

Customer Service for Regulators

A standard providing for customer service from government regulators is not an oxymoron or a promotional gimmick. It's an essential component of public service. Yet, despite the growing need for local governments to recognize *all* of their citizens as valued customers, many service providers stubbornly refuse to treat the people they regulate as customers. All too often, employees who primarily play regulatory roles have grown comfortable with the traditional bureaucratic command, control, and make-them-obey approach to service. Regulators, with their skepticism and mistrust of the people they serve or regulate, can be a serious impediment to transforming organizations and instilling them with a customer service orientation.

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How Orange

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County

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Extends

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Service to

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All Customers

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Bruce McClendon

Paradox Lost

At first glance, many of the concerns and apprehensions of regulatory staff appear valid. After all, how can employees charged with enforcing laws be expected to satisfy the people being regulated? A frustrated Orange County, Florida, zoning enforcement officer said that he now understands what New York Yankee Manager Casey Stengel meant when he stated that "The secret to being a manager is to keep the five guys who hate you from the four guys who are undecided." One plans examiner complained that if customer satisfaction was the goal, then he would have to approve all permit requests. He simply could not understand how one could reject a plan and at

the same time satisfy the applicant.

Fortunately, there is an answer to this paradox. The surveys that the author has conducted clearly reveal that customer satisfaction depends primarily on factors that have nothing to do with whether a request is approved.

These surveys show that customers want quick service; knowledgeable employees with a courteous and respectful attitude; fair treatment; understandable rules and regulations with consistent interpretations; customized products and services; trusting, empathic, and caring service; and employees who demonstrate ingenuity and creativeness in solving problems.

Other factors influencing the service experience include convenience and accessibility of services, availability of parking, appearance and security of facilities, and methods of payment that can be accommodated. But it is reliability—the ability to perform the service consistently, accurately, and dependably—that is the most important overall determinant of customer satisfaction.

Customers must be able to rely consistently upon the accuracy and dependability of the information and services they receive. Professional, prompt, friendly, courteous, caring, and inexpensive customized service that leaves a customer with inaccurate information or with a permit that will be invalidated at inspection time will not produce satisfied customers. Reliability always must be the cornerstone upon which organizations build their customer service programs. Local governments must be committed to doing things right the first time, every time. Zero defects should be the performance standard.

There is no natural law that a certain number of things must go wrong. According to total quality management (TQM) guru Philip Crosby, "Giving people standards that encourage them to believe that errors are a normal part of business

life is counterproductive and insults their intelligence." However, if and when something does go wrong, the organization must have a highly responsive recovery system that empowers and forces its employees quickly to acknowledge, react to, and correct the situation to the customer's satisfaction. Managing for zero defects and complete satisfaction, and accepting nothing less, are essential components of successful customer service.

Walking the Talk

Over the past four years, County Chairman Linda Chapin has been working to instill a customer service orientation into all aspects of Orange County (Florida) government, including regulatory areas. Following are selected examples of some significant customer service improvements in the development and delivery of regulatory services by the Orange County government.

Building. To make customers feel welcome and more comfortable, the service counter area was remodeled to convey the appearance and atmosphere of a private sector professional office. The long, continuous counter was removed and replaced by several individual desks, so that people applying for permits can sit in chairs and be treated as valued customers rather than as numbers.

An Interactive Voice Response System operates in the building department. From a touch-tone phone, contractors can dial into the Building System and schedule or cancel building inspections or obtain plan approval information. The enhanced system, now in test form, will allow contractors to get information on licenses, bonding, fees, and permit status, enabling better scheduling of materials and labor and saving contractors time and travel.

A new program allows licensed contractors to put funds into escrow

for permitting and to request permits by fax rather than in person. A self-directed team of department representatives and individuals from the private sector is involved currently in an effort to reengineer various permitting procedures, with the objective of streamlining the county's regulatory processes while continuing to protect and promote the public's well-being.

