



Being a customer service-oriented township

“How can I help you?”

It’s such a simple question—but asking it, hearing the response and trying to provide the service or find the answer can be more of a challenge than one might expect.

*The key is providing a culture of customer service within your township. **All** elected township officials, **all** township employees, and **all** township board and commission members need to have a “customer service” mentality when it comes to interacting with township residents—and with each other.*

*After all, “all townships—whether your population is 1,000 or 100,000—only exist to serve the needs of their community,” said **John Elsinga**, manager of **Delhi Charter Township** (Ingham Co.), whose staff is committed to and has undergone customer service training. “It is critical for townships to understand the importance of respecting both the internal and external needs of the community.”*

Success for any organization—including a township—is dependent on how well your “customer”—be it a resident, a business in the township or another organization—is served. Having quality customer service skills—whether in the office, on the phone or out in the community—can help the township be seen in a positive light by residents, making them proud to be a part of your community.

Customer service is even more important today than ever before because of the advent of the technology that has, to some extent, replaced human contact—the crux of any effective customer service.

TYPES OF CUSTOMERS

The name used for those served in an industry varies. Doctors call them patients; lawyers call them clients; associations call them members; retail businesses call them customers; teachers call them students; and townships call them taxpayers, residents and voters. Regardless of what they are called, those served look to be treated with dignity and respect. And if residents do not receive this respect and dignity from their local government, it can sour their feelings about the township—and its elected officials and employees.

“In a business, the need for customer service is clear—if people don’t like their service, they can take their business elsewhere,” said **Rod Taylor**, manager of **DeWitt Charter Township** (Clinton Co.), where the township’s nearly 40 employees have taken customer service training. “Poor customer service is reflected in a business’s bottom line. With local government, residents aren’t often going to leave your jurisdiction. But whether it’s how your house is assessed, applying for a special use permit, or interaction with local police—townships don’t have anything *but* customer service to provide to residents.

“Residents’ common experience with the township is that this is the use of their tax dollars—and we want their experience to be as enjoyable as possible.”

Added **Dan Gough**, building inspector for **Blackman Charter Township** (Jackson Co.), who has undergone customer service training, along with the township’s other employees, “As a township resident, I don’t look at myself as a customer. If I were a customer and I am not happy with the service I am receiving, I can go elsewhere. As a resident of a township, I have no choice in where to go for permits, voting, assessing and other government services—I get what they offer. As a township employee, I treat all people that come into or call our office as I would want to be treated. Being the ordinance officer, I often have to tell residents things that they don’t want to hear, so I try to make it as pleasant as possible.”

There are always two customers involved in any relationship: the external—the end customer—and the internal, the people with whom we work. It can be easy to overlook the *internal* customer, because organizations typically focus primarily on the *external* customer. However, the internal customer—i.e., the township’s officials and employees who interact with the public—can be even *more* important than the external customer because we typically spend more time with those with whom we work.

This is where teamwork comes into play. How a township treats its team members can be infectious—and ultimately determines how it treats its “customers.” The camaraderie experienced within the township lays the foundation for the image it presents to those being served externally.

This sense of teamwork can also ensure more streamlined service to residents—helping to provide a positive reflection on how efficiently the township operates. “In today’s times of downsizing, fewer employees and doing more with less, proper customer service becomes even more important,” said Elsinga. “It’s so critical to make sure that departments work seamlessly together to serve the customer. When there’s a need, anyone can take care of it.

“The neat thing about township government is that we’re taught that if residents call us, we’re going to go out of our way to help them—even if it’s not our jurisdiction. We can be the liaison to work with others and help resolve the issue. We accept that level of responsibility.”



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WHAT’S SAID—AND WHAT ISN’T

Many surveys have been conducted to determine what it takes to maintain and attract new customers. In most cases, the “attitude of indifference” on the part of an employee will cause the customer to consider doing business elsewhere. It is also a “going the extra mile” attitude by an upbeat employee that will make happy customers and attract new ones. While residents may not be likely to take their township “business” elsewhere, the same lessons learned about conveying a positive attitude apply.

