

Pushing the Envelope of

Municipal Customer Service Excellence

BY LISA FRIEDLANDER

We have many choices as customers in the retail and service world. We decide which restaurants, stores, dry cleaners, banks, and doctors' offices we frequent. Research suggests that, while the kinds, qualities, and costs of products are important to us, excellent customer service is often more important. Customers return to businesses that treat them well, take an interest in their concerns, meet their needs, and resolve problems graciously. They also tell their friends and relatives about these businesses. Customers drive businesses, and when businesses fail to recognize and capitalize on this, they fail. The argument for excellent customer service in the retail, service, and industrial realms is that businesses themselves benefit.

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Unlike profit-driven businesses—whose goals revolve around building their customer base—municipal offices develop, build and foster their communities. The municipal “profit” is manifested in community confidence in the capabilities of its local offices, a sense of community pride, and a caring, neighborly atmosphere. These are some of the key desirability factors that draw people to a particular community when they relocate, and what promotes loyalty among retirees who, freed from jobs and child-rearing, might otherwise be lured elsewhere. While “citizenship” is a national concept, it is embodied locally, and vitalized through the daily transactions and interactions that individuals have with the various representatives of their local government. It's important to realize that every face in a municipal office represents that municipality when interfacing with a constituent.

Take It From the Top

Customer service excellence can only be accomplished as a top-down phenomenon. Managers and supervisors set the standard for the frontline employee in several ways: making the mission known and



rewarding those who accomplish the mission through their hard work; making explicit how the concepts of great customer service, such as friendliness and courtesy, play out in word and in deed; and modeling these behaviors and attitudes with employees. In an atmosphere of great customer service, employees feel capable, respected and valued. Even dealing with difficult customers is easier for a frontline employee when she knows that the rest of her team and her supervisor are covering her back.

It is unrealistic to expect employees to intuit how to provide excellent customer service. And it is important to define for employees that “doing your work” means not only processing the paperwork involved, but also serving the constituency. The administrative pieces are the means to the ends, not generally the ends in themselves. Adequate training, and updating employee know-how, yields more employee consistency and satisfaction in the performance of duties and in lowering the stress level of the office.

When managers use time and energy to attend to building a competent, confident, and reliable staff, both upon hiring,

and periodically thereafter, then the work environment has the capacity to shift from a reactive, “putting-out-fires” atmosphere, to a proactive and friendly workplace. It benefits everyone when people enjoy their jobs, get the maximum benefit out of serving their constituency, and readily align with a culture of excellence and service based upon valuing every player in each transaction—customer, employee, supervisor, and community.

When does customer service begin? It begins even before reaching the office. It begins as you prepare to come to work with the kind of care you want to invest in everything. Getting enough sleep, eating healthfully, presenting a clean and neat appearance, with clothing suitable for an office environment, all set the stage. Part of the mental preparation for work means practicing compartmentalization—leaving personal troubles and emotional intensity at home. It is never productive to target others in the workplace with anger, frustration or disappointment you may be experiencing in personal matters. In fact this makes for a hostile work environment and results in lower productivity and accuracy. Supervisors can address these

Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time.

—Marian Wright Edelman

issues with employees in a helpful way by encouraging people to report the presence of a personal struggle and then offering to provide additional support and back-up. Then encourage people to attend to their self-care by taking short breaks. This fosters a team approach and a mutually caring environment.

Creating an Impression

The moment a customer enters your office a first impression is created. Because a manager may not have a lot of control or discretion over the look of the office environment—it may be an old building with drab paint colors, generic furnishings, and poor lighting—the person-to-person contact is paramount.

Nobody likes to feel invisible. A front-line employee must always stop whatever behind-the-scenes paperwork he or she is doing in order to make prompt eye contact with a customer and courteously acknowledge their presence. “Hello, my name is Jake, and I will be right with you,” is an appropriate comment if you need to move from your desk to the front counter. If you are already available then an introduction with the words, “How can I help you today?” will work well. Make it a point to remember people whom you have seen before, to ask their names, and to treat them like good neighbors whom you are likely to run into time and time again. If you imagine that you will be seeing your customers often, it helps put emphasis on the importance of every single encounter. Your service should be so great that you relish the thought of seeing this person again, because you know you have helped make their day.

In our often hectic and frenetic lives, it can feel stressful to step into a long line awaiting service. Feeling invisible and unimportant, on top of needing to resolve an issue or execute a transaction, produces frustration and stress. The knowledgeable and service-oriented employee will, between transactions, lean out her window and say something like, “Thank you all for your patience. I just want to assure you I am doing my best to help each person as quickly as possible.” In a culture of customer service excellence, creative approaches often help, such as having a set of numbered tickets or a pad and paper ready to suggest a sign-in for people who may be weary of standing

and would prefer to sit if they could without losing their place in line. Having a bowl of lollipops for children also works well to let your constituency know that their comfort is your concern.

