



How to Create a Customized CUSTOMER SERVICE PHILOSOPHY for Your Organization

By Tiffany Harben

WELCOME! IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN ASSIST YOU WITH? THANK YOU FOR COMING! CUSTOMER SERVICE SEEMS SO SIMPLE YET HAS ONE OF THE GREATEST IMPACTS ON A CUSTOMER'S EXPERIENCE DURING AN EVENT. A LARGE PORTION OF THE SUCCESS OF AN EVENT IS A PRODUCT OF OUTSTANDING INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE BETWEEN STAFF, VOLUNTEERS, SPONSORS AND VENDORS THAT TRANSFORMS INTO OUTSTANDING EXTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE TO PATRONS.

The City of Allen Parks and Recreation Department is no different than most organizations in the fact it holds its employees, volunteers and boards to delivering the highest level of customer service. Although customer service is held in such high regard by the department, no formal customer service philosophy, policies, procedures and expectations were formally established from 1978 to 2007. To ensure seamless customer service consistent from top to bottom, facility to facility and event to event the department decided to employ a grassroots approach to creating its own customer service philosophy and implementation.

You may be asking yourself what exactly is a customer service philosophy? A customer service philosophy is similar to a mission statement in that it states what broad expectations your organization has regarding customer service. After many hours of collaboration "Delivering Remarkable service by Empowered employees creating Amazing experiences resulting in Lasting impressions" or REAL for short was instituted by the City of Allen Parks and Recreation Department.

Before we explore the steps necessary to create your own customized customer service philosophy let's first remind ourselves of the importance customer ser-

vice plays in our success. We all know if someone has a horrible customer service experience he/she will tell everyone about it. Providing extraordinary customer service to your patrons will not only build customer loyalty but encourage them to spend more time and money at your event as well. Having raving fans helps create favorable political support for the next time you ask for additional funds or to try something new and radical.

We cannot forget internal customer service is just as important as external customer service. Maintaining a positive environment for employees and volunteers that is unwavering during even the most intense times helps uphold motivation and loyalty. Having complete organizational buy-in and support in regard to delivering remarkable customer service helps ward off a stressful and unhealthy work environment, lost revenue and a bad reputation.

So, how did the City of Allen Parks and Recreation Department develop their own customer service philosophy using a grassroots method? Here's how.

Assembling the Team

The first crucial step in creating a customer service philosophy is to assemble a dedicated team of individuals who will be responsible for its development,

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implementation and ultimate success. Put together a team who represent a diverse cross section of your entire organization. Include part time staff, full time staff, volunteers and board members. Utilizing a diverse team will help ensure you take into account all areas of your organization as it relates to customer service.

When picking your team, choose wisely. Focus on individuals who take initiative, have time to commit to the process and understand and demonstrate exceptional customer service themselves. Make sure the team knows they will not only be responsible for developing the philosophy but also for disseminating the message throughout the organization.

To guarantee the group is successful, construct a proper size group for your particular needs. When a group gets too large, often times it is difficult for things to get accomplished. If a group is too small the workload may become overwhelming. You are the best barometer of what size group to assemble. It is imperative throughout the process to instill a climate of openness and equality. Make sure everyone knows all ideas and input are welcome and everyone has a voice.

As the work load increases tasks can be distributed individually, and you might entertain the idea of putting together subcommittees. To prevent monotony, alternate meetings with the entire group with smaller individual subcommittee meetings. Make sure throughout the process to take time to solicit feedback from others outside the group ensuring the team is heading in the right direction. Adding or replacing members throughout the process is a great way to breathe new life into the creative process. Added mem-

bers can provide additional feedback, new ideas and a different perspective. Each time the group moves from one task to another use those shifts in energy to recruit new members.

Using a grassroots campaign including a wide variety of individuals from your organization will help increase buy-in. Creating a customer service philosophy that is a group effort from the bottom up and not a mandate handed down from management, typically proves to be much more successful.

Develop the Philosophy

When developing the customer service philosophy first start by creating a customer service statement. When developing your customer service statement, why reinvent the wheel? Identify businesses and organizations you know have excellent customer service. Where have you received excellent customer service? Research those companies for ideas you can apply to your organization.

When researching companies for the City of Allen Parks and Recreation statement our group studied Chick Fil-A, Disney World and Nordstrom's and picked key words and concepts we felt fit our need.

When developing the statement, use power words. A thesaurus is a great tool to use for this step. The REAL Customer Service Statement features the words remarkable, empowered, amazing and lasting. Replacing basic words like "great" with "outstanding" "distinguished" or "excellent" helps evoke much stronger emotions.

