

SAMPLE

**ELEVATING CUSTOMER SERVICE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
A PRACTICAL GUIDE**

HEATH BOICE-PARDEE
EMILY RICHARDSON
EILEEN SOISSON

ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS | 2018
DENVER, CO

Published by Academic Impressions.

CR Mrig Company. 4601 DTC Blvd., Suite 800, Denver, CO 80237.

Copyright © 2018 Heath Boice-Pardee, Emily Richardson, and Eileen Soisson.

Cover design by Brady Stanton.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

For reproduction, distribution, or copy permissions, or to order additional copies, please contact the Academic Impressions office at 720.488.6800 or visit:

<http://bit.ly/2qbHuLr>

Academic Impressions

ISBN: 978-1-948658-03-4

Printed in the United States of America.

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1 When Customer Service Meets Higher Education
- 4 A Roadmap for Using this Book

8 SECTION 1: LEARNING FROM SERVICE INDUSTRY LEADERS

- 9 The Research on Customer Service
- 15 The Recent Growth of a Service Focus in Higher Education
- 22 Examples from High-Service Organizations Today
- 29 Final Thoughts

30 SECTION 2: DEVELOPING SERVICE COMPETENCIES

- 31 Who Are Your Customers?
- 32 What Do Your Customers Need?
- 40 What Do You Need?
- 40 What Intersections Exist?
- 41 Case Study
- 43 Final Thoughts

45 SECTION 3: HOW TO SUPPORT FRONTLINE STAFF IN ENHANCING CUSTOMER SERVICE

- 46 What Support Do Frontline Staff Need?
- 50 How to Manage the Barriers to Providing Service

- 53 Survey: Common Concerns for Frontline Staff
- 69 Final Thoughts

71 SECTION 4: SCRIPTING AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE

- 72 What Is Scripting?
- 73 Why We Use Scripting
- 74 Can Customers Tell When You Are Using a Script?
- 77 A Script that Provides Service Excellence
- 79 Telephone Service Scripts
- 91 Email Service Scripts
- 96 In-Person Service Moments
- 103 Final Thoughts

105 SECTION 5: CREATING ENVIRONMENTS THAT FACILITATE CUSTOMER SERVICE

- 106 Conducting a Servicescape Audit
- 122 Final Thoughts

124 SECTION 6: POLICIES AND PRACTICES THAT IMPACT SERVICE

- 126 Evaluating Your Existing Policies and Procedures
- 132 Developing New Policies and Procedures
- 140 Implementing Policies and Practices in Ways that Boost Service
- 144 Final Thoughts

146 SECTION 7: CULTIVATING FACULTY AND STAFF BUY-IN

- 147 1. Model the Way

149	2. Inspire a Shared Vision
150	3. Challenge the Process
152	4. Enable Others to Act
154	5. Encourage the Heart
155	So what about the Faculty?
157	Final Thoughts

158 SECTION 8: POST-SECONDARY EXAMPLES OF CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

158	What Enables Excellence in Customer Service
168	Profiles of Customer Service Excellence at Colleges and Universities
168	<i>Central Michigan University</i>
171	<i>Coastal Carolina University</i>
176	<i>University System of Georgia</i>
180	<i>Pace University</i>
182	<i>Rollins College</i>
189	Conclusion

191 WORKS CITED

195 ABOUT THE AUTHORS

198 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

When Customer Service Meets Higher Education

Consider the following organizational values:

1. Creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome.
2. Acting with courage, challenging the status quo.
3. Being present, connecting with transparency, dignity, and respect.
4. Our commitment to creativity, technology, and innovation generates unparalleled experiences that drive long-term value...
5. We do the right thing, all the time.
6. We care about the well-being and success of every person.
7. We make a difference in every community we serve.
8. We respect and listen to our people.

Since institutions of higher education are generally committed to enhancing diversity and community, providing for student success, and being places of education and caring, each of these core values could easily belong to a college or university; but this isn't the case. In

fact, all of these statements come from companies known for providing exceptional customer service.



Which Organization's Values?

Look at the eight statements on the previous page. All eight came from one of these four companies recognized for its customer service: **Starbucks**, **Disney**, **Hilton**, and **Wegmans** supermarkets.

Exercise!

Try to guess which organization produced which statement—then check the answer key on page 7.

This fun exercise is also telling. Why are these the values of Disney or Starbucks—rather than the values of our local college or university? Once considered to be the ivory tower—revered and followed by society—academe has learned that it cannot rest on its historic or academic laurels any longer. In the changing landscape of higher education, colleges and universities increasingly have to compete to enroll and retain students who are “shopping” for better facilities, better services, better curricular and cocurricular opportunities, and better potential for getting a job (all at a reduced price).

