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Customer Service in Ontario's Colleges

by John Keith

Introduction

"The best organization in the world will be ineffective if the focus on 'customers' is lost. First and foremost in education is the treatment of individual students, alumni, parents, friends and each other (internal customers). Every contact counts!" (Kotler and Fox in an electronic resource from Oracle Corporation, 2001).

Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) are in competition with private colleges, universities and one another to attract students in a time of declining enrolment. The colleges are also concerned about attrition – losing students prior to graduation and are therefore seeking ways to aid retention (Drea, 2004).

Sophisticated marketing plans are devised to attract new students to the institutions as evidenced by the assortment of college recruitment literature, advertising campaigns and other communication aimed at student prospects. The factors contributing to attrition require an integrated approach to retention strategy (Rose, 1996). College marketers seek ways to develop and nurture relationships with student prospects *inter alia*. Student-centeredness is the rallying cry of retention management planners (Smith, 1995). Relationships with alumni, employers, donors, partners and others are built and sustained with attention to thoughtful communication strategies. All these activities feature customer service components, although in many cases they are not thought of, or recognized, as such, if at all.

Consistency, quality control and focus, along with recognition of customer service activity in the colleges, are important considerations requiring attention. Therefore, to be more effective, college marketing and retention customer service activities should be co-ordinated from a single source within the organization, involve everyone connected with the college and be recognized for what they are. Further, a quality customer service (QCS) program must have clearly delineated strategies to encourage a service-oriented college culture that impacts current and future student customers and others in the most positive ways possible.

Quality Customer Service Defined

Customer service, simply stated, is the service an organization provides for its customers. Quality customer service may be thought of as the means by which an organization relates with its customers

and others to provide for their needs, earn their trust, gain their loyalty and ultimately, to form partnerships with them for the benefit of all. Treating others as we want to be treated is not only important, it's expected. Anything less creates a negative impression. Something more is very often greatly appreciated. Smith says, "How well we are treated shapes our day." (1995). QCS creates a healthy climate for interacting with customers, potential customers and others. It's good for doing business, whether your business is retail sales or college recruitment and retention.

A quality customer service definition offered by Jack Speer, publisher of BizWatch, an online business news source states that, "Excellent customer service is a process by which your organization delivers its services or products in a way that allows the customer to access them in the most efficient, fair, cost effective, and humanly satisfying and pleasurable manner possible" (Speer, 2004). Organizations often create and customize their own definitions based on beliefs, values and focuses. But they all have the same core message, how to best serve customer contacts in the best interests of all concerned.

Discussion

Some in the education field find the term customers distasteful or inadequate when referring to students. Faculty, for instance, may consider it a shallow interpretation of their relationship with students. (Smith, 1996). However, instructors are frontline customer service deliverers to student customers. A CAAT new faculty competency checklist draft identifies a number of customer service activities. Among them are communication strategies for faculty, including engaging student customers, and listening and offering help to them to better deliver service. Another customer service activity identified addresses the assessment of customer needs, how best to accommodate them with service delivery that best suits them. (Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology, 2003, p. 13). The term customer service may not have been considered in the checklist, but the interaction between faculty and students referred to in the section, fits the definition.

Call it what you will, college students today expect quality customer service, and they want it efficiently and effectively to meet their wants and needs. (Oracle Corporation, 2001). The colleges respond with a variety of customer service activities, encompassing any planned or unplanned customer or potential customer contact activity or initiative, including faculty contact with student customers. It is not very often called customer service, however. The term student service or student-centeredness is substituted in many instances. The Marketing Manager at one Ontario College said that she was unaware of the use of the term customer service in the colleges, but indicated that it is the key message of a Noel-Levitz Canada marketing presentation to the college to enhance enrolment and retention. (C. Campbell, personal communication, March 9, 2005).

All colleges engage in various customer service activities, albeit usually in a fragmented fashion, by department or program. Student-centeredness, identified in college mission statements, value sets, strategic plans and president's reports, is by its very nature customer service-focused. The heading of the St. Lawrence College president's message is, "Student Success is Our Only Focus! Welcome to YOUR Community College." (St Lawrence College of Applied Arts and Technology). Lambton College's mission statement trumpets "a caring attitude" in reference to its relationship with its customers. (Lambton College of Applied Arts and Technology, 2004). These are examples of college commitment to quality customer service, and it's a priority.

College activities that seek to entice prospective students to enrol and engage students to satisfy their wants and needs are performing QCS. These activities emanate from various sources, some from marketing staff, others from administrators, and still others from department heads. For example, a recent memorandum from the Acting Vice-President, Academic of Loyalist College to faculty and academic support staff asks them to be on the lookout for students at risk, and to intervene and encourage those identified to access the appropriate student resources. (T. Reid, personal communication February 25, 2005). That is a request for customer service activity and an aspect of retention strategy. Many such directives do not now come from a single source as part of an overall customer service strategy that is enshrined in the college culture.

QCS is most effective when administered from a single source as a marketing, public relations function. It helps establish and retain a QCS focus for the organization. QCS funnelled through a single source in an organization encourages quality control by ensuring even distribution of initiatives and activities, thereby limiting the potential for conflicting or inconsistent activities.

