Session title: Is the Customer Always Right? Strategies for Handling "High Maintenance" Stakeholders
Moderator/Panelists: Tom Hennick, Public Education Officer, Connecticut Freedom of Information Commission
Elisha Hodge, Tennessee Office of Open Records
Barbara Housen, Connecticut Office of State Ethics
Giovanni Mejia, Associate Counsel, New York City Campaign Finance Board
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Rapporteur: Rosalie Readman

Session Summary

Is the client always right? Not necessarily, according to testimonies emerging from the panel. Agencies and organizations that must deal with clients are not immune to spurious requests.

In this regard, several problems emerged during discussions: first of all, the number of requests that can come from a single person. Sometimes, for example, a person who is dissatisfied with the results of a first request will decide to flood the agency or organization with additional non-stop requests in order to vent his or her frustration. The workload generated by certain requests was also an issue for panelists. Having to cope with processing times that are sometimes quite short and/or with limited personnel, it becomes complicated to process applications requiring the analysis of documents from the previous 20 years or thousands of emails. Moreover, requests of a more emotional nature by certain clients seeking, in reaction to an event or out of anger, a way to vent their spleen or to obtain control over an agency or organization out of a lust for revenge can be difficult to manage. In dealing with these types of requests, the solution is hard to find through legislation as the intention is often intangible.

Panelists explored several possible solutions to these difficult cases. For example, one agency established a maximum number of pending requests per person in order not to have to devote too many resources to one person at the expense of other clients. A number of organizations specializing in access to information, for their part, charge fees to process requests. This element is used as a tool in different ways. One agency will refuse to process access requests if previous bills are not settled. Another sent the client a cost estimate and required a deposit before initiating proceedings. Some applied varying charges according to the information requested; less for personal information and more for general requests, which are much broader in scope. The establishing of limits or procedures that define a reasonable or unreasonable request also serves as a tool in many organizations.

Media relations also constitute a reality that organizations have to face. A client who is not satisfied with a response will often make use of the media to state their views. The best way to react to this sort of event is by providing the version of the organization, while sticking to the facts and to references to the law so as to avoid becoming embroiled in a public-opinion debate concerning the procedure targeted by the criticism.

Panelists unanimously agreed on a main recommendation concerning the most difficult clienteles: the importance of keeping channels of communication open as much as possible. While the client is not always entitled to be right, organizations wish to fully assume their role nonetheless. In this regard, it is important to find a balance between what services can be provided and the agencies' responsibilities.