Planning and zoning. In some local governments, initial contacts with unscheduled walk-in customers are handled by inexperienced, entry-level planners. In Orange County, the Planner of the Day (POD) program is an exception. Every day, two staff planners are assigned on a revolving basis to be the on-call "planners of the day." One planner is responsible for assisting customers who walk into the department, while the other assists those customers who use the telephone for service. *All* of the professional planners, including senior staff, take turns in participating.

To accommodate families, the customer waiting room in the planning department has been improved by the addition of a small, supervised play area for children. Toys, a drawing board, and art supplies are provided. For the adults, coffee is available in the morning at no cost to the customer.

For three consecutive years, the planning department has conducted an annual survey evaluating customer service. The service factors evaluated in the surveys are based on the values and priorities identified by a series of focus groups, whose members represented the department's various customers. The letter that accompanies the annual survey always describes the changes in the department's operations that have been made as a result of the previous survey.

Public utilities. To increase compliance with regulatory programs associated with the Safe Drinking Water

Act, instructions mailed to residents now are printed in both English and Spanish. As a result of this effort, participating residents find it easier to understand the regulations, and compliance has increased significantly.

Recycling is a mandatory participation program in Orange County. The resource recovery hotline receives 3,500 to 5,000 calls per month. On the hotline, customer representatives answer questions on recycling, mandatory garbage collection, yard waste, and household hazardous waste; follow-up calls are made to each customer who reports a problem or complaint, to ensure that the problem has been resolved. Further, a small vehicle drop-off station has been built at the landfill to accept solid waste directly from citizens. Safe, paved, and covered, the drop-off station is located away from the active face of the landfill, which is used by commercial garbage trucks.

The department now accepts credit cards for the payment of water and wastewater utility bills, and a drive-up payment window and free parking also are available. A telecommunication device for the deaf has been installed for the use of the hearing-impaired.

Public works. At the inception of a controversial project, staff members assemble a focus group of representatives from the affected community to consider the issues and to obtain citizen input on appropriate approaches and solutions. For difficult processes, procedural changes, or other areas of specific customer sensitivity, a focus group of interested customers, experts, and industry professionals is assembled to review the problem in detail and to develop mutually acceptable solutions. The solutions then are reviewed with the customer community before implementation. For large, specific customer groups such as homebuilders, a particular staff person is designated as liaison, providing a point of

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contact, improving communication and efficiency, and enhancing customer goodwill.


Corrections. This division has developed a handbook designed to assist individuals visiting the correctional facilities. The handbook provides information on a variety of subjects, such as visitation, depositing money into an inmate account, corresponding with an inmate, bail bonding, and a variety of other concerns, including frequently called phone numbers.

A signage program has been developed for the complex. Signs were designed by customer service teams and constructed by inmates, who then installed them at the appropriate locations. The signs identify the various buildings and provide directions throughout the facilities. One of the useful features is that the signs are color-coded, which allows visitors who are unable to read (or to read English) simply to follow the colors.

Telecommunications. Currently, this department is working on a significant project designed to promote enhanced customer service: the Citizens' Service Request Tracking System, which will allow the public to call virtually any number in the county government and file a request for service and/or a complaint. The on-line system will track each request and will be able to report on its status as it progresses through the processing cycle.

Total Commitment

Local governments that allow their regulatory staff to opt out of the service revolution are only paying lip service to the philosophy of customer service. Government exists to satisfy the needs of all of its citizens, not just a select few, though balancing service and regulatory enforcement responsibilities is a challenge.

You cannot change the way a government works until you change the way it thinks. Orange County employees are learning to think of everyone as a customer. As part of the Citizens First program, Orange County is changing its bureaucratic culture by focusing on the needs of all of its citizens; listening to all of its customers in setting customer service standards; streamlining and reducing regulatory complexity; measuring results rather than inputs; delaying its management structure; and delegating, empowering, and expecting all employees to provide superior customer service. The philosophy behind it all extends the Founding Fathers' ideals: This is government of the people, by the people, and for all of the people. 

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