The Language of Service

Common courtesy holds uncommon power. When you use the little words—“please,” “thank you,” and “you’re welcome”—with an engaging smile and eye contact, your customer will feel respected and, most often, will follow suit. This is a crucial step in controlling the conversation, maneuvering it proactively and positively. The language of customer service excellence—the way employees communicate with constituents—is the most important skill set in creating goodwill and solving problems. The lexicon of excellent customer service does not include the words “no” or “I can’t.” Negative responses are conversation-stoppers and immediately dismiss the customer. Trade in “no” for sentences that sound like this: “The office that has the paperwork you request is two doors down on the left. Let me know if you have any trouble finding it.” Trade in “I can’t” for, “What I would like to do for you is explain all the steps and procedures and make sure you understand exactly how to get from point A to point B.”

The “never-say-never” rule helps prevent employees from painting themselves into a corner. If an employee mistakenly says “I can’t” before checking with a supervisor or go-to person, then she will look foolish if she is later proven wrong. On the other hand, inflating what you can reasonably accomplish for a customer may result in having to disappoint. Supervisors need to create a workplace culture in which employees may freely ask questions of their co-workers and superiors, thus gaining further information to help them in their jobs.

Communication is not just a means to present service to a customer and control the interaction at the outset; it is also a set of tools that includes the ability to listen well and to ask clarifying questions. You cannot help a customer if you don’t understand what she’s seeking. Listen, ask clarifying questions, and replay to the customer what you understand. Imagine yourself at the deli counter. Is there anything more frustrating than ordering a

My creed is that public service must be more than doing a job efficiently and honestly. It must be a complete dedication to the people...with full recognition that every human being is entitled to courtesy and consideration.

—Margaret Chase Smith

half pound of turkey only to be asked, after a few slices, how much you want? Simple requests should stay simple. Complex requests require that you inform the customer of different options, if appropriate, after you establish what issues need resolution in this particular case.

Another important tool in steering interactions in a positive direction is a positive attitude. This really greases the sometimes cumbersome, sometimes fragile machinery of cities and towns. Even one positive and efficient interaction can do a lot to dispel a public perception of too much red tape. While policies and procedures are designed to organize and streamline transactions, they sometimes change over time, which results in confusion. It's important to refresh employee knowledge of changes in policies, procedures and methods for accomplishing transactions. Every employee should feel like an expert at all times. They need to know who the "go-to" people are when a situation goes beyond the scope of their own know-how. It's OK not to know the answer to something, and often more efficient to let the customer know right away. "While I don't know the answer to your question, I'm confident my supervisor will. May I take a minute to check with her and get your issue sorted out?" The customer will appreciate your willingness to do whatever it takes, and to consult whomever is knowledgeable about resolving the issue at hand. This prevents employees and customers from becoming frustrated, and it ultimately makes transactions more efficient.

If an employee is knowledgeable and competent but involved in a long transaction, or if there is a wait involved, it pays to explain to the customer what you're doing. If it takes longer than anticipated—particularly during a telephone transaction—come back to your customer to reassure him that you are continuing to work on implementing what he needs. Think about how reassuring it is when, having a physical with your doctor, the physician describes to you all the steps and procedures and why they are taking place as you go through the process. This allays fear and impatience in the customer and builds confidence in the service provider.

Empathy and Enthusiasm

No matter how excellent your customer service is, there will be unhappy customers from time to time. The most powerful

Customer Service Strategies

- Customer service is a top-down currency.
 - Train and update staff.
 - First impressions count.
 - Offer common courtesies and avoid "no's."
 - Listen, ask, validate.
 - Identify the go-to people.
 - Disarm difficult customers with empathy.
 - A positive attitude creates positive results.
 - Walk your talk.
- Lisa Friedlander

tool in disarming a disgruntled constituent is empathy. Empathy does not mean you agree, but it does mean you can understand your customer's point of view and make that known to her. Empathy is conveyed in language like, "I understand how you would feel that way," or "I can see how you reached that conclusion," or "I hear what you are saying," or "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced; let me try to do something to help."

An attitude of enthusiasm, a desire to please, confidence in problem-solving, and the determination to find the necessary resources and information to resolve an issue constitute the control panel of the customer service engine.

Walk your talk! Where exceptional customer service is the norm, employees only make promises they keep. If you tell a customer you will call them at a certain time to resolve an issue or provide more information, hold that as a sacred duty. When supervisors treat their employees with the same level of integrity, the message gets reinforced. Be true to your word.

Workplaces that embrace the notion of teamwork function like well-oiled machines. The teamwork concept means a desire to work together for common goals, cooperation among staff, and timely communication between all members of the team. When ideas and suggestions from team members are solicited, discussed, and implemented by managers, everyone takes pride in their work and more actively participates in the procedures and outcomes of the office. 🌟

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make which, over time, add up to a big difference that we often cannot foresee.

—Marian Wright Edelman