



Customer Service Program

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Summary

In late 2011, the Richland County (SC) Business Service Center was given the responsibility of improving its customer service. That is both a meaningful challenge and opportunity. Just because citizens have to pay taxes does not mean they have to hate the experience. A comprehensive customer service program was therefore developed that ensures that customers receive *awesome* customer service – *and* that employees, and supervisors, know what customers think about the quality of the service they received from our office.

This program also gives an early warning to any issues that might be arising, allowing a quick response to address those issues before they become problems. This program *does* take a little time. But as with anything else, the way people use their time reflects their core priorities.

- All documents referred to below are found in the Customer Service folder.

Mission

- Richland County Government is dedicated to providing services that are accessible to all residents and improve the quality of life in our community.
- It is the Business Service Center’s mission to serve Richland County’s diverse business community with outstanding customer service by



- collecting business-related taxes and fees fairly, equitably, and conveniently
- issuing business-related licenses and permits accurately and promptly
- enforcing the County’s business requirements effectively, efficiently, and equitably
- educating the business community regarding those requirements proactively and collaboratively

What “Customer Service” Means

- There are lots of definitions of customer service online.
 - the service or care that a consumer receives before, during and after a purchase. It's one of the factors that come in to play when a consumer is determining buying value, the other is the quality of the product or service that is being offered. (www.marketing.about.com)
 - the provision of service to customers before, during and after a purchase. According to Turban et al. (2002),^[1] “Customer service is a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction – that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the customer expectation.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Customer_service)
 - the practice of providing customers with a positive, helpful experience when they enter a business, throughout the time they stay at the business, and even after the customer leaves, should they have additional questions or products to return. (<http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-service.htm>)
- Definitions, however, do not capture what customer service really means. “Customer service” means that customers feel welcomed, appreciated, respected, and genuinely enjoyed. The intent of this customer service program is to help customers feel like a million bucks. They may have to pay taxes, but awesome customer service will help them feel great about it.
- A 95.6% customer satisfaction rate from more than 1,000 citizens over more than three years shows that it IS possible, and this department shows how it’s done.

Training and Education

- Providing exceptional customer service requires an ongoing commitment to training. While it is particularly essential for new employees, effective customer service training includes all employees.
- Customer service training will begin for new employees by seeing exceptional customer service in action: shadowing seasoned employees as part of their formal training program.
- All employees will be provided formal customer service training at least once a year. (This does require prior approval from Administration to close the office or to conduct this training after hours.) This training may be coordinated either with internal sources or the HR Department.



- All employees will be provided informal customer service training periodically throughout the year by the distribution of appropriate articles found online.
- Due to the prevalence of e-mail and the importance of presenting a professional image while using it, all employees shall register for the County’s “E-Mail Etiquette” class at least once, and more frequently as necessary. (In the absence of this class being offered, online articles about “e-mail etiquette” may be substituted.)
- Presenting a professional image through one’s writing with customers is equally important. If it becomes evident that an employee’s business writing skills need to be enhanced, this will be provided for employees as well.

Customer Interactions

- The Business Service Center strives to provide exceptional customer service to the business community, to other County departments, and to other organizations. This ongoing endeavor manifests itself in a variety of ways, including:
 - How staff interact with businesses visiting the office,
 - How staff interact with businesses contacting the office via phone,
 - How staff interact with businesses contacting the office via e-mail,
 - How the staff interact with businesses contacting the office via voice mail, and
 - How staff interact with businesses contacting the office via postal mail.

Customer service in these areas are discussed further on the following pages.

- Various aspects of the department are reviewed at least annually for customer service quality, including:
 - messages that citizens hear when calling the department’s phone system,
 - forms that citizens are required to complete for different reasons,
 - signs that are posted outside and inside the department, and
 - correspondence sent to businesses from the department, whether by mail, fax, or e-mail.

E-mail Interactions

- All e-mails received by the Business Service Center shall be responded to no later than by the close of the following business day.
- All e-mails sent by Business Service Center staff should include the staff person’s first and last name, title, phone number, and office website address.
- All e-mails sent by departmental staff should begin with a greeting and include the person’s last name. An example: “Thank you for contacting the Business Service Center, Mr. Smith.”



- All e-mails sent by departmental staff should conclude with a greeting, an offer of further assistance, and include the person’s last name. An example: “Thank you again for contacting the Business Service Center, Mr. Smith. If you have any questions or if there’s anything else I may help you with, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

Phone Interactions

- All voice mails received by the Business Service Center shall be responded to no later than by the close of the following business day.
- To the extent possible, no caller should be on hold for more than two minutes while waiting for a staff person to answer their call.
- All phone calls taken by Business Service Center staff should begin with a greeting of “Good morning” or “Good afternoon,” the staff person’s first name, and “Richland County Business Service Center.”
 - If the staff person is taking the call, the employee shall ask “How may I assist you today?”
 - If the staff person is making the call, the employee shall also ask, “Is now a good time to talk?”
- Staff shall also ask the name of the person they are speaking with, and then use their title and last name, Mr. Smith, frequently throughout the conversation.
- All phone calls should conclude with a greeting, an offer of further assistance, and include the person’s last name. An example: “Is there anything else I can help you with today, Mr. Smith? If there’s anything else I may help you with, please do not hesitate to call the office. Have a good day.”