It's in this context that colleges and universities are considering how to provide excellent service to students as customers. Yet there remains frequent resistance to considering college students as customers. The authors of this book contend that “students” and “customers” do not need to be mutually exclusive.

Perhaps the most pervasive argument against students as customers arises from how our colleagues understand a customer service concept from the early 1900s in London, when store owner Henry Gordon Selfridge adopted the

philosophy, "the customer is always right." For over a century, this adage has been used widely, but there are many philosophical holes in this theory. We know that customers often need correcting; the customer *isn't* always right. Applying "the customer is always right" to students isn't appropriate or realistic in higher education, and we need to allay our colleagues' fears that this is what we mean by "customer service."

One way to understand what *do* we mean when we talk about providing students with improved customer service is to refer to our own experiences. As a customer, what do you expect and how do you like to be treated? The fact is that most customers don't expect to be right all the time; rather, they expect to be heard. As a customer, you probably have the following expectations—you expect providers to:

- Treat you with respect;
- Value your time;
- Listen to you;
- Apologize when things don't go as promised;
- Offer you the experience that was advertised;
- Care about your experience;
- Help you understand why specific decisions are made (whether you agree or not).

We contend that each of these is true of the expectations of most customers—and is true of students in higher education. There are many commonalities between "students" and "customers." By dispelling the illogical fear

that if we treat students as customers they might demand specific grades, or feel entitled to a certain kind of conduct, we can hold a more thoughtful conversation about what it really means to approach students as customers.

A Roadmap for Using This Book

This book will be helpful to you whether or not you fully buy into the concept of students as customers. If your interest is to enhance student satisfaction, provide for a better student experience, improve retention, or make your office environment more conducive to getting work done, you will find many tips and tools to assist. This book also addresses other “customers” in higher education besides students—staff, faculty, parents, alumni, and community members, etc.

Each section will provide you with practical, hands-on exercises and/or worksheets to help you dig into your own customer service challenges in higher education. Throughout the book, you will see worksheets and exercises to help you investigate issues more deeply. Watch for:



Consider This...



Exercise!



Fun Fact!

The book consists of 8 sections:

Section 1: Learning from Service Industry Leaders

This section will provide insight into industry leaders known for providing excellent customer service including Marriott and Hilton, Starbucks, Disney, Universal, and more. Specific research and examples, including the customer service philosophy behind each model, will be outlined for application in higher education settings.

Section 2: Developing Service Competencies

This section will provide a roadmap for identifying the service competencies needed to provide excellent customer service in higher education based on general and specific functional areas.

Section 3: How to Support Frontline Staff in Enhancing Customer Service

This section will discuss frontline staff and their specific role in providing high-level customer service. Strategies for coaching and supporting frontline staff, as well as insight into ways to manage stress, will be covered.

Section 4: Scripting and Service Excellence

This section will discuss the benefits of “scripting” in higher education. Phone greetings, responses to regular questions, and ways to manage complaints will be highlighted. Training staff and students on the use of scripts will also be covered.

Section 5: Creating Environments that Facilitate Customer Service

This section will cover the creation of physical environments that facilitate positive interactions with customers in higher education.

Section 6: Policies and Practices that Impact Customer Service

This section will discuss the myriad of policies and practices used in higher education and their impact on customer satisfaction. Gaining an understanding of federal, state, institutional, and office-specific policies and practices will be discussed and reviewed. Specific focus on developing institutional policies and practices that enhance customer service will be reviewed.

Section 7: Cultivating Faculty and Staff Buy-In

This section will discuss how some campus partners may not immediately buy into the concept of enhancing customer service in the higher education setting and outline strategies to increase participation.

Section 8: Post-Secondary Examples of Customer Service Excellence

This section will discuss specific examples of colleges and universities who are implementing policies, practices, and philosophies to enhance customer service on-campus. Examples of institutions who are known for providing excellent customer service, as well as schools who are new to implementing new strategies, will be discussed.

We hope that the material in this book will capture your interest in improving experiences for your customers, challenge you and your team, and facilitate your own creativity. If you have questions or comments for the authors, or for Academic Impressions, please reach out to us. After all, you are the customer and while you may not always be right, you deserve to be heard.