Make sure the statement is memorable. Having a customer service statement that is lengthy and overcomplicated will be hard for your organization to adopt. You might consider using an acronym or catchy phrase. Also, verify the customer service statement is consistent with your current mission and vision statements.

After you have developed your customer service philosophy consider creating guiding principles to help further define what customer service is for your organization. Guiding principles break your statement into further detail and define what customer service will look like in your organization. For instance, remarkable service may be defined as:

- Being accessible to your customers and responding to them in a timely manner with clear and accurate information.
- Exercising flexibility and responding to changing customer needs.
- Seeking to delight your customers and establish close customer relationships.
- Providing seamless, consistent service from facility to facility and location to location. Your service level will become the brand by which you are known.

CREATING SERVICE STANDARDS FURTHER DEFINES YOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES BY ESTABLISHING A STANDARD PRACTICE BY WHICH IT WILL BE CARRIED OUT.

- Recognizing your internal customers are as important as your external customers, because requests from your co-workers ultimately help you provide outstanding service to your customers.

If the ultimate goal is to have a system by which you can track the success of your customer service philosophy you may consider adding an element that can be measured. Creating service standards further defines your guiding principles by establishing a standard practice by which it will be carried out. For example, being accessible to your customers and responding to them in a timely manner could be defined as returning all phone messages within 24 hours.

Customer Service Statement:
remarkable service

Guiding Principle:
being accessible to your customers and responding in a timely manner

Service Standard:
returning all phone messages within 24 hours

The creative portion of the process tends to take the most amount of time. Identifying and defining each element including your customer service statement, guiding principles and service standards can be quite a daunting task. Make sure to allow your team adequate time to accomplish this large scope of work yet encourage them to work at a pace that is efficient and productive. The development of your philosophy will prove to be one of the most rewarding parts of the process as you will then have all the details of your customer service philosophy completed.

Implementation

Now that you have a completed customer service philosophy what should you do next? Creating a successful implementation plan will ensure you achieve the goal of having everyone in your organization understand and buy-in to your new philosophy.

When rolling out your new philosophy consider rolling it out in sections. You can roll the customer service statement out first to build excitement and anticipation for the steps to come. Making sure not to overwhelm people with informa-

ALTHOUGH DEVELOPING YOUR OWN TRAINING WILL TAKE ADDITIONAL TIME IT WILL ENSURE EACH PERSON WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION RECEIVES THE SAME INFORMATION.

tion is imperative. Consider disseminating information from the top of your hierarchical structure down. Having managers and supervisors buying-in first and practicing the information they have learned will help set an example for those in their divisions or work groups.

One of the most efficient means of making sure everyone in your organization received the same message regarding your philosophy is to develop a mandatory training program. Although developing your own training will take additional time it will ensure each person within your organization receives the same information. When soliciting trainers, turn to your existing team members as they already have a vested interest in the success of the program. Use this opportunity to recruit additional staff as well.

A great way to keep the customer service momentum going and in the forefront of everyone's mind is to implement an internal recognition program. Who doesn't like being formally recognized and rewarded for a job well done? Encourage people in your organization to nominate others who have demonstrated extraordinary customer service. Create a committee that picks top performers and distribute rewards of gift cards, time off work, extra money or simply a silly prize. Creating an internal newsletter or including customer service in a portion of your existing newsletter will further recognize staff.

As previously mentioned, design a measurement tool for internal and external customer service. Establish a benchmark prior to rolling out your philosophy and then re-measure your results six months and one year down the road. Conduct

surveys, establish focus groups and secret shop your event to gain a better understanding of the customer service your organization offers. How better to know just how much your hard work has paid off?

Going forward, re-evaluate your customer service statement, guiding principles and service standards regularly. As we all know things change so quickly in this industry that which worked before may become obsolete. Make sure to frequently update and make changes as needed.

Customer service plays a great importance in the event industry as events are a customer service based product. If your event is successful year after year, creating your own customer service philosophy will only help enhance and improve the service you already offer. Although the process does seem to encompass quite a bit of work, creating a detailed plan customized to your organization's beliefs allows all those involved to conduct themselves as you have defined. As we all know there is always room for improvement and what better area to do so than customer service.

Tiffany Harben has been with the City of Allen for 5 years and completed her internship with the Parks and Recreation Department, served as Tournament Coordinator at Chase Oaks Golf Club and is now the Special Events Coordinator. Tiffany was one of the founding member of the REAL Customer Service Team and has served as a trainer as well as Committee Chair of Training for the REAL Team.