure customer satisfaction with the resolution of their cases and to identify areas for improvement.

8.5.5 Conclusion

The AGB called for a Customer Service Center to support potential applicants and applicants during the application process. The Customer Service Center was launched prior to the applicant window to support this guidance. To support fairness and transparency, during the application window, ICANN published inquiries and standard responses in a publicly available knowledge base. As the Program progressed through evaluation and other phases, ICANN continued to share information via webinars, Applicant Advisories, and the New gTLD microsite.

Over time, the Customer Service Center has evolved to support not only applicants at all phases of the New gTLD Program, but also registry operators, other contracted parties, and the public. As of 2015, the Customer Service Center provides 24/5 support, phone support, and support in the six UN languages. To further support continuous improvement, the Customer Service Center has also implemented public service level targets, an enhanced customer portal, an internal knowledge base, and a customer satisfaction survey. Based on the demand for support before, during, and after the application window, ICANN recognizes that customer service is a critical function of the organization, and should be planned for accordingly for future operations. As the systems, processes, and resources have been established to support ICANN's contracted parties and the wider community, in advance of the next application round, these resources should be leveraged to ensure that an appropriate team is in place to support the activities of the New gTLD Program.

In summary:

>**8.5.a** Consider customer service to be a critical function of the organization, and ensure that the Customer Service Center has the appropriate resources to support the ongoing and future activities of the New gTLD Program