In-office Interactions

- All staff shall present themselves in a professional manner. Blue jeans, tee shirts, of other very casual attire do not give a professional appearance. (See also the Dress Code procedures.)
- All staff should greet office visitors with a greeting “Good morning” or “Good afternoon” or “Welcome to the Business Service Center,” followed by identifying yourself, and concluding with “How may I help you today?”
- Staff shall also ask the name of the person they are speaking with, and then use their title and last name, Mr. Smith, frequently throughout the conversation.
- If an employee is on the phone with a customer when a visitor enters the office and another employee is not available to assist the visitor, please greet that visitor and let them know you’ll be with them as soon as possible.



- If the call is business related, either conclude the call as expeditiously as possible, or, if it appears that it will take more than another two minutes, ask the caller if you may call them back in a few minutes, then assist the customer.
- If the call is a personal call, terminate that call promptly and assist the customer. (Personal calls are to be kept to a bare minimum, on an emergency basis only.)
- If an employee is assisting a customer at the counter, then returns to their desk to further assist the counter customer and the phone rings, let it ring. It will either go to voice mail if it was a direct call to the employee, or the call will roll to another employee logged into the phone queue. The employee should serve one customer at a time and give that customer their full attention. (See also the Phone System procedures regarding not answering calls from the queue.)
- All office visit conversations should conclude with a greeting, an offer of further assistance, and include the person’s last name. An example: “Is there anything else I can help you with today, Mr. Smith? If there’s anything else I may help you with, please do not hesitate to contact the office. Have a good day.”

Staff Customer Service Cue Card

- **E-mails:** Greeting: “Thank you for contacting the Richland County Business Service Center, Mr. Smith.”
Conclusion: “Thank you again for contacting the Business Service Center, Mr. Smith. If you have any questions or if there’s anything else I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”
- **Phones:** Greeting: “Good morning. This is _____ with the Richland County Business Service Center. How may I assist you today?”
Conclusion: “Is there anything else I can help you with today, Mr. Smith? If there’s anything we can help you with in the future, please let us know. Have a good day.”
- **Office visitors:** Greeting: “Good morning! Welcome to the Business Service Center. I’m_____. How may I assist you today?”
Conclusion: “Is there anything else I can help you with today, Mr. Smith? If there’s anything we can help you with in the future, please let us know. Have a great day.”

Customer Feedback Methods

- An essential element of this customer service program is assessing the customers’ perspective of customer service quality. There are a number of tools used to accomplish this, which are described below.



1. A comment card is placed on the counter to make them easy to see and easy to pick up. A classy comment card box is hung on the wall near them, with a cover emphasizing the department's priority on receiving their feedback.
2. Phone Customer Service Survey Calls – Customers who visit, call, or e-mail the office may receive a customer service survey by phone from the Director. The Director calls one customer per employee per day to ask that customer the same customer service questions that appear on the comment card.
 - For customers at the counter, a blank “business card” (or “office card”) is completed, either by the customer or by staff, and left with our office. This business card will contain the contact information about the specific customer who walks in our office.
 - All customer service calls are made within seven days of the date of the customer's visit, and preferably within four days.
 - Do not leave voice messages – it is ineffective. If a customer for a given employee does not answer, another customer is called.
 - For customers calling in, Phone Logs are used to obtain contact information from customers who call the office. All employees are required to complete a phone log with the name of the caller whose call the employee answers, the phone number of the caller, and the business name. Some callers may not want to give their name or phone number, and this is fine. We don't force the issue. The information on the phone log is then used to call back the customer within one or two days to ask the same customer service questions.
 - For customers e-mailing the office, all e-mails sent From bsc@rcgov.us or from a BSC staff person to respond to e-mails sent to bsc@rcgov.us shall be blind-carbon-copied (bcc) to bsc@rcgov.us. (This is because e-mails sent from bsc@rcgov.us do not go into the BSC Sent folder. Instead, they automatically go into the Sent folder of the author, which prevents reference by other staff. Therefore, an Outlook Rule will be set up so that all the e-mails will be placed in a separate folder for easier reference and follow-up.)

Other Potential Tools that may be used in the future

3. An online survey is planned but has not yet been implemented (through SurveyMonkey).
4. A “Secret Shopper” is a person who goes “undercover” in order to assess the quality of customer service provided by an organization.



Tracking Feedback

- Like any other good program, numerically tracking the progress or results of the program is essential. It quantifies the level of customer service. A spreadsheet is used for this purpose. The spreadsheet has several different worksheets within it, each labeled with a meaningful name. The answers to the customer service questions are included in columns, as are comments related to each question. The source of the monthly reports also comes from this spreadsheet.
- This spreadsheet is found in the “Customer Service” folder.

