Our Customers

Talk to them!!!!

With less than the usual amount of arm twisting I got two people from very different parts of the Centre to write about their client service experiences for you this month and share how they felt about them. What really got me is how, without any prompting, they both zoomed in on the same issue - communication - as THE issue. Kym Hosking, in her article, goes so far as to use the word 'fundamental'.

The message is simple. Keep your client informed and involved. Talk to them through the various stages of each job - planning it, doing it, waiting for things to happen which are outside your control, finishing up - in the good times and the bad. You'll usually be paid back with understanding, cooperation and tolerance.

You'll see this theme coming up again and again. Check out how often it comes up in this example from the literature (Berry & Parasuraman).

Top Ten Service Attributes of Importance to Customers.
1. Being called back when promised.
2. Receiving an explanation of how a problem happened.
3. Providing me with information so I know what number(s) to call.
4. Being contacted promptly when a problem is resolved.
5. Being allowed to talk to someone in authority.
6. Being told how long it will take to solve a problem.
7. Being given useful alternatives if a problem can't be solved.
8. Being treated like I am a person, not an account number.
9. Being told about ways to prevent a future problem.
10. Being given progress reports if a problem can't be solved immediately.

Over now to this month's guests, Carmel and Kym.

John Currie

About Starfish

Two people were strolling along the beach, the tide was dropping and several starfish were left high and dry on the sand. As the pair walked and talked, one of them picked up each starfish they came to and tossed it back into the sea. Finally the other said "There are so many starfish. Why bother? What difference does it make?" Said the companion, as another starfish whirled towards the water, "It mattered to that one!".

What Matters to Us

Facilities Management staff manage 9 Netware servers, 3 NT servers, 4 Unix servers, 14 Unix workstations, around 75 Macintoshes, 360 PCs and 40 printers and peripherals. Machines are easy to manage, it's the people who use those machines that keep life interesting. The diversity of the hardware and software we come in contact with is more than matched by the diversity of the people.

When Starfish A phones and says "My spellchecker isn't working" just a minute after Starfish B has phoned with "There are 3 classes in the labs and none of the PCs are working", what happens? For Starfish B there is no question. We have to get a skilled person there immediately. Maybe Starfish A can wait a week, but -

- what if A is the VC's best friend?
- what if A has the influence on a committee which will decide on renewing the FM agreement?
- what if two minutes on the phone will sort this one out?
- what if A really means "the spellchecker isn't working and neither is anything else in the entire department"?

Phone and email contacts, as well as on site mechanisms like in-trays and message boxes, are the life-blood of our activities. If the messaging doesn't run smoothly, both ways, then anxiety levels rise, both here and "out there".

Anxious people are incredibly time-consuming. A very few people are born anxious - we have to work with that regardless - but most people are reasonable and respond very well to interest, even mild interest. If starfish can't be thrown back right then and there, try to make them comfortable with the wait. Find out about the problem, supply them with information about who will call and when, about why they can't be attended to right now.

What Matters First

When we begin a new agreement, a lot of attention gets paid to how the site visits will operate. We need to ask how staff, and sometimes their students, will let us know something needs doing, and how we're to let them know that we've looked at/solved/are working on their problem. If these questions aren't sorted out properly they usually force themselves upon us. They require careful thought initially, but also need to be monitored and reviewed whenever something goes wrong.

We also need to ask how the staff of the department get to know about how the FM agreement works. At first glance this seems the province of the people who signed up for the agreement. This is OK sometimes but I am starting to think that more attention to this from the beginning might cut back on all sorts of problems later.

Hidden Matters

Back in the office we do a lot of work too. Most of the Unix work and as much as possible of the Netware and NT server work is "invisible" to the clients. This presents a communication problem in that somehow we need to make sure that the clients know they are getting "value for money". Finding a computer literate person at the client end who has an interest and the time to hear about the background work is always a help. Keeping a log book, sending email status reports are good if they suit the particular clients. At agreement review time the timesheet reports are very useful. (Yes, FM staff are particularly talented with timesheets so I do trust my figures.)

Starfish Endings

What matters to our clients matters to us. More than this, we have to be seen to understand and act on whatever the problem is. We have to let the clients define the urgency of their own problems. If you tell Starfish A that Starfish B has 50 staff and 70 students waiting for a server to be restored, then Starfish A may choose to redefine the urgency of the spellchecker problem.

Our starfish need to feel that if they get stranded on the sand again, they will be sure to get some help.

Carmel Hegarty
(Facilities Management Co-ordinator)

TaxiPlus

Analysing client service issues after the event can be a confronting discipline. It reveals all too starkly what could be improved and also what actually worked. Upon reflection, in making the TaxiPlus videos - VideoVision's largest production ever - a plethora of CS issues beckoned, so I decided to tackle a fundamental of CS - the communication process. But first.....

The brief in brief

Our client was the Graduate School of Management, consulting for Queensland Transport.

Our instructions were to produce a teaching package for taxi driver instruction and develop packaging and trademark logo for the series. (You may have noticed a strange taxi parked in the back lane.) Our part involved making videos covering:
- defensive driving
- providing services for people with disabilities
- communication
- dealing with difference (cross cultural and anti-discrimination issues)
- personal and financial management

We had to develop the concept, script, shoot and post produce 80 minutes of video within a 12 week period! For a production unit our size, this is a big commitment.

The production crew consisted of: Donald - script, direct, edit, graphics; Charles - camera; Sue - graphic design, makeup; Juliet (freelance) - sound; Kym - script, edit, budget, scheduling. Meanwhile, Triny, Keith and Glynis held the fort, handling other UQ productions.

Communication

From the very start we communicated with the client about the actual process. Given the deadline and budget, it was important to let the client know what they could expect - what were realistic expectations.

If this doesn't happen, the client may fill in the gaps and expect too much. Often clients don't know what is involved in commissioning a video (and why should they?), so the actual process needs to be explained. For example, once scripts are signed off (agreed upon), we shoot and post produce to that script. Any changes after sign off would result in extra expense.

It was important to ensure the major stakeholders understood the extent of the brief. If this isn't clarified early on, the job can mushroom with corresponding costs.

At the initial meeting, it was crucial to clarify roles, points of contact and who was responsible for making decisions. We wanted to get all the cards on the table straight away. For example, if we were expected to develop scripts within the timeline, we expected prompt turnarounds and comments on drafts.

We requested focus and expert groups to provide feedback along the way. This way, potentially expensive errors could be detected at an early stage and help determine if we were actually delivering the intended message.

It sounds as though we made a lot of demands, but to balance this made sure we understood what the client wanted. After procedures/expectations (on both sides) were explained, we then had a responsibility to keep the client informed. This meant scheduling regular meeting and providing ad hoc updates.

The Head of the Graduate School of Management, Victor Callan, provided a lot of guidance through this process and I am grateful to have learned so much from him about proactive client service.

I also learnt the importance of people working together and considering each other's point of view. And that you can plan until the cows come home, but sometimes the universe rudely tears apart without warning. We contended with uncooperative weather, lost actors/taxis, people wanting to hire the taxi whenever we stopped and communication breakdowns. Even so, this project experienced a remarkable lack of unscripted dramas which meant TaxiPlus was not so taxing after all.

Kym Hosking
(Then Senior Television Producer)

"Find out what your customers want and give it to them."
Stew Leonard