

How Customer-Friendly Is Your School?

Attitude, behavior, and communication are the ABCs from which a school can create a customer-friendly environment that welcomes and serves all its constituents.

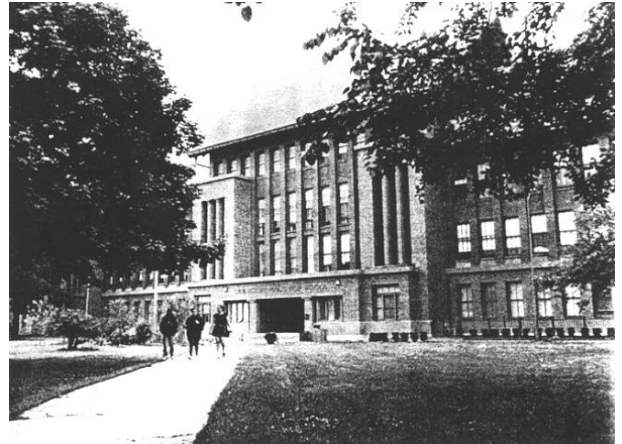
Business expressions like *marketing* and *customer service* are just beginning to infiltrate education jargon, yet many educators are not comfortable with the invasion. We usually don't think of our services in terms of customers.

However, with the rise of choice, charters magnet schools, and vouchers, a decidedly commercial concept has begun to change the rules—competition. Today's schools cannot afford to ignore its implications for the way they relate to their...well, yes,...*customers*.

If we accept, either graciously or grudgingly, that competition means that schools must adopt a market-driven approach, how do we determine who our customers are? Are they our students (certainly the focus of our services)? Their parents (usually our most compelling patrons)? The taxpaying public (they do pay the bills)? And what about teachers, administrators, and staff? Don't they count?

Yes to all of the above. Anyone who interacts with a school could—and should—be considered its customer. And all should be treated in ways that embody a customer-friendly approach toward realizing the goals and values of our schools. However, in today's competitive environment, parents and other taxpayers ultimately determine how and whether schools stay in business. They are the purchasers of educational services for our youth. By definition, then, they are our primary customers.

School customers come in all sizes and shapes, from the involved PTA mom and dad to the local business owner and the retired couple down the street. Some are more likely than others to



come in contact with schools: parents of current students, parents of prospective students, volunteers, business partners, and perhaps voters on election day.

How can schools best serve their customers? The ultimate measure of service is, of course, the quality of the product. Goodwill can never replace a good education. Certain supporting practices, however, may either advance or hinder the core educational mission. They are the ABCs of good customer service: *attitude, behavior, and communication*. The good news is that these practices do not require much time or money.

A Attitude

People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. “Jones Middle School.” The voice on the other end of the line is flat and perfunctory. I can hear another phone ringing in the background. “Can you hold, please?” Before I can respond, I am put on hold. As I wait, I notice that I'm slightly put off by the person who answered the call. I feel like an intruder, an inconvenience. But why? In today's busy office environment, it's not unusual to be put on hold.

Then I realize that it's not so much *what* she did, but *how* she did it. The tone and tempo of her voice—little inflection and no pause for a response—suggested that she wasn't particularly thrilled to answer my call. Whether she meant to or not, she gave the impression that she didn't care.

She could have left a more positive impression simply by putting a smile in her voice: varying her inflection and waiting for my response. These are

small, easy-to-learn changes, but what a difference they make.

Tougher to learn, however, is the underlying attitude that says “I want to help.” Attitude is the engine that drives all actions. Although it can’t be taught, it can be fostered, beginning with the hiring process.

Customer service-oriented organizations hire people with positive attitudes and skill at working with people. These organizations look for employees who are quick to smile and who exhibit a can-do approach. Schools should evaluate all job applicants—from custodians and bus drivers to classroom teachers and administrators—not only on their position qualifications but also on their outlook and interpersonal skills. All should understand customer service expectations from the moment they inquire about the job. Those who don’t agree need

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not apply.

Once employees are on board, management can maintain the customer-oriented tone through example, empowerment, and recognition. When administrators lead in putting the customer first, their staff is likely to follow. In companies with quality customer service, high-level managers often answer front-office phones, pick up litter, and do whatever is needed to take care of customer needs.

Administrators should also empower their employees. Front-line staff should have the information and authority to answer customer questions and make everyday decision without having to check with someone else. Customers get annoyed when they are passed along the bureaucratic

food chain.

An effective way for administrators to encourage good customer service is to regularly recognize their employees’ efforts. Some organizations select an “employee of the month” or give certificates for outstanding service. Some hold award ceremonies—continental breakfasts or after-school teas. Schools with outdoor marquees may post the honored employee’s name to show the whole community how much they value their “Employee Who Cares.” Recognition may be as simple as a brief note of thanks or a quick pat on the back. The important thing is to let employees know that their efforts are appreciated.