GET CERTIFIED AS A CUSTOMER SERVICE PRO

Become a customer service expert by attending one of Academic Impressions' certification trainings. These events provide in-depth instruction with top customer service experts in higher education, and allow plenty of time for role-playing and practicing the core skills of good customer service. The conference culminates in a final written exam and you will receive a certificate of completion for your time spent and knowledge gained at this event. Show that your campus is a leader in customer service: get your entire front-line staff certified! We also provide on-campus certification workshops.

Interested? Contact Amit Mrig, President, Academic Impressions:

amit@academicimpressions.com

SECTION 1: LEARNING FROM SERVICE INDUSTRY LEADERS

Lead author for this chapter: Emily Richardson.

So where does one begin with creating a customer service philosophy for their department, school, or university? A focus on customer service may be newer to higher education, but because it isn't new everywhere. One place to look is at examples of excellence outside of the higher education sector, in business and industry. The concept of service has changed dramatically with the advent of Internet retailers, but even web-based retail models have made a conscious decision about their philosophy to enable them to meet the customer's needs. We are also seeing an additional change, one that focuses on self-service and only requires human intervention when the situation can't be handled through basic self-service. So when did service become so important to everything that we do?

In 1982, Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. wrote a book called *In Search of Excellence*, which catalogued the business practices behind successful companies. One of the key factors listed in the book was "close to the customer," and they used the phrase to describe such companies as Disney, Marriott Hotels, and Neiman Marcus. One statement that rings true for higher education that should be considered when thinking about service is: "a simple summary of what our research uncovered on the customer attribute is this: the excellent companies really

are close to their customers. That's it. Other companies talk about it; the excellent companies do it" (p. 156).

This book was followed three years later by a book titled *Service America! Doing Business in the New Economy*, written by Ron Zemke and Karl Albrecht. In the book, Zemke and Albrecht declared that the current economy was actually the service economy. They talked about the importance of managing the service encounter by designing a service system and hiring the right people. These books led the way for retailers, hotels, and businesses thinking about customer service more seriously for the first time. There was a realization that those who were working hard at giving their customers superior service were producing the best results.

This also led to an entire group of books focused on what a company needs to do to serve customers well and to get the customer to return. This is a simple statement, but one that is powerful: a restaurant or a hotel wants a repeat customer, because repeat business is less expensive than advertising to find a new customer. In higher education, it is the same thing: we want a student to return the next semester, an alumni to return to campus or to provide a donation, a conference participant to recommend the school to their child, an attendee at a sporting event, or a musical performance to return again to the campus. While higher education is unique in many ways, in this respect we are the same as any other business: we want and need our customers to return again.

The Research on Customer Service

At the same time that Peters and Waterman were writing their books, Jan Carlzon became the president of Scandinavian Airlines, which was having financial trouble.

He adopted the concept of a moment of truth, which he described as follows in his book *Moments of Truth*:

“Anytime a customer comes into contact with any aspect of a business, however remote, is an opportunity to form an impression.”

The idea was that every employee, regardless of their job or title, had an opportunity to make an impression on a customer.

To illustrate this concept, let me share an example of a “moment of truth” from my own experience. Preparing for a recent trip to a conference, my administrative assistant accidentally made a mistake with the flight reservation. The day before the trip, I had no way to check in online because the name on my driver’s license did not match the name on the ticket. The name on the ticket was that of my administrative assistant!

The phone call to the airline yielded an hour wait time, so—living close to the local airport—the airline’s ticketing desk became the next logical stop. The phone call to the airline yielded an hour wait time, so—living close to the local airport—that became the next stop. The wait in line for a ticket agent went quickly, but I wasn’t anticipating a great result. I knew the mistake had been made and that typically airlines will charge for reservation changes, so I fully expected to walk away saddled with fees.

When I reached the counter, though, the result blew me away. The agent listened, empathized, and then explained that although the current ticket would not be valid, they could issue a voucher for future travel to my administrative assistant. This was great for her, but it still didn’t solve my need for travel for the next day to speak at a conference. The agent continued to listen, and then proceeded to issue a new ticket. Not only was it a new ticket, but it was issued

at the same rate used for the original ticket, and—by way of apology for the experience I had had on the phone—they also upgraded the ticket and provided me with access to the airport lounge! Through that interaction, the employee made me a lifetime customer. This was what Carlzon described as a moment of truth.

Take a moment to think about this in the context of your own life. Have you had an experience, say, in a restaurant where the host or hostess sat you on time and the server was superb, but then the wine sommelier treated you poorly when you asked the difference between a Merlot from Argentina and one from Australia? Each individual in this story makes up the full service experience, and everyone has a chance to make their own impression with you as the customer.

