Convergence of Philosophy and Methodology in Customer Service

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Customer service starts out as a philosophy: "Provide high-quality service." "Treat others as you would like to be treated." "The customer is always right." These statements give businesses a goal, but no path to reach it. With just a philosophy, there is no way to tell how well employees are providing service or how they could do it better. Good customer service cannot happen until these philosophies are broken down into methodologies.

The philosophy of keeping customers happy is important, no matter how that philosophy is carried out. Chamberlain (2008) wrote, "According to the Customer Service Institute, 65 percent of a company's business comes from existing customers, and it costs five times as much to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one satisfied" (p. 6). Just as happy customers will bring their friends along to the library, dissatisfied customers will warn their friends away. These customers may go to other libraries; they may give up on them all together:

> There is a plethora of bookstores, electronic stores, and online search engines and sites ready to provide the books, films, music, and information they desire; there are local art agencies, museums, park and recreation departments, and senior and neighborhood centers offering wonderful, inexpensive (if not free) programs for all ages. (Chamberlain, 2008, p. 6)

In her book, *Customer Service Excellence*, Darlene Weingand spent the first chapter laying out a philosophy of customer service: "Customer service excellence begins with a restless dissatisfaction with the status quo and the belief that one can do better." (1997, p. 9). But that dissatisfaction doesn't guarantee a change. Weingand (1997) wrote that "many library staff members work long hours with the *intent* of

providing good service" (p. 2). Whether or not this happens is less certain. "The

service ethic is, indeed, a historical and traditional foundation of library operations, but it

ebbs and flows from library to library" (Weingand, 1997, p. 2). Weingand proposed

several reasons for this inconsistency, from introverted library staff to poor library

"spirit." This latter reason focuses mostly on the attitude of library workers and

managers: "At the extreme negative end [of the spirit continuum], the library suffers from

poor staff morale that inevitably carries over into poor customer service. At the opposite

pole of the continuum, positive organizational climate results in high staff morale and

the customers benefit" (Weingand, 1997, p. 4).

Following these ideas, in theory, excellent customer service could be achieved

by believing that service can be improved, by hiring only extroverted workers, and by

keeping those workers happy.   But in practice, providing even good customer service

means hours of training sessions and identification of important customer service

objectives. Employees need to know how they can change the status quo and provide

better customer service. A strong methodology is key for maintaining consistent

execution of a customer service philosophy.

Weingand (1997) listed another reason for inconsistency which is seen in other

articles on the topic: an aversion to the "customer" concept of library users. Bernstein

(2008) said that "While some may question comparing a library to a department store,

and some may shudder at using the word customer instead of patron, keep in mind that

our users *are* our customers" (para. 6). By viewing a library's users as customers,

employees can better equate their level of service with the service provided at the

businesses they frequent. Bernstein's article listed service methodology for two high-

end chains, Nordstrom department stores and Ritz Carlton hotels. Nordstrom's customer service policies are open-ended, asking employees to know their product, to be courteous and professional, and to follow through, among other tasks. These give employees the freedom to fulfill the policies as they see fit, as though each is its own philosophy. The Ritz Carlton's are more specific: "Know the Likes and Dislikes of Repeat Customers." "Be Responsible for Uncompromising Levels of Cleanliness." "Escort Guests Rather than Point out Directions" (Bernstein, 2008, Ritz Carlton section). These policies ensure consistent interactions between guests and employees of any Ritz Carlton hotel. Bernstein (2008) made a case for using the two companies' rules as well as for employing a methodology in general, as he said "There is much overlap in the principles they use, mainly because they are largely common sense. Still, in the busy days of work and personal lives, common sense can slip through the cracks" (Ritz Carlton section, conclusion).

Whether or not employees like to admit it, libraries are a business, and a good customer service methodology can enhance future business. Casey and Stephens (2009) recommended talking to customers about their perceptions of the library while providing service. "Find out what they're looking for in a library. Do they expect to see or find things that you don't offer? Do they want training or classes in areas your library doesn't currently provide? Potential new initiatives abound" (Casey & Stephens, 2009, Smiles and energy section). They also posited that a routine question could become "an opportunity to tell them about new services your library might have" (Casey & Stephens, 2009, Smiles and energy section). This type of semi-scripted interaction provides more concrete results than the vague "the customer is always right" adage.

Weingand (1997) wrote that "if, indeed, the customer is always right, then all services and operations would be designed to meet, or exceed, customer expectations" (p. 27). However, customers cannot be right if employees are not aware of their opinions.

Librarians might also find that customers need a different kind of help than they are used to asking for. Fry (2009) proposed that customer service should include services outside of locating books on the shelves. "From resetting bike locks to printing online organ music, my public library colleagues were repeatedly demonstrating a "we're here to help" attitude, covering a huge range of questions and problems" (Fry, 2009, "We're here to help" section). She wrote that "making an effort to connect with our patrons encourages them to develop a relationship with us that should, if retail managers are right, increase the likelihood that they will use our services and materials" (Fry, 2009, Interaction = profitability section).

Some libraries take the idea of customer service methodology to its limit, conducting studies on the effectiveness of their service policies. Vilelle and Peters (2008) researched how to best utilize their university library's student shelvers as question answerers on floors where reference desks are far apart or non-existent. Beginning with the hypothesis that "Many library customers' questions never reach designated service points such as circulation and reference desks," the researchers studied how often these employees were asked questions and what they were asked (Vilelle & Peters, 2008, 60). Since most questions pertained to the location of a book or a facility within the library, the student employees were asked to improve their customer service by accompanying patrons to these locations when possible.

       Of course, methodologies mean nothing without the philosophies behind them. Karl Albrecht, author of *The Only Thing That Matters: Bringing the Power of the Customer into the Center of Your Business*, said "Many organizations will fail in their quest for total quality service, not because their leaders don't understand the conceptual or technical requirements for achieving it, but because they don't realize that the heart of the service journey is spiritual rather than mechanical" (as cited in Weingand, 1997, p. 4). That is, employees have to believe in the end goals of their service or their smiles and offers of assistance will not be believable. A strong sense of commitment to customer service must go hand in hand with simple, specific policies for carrying it out for a library, or any business, to best serve its customers.

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