Commentary

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To Achieve Exceptional Service, You Must First Listen to Your Customer

The research conducted by Scott Hock, Sarah Anderson, and Matthew Potoski and described in their article “Invitation Phone Calls Increase Attendance at Civic Meetings: Evidence from a Field Experiment” provides valuable data that proves the effectiveness of making the extra effort through phone calls to personally invite citizens to participate in important public meetings. In addition, their research is able to quantify the cost associated with this outreach methodology so that it can be weighed against the nonquantifiable benefits of increased participation.

This phone technique, along with other nontraditional forms of notification, is critical in guaranteeing increased attendance. While there might be disagreement as to which technique is most cost-effective in improving citizen participation in local government, there should be no disagreement as to the importance of soliciting input from our citizens.

I have been fortunate to work for the city of Ames, Iowa, for 33 years, the past 30 as the city manager. Over the past 17 years, we have committed ourselves to an organizational initiative known as Excellence Through People (ETP). Through ETP we have become a values-driven organization. Yes, we still have personnel rules and standard operating procedures in our departments, but, for the most part, we attempt to influence behavior through a commitment to living our 13 values every day. We do this in order to accomplish two overriding goals of ETP: (1) to provide exceptional service to our customers at the best price and (2) to provide an enjoyable and stimulating work environment to our employees.

One of our 13 values is “Listening to Our Customers.” At our orientation session with each of our new employees, I share the following two stories, which emphasize the importance of obtaining input from customers before making any final decisions regarding the implementation or revisions to our systems, programs, or services. I learned some time ago that you cannot provide exceptional customer service based on what you think your customers want! If we remain isolated within the walls of our offices and attempt to anticipate what our customers want, we are doomed to failure.

Lesson 1 from the Private Sector

Some time ago, my wife consented to allow me to purchase the largest available television. It was before the era of plasma, LED, or LCD options. My largest option at the time was a 36-inch set. I was particularly
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excited about my new purchase because it was right before New Year’s Day, and I would have it in time to watch college football bowl games.

You will remember that these sets were extremely large and very heavy. There was no way I could fit it in my trunk or carry it into our house. Unfortunately, this was on a Friday, and the store only made home deliveries on Tuesdays, well past the two upcoming bowl days. As I expressed my displeasure to my salesperson, he offered to waive the $25 fee for the Tuesday delivery. However, I really didn’t care about paying the delivery fee, I wanted the set delivered on Friday rather than the following Tuesday. Unfortunately, the salesperson never seemed to get it. He thought he was taking an extraordinary step to exceed my expectations by waiving the delivery fee. Yet, I was still frustrated that I would not be able to view the Orange, Sugar, and Rose Bowls on my new “big screen” television. He obviously was not listening to what I was telling him would make me happy, and therefore he failed to provide me with exceptional customer service.

Lesson 2 from the Public Sector

Before we began our ETP initiative, employees from our Utility Customer Service Division visited with me about a desire to improve their image with our customers. This group is responsible for handling the billing for our municipal electric, water, storm water, and sanitary sewer utilities. Previous user surveys had indicated that there was room for improving their customer satisfaction ratings.

As a result, they established a team, looked at what other utilities were doing for their customers, and brainstormed numerous procedural changes that they felt our customers would appreciate. After much discussion, they decided to institute a new policy whereby new customers would no longer pay a deposit fee and all current deposits would be returned to our existing customers. The new policy was quickly implemented, but our employees were frustrated to learn from a subsequent survey that our customer satisfaction level did not increase as they had hoped.

In response to this negative feedback, the Customer Service team agreed to try again, but this time focus groups were drawn from a cross-section of our customer base in order to solicit ideas for improving our services. Interestingly, a common theme that emerged from these discussions was the desire to pay utility bills on any day in the month rather than on the fifteenth or thirtieth day of the month, as was then required. A slight modification was made to our billing software and the policy change was made. Lo and behold, the next survey that was distributed yielded a significant improvement in our satisfaction ratings from our customers … all because we first asked what the customers wanted, rather than making assumptions about what they wanted.

The research findings reflected in Hock, Anderson, and Potoski’s article will benefit practitioners who are committed to increased participation in the decision-making process by their customers. It is hoped that this type of research will be expanded to include other techniques that government officials at all levels can rely on to promote more engagement from our customers. However, regardless of which technique is utilized, it is important to remember that you cannot provide exceptional service to your customers unless you first take the time to listen to what they want!