In 1993, Ken Blanchard (the author of *The One Minute Manager*) co-authored with Sheldon Bowles a book titled *Raving Fans, A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service*. This book features the tale of a man named Charlie, who helps a manager determine the three secrets for developing customers into “raving fans.” The first key is to **Decide what you want** by creating a vision of perfection centered on the customer.

Do you have a vision for customer service at your institution of higher education? Can you paint that picture for others? A service strategy is a distinctive formula for delivering service that is valuable for the customer. Disney’s is simple: “To make people happy.” You might find hints in the mission or vision statement for your institution as to the expectations for students. But remember that customers can be parents, alumni, coworkers, conference attendees, AND prospective students to name just a few. A customer service strategy must be applicable to all.



Exercise!

Create a Vision Board

What is your vision for what your customers should experience? A vision board may help you and your team establish ideas. Print photos or phrases from the Internet, or cut pictures and words from magazines that represent what you want to offer your customers. Paste these to a poster board and hang it in the office for quick reminders and encouragement!

Charlie, the main character in Blanchard and Bowles' book, then explains that you need to **Discover what the customer wants**. You can better understand what the customer wants if you first have your own vision. Then, the customer's vision will help you fill in the gaps and determine what to ignore. One idea to help you discover what your customers want would be to hold a focus group comprised of different types of customers and ask them what they think about your vision statement—what is missing and what is important. Your work group might think, for example, that communicating weekly to your student population is enough to keep them apprised of activities happening on campus, but you might learn from your focus group that in fact bi-weekly communication would be better due to the sheer number of emails they receive.

The third secret is to **Deliver plus one**. This secret is about developing the consistency that must be present every time a customer experiences service within your organization. There is no question that consistency of service within any specific office can make a difference. Recently at my own institution, it was requested that a

department on campus continue to serve students in the same way that they always had—yet their department had been reorganized, and half of the employees had been moved to a new location with different duties. The expectation for maintaining consistency in this case was impossible due to the work obligations of those left within the department. **Deliver plus one** was not the standard, and all consistency was lost. Providing consistent service must be a key component in all staffing decisions, and yet it is often not considered during times of change.



Consider This...

Read *Raving Fans*

Consider reading Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles' book together, as a department. Then hold a brown bag lunch to discuss the book, and have team members discuss how this book applies to your department.

There is another book I recommend—*Fabled Service, Ordinary Acts, Extraordinary Outcomes*—that was written by Betsy Sanders in 1995. It is a story about how a company can reach what they call “fabled service,” and it features retailer Nordstrom as the primary example. But what actually *is* fabled service? The book defines it as such: “Service only becomes significant (fabled) when it is so meaningful to your customers that they articulate and proclaim it.”

Think about this statement personally. When was the last time you received such excellent service that you raved about it to your friends and neighbors? The extraordinary

service you received was so great, that you are willing to tell others about your experience.

Star ratings in the online world have become the way an individual “proclaims” their impression about a product. Amazon often sends requests for an individual to rank the packaging or delivery from a vendor they use. After a trip, Travelocity will ask you to rate your experience through the use of stars. *Fabled Service* was written before the Internet explosion, yet the ability to tell others about service has become even more accessible with your iPhone or Android device.

To achieve *Fabled Service*, the book recommends that you think more broadly about service in general:

- Think as your customer thinks; the customer defines fabled service.
- Realize that service is everything your company does, and thus becomes everyone’s job.
- Integrate service into everything you do.
- Service is a cost of doing business, and you need to design the system right.
- Service can and will impact revenues.
- Focus on the growth of those in your company who serve others.

In 2004 we saw *The Fred Factor* by Mark Sandborn reach the best seller list. In 2013, Sandborn published *Fred 2.0: New Ideas on How to keep delivering Extraordinary Results*, and once again we learned more about Fred, his postman, who consistently delivered service in simple yet remarkable

ways. Can you imagine getting flowers on Mother's day from your postman? This is not a book about normal or average workers. Instead, this is a book about those individuals who are choosing to be extraordinary in the way they treat those whom they serve. Think about this quote from Fred: "I like doing things for people because it makes me feel better. I know I've done a good job if I take care of my customers—although I don't think of them as customers; I think of them as my friends or the folks on my route. Some people may not even have a clue what I've done for them, but that's okay. I don't do it so they'll know—I do it because it's the right thing to do."

Can you think of individuals at your university who are just average? Most of us certainly can. By contrast, it is much harder to think of those who are extraordinary all the time. Yet for us to achieve excellence in customer service, we need individuals who are committed to working with passion and to providing the best service possible to every employee.

