

Complaint-Free Customer Service

Bruce McClendon

At a recent strategic planning workshop for department heads and division directors in Orange County, Florida, one of the participants suggested that a worthwhile goal would be for everyone to reduce the number of complaints they received. While this at first sounded like a good idea, on further reflection it was clear that this could be a counterproductive measure. After all, there are many ways to reduce complaints: eliminating complaint/suggestion boxes, changing phone numbers or mailing addresses, or just throwing away complaint letters before they are logged in. But of course, what we really wanted to reduce were not the actual acts of complaining but the negative events that were producing the complaints.

Complaints Are Valuable

Complaints are an essential aspect of successful customer service. They are important indicators of unsuccessful service and essential sources of feedback from customers. Complaints simply mean that the customers' expectations have not



been met. More important, they almost always mean that customers want to continue to do business with you, that they have not given up on you, and that they are willing to give you a chance to fix things, to put them right. Your customers know you were wrong. What they do not know is what you are going to do about it.

Psychology of Complaints

As a general rule, nobody likes to receive a complaint. Appreciation for complaints is almost always a learned trait. People are quick to accept praise and to take credit for successes, even when they have made only a minor or even imagined contribution to the outcome. In contrast, failure is an orphan for which few are willing to accept responsibility.

The first step in learning to live with complaints is developing the ability to separate the complaint from the feeling of being blamed. A religious fundamentalist would describe this ability as that of loving the sinner while condemning the sin. Complaints are an important kind of feedback, and your emotions cannot be allowed to get in the way of the information you need in order to provide effective service.

Obstacles to Overcome

A good rule of thumb is that only about 4 percent of people who receive poor service even bother to complain. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that for every complaint you receive, 25 other people received similarly poor service but did not bother to complain. While this is only an approximation, the percentage of people who receive poor service from government and who do not complain must be much higher, if anything, than it is for private sector businesses.

There are many reasons why people do not bother to complain about poor government service. Many believe that complaining would be a waste of time because of apathetic bureaucrats, while

others know "you can't fight city hall." Some organizations exhibit a subtle but nonetheless complaint-hostile environment, and their customers pick up on it. Such environments are characterized by the absence of complaint boxes, customer satisfaction evaluation forms, name tags on employees or nameplates on their desks, business cards, or information on the name or phone number of the manager who has general supervisory responsibility for the staff. Someone who manages to penetrate these complaint barriers may encounter only defensive supervisors who are more interested in grilling and discrediting the complainer than they are in getting all the facts.

Unfortunately, there is an even more ominous factor that reduces the number of complaints. To the surprise of many public servants, the number-one reason why more people do not complain when they receive poor service from the government is the fear of reprisals. At the national level, a 1995 CNN/USA *Today* poll found that "39 percent believe that government has become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens." A good illustration of this factor at the local government level is the reluctance of some building contractors to complain about inspectors because of the fear that these inspectors and their cohorts will retaliate with extra scrutiny.

The private sector, according to Tom Peters and Robert Waterman in their landmark book *In Search of Excellence*, overspends in trying to get close to its customers. And, they report, the good news from excellent companies is "the extent to which, and the intensity with which, customers intrude into every nook and cranny of the business—sales, manufacturing, research, and accounting." Yet local governments, which have the added burden of overcoming the unwillingness of many of their customers to complain, are often all too willing to wait until election time to hear from them.

The Value of a Dissatisfied Customer

Contrary to conventional wisdom, silence is not golden. For instance, Carl Sandberg accepted an invitation from a playwright to preview a new play but fell asleep after the first act. Afterward, the author expressed disappointment that Sandberg would not be able to critique his play. An irritated Sandberg curtly replied, "My good friend, sleeping is a critique."

Customer-driven service providers seek out dissatisfied customers. They want to know what is making their customers unhappy so that they can use this information to find and fix problems. In an unusual step for a school district, St. Lucie County, Florida, undertook a survey specifically designed to seek out dissatisfaction. Superintendent David Mosrie explained that his district was not interested in "one of those feel-good surveys" but rather wanted to find what he called "points of pain." The survey results were used to make significant operational improvements in communicating and responding to parents who called or visited the school facilities.

