

Why *good* service isn't good enough : UCOL Library's pledge to provide *excellence* in customer service.

Introduction:

As part of a staff-development initiative the Library staff decided to develop a customer services commitment.

Jo Heslop from Impact Training facilitated a one-day workshop in January 1998, which all Library staff attended.

Using a customer services document developed by a United States tertiary library, Manawatu Polytechnic Library staff (as we were then) wrote a customer services standards document, along with a service pledge. This commitment to customer service remains as our chief focus and is the foundation on which our work is based.

Background:

The need for an articulated service policy had been felt for some time. Each individual staff member had standards of service they adhered to, but we felt it necessary to discuss these and to stipulate what we actually meant by "excellence" and other terms. We needed to have consistent service standards that everyone understood and agreed to. There was a need to talk about specific services and to quantify some standards (eg. promptness of answering telephones, acknowledging people at services desks etc.).

Initial Workshop:

Jo Heslop from Impact Training had met with 2 members of the Library staff to establish what we wanted to achieve at our training day, and to set up the format for the day's proceedings.

The workshop was held in mid January prior to the start of the academic year.

The Library was closed for the day to enable all staff to attend.

The majority of the pre-lunch session was devoted to "DiSC" analysis. Each staff member filled in a Personal Profile System questionnaire, designed to evaluate our behavioural patterns at work. Once all questionnaires had been completed, staff were grouped according to work behavioural profile. Within each of the 4 groups, we talked about our strengths and weaknesses, allowing others to gain an understanding of how we each functioned in our work environment.

There was some reluctance from a few staff at having to spend so much time on the personality profile (as several staff members had undergone similar evaluations on many occasions in the past), but it was felt that maximum benefit for the Library would be gained if we all went through the exercise together.

The post-lunch session was then largely devoted to talking about the things we wished to include in our Customer Services Pledge, and what we understood the pledge to mean.

Pledge:

At the workshop, a draft pledge was presented merely as a starting point. The basis for this initial document was the pledge that Wright State University Libraries in Ohio, USA had developed -

(http://www.libraries.wright.edu/services/Custom_Services.html).

At the workshop we talked primarily about the Commitment to Service, the Commitment to Excellence, and some of the pledges under the heading General Services. Until we dealt with some preliminary definitions of “excellent” service, we did not wish to move to more specific pledges.

As an example of the processes involved in writing pledges, one of our General Services pledges states –

We will answer the phone promptly and, if unable to deal with the matter then, offer to call back at an agreed time.

On the training day this pledge was worded -

We will answer the phone promptly and offer to call back within 10 minutes if unable to deal with the matter immediately.

We discussed the key words/phrases in the sentence, defining what we each understood them to mean. “Prompt” mean we should answer the phone as soon as it rings, even if serving someone face-to-face. It was explained by the Library Manager that because the person at the other end of the phone cannot see if we are busy and/or short-staffed, we need to respond immediately to the ring of the telephone. The agreed action was to politely excuse oneself to the current customer and pick up the phone. The caller was to have the situation explained (ie. already serving someone else), and asked to explain their needs quickly. The staff member was to evaluate the question, assess the timeframe involved and respond accordingly. If an instant answer was not forthcoming, arrange to call back, or for the caller to phone again at an agreed time later on.

When the final version of the pledge was written, we decided to remove specific times, settling instead for the wording “agreed time”, so that there was a negotiated solution between both parties.

As part of this same pledge we also discussed the greeting to be given when answering the telephone at work. We wanted to avoid a long greeting, but needed the caller to know which section of the institution they were connected to, and the name of the staff member answering the phone.

Although Jo (our facilitator) told us that we should say our name last to make that the thing most remembered by the caller (eg. “Good morning, Library, you’re speaking with Jane”), most of us were not entirely comfortable with that greeting. We left the actual wording up to the individual, as long as the key word “Library” and the staff member’s name were stated. Again, it was optional as to saying “Hello”, “good morning”, “good afternoon” etc. Ultimately, the staff member answering the phone had to be comfortable (and not tongue-tied) with the greeting given!

After the initial workshop, a small sub-committee then set about writing our customer service commitment. As mentioned, we drew very heavily on the document developed by Wright State University Libraries, using many of their general pledges and adapting their specific service commitments to reflect our own situation. Each draft was circulated to all Library staff. Wording, interpretation and implications were discussed, and revised where necessary. We were always conscious of not wanting to promise more than we could reasonably deliver, whilst not setting our standards too low. The word “excellence” underpinned everything. If we were not aiming for excellence in customer service all the time, we felt that our standards were not high enough. If standards are set too low, then achievement levels do not often rise above the mediocre.