The Recent Growth of a Service Focus in Higher Education

The book *Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education* by Dr. Neal Raisman paints a bigger picture of customer service in higher education. "Colleges are starting to see higher education in business-like realities. They are realizing that revenue depends on selling the college (recruitment) to its customers (students and parents). Sales (enrollment) are made based on the college's brand (image), product (courses, programs, degrees), and by

creating a connection with the customer (customer service).”

In light of the current economy, political climate, and widespread competition, many universities are seeing decreases in revenue, lower retention rates, and universal cutbacks. In response, service excellence within higher education has become an idea that more administrators are welcoming on their campuses.

Five years ago, there were approximately 10 higher education institutions providing a university-wide customer service program. Those institutions were mostly in the state of Georgia because of a governor mandate that any state monies for education must have some sort of service focus. In 2017, we have been able to identify at least 118 institutions with a program specifically focused on customer service within higher education.

As much as some people in colleges and universities may still cringe at the term “customer service,” colleges and universities are businesses at their core and must address the reality of customer service in higher education settings. The reality of increased competition in higher education, the rising expectations of customers, and the challenge of retention are three main reasons why we are seeing unprecedented growth in the number of customer service programs in higher education.

Increased Competition in Higher Education

The increased competition in higher education contributes to the need for better service and a more student-focused experience. Universities and colleges are much more competitive due to the new options available for learning. In the 1990s, an online college degree was not an option,

let alone an online college class; whereas, today many such programs exist. Thanks to the ease of transportation and modern technology, students today are more able and willing to travel to an out-of-state school than they were decades ago. Today, there are also a variety of avenues by which students can achieve a college degree and define the experience. There are more schools to attend, to transfer into, and from which to graduate.

Years ago, the idea of free education was laughable. In April 2017, New York lawmakers approved a scholarship proposed by Governor Andrew Cuomo that would be available to individuals whose families earn \$125,000 or less annually. The scholarship would cover all tuition for two- and four-year public colleges. While other states may offer free community college, New York is the first to make free tuition available at four-year public colleges, and there is sure to be a ripple effect to colleges competing for that same student.

Rising Expectations of Our Customers

Students and their families have greater exposure than ever to the available options provided by different colleges, and with that exposure comes higher expectations. They can compare and contrast with a standard of what they are looking for in and throughout the college experience. If one school rolls out the red carpet for incoming students (e.g., provides a luncheon with an opportunity to meet future faculty and staff), while another school only sends a form letter, students who experience the latter may respond with disappointment. This is especially the case if the incoming student's family or friends have experienced the other, more personal level of service instead.

Customers will have basic expectations when it comes to service and how they want to be treated. Boyd (2012) shares specific tips that academic advisers and other

institutional officials can follow to provide quality service when interacting with a student, and these are applicable to the expectations of any customer:

- Treat students with dignity and respect. This is a basic human necessity and right.
- Give students clear directions on how to solve their problems and issues. Students should not be given the runaround. Students are at college to study and learn, not go on a wild goose chase all over campus trying to find the answers to simple questions.
- Be responsive to students and their parents. “If you tell a parent you will call them back today, then call them back today” (Ewers, p. 2). Being true to your word means a lot to students and their families.
- Provide timely answers to students’ questions and give regular feedback on their progress.

These tips are specific to individual service interactions, but it is even better if an institution as a whole takes the time to identify and learn about the expectations of its various customers. Based on that student’s background or story, what one customer expects may be very different from what another would expect.

The Challenge of Retention

The concept of “if you treat them well, they will stay” seems to make a service program seem very simplistic. But there is in fact some truth to that concept.

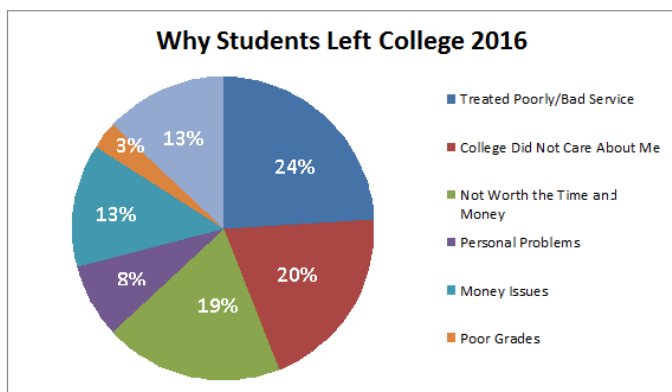
Why do students leave college? Does service have anything to do with students transferring to another school?