So how are attitudes conveyed? According to Albert Mehrabian in his book *Silent Messages*, attitudes are conveyed in the following manner:

7 percent—Words (*what is said*)

38 percent—Voice inflection (*how it sounds*)

55 percent—Body language (*how it looks*)

In this model, two key elements are conveyed: facts and feelings. The *facts*—the words—are just 7 percent of the total message. The *feelings* part of attitude becomes much more difficult to decipher and is conveyed by voice inflection and body language. This human dynamic is in play 24 hours a day, and is ongoing, especially in the customer service arena.

“To me, customer service is the little extra effort,” Taylor said. “Anyone can accept a bill payment. But when you do it with a smile, when you’re building a relationship, and trying to positively converse with a person—that goes to show that we care, that we do understand. It shows that we are only here for one reason: you.

“We are not here for ourselves; we are here for our customers—the residents—and we want to make their experiences with the township positive, every time.” ▶

Body language can also be an important aspect of how attitudes are conveyed. What is body language? Simply put, it is a message without words, such as “a knowing look” or “a look that could kill.” Even silence can be a form of communication, and facial expressions are a significant form of body language. Feelings, emotions and attitudes are more clearly expressed by the expression on one’s face than any other form of body language. It demonstrates how you feel about yourself, your work and the person with whom you are communicating.

Other forms of body language are gestures, posture, touch, proximity to the person with whom you are talking, and even the clothes you wear. All are significant and say something about who you are and how you feel about what is going on in the present moment. If you ever have a question about body language, just remember if you get a smile the next time you step up to a counter for service.

Voice inflection used during communication also demonstrates how confident you feel about yourself and the facts being communicated. A strong, firm voice shows the strength of your convictions and the confidence you have in yourself. A hesitant, shy voice may indicate doubt and uncertainty.

Said Elsinga, “Residents are paying [taxes] for a good quality of life and for township services. We try to deliver [services] in a responsive, friendly manner—‘I’m glad you called. How can I help you?’ Don’t make them feel like a nuisance. Help them, and they will feel good about living in the township.”

VALUING THE TOWNSHIP’S ‘CUSTOMER’

How do township officials and employees value and dignify their customers—their residents? Here are five steps that can ensure that residents feel respected.

1. Be sincere. Sincerity is necessary to lay a firm foundation for all of the other steps involved. Sincerity cannot be faked—it is the “true you” coming through. Two words can verify a person’s sincerity: attention and intention. Pay *attention* to the needs of the customer with the proper *intention*. Are you truly there to meet the needs of the customer or are you there to satisfy your own needs? The customer will know because of the model of how attitudes are conveyed: 7 percent words, 38 percent voice inflection, and 55 percent body language.

2. Use the person’s name if you know it. Using a person’s name will show that you are interested in valuing that individual. It shows that you genuinely care, and enhances the value of the communication.

3. Be present with body, mind and spirit. Be totally present and make the customer the focus. Bodily, this means you use your ears to pick up their words and voice inflection, and your eyes to observe their body language. Mentally, it means to shut down all internal dialogue and zero in on the customer. Spiritually, it means to listen with your heart to tune in to the feelings experienced by the customer. Although these activities are easier to talk about than to accomplish, just by discussing them, you are heading in the right direction.

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Body language—a message without words—can be an important aspect of how attitudes are conveyed.

4. Ask questions and listen. How much do you know about the customer? The more you know, the easier it will be to meet his or her needs and wants. Appropriate questions will garner better information and show that you truly care.

Listening is a skill that is closely related to asking questions. The skill of listening is perhaps the least understood of all the skills involved in effectively serving a customer. This is especially true when dealing with an irate resident. Listening has the potential to diffuse hostility as indicated by the following:

- Truly listening shows you are interested in solving the problem. It lessens anger.
- Agree when appropriate. Often the person with the problem expects confrontation. Agreeing can help diffuse the issue. Becoming defensive can lead to escalation.
- Stay focused on the issue. This can have the tendency to reduce stress in the person you are dealing with. Do not try to justify your position.
- Clear, slow, soft language will have a calming effect. The person you are dealing with will have the tendency to follow your example.
- Let them do the talking. Remain silent as much as possible and control the conversation with relevant questions.

Often the greatest obstacle to effective listening is being judgmental. To truly hear the customer, it is necessary to set aside our own opinions and completely shut down internal dialogue, and listen to not only the facts but also the feelings being communicated. We gravitate toward those who are excellent listeners because they validate us as individuals. Listening is perhaps the least developed of all customer service skills.