B Behavior

It’s not just what you do, but how you do it. The woman stood silently at the school office counter,

timidly waiting for someone to notice. Both secretaries were busy, one on the telephone and the other with a sick student. A teacher entering the office noticed the parent and brightly asked whether he could help her. It soon became apparent that the woman did not speak English. Undaunted, the teacher offered a few words in broken Spanish. Nodding and gesturing animatedly, they disappeared down the hall toward a classroom, the woman smiling and looking more comfortable.

Whatever concern the woman had, the teacher’s smiles and gestures were sufficient to ease the situation. By stepping in, the teacher demonstrated the essence of customer service—helpfulness—and left a positive impression of the

school.

First impressions are vital . . . and often indelible. They start from the customer’s initial contact with your school. Many times it’s a telephone call. Prospective or new residents call to find out about registration. Parents of enrolled students call to report their child’s absence or to get information about events. Community members may call to find out about elections or classes held at the school. Telephone procedures and practices are among the most important tools in your customer service kit.

Although effective when used properly, telephone procedure can be destructive. People get irritated if their calls go unanswered for more than four or five rings. They don’t know—or care—how busy things are on the other end. They notice when their messages are not returned in a timely manner (24 hours, at most) or when they are put on hold without acknowledgment for more than a minute. And, of course, we all have experienced the aggravation of cumbersome and impersonal telephone answering systems. Technology is a boon when applied properly, but a bust when it’s not.

Providing customer service guidelines and training will help employees effectively manage the multiple needs of their publics. Instruct all staff in proper telephone procedures, and encourage teachers and nonoffice personnel to answer phones when passing through a busy office. Expect anyone who has contact with the public—from custodians to classroom teachers—to greet visitors with a smile and offer assistance.

Teachers, counselors, secretaries, administrators, and other front-line staff should receive training in working with the public, particularly in difficult situations. Every employee should understand

and be able to perform the important role that each plays in customer relations.

The essence of effective customer service behavior is courtesy, which the dictionary defines as *polite, helpful, and considerate*. Put yourself in the customer's place and treat her or him as you would like to be treated. How do you feel when you're in an unfamiliar or maybe even uncomfortable situation and trying to get assistance? How do you feel when people don't acknowledge your presence or return your phone calls? How do you feel when someone takes the time to explain something patiently? Or when someone goes that extra mile to give you help? Which kinds of responses make you more likely to support the business that person represents?

A caution, however: Become familiar with the major cultural norms of any ethnic groups residing in your school community. Responses that members of mainstream Western culture might take for granted could be inappropriate for people from other cultures.

C Communication

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Can your school's main entrance sign be read from a distance? Is your school's mission statement attractively displayed through exhibits of student work? What sounds do you hear when you walk the halls?

Your school's environment says a lot about your school. It is a silent messenger about the attitudes and actions contained within its walls. Your school's grounds and buildings—even its sounds and odors—communicate how much its occupants care and what they

care about. The environment is, therefore, an essential component of customer service.

What does your school tell outsiders? Try seeing it through a stranger's eyes. When you approach, is the main entrance easy to find? How does it feel when you walk through the door? Warm and friendly, with exciting learning projects displayed throughout the halls and rooms? Or dark and cold, with sterile walls and litter in the halls? Is the main office easy to find and welcoming? What do you hear as you walk the halls? Sounds of learning and involvement or of

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teachers' yelling and students out of control?

Outsiders form an impression of your school from the moment they drive up the street. The cleanliness and repair of the grounds and building reflect the level of discipline in, and concern for, the school. Displays of student work not only highlight the curriculum but demonstrate the academic values of the school. The signs on entrance doors tell a lot about the school's attitude: Is it welcoming (*Welcome to ABC School. All visitors please check in at the main office*) or forbidding (*All visitors must report to the main office. No smoking on school grounds*)?

Other forms of communication play a vital role in your customer service program, as well. How user-friendly and inviting are your school newsletters? Are they easy to read, with illustrations, white space, and short articles written in everyday language? Do they contain articles of interest to the

audience, and do they invite feedback and involvement in school activities? Look at them with fresh eyes to see what they are saying between the lines.

Do you have a school brochure? If so, apply the same standards of user-friendliness. Don't try to impress readers with long, jargon-filled treatises on your curriculum and programs. Focus on the special and unique features of your school and include interesting information that will be helpful to new families.

Finally, the most important aspect of customer-oriented communications is *listening*. To serve your customer well, you must know what the customer wants and needs. Ask, and be open to input. Give customers multiple opportunities to give feedback on your services: tear-off comment forms on school newsletters, phone or paper-and-pencil surveys, open forums, coffees with the principal, and so on.

And be sure to listen carefully to what your customers say. Don't be defensive. Take all ideas into consideration, regardless of their merit. Most people will respect the results, even if they don't agree, as long as they feel they've been heard. The essence of good customer service is showing that you care.

Remember, in today's competitive environment, your school's success and, perhaps, survival may depend on how well you serve your customers. v

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