Dr. Neal Raisman's research shows that 44 percent of students nationwide leave a university due to the perception that they were treated poorly or that the college didn't care about them. This research is shared in the chart on the next page, and such information about retention is the foundation for Coastal Carolina University's service initiative. Coastal Carolina University (CCU) launched a service excellence initiative in 2012 called Feel the Teal®. (You can read more about the initiative in Section 8 of this book.) CCU's university-wide customer service plan is designed to improve service delivery and increase customer satisfaction and retention. Raisman's research is shared with all new employees to stress the importance of service excellence and how it ties to retention.

According to Raisman's study:

Twenty-four percent of college students will leave because of the perception that they were treated poorly or received bad service.

Students are consumer-oriented. They see themselves as customers who should be treated well, especially as the cost of attending college continues to rise. Students clearly relate the amount they are paying to the way they believe and feel they should be treated and served. Participants in the study did not necessarily link paying tuition to a sense of privilege, but they did indicate that they expect high-quality service in exchange for the amount of money they were paying. One student elaborated on this perspective in the study: "I am paying a lot of money and I don't care that she said they were understaffed. For what I am paying, they should have more staff and better service."



Source:

<http://academicmaps.blogspot.com/2016/09/why-students-left-college-2016-neal.html>

Many students cited that they had trouble getting help when they needed it, described “sour-faced clerks hassling them,” and reported being sent from office to office in search of a solution. All too often, their problem or issue remained unresolved, even after “the shuffle.” Students stated that they were often unable to find a satisfactory solution or even proper attention to their request for assistance.

Twenty percent of students will leave due to the perception the college/university doesn’t care about them.

In this scenario, students are made to feel like a number and because of that, it is easier for them to leave. This is an important statistic since it clearly points to a lack of engagement on the part of colleges with these students. This data is a useful reminder that everyone has a natural need to feel valued and welcomed if they are to engage back. We must find ways to build connectedness with students through person-to-person engagement that

extends beyond social media. If a student perceives that he or she is not cared about or does not belong, that student will be much more likely to drop out and seek another person, group, or college that values and welcomes him or her in a more meaningful way.

A common statement made by students in the study was “all they cared about was my money but after that they paid me no attention.” This indicates that colleges are not engaging students as well as is necessary to keep them. Schools need to maintain positive contact with students and engage them with some activity or aspect of the college. The Citadel and other military schools create engagement through shared experiences and a pride in the school’s corps. Engagement makes students feel closer to the school, and thus a part of it, and that helps to overcome the feeling that they are attending a faceless institution that does not care for or about them.

Nineteen percent of students will leave because they believe that what they are going through does not have value and is not worth it.

This is related to the cost and service issues of the most common response, as discussed above. Students are coming to campus with a very strong return on investment proposition. College is supposed to lead to a job and a career: students go to college to get the education and training they need to get hired. However, they are hearing from the media that many students who graduate from college today are not getting jobs, or are working in areas not related to their area of study. This causes them to be wary about the amount of money and time they are putting in, so—more than ever—they are demanding a clear return on their investment.

Regarding the benefits of good customer-student relationships, Emery, et al., said, “Student-customer satis-

faction directly correlates to larger enrollments: Happy students stay in school, so retention rates remain high; happy students tell their high-school friends, so recruitment numbers are higher...” (p. 2). More students generate more tuition revenue, and in the current economic reality, this tells us that service excellence must be threaded throughout higher education operations and practices.

For colleges and universities that place a vision and value on service excellence, rewards can translate into increased revenue through improved recruitment and retention, reduced recruitment costs, improved service and satisfaction, quicker yield conversions, and closer internal working relationships. This term of “customer service” is still new and somewhat foreign in higher education, but it is sure to give the institutions that embrace it a competitive advantage in the future. To seize that advantage, it’s important to see what lessons we can learn from successful high-service organizations in other industries that have a long track record of providing excellent service.

Examples from High-Service Organizations Today

It is one thing to talk about customer service theory, but quite another to see it in action. There are multiple other organizations for us to consider and learn from. They include hotels, resorts, restaurants, grocery stores, and other online retailers. Each one recognized here has service to the customer as a key to their vision and strategy.

Delivering WOW service has been made famous by Zappos, since WOW is their #1 core value. Their mission has been aligned around the concept of providing the best

customer service possible. This means going above and beyond to please customers, co-workers, vendors, and partners.