5. Gratitude. As noted earlier, a township's primary role is to serve its residents. How often do officials and employees express their gratitude? Silent gratitude does not do anyone any good. If you feel it, say it. Or better yet, write it. A meaningful written "thank you" is powerful. The attitude of ▶

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gratitude invokes the natural law of life that states, “What you focus on expands.” The expression of gratitude lays the foundation for more of the same to manifest in your life. The following quote by Melody Beatty, author and journalist, expresses well the impact of gratitude in all of life beyond the customer service arena: “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order and confusion into clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home and a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow.”

DEVELOPING CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

Developing customer service skills takes time and proficiency. Developing or improving these skills follows four distinct steps:

1. **Beginning awareness**
2. **Awkward use**
3. **Consciously skilled**
4. **Integration**

Beginning awareness is the “a-ha” experience, being exposed to something for the first time. This can be a fact, a skill or any new experience. If this is a skill that you wish to develop, you will then move to the next step, which is *awkward use*. When we learned how to ride a bike, it took time and a few falls before we mastered this skill. All people go through this sort of process in mastering a skill.

If you are motivated to perfect a skill, you have to *consciously embrace*—the third step—and pay attention to it, and practice it again and again. With time, this skill becomes step four—*integration*—and you will be able to do it without thinking about it. You have reprogrammed your subconscious mind. Developing customer service skills is a process that never ends, and every new day gives us the opportunity to hone these skills.

Another way of developing customer service skills is to periodically reflect or review the happenings of the day, week or month. This practice can facilitate learning from the township’s daily dealings with customers and examining means to better serve the public. Doing this as a board, among departments, or with a colleague can give a better perspective. Multiple viewpoints are normally better than one.

Said Gough, “Our board members are very demanding in our ability to offer quality service with respect to our residents. All employees are required to participate in a monthly staff meeting where we discuss ways to improve our quality of service and other matters.”

Our human nature means that sometimes we make mistakes. These mistakes, however, can be turned around and used to enhance our performance in the eyes of the customer. The key is to respond positively when a mistake is made. How a mistake is handled can lead the customer to see your resourcefulness and make a favorable impression.

In today’s fast-paced, technology-driven society, it becomes imperative for townships to constantly seek to improve their customer service. Our society puts a premium on organizations, including townships, that are innovatively and creatively doing a better job of satisfying the needs and wants of their customers.

THE BOARD SETS THE TONE

Often the example set by the township board will set the tone for individual township team members. It is important to make customer service a priority for all township officials, employees and volunteers. Every team member touches the external customer, whether directly or indirectly—so everyone in the township is a customer service representative.

Noted Taylor, “Customer service is easy to lose in the day-to-day tasks that people do. But it has to be a priority of the township management and board. The township needs to be a learning organization—one that is always trying to evaluate and improve how it provides service to its residents. Township officials and employees need to constantly be learning new things, and townships need to put a focus on that and see the big picture.”

A key benefit of delivering outstanding customer service is the personal satisfaction that comes from serving the public and providing a service that residents need and want. Township officials and employees often exceed expectations when it comes to providing service to their residents—which in turn makes the residents proud to call the township “home.”

Elsinga recalled a recent incident when a resident had downed tree branches in his right-of-way. He cut up the branches and called another agency to see if it would clear the branches from the right-of-way. “They wouldn’t help him, so he called our public works department, who told him, ‘We’ll be right over to pick them up,’” recalled Elsinga. “The township offers a brush drop-off collection service, and the township employees went above and beyond to help the resident.

“The end result is that the resident feels good about the township and the level of service we provide,” said Elsinga. “That’s what makes the township form of government so great. We take care to explain the services that we can and cannot deliver, to have an answer for residents, and to try to find a solution for people.” ■

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A seminar instructor, Arens has presented at several MTA events. For more information, including customer service training opportunities for townships, visit www.lifeenhancingprograms.com or call (989) 466-2851.



Three simple steps

These three steps can help guarantee customer satisfaction as townships move into the future:

1. The "customer" is king or queen. There are two customers, the internal and the external. Of these, the internal is the most important. The township team lays the foundation for how the external customers are treated.
2. How township officials and employees feel about their work within the township helps determine the level of service rendered to the township customer.
3. Every person in the township should constantly seek to incrementally improve his or her customer service skills.

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