Customer Service Survey

- The source of the customer service questions is largely the “2011 Federal Customer Experience Study” called “Uncle Sam at Your Service” which identified key customer service components and Americans’ satisfaction with the federal government’s providing those components.
- The customer service survey phone call to a business should begin as shown below:
 - “Hi! This is Pam Davis. I am the Director of the Richland County Business Service Center. I’m calling because you recently visited the Richland County business license office. I wonder if you have a few minutes to answer a few customer service questions about your visit.”
 - If yes, go to the questions below.
 - If no, when is a good time to call you back, and at what number?

Questions:

1. Responsiveness – Was the service you received
 - very fast, • fast, • prompt, • slow, or • very slow?
 - Do you have any comments about this?
2. Professionalism – During your visit, what level of professionalism did the employee show you:
 - Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor
 - Do you have any comments about this?
3. Knowledgeable – How knowledgeable was the employee in answering your questions?
 - Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor
 - Do you have any comments about this?
4. Clarity – How clearly and understandably did the employee answer your questions?
 - Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor



- Do you have any comments about this?
5. Resolution: How well were your questions or issues addressed and resolved?
- Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor
 - Do you have any comments about this?
6. Overall Satisfaction: What is your overall level of satisfaction with your experience?
- Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor
 - Do you have any comments about this?
7. Overall Ease: What would you say is the overall level of ease of doing business in Richland County?
- Excellent, • Very good, • Good, • Fair, or • Poor
 - Do you have any comments about this?
8. Comments or Recommendations: Do you have any comments or recommendations to help us improve the quality of interactions with our office?
- Employees are then scored based on the responses from their customers from the first five questions. The Overall Ease question is not specific to one employee and therefore is not included in the employee's score. The question asking for comments or recommendations, while specific to one employee, are not scored and are therefore not included in the employee's score.
 - Any comments or recommendations received that relate to other departments will be shared with the directors of those departments.

Sharing Feedback

- Feedback is most useful when it is shared. Feedback is shared with *both* the employees of the office as well as the County Administrator and the Chief Financial Officer. Two reports are provided to them.
- (1) The first report is a "Customer Service – Monthly Report." This report provides brief but detailed data about the numbers of comment cards received, number of blank business cards received, number of phone calls made, and so forth.
- (2) The second report, "Customer Service – Highlights" is much more interesting. This report presents the best and the worst of the comments received that month, under the headings of "Way to Go!" and "Still to Go." Employees are also given the comments made by customers that they themselves helped – so the employee can see the feedback that relates directly to them. Receiving so many *awesome* comments, while uplifting, also serves as an extraordinary counterbalance to the occasional negative comments that Administrators or Council members may hear.



- It is important to include the “worst” comments as well as the great comments.
 - The “worst” comments are generally not very bad at all – since the department does as much as possible to ensure that every customer has a great experience.
 - Additionally, everyone remembers and understands the old Lincoln adage, “You can’t please all the people all the time.”
 - Sharing these comments also highlights concerns that customers have that may be beyond the ability of the department director to address. Sending these concerns to the Administrator is important because it repeats the same concerns that the department director has mentioned repeatedly in the past. (With this department, this is the need for more physical space. This need is expressed to superiors at least annually, and now customers do as well.
 - Sharing the not-so-good comments also increases the legitimacy of the customer service program, as it accurately reflects the true level of customer service in the department rather than skewing the level of customer service by hiding or omitting the less-than-stellar comments.

Continuous Improvement

- Customer service can always be improved, even when it’s already outstanding. Examples of awesome customer service can be found in any interaction with any company. Staff are strongly encouraged to be alert to such high quality service and consider how that service touch might be applied to this office.
- Some companies are well-known for their customer service. One company experienced first-hand for their amazing customer service is Chick-Fil-A.
- A few examples of outstanding customer service touches from the private sector include the following:
 - a free mint after a meal
 - bussing the table
 - holding the door open
 - going out to meet a customer with an umbrella on a rainy day
 - having a small step-stool in the bathroom for children to stand on to reach the facets to wash their hands
 - walking someone to another department rather than providing directions
- Other examples of outstanding customer service that are planned for some time in the future:



- Providing a TV/DVD in the office's lobby to play an assortment of DVD's that provide important information regarding how to do business in Richland County or in South Carolina, how to start a business, or any other number of business subjects.
- Hosting a quarterly workshop called "Richland Business 101" for all businesses wishing to learn more about the County's requirements to do business
- Another good source of great customer service ideas is periodically exploring customer service programs of other governments around the country, at any level. These may be found through Google, the National Association of Counties, the International City/County Management Association, the National League of Cities, State Municipal Associations, and others.
- Be aware that great customer service does not mean doing someone's work for them. To the extent possible, assistance will be provided, but this does not mean that the customer is not required to meet their responsibilities.