When Zappos began to sell shoes in 1999, the prevailing wisdom was that the customer will buy from “the company with the best service and the best selection.” As an online vendor, Zappos realized that to stand out from their competition they needed to not only ensure selection, but also empower their employees to provide higher-quality and higher-speed service. To understand the Zappos model of service, take a few minutes to visit the customer testimonials page on their website. Their WOW service is attested throughout the customer comments, where you will see superlatives like “amazing,” “the best,” “awesome,” and “excellence.”



Consider This...

What customer communications do you receive?

Think about the letters you have received from customers. What types of words are they using? Do they comment using words similar to the “WOW” at Zappos?

Or are they letters of complaint, telling you how their service expectations were not met? Which kind of letter would you rather receive?

When I think about excellence in customer service, Disney happens to be at the top of my list. As previously stated, their vision is “To Make People Happy,” and if you have

ever visited their operation, you have seen that they do everything possible to make that happen. Having students who worked for Disney, I got the opportunity to spend time with their casting department (Human Resources) to learn about how they hire and train employees. The original video from *In Search of Excellence* consisted of a 15 minute segment about the hiring process at Disney and the way they make sure that employees are trained and prepared for customer service. Here are just a few things that they do:

- They know that people coming into the parks first thing in the morning are excited about the opportunities that await them. They also know that at the end of the day, guests are tired and just want to get to their cars. So they deliberately hire to ensure that upbeat, energetic individuals are able to work the morning shift, while quieter (but direction focused) individuals help people out of the park and to the parking and transportation areas.
- The individuals who clean the park during the day are taught that the most familiar phrase they will hear is “Where are the bathrooms?” They are taught to answer that with a fresh eye, because even though they may have heard the question a dozen times already, each person asking is a brand new customer.
- The Disney characters are taught to realize that those in wheelchairs won’t have the same access to them. Instead of waiting for these guests to come to them, the characters approach these guests, so they too can experience the wonder of Disney.

A hotel chain that must be mentioned when discussing service excellence is Ritz Carlton, which in 1983 became The Ritz Carlton Hotel Company LLC. As they grew in number, they also grew in service excellence, especially during the time when Horse Schulze was CEO of the company. During his leadership, they became known for the motto “We are Ladies and Gentleman serving Ladies and Gentlemen,” and they used this concept to empower their employees. They trained front line staff to accommodate the needs of their guests (within reason) without having to go to a supervisor to gain approval. Still today, their “Gold Standards” include multiple references to serving their guests, and they encourage their employees to offer sincere greetings, to use guests’ names, to offer fond farewells, and to own and solve guest problems. The Ritz Carlton won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 1992. In 1998, Marriott purchased the chain.

During my academic year in hospitality management, I was able to attend a conference on Quality Management where Horse Schulze spoke to academic and hospitality managers about their efforts to meet and exceed guest expectations. The concept of customer first as a value proposition was the piece that continues to remain front and center in my memory today. He spoke of his employees as the key to whether or not the company would succeed and the care that must be given for the employees to buy into the vision and the dream of customer service. Each employee carried a laminated card in their pocket that had the company’s motto and vision imprinted, as a daily reminder to the employee that they were part of something larger.

There is also no shortage of restaurants that have the customer first in their mind, but Starbucks rises to the top as one that has designed their operations and trained their employees the best in relation to customer service excellence. In their booklet for their employees, “Business Ethics and Compliance,” the following is stated: “We are all caretakers of the Starbucks reputation. How we conduct

our business and how we treat others—our fellow partners, customers, communities, suppliers and shareholders—will continue to determine how the world views Starbucks.” This statement immediately puts forth the importance of customers, but also speaks to how they are to be treated: There is the expectation of excellence in service. The booklet continues on page 10 to talk about how they want customers to be treated: “Legendary customer service is a top priority at Starbucks. We strive to make every customer’s experience pleasant and fulfilling, and we treat our customers as we treat one another, with respect and dignity. This means, for example, that we never harass or discriminate against our customers.”

One cannot go into a Starbucks and expect anything different when this type of information is available online. Their stores have become the neighborhood hangout, where friends go to meet, where business occurs, and where individuals take a moment to relax with a great cup of coffee. Once again, this is made possible by their emphasis on customer service and the expectations they set for how their employees should treat the customer.



Consider This...

What examples can you think of?

Use regional examples when talking about customer service to your colleagues or employees. They will relate to the companies they know and can start to make comparisons with the service they’re providing.

