

The Five Most Common Mistakes in Customer Service

In addressing the 1990 annual conference of the International City/County Management Association, Costis Toregas, president of Public Technology, Inc., proclaimed that "customers are the dominant driving force in the private sector, and the customer must become the primary focus and dominant driving force in the public sector." Today, there is widespread evidence of an explosion of interest at every level of government in the concepts, principles, and practices of customer service.

There is a growing acceptance that governments can benefit from treating their citizens like valued customers and from taking a keen interest in adapting some of the more successful customer service techniques developed by the private sector. As governments attempt to transfer private sector practices into their own operations and activities, however, they need to correct some common mistaken approaches.

1. Customer service is an orientation, not an event. A passion for customer service must start at the top of the organization and be communicated to every employee. Managers must demonstrate a commitment to customer service and lead by deed and example. Job descriptions must reflect customer service values and expectations, and performance appraisals must include benchmarking, measuring, and evaluating the ability of each employee to deliver superior service from the perspective of the customers.

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If managers allow events and slogans to precede substantive reforms and improved performance, they should be prepared to cue the voodoo drums because trouble will be on the way. Posted slogans and public events will not mask a failure to deliver service to the public. In fact, they usually have just the opposite effect.

For example, in one government office, so many employees were involved in hanging the banners and decorations announcing Customer Service Week that a long line developed at the service window. When an irate customer complained and asked, "Where's the service?" a clerk alertly replied, "Oh, that starts next week."

In a different agency, a disgruntled customer used a marker to change the slogan from Customer Service Week to Customer Service Weak, and another customer asked, "What about the other 51 weeks?" The point is, government should not advertise and promise what it cannot deliver, and localities that raise their customers' expectations should be prepared to be scrutinized and judged.

For instance, most governments have made it a practice to put their newest, least qualified, lowest-paid, most inexperienced, and least knowledgeable employees in front-line, public contact positions. What kind of image is conveyed by this highly visible lack of commitment to service? It lets customers know right away how unimportant they are to the organization. This first impression of staff inexperience and incompetence will be difficult to overcome, no matter what happens later in any service encounter. Actions always speak louder than words.

2. Customers represent relationships, not just numbers. Government likes to measure things, and it usually is good at it. Unfortunately, many government agencies and organizations use such simple measurements as the number of people serviced as basic indicators of performance. Customer *evaluations* of service must be quantified, rather than the volume of people served.

Cultivating personal, caring relationships is the real secret to superior customer service. Customers need to believe that employees care personally about them and about helping them to resolve their problems. Co-ownership of the customer's problems must reside in the first service employee the customer encounters, and "handoffs" to other employees should be discouraged if not prohibited. All employees must be trained, provided with information, empowered, and expected to act on behalf of their customers.

3. Guarantee products and services. With the exception of governments, few service providers do not have a policy or practice of offering some apology or gesture of compensation for mistakes. Just when did one last hear a government employee willingly acknowledge a mistake or offer a sincere apology, then promise to do whatever is necessary to make it right? Reliability is the most important determinant of quality and customer satisfaction, regardless of the type of service. If the service is not accurate and dependable, then it does not matter how courteous and friendly the employee is, how quickly the service is delivered, or how modern and attractive the facilities look.

Also, note that the private sector

has learned that a well-handled mistake usually breeds more trust and loyalty than existed before the negative incident. Customer complaints are a golden opportunity to solidify relationships.

4. Ensure that real hearing goes on at public hearings. An essential ingredient of superior customer service is listening to customers and hearing what they are saying. Members of the public are not stupid. They have learned that little benefit or value can be gained from public hearings. They know that the primary purpose of these hearings is either to fulfill a legal requirement or to make a gesture giving the appearance of seeking public input. Clearly, the original purpose of traditional town meetings has been lost; today, there may be a lot of talking but actually little is heard or listened to at these public meetings.

Paradoxically, government employees are being given training in how to communicate, but most such programs focus on public speaking or on using graphic aids, rather than on improving listening skills. Furthermore, few if any governments ever have been criticized for overspending on efforts to get to know their customers better—one of the common attributes of successful companies according to Peters and Waterman in their landmark book *In Search of Excellence*. Unfortunately, most governments do not know that they are bad listeners.

Surveys show that, in comparison to the private sector, a much smaller percentage of people who receive poor service from a government institution even bother to complain. The tragic news hidden in this statistic is the reason people give when explaining why they do not complain. Contrary to conventional wisdom, it

is not that they do not expect good service and are not disappointed when they do not get it. No, the primary reason why government's customers do not complain about poor service is fear of reprisals.

A national poll conducted in 1995 by Gallup for *USA Today* and CNN found that 52 percent of respondents believe that government has become so big and powerful that it poses "a threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens." Perhaps, if government employees were more aware of why people are reluctant to come forward with complaints, they might be more solicitous and more respectful and appreciative of the complaints they do receive. They might also become more understanding of the need to reach out through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and various mass survey techniques to learn more about their customers' concerns, needs, and expectations.

5. Do not try to make the system idiot-proof. In the film *Six Degrees of Separation*, Donald Sutherland plays a highly successful big-time art dealer. While asleep, he dreams that he is visiting his son's second-grade art class and discovers that all of the children's paintings look like Dali's, Picasso's, and Kandinsky's. Stunned, he asks the teacher why all the paintings are so good. She replies, "I know when to take the painting away from the student." Unfortunately, government does not have Sutherland's art teacher. Too often, government just does not know when to stop. Over 20 years ago, management guru Peter Drucker observed that few service institutions suffered from not having enough managers, that, "in fact, most of them are overmanaged and suffer from a surplus of rules, procedures, and processes."

If anything, the situation only has gotten worse. In government, how things are done has become much more important than what actually is done. Instead, employees need to spend more time on satisfying customer needs and less on dealing with the internal (infernal?) bureaucracy. Our governments are now dedicated to creating an incredibly complex system of rules, regulations, and procedures designed to anticipate every possible situation and circumstance. This search for uniformity and certainty in order to guard against incompetence, regulatory loopholes, and favoritism has driven common sense and wise use of personal judgment out of the bureaucracy.

Our system of laws has become so complex that it is beyond almost anyone's ability to comprehend it all. If superior customer service is the goal, then government must reduce regulatory complexity and bureaucratic rigidity and must empower its employees to use their common sense and discretionary judgment to achieve broad regulatory objectives. Responsibility, not process and procedure, is the key to action and results.

Ben Watts, the head of Florida's department of transportation, recently was given permission by the Florida legislature to allow his staff to shelve its 780 rules for three years, in a pilot program to see whether a government bureaucracy can function better and smarter and with less litigation by following general guidelines that leave room for rational decisions and professional judgment. Stay tuned, it should get really interesting in Florida.

In the book *Reinventing Government*, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler espoused the simple thesis that the kind of government that devel-

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oped during the industrial era, with its sluggish, centralized bureaucracies, its preoccupation with the rules and regulations; and its hierarchical chains of command, no longer works well.

Despite the best of intentions, government has drifted away from the people and has become a victim rather than a master of change. In contrast, the private sector, which is driven by competition, has adapted to changing conditions by delayering, reorganizing, downsizing, outsourcing, and empowering both its employees and its customers. Government cannot stand against this tidal wave of change and remain unrepentant, unreformed, unreengineered, and unreinvented. A commitment to customer service is but one of the essential steps that must be taken if we are to return to the Founding Fathers' ideals of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." **DAI**

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