Our customer service commitment is in 4 parts:

- Commitment to service (from which we have extracted our service pledge)
- Commitment to excellence
- General services
- Specific services

The first 2 sections articulate our customer service goals. We have defined excellent service in our Library as being “consistently professional by providing courteous, prompt and reliable service”.

Section 3 – General Services - deals with our acknowledgement of clients’ requirements and prompt attention to them.

Section 4 – Specific Services - quantifies some of the standards we adhere to in the Workroom. We have set time limits for achieving various library tasks which affect our clients (eg. acquiring new materials, reshelving books and serials, obtaining interlibrary loan requests, reporting equipment faults).

A Library suggestion box has been made available as another means of obtaining customer feedback. We will post answers on a board in the entrance to the Library, and intend to have the same information available, in the near future, on the Library website. We recognise the need to respond promptly and effectively to all communication.

Follow-up:

The Customer Services Commitment remains an ongoing process. A second staff development day was held just prior to Christmas 1999, with customer service as its major focus. We looked at how well we felt we were doing with our Customer Services Pledge, and what other initiatives we needed to undertake. 1999 was a difficult year for us, with the move to a single-site Campus in the centre of Palmerston North. Needless to say, there were many things which were not working well during the first half of the academic year, and the Library was often the first port of call for students seeking help or information. We were conscious of the frustrations felt by many students and staff and strove to make extra efforts in the area of customer service. We would frequently take on an advocacy role for students – contacting staff on a student's behalf, and finding a solution to the problem. There were times when it was very difficult to remain upbeat and helpful – especially with the numerous technical problems experienced on Campus in the first six months of 1999. Even the Library computerised catalogue was functioning at about half speed! The Library staff saw a considerable expansion in numbers last year, with the Library having responsibility for administering the student studios throughout campus. The bulk of the problems were (and still are!) technical ones – particularly with computers, printers, and photocopiers not functioning, or with logins not working correctly. Amongst the Library staff we now have 6 part-time computer support assistants – most of whom are computing students at UCOL. They do not have any Library training and have not undergone any previous customer services training. The challenge has been to bring these staff members “on board” – so that the service given by all members of the Library staff is consistently high. It is been interesting to get staff to give their definitions of “professional”, “prompt”, “excellence” etc.

UCOL has an annual awards ceremony recognising excellent performance in the organisation. In 1999 I nominated the Library for the “Julia Camden Award for recognition of an outstanding contribution to organisational development and support”. To the delight of Library staff (and many other supporters within UCOL) we won the award – and \$2000 to be used in staff development!

All new Library staff undergo customer services training as part of their induction, so that the same high standard of service is given at all times, by all staff. Our Customer Services Pledge has now been adopted as our guiding principle, and forms part of our performance appraisal.

I can confidently say that our commitment to excellent customer service is uppermost in our thinking most of the time. Sometimes, of course, it takes the form of “oops, that wasn't really in line with our customer services pledge!” when we have felt ourselves getting a little “testy” with difficult clients. The effort is always to try and give excellent and consistent service, no matter how crappy your personal life is at the moment, or how much of pain the client is!

Customer Service Commitment:

Commitment to Service

- The UCOL Library is firmly committed to providing excellence in customer service. We will continually evaluate and update these standards, and value your input.

Commitment to Excellence

- We will be consistently professional by providing courteous, prompt and reliable service.
- We will empower our customers in their search for lifelong learning.
- We will ensure that library staff develop and maintain expertise in and knowledge of Library resources and services.

General Services

- We will acknowledge you immediately at the service desk, respond to your needs, and call for additional staff if unable to serve promptly.
- We will answer the phone promptly and, if unable to deal with the matter then, offer to call back at an agreed time.
- We will make available to you the tools and training to enable access to UCOL Library's collections, and provide a gateway to selected external resources.

Specific Services

- We will place and acknowledge faculty acquisition orders within 10 working days, and provide priority delivery when necessary.
- We will make new books available within 4 weeks of receipt, and provide priority delivery when necessary.
- We will process current serials within 24 hours of receipt.
- We will notify staff when requested serials arrive.
- We will place your interlibrary loan requests within 2 working days, and provide priority delivery when necessary.
- We will notify you promptly when the interloan arrives, or advise if unavailable.
- We will reshelve library materials within 24 hours of use and regularly maintain shelving order.
- We will publicise changes to our services.
- We will report equipment faults immediately and advise customers appropriately.
- We will respond to your signed suggestions within 5 working days.

A suggestion box is available in the City Campus Library – your comments are welcome.

The Pledge

UCOL Library staff are firmly committed to providing EXCELLENCE in customer service.