From Worst-Case to Defining Moment

We offered a brief sampling of how Disney makes service count throughout their hotels, restaurants, and theme

parks. None of their employees are average—they are all expected to be extraordinary. As a guest of Disney many years ago with three young boys, I got to experience Disney service excellence in a surprising way. Within two hours of checking into our cabin at Camp Wilderness, I slipped and broke my ankle, and my husband had to call for help to get me to a hospital. That in itself was well done, but it was the service after we returned to the cabin that blew me away. The service concierge came to meet with us and assured us that we should stay and see the parks. Given crutches at the hospital, I couldn't imagine getting around the park. Suddenly there was a wheelchair at my disposal, and they ordered a wheelchair accessible bus to follow the route we would take so that I could easily get in and out of the parks. Once in the parks, we also realized that there were special entrances for those in wheelchairs. For four days, each and every day, the service concierge called and connected with us to ensure that we had what we needed during our stay, and they continually delivered excellence in service. The best part of it all was having front row seats for the parades. The experience showed me how proper planning and training on an organization's part can make the best out of an unforeseeable situation on the customer's part.

I have a degree in the hospitality industry, and I worked in restaurants, resorts and hotels for many years before changing over to higher education. I'd like to share one of my customer service experiences in that vein to demonstrate what you can do, even under the most difficult conditions, to make customers content and happy.

I had the privilege to work in Maui, Hawaii at a luxury resort that was known for beautiful views, exquisite furnishings and excellence in food service. As the food service manager, I had responsibility for a 250 seat dining room that filled every evening. It was designed in a Hawaiian theme, with plantings, statuettes, and lighting

that set the mood for this indoor/outdoor restaurant overlooking the ocean. One evening, the restaurant was fully booked and busy. At about 8:00 p.m., the sprinklers that were embedded in the beds of flowers and plants proceeded to go off with full pressure, getting every guest—yes, all 250 of them—soaking wet, along with their food, clothes, the tablecloths, and the tile floors. Oh yes, and the servers, including myself, were also very wet. It was an occasion when I didn't know whether I should laugh or cry, but I knew neither of those responses were going to be appropriate. Instead, we moved rapidly into action, calling for every employee from the hotel to come to the dining room. We secured every pool towel from the pool and handed them out to guests. At the same time, we had our bartenders walk around to the tables and mix drinks for guests, and had our chefs begin the process of making brand new dishes for those that requested them.

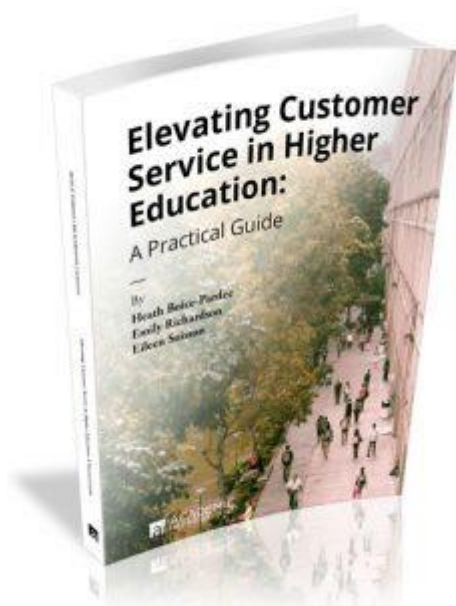
In the end, we did have to write off some of the charges and offer vouchers for another meal, but it was the hard work by the entire staff that did not go unnoticed by the customers. They realized that the problem wasn't ours, but that with extraordinary hard work, we were going to make things right for them. Instead of closing at 9:30 p.m., we were still serving at midnight. At about 12:30 a.m., one couple who had just been seated at 8:00 p.m. when the sprinklers first went off were leaving the dining room, and they hunted me down. The gentleman commended my staff for their hard work in making sure they still had a wonderful evening, and then handed me \$500.00 to split amongst the staff present. He asked to hear our secret for hiring people who were extraordinary in their work ethic. I had not thought about that element before, but it was true: we were able to find workers who really cared about the customers and went out of their way to make them happy. All I could offer was that I was privileged to have found them, but I truly couldn't answer "how" we had

done so. It wasn't until I started to study the theories and concepts in the books that came out in the years after this experience that I realized I had been hiring for the passion to serve, not for ability or knowledge about service. Abilities and knowledge can be learned, but passion cannot be taught.

READ MORE

We hope you have enjoyed this complimentary sample from *Elevating Customer Service*.

You can purchase the entire book [here](#).



<https://www.academicimpressions.com/product/customer-service-higher-education-book/>