A coordinated QCS effort also helps in the identification of areas in need of attention by monitoring effectiveness from a dynamic perspective. There is some movement toward that way of thinking in the CAATs. A recent staff bulletin from the President of Loyalist College discussing enrolment management strategy addresses the issue. The importance of communication and contact with potential students is identified, and meetings with program and department heads are in the works "to ensure that plans are coordinated and efforts optimized." (M. Piercy, personal communication, March 7, 2005). Perhaps that is a step in the direction of incorporating a single source QCS as a best practice.

Although it has been difficult to uncover much research material on customer service in community colleges, there are higher education institutions that embrace the activity with a passion. Valdosta State University in Georgia sees QCS as a "legitimate focus for our colleges and universities," and a measure of the organization's commitment to its students (Smith, 1995). And they call it customer service! A college in England has adopted a clear-cut customer

service approach to aiding retention by changing the emphasis of their marketing strategy from recruitment drives to keeping their current student customers happy (Rose, 1996). Dave Sivak, Business and Industry Coordinator at Westmoreland County Community College in Pennsylvania insists on a high level of customer service to retain and gain customers, and spread the word about their college's customer-centred focus. He said, "Our instructors were selected for their people skills and were directed to work hard to retain current customers." (D. Sivak, personal communication, February 28, 2005).

The effective delivery of QCS requires a combination of skills and knowledge. College representatives, including support staff, administrators, faculty and others, must have a good understanding of the organization's products and services. Also, they require excellent communication skills with the ability to actively listen to customers and identify QCS opportunities. Perhaps the most important asset for a customer service representative to possess is the right attitude. Skills and knowledge to deliver QCS can be readily acquired by most, whereas possessing the right attitude, one of empathy and other-centeredness, a more holistic concept than the idea of student-centeredness, requires the development of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2004).

Colleges should include quality customer service delivery as a job requirement for every position in the college. Even contact with custodial staff, backroom administrators and others not considered frontline workers is likely to occur on occasion. Further, the colleges must build QCS requirements into their contracts with outsourced food, retail and other services. Their frontline workers shape customers' experiences everyday. Robert Aitken of the Centre for Instructional Development at Vancouver's Community College said in a recent seminar that all college representatives must provide quality customer service to customers from first contact to last. (R. Aitken, personal communication, November 17, 2004). The need for a buy-in from everyone connected with the organization to embrace QCS is absolutely essential, recognizing the customer as the reason for the organization's existence.

Customer service training should be provided for existing staff to bring them up to speed on the importance of a concerted effort to address customer wants and needs and generally enhance their college experience. Occasional refresher sessions would help with retention and renewed commitment to embracing the institution's service goals. Also, new-hires should receive QCS training as part of their orientation. The idea is to introduce the concept and emphasize the importance of a concerted effort by everyone to weave QCS into the fabric of the institution.

Recommendations

1. Create a quality customer service statement for the institution.
2. Enshrine QCS as a key element of college culture.

3. Recognize the value of QCS to enrolment and retention success.
4. Co-ordinate all QCS activity, organization-wide, from a single source.
5. Establish a QCS committee comprised of a range of college representatives and customer student representatives to plan and implement initiatives.
6. Consistently monitor and assess QCS effectiveness and make adjustments to delivery strategy as warranted.
7. Consider all employees, contracted service providers and others connected with the college as customer service representatives.
8. Make a service-oriented attitude a requirement for everyone connected with the college.
9. Include customer service delivery in all job descriptions.
10. Present customer service training to new-hires, current employees and others connected with the college.
11. Offer periodic QCS refresher opportunities to all employees and volunteers connected to the college.
12. Empower all employees to deliver appropriate QCS and reward good customer service practices.

Conclusion

No doubt there are detractors who cringe at the prospect of connecting the term customer service with an institution of higher education. Some may consider the term demeaning. However, given the college funding crisis and current economic climate, a quality customer service strategy is a prudent adjunct to any marketing activity undertaken.

It is not the actual term 'customer service' that is important as a function of college business, but rather embracing the QCS ideal, and implementation of such strategies that are in the best interests of a college to help increase enrolment, aid retention and build a service excellence reputation. Public relations is often termed community relations or corporate communications because of the stigma attached to the term. Call customer service what you will, but embrace it for all it is worth: a strategic design to encourage the emotional intelligence of empathy and other-centeredness in employees; build and sustain student trust and loyalty; and develop a great reputation to carry into the future.

The creation of a customer service college culture has far-ranging benefits. It builds a reputation of service excellence that permeates the larger community. A great image as an institution that cares about its student customers attracts student prospects and contributes to a positive experience, from first contact through to graduation and beyond. The bottom line is, in the best sense of the metaphor, that colleges must seize every opportunity to value their customers, potential customers, and others by developing quality customer service college cultures that embrace the ideals of empathy

and other-centeredness. It's a noble pursuit for the colleges, a wholesome endeavour for college representatives and an essential strategy for attracting and retaining college customers.

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