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Tax collector 'hires' new employee who never gets a day off

DeLand, Fla. – The Volusia County tax collector has found a way to combat the staffing challenges in the post-pandemic world. Tax Collector Will Roberts has hired an employee who will work 24 hours a day, seven days a week for less than the cost of a traditional employee. When he walks through the proverbial door Monday – Labor Day, the new bilingual team member will enter with the training needed to do his job, which saves time and money that would've been spent on an 8 am to 5 pm counterpart.

Employing Sunny, the chatbot, is one of the most recent actions Tax Collector Will Roberts has taken to improve the way people experience government services in Volusia County.

"We are continually looking for ways to improve convenience for our customers while also being fiscally responsible," Roberts explained. "Adding Sunny to our team enables customers to ask property tax or motor vehicle-related questions any time of day without having to call or visit a location."

Along with the ability to serve many customers at one time, the Office also realizes the fiscal benefits of employing a chatbot -- no annual increases for salary or benefits, no absences for illnesses or vacation, and no overhead costs for office space or equipment. He also works all holidays.

Roberts clarified that even though Sunny learned from other Florida tax collectors, he needs to learn the nuances of Volusia County. The chatbot will remain in beta mode for the foreseeable future and will benefit from supervisory oversight and ongoing training from seasoned team members to ensure his answers are accurate, complete and up-to-date. If Sunny doesn't know the answer the first time he's asked, one of his trainers will focus on that topic and the phrasing used by the customer and assist Sunny with his response. Information is provided in English or Spanish.

Like any new employee, there will be a limit to his skills – at least temporarily. Sunny will not be able to take phone calls, collect payments or provide individualized answers to DMV or property tax questions. However, he will link to webpages where customers may search their DMV or property tax information and conduct online services.

Sunny will be on the job 24/7 to answer questions. Down the road, Roberts said he expects the chatbot to be trained to transfer the customer to a live agent during business hours. Once he's proficient and passes probation, Sunny's responsibilities may include interacting with customers on social media and completing vehicle and vessel renewals online.

"Employing a chatbot is our most recent step toward bringing government services into the current century," Roberts said. "We are always looking for efficiencies that enhance our service."

Since taking office in January 2021, Roberts has increased vehicle and vessel registrations renewed online by nearly 40 percent. Online renewal options have expanded to include specialty plates and vouchers. The Office also has enhanced customer communications with a new website and Facebook page that promote "skipping the trip" by using online services.

"It's not a surprise that people are looking to do more online," said Roberts. "It shouldn't be a surprise that government is developing solutions to serve its customers in the manner the customer prefers. Some might call it an innovative approach to government. I'd say it's a necessity."

Increasing online access to services is only one area where Roberts has employed technology to improve customer service. The Office's electronic queuing system now provides timely updates to customers on their position in line and solicits feedback after the transaction to continually improve services.

Several improvements have been made inside the physical offices of the Volusia County Tax Collector, including processing toll violations which allows customers to pay fines and renew a vehicle registration in one trip. For the first time, people can apply for a concealed weapon license in Volusia County at the DeLand Office of the Tax Collector. Customers who need certified copies of a birth certificate may complete the transaction in the DeLand office rather than travel to a State location in Daytona Beach or Orange City. Customers waiting in a lobby can monitor their position in line on lobby TV monitors. The first "one-stop shop" opened in Orange City and provides driver license, tag & title transactions and collects property taxes in one location. Additional one-stop shops are expected to open this fall in the Daytona Beach, DeLand and South Daytona locations.

In mid-2023, Roberts said he plans to open a "one-stop shop" in Deltona to improve access and convenience for the county's most populous city.

Sunny's avatar is an ode to Volusia's racing history

Like the chatbot avatars used by other Central Florida tax collectors, Sunny's image is an ode to one of the county's unique assets – Volusia's rich racing history.

"We felt that our chatbot should portray a look that is unique to Volusia County," Roberts said. "We are home to 'the World Center of Racing" and we also have tracks on the north and south ends of the county. It seemed natural for Sunny to celebrate that history and ongoing experience."

The avatar wears a racing suit including a name patch and carries a helmet. He is standing in front of a checkered flag. His name, Sunny, represents his positive attitude and consistent customer greeting to open the virtual conversation: "Hi, I'm Sunny. How may I brighten your day?"

Other Florida tax collectors who employ chatbots have unique avatars. Examples include an astronaut named Gabby at the office of the Brevard County tax collector. Orange County's avatar has the same name and likeness as the elected tax collector. Owen, a smiling Jeep wearing a baseball hat, works for the Pinellas County tax collector.

To start a chat with Sunny, please visit vctaxcollector.org and click on Sunny's image on the right side of the screen.