Unfortunately, the St. Lucie County example is an anomaly. It is almost unprecedented for any unit of local government to undertake customer dissatisfaction surveys and subject themselves to the resulting media scrutiny. Furthermore, only a few local governments have aggressive, comprehensive programs for routinely and systematically surveying their customers and for using their feedback to improve the quality of their products and services. Too many local governments are willing to assume that silence means satisfaction. Complaint-free customer service really is an oxymoron. In the absence of an inviting, complaint-friendly environment with a genuine awareness of and appreciation for the true value of complaints, it is doubtful that any organization could really provide satisfying customer service.

Benefits of Complaints

There is no question that complaints can be an invaluable source of information in helping anyone develop better products and services and in improving the productivity and efficiency of operations. In fact, complaints are among the easiest, least costly, and most efficient ways to obtain useful information from customers. Complaints help in focusing on the particular problems and concerns that are of immediate significance to customers. Information gleaned from customer complaints is particularly useful in fine-tuning and incrementally improving on the delivery of services.

It also is important to note that, in a few instances, this is the only way in which a local government can identify and obtain some types of information. For example, some personnel will exhibit different patterns of behavior depending on whether they are being observed by a supervisor.

Written complaints are usually more valuable than spoken ones because it is more difficult, costlier, and more time-consuming for the customer to communicate in this way. Common sense suggests that the more thought and effort are put into something, the more valuable the result is. But regardless of how a complaint has been delivered, it is essential that it be acted upon immediately. Within 24 hours, a phone call should be made or a letter sent acknowledging receipt of the complaint, thanking the individual for making it, and committing to a certain date when he or she can expect to receive a more detailed, follow-up response.

It has been said that people do not care about what you have to say until they know that you care. In your initial response to a complaint, you must show that you care about the person and are genuinely concerned about his or her situation. Empathy is the best emotion to convey.

Complaints are among the easiest, least costly, and most efficient ways to obtain useful information from customers.

Satisfying Complainers

What most customers want more than anything else when they complain is a sincere, heart-felt apology. As simple as this may seem, government employees need to be more willing to step up and admit it when they make mistakes. Unfortunately, a coverup is frequently the first option for the bureaucrat. In contrast, the private sector has found that by quickly responding to a problem and by offering compensation—such as a reduction in price, a discount coupon for future service, or a free product—a company can restore and even improve upon customer satisfaction levels. This approach also can work in the public sector.

For example, in one community a homeowner was promised a plumbing inspection between the hours of 9 a.m. and noon. When the inspector failed to show up, the customer telephoned and complained to the senior inspector. The inspector apologized and asked what time would be convenient for a rescheduled inspection. The work was inspected and approved, and then the inspector did the unexpected: to the surprise and delight of the customer, he apologized once again and then returned the customer's permit-fee check. Local governments need to be more willing to look at

the private sector's practices of guaranteeing work and compensating their customers for poor service.

What to do when the customer is wrong? Well, the customer may not always be right, but the customer is always the customer. In these situations, the listener should hear the customer out, acknowledge his or her feelings, and offer a solid explanation for the local government's position. Blaming the system ("I only work here") will not wash! Most customers are not willing to separate individuals from the larger system. The best approach is to be honest, sincere, and empathetic. Even if you cannot help them, customers should believe that you did everything that reasonably could have been expected. Do not pretend and play games with customers. They are owed an honest, all-out effort on their behalf.

Complaint-Friendly Environment

While complaint-free customer service sounds like a good idea, nothing could be further from the truth. Complaints should be valued, not feared, and the creation of a complaint-friendly environment that encourages and rewards complaints is an essential component of successful customer service in both the public and the private sectors. **PM**

Bruce McClendon is the director of planning and development, Orange County, Florida.