

**Customer Service:
Planning to Survive
Executive Planning**

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as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program**

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ABSTRACT

A clear, concise and uniform definition of customer service did not exist for the Hill AFB Fire & Emergency Services Organization. The purpose of this research was to develop a definition of customer service as it applies to the fire service and to provide other fire executive officers with an insight on improving their level of customer service and satisfaction. This study employed a descriptive research methodology. The research questions to be answered are:

1. What is customer service?
2. How does the literature define customer service?
3. Can a fire and emergency services organization employ what has been proven to be effective customer service from the private sector?
4. What is the significance of acknowledging, understanding, maintaining and improving customer service?

A survey of fire and emergency services personnel was administered to gauge their perceptions of customer service. A similar survey was also administered to an equal number of external customers in an attempt to measure their perceptions and opinions, and to determine if there were any major differences between the two groups polled.

The results compiled displayed a disparity between what our external customers thought of our level of customer service and what our employees thought of the level service we provided.

The recommendations, based upon the literature review, surveys, findings, and discussions, were that the organization and the fire service in general, must focus their attention, resources and actions towards a more service oriented delivery.

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INTRODUCTION

Hill Air Force Base, Utah occupies approximately 6,600 acres in the northeastern corner of the state. The Base Fire Department services approximately 23,000 inhabitants. Current initiatives are underway to transfer portions of the workload from McClellan Air Force Base, California and Kelly Air Force Base, Texas, both Bases closing as a result of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) initiative. With this transfer will come approximately 3,100 new civilian and military workers. It seemed that the time was at hand to formulate a new organizational policy with regards to customer service. Prior to this research, a clear, concise and uniform definition of customer service did not exist for the Hill Air Force Base Fire and Emergency Service Organization. The purpose of this research was to develop a definition of customer service for the Base's use, as it applies to the fire service in general, and to provide other fire executive officers an insight on improving their level of customer service and satisfaction.

This study employed a descriptive research methodology. The research questions to be answered are:

1. What is customer service?
2. How does the literature define customer service?
3. Can a fire and emergency services organization employ what has been proven to be effective customer service from the private sector?
4. What is the significance of acknowledging, understanding, maintaining and improving customer service?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program requires students to conduct a research project as part of its curriculum. The chosen topic for this research was customer service.

This research is important to any fire and emergency services organization. First, because recent efforts and successes have led to the privatization of many departments and it becomes a matter of survival. Second, because we are a service providing agency, we must provide our customers the levels of quality delivery and satisfaction that they expect and then attempt to exceed them. Third, in providing life saving, emergency response, medical treatment, protection of possessions and resources and the environment, can we afford to offer them anything but the very best? Finally, other Chief Officers may utilize this study, it's findings and recommendations in developing and administering a customer service plan within their respective organizations.

Previous customer surveys, personal interviews and periodic feedback from external customers provided evidence that this organization was not consistently providing quality customer service. It became evident that in the grand scheme of federal government downsizing that fire and emergency services were not exempt from cutbacks in personnel, budgets and resources. In order to proactively prepare to defend our existence as a service providing agency, it was decided to research, analyze and act upon improving our customer interface program. It was determined that by doing so would increase our chances of survival and provide added value to those we serve.

This study relates to the Executive Planning Course as the results will be utilized to chart the future of how, what and why we provide our particular customers the services we offer. It will be the model upon which we educate our employees and customers. It will provide us with the necessary information we need to understand, maintain and improve our customer service delivery and finally, will help ensure our survival as an organization.

The Executive Planning model of project management was employed in the formulation of this project.

The remainder of the course components, project leadership, strategic planning, analysis, acquisition, implementation and evaluation will be employed when this fire and emergency services organization acts on the recommendations of this research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of the literature review is to establish a definition of customer service from the private sector service oriented perspective, attempt to translate that definition into fire and emergency services terms, allude to some of the successes in the realm of customer service and finally, to learn how significant the level of customer service it provides impacts an organization.

Customer Service Concept and Definition

In order to understand the term, we must first understand the words. In Webster's II, New Riverdale University Dictionary, the word customer derived from Latin and French is defined in two ways, (1) one who buys goods or services and (2) a person with whom one must deal, (Soukhanov, 1984, p. 340). The word service, derived from Latin and French however, has 18 different meanings. For the purpose of this research, the one chosen is the employment in duties or work for another, (Soukhanov, 1984, p. 1066. Both innocuous words alone but when combined into customer service as a term, to misquote Shakespeare, "Therein, lies the rub!" It is an expression of an idea, an individual intangible and personalized concept. All the literature supports this interpretation. What is relevant, is the level or quality of that customer service which is provided, and how the receiver perceives it. Perception: The individual (customer) perceives service in his or her own terms. (We always add "to McGill's line: in his or her own unique, idiosyncratic, human, emotional, end-of-the-day, irrational, erratic terms") (Peters and Austin, 1985, p. 71).

A service is an intangible. It doesn't exist until it is called for by the recipient. Quality control of a product involves weighing, measuring, and comparing the finished good against a rigorous engineered standard. Quality control of a service entails watching a process unfold and evaluating it against the customer's level of satisfaction. That's a perception – something appreciably more slippery than the physical dimensions of a product. (Zemke and Schaaf, 1990, p. 13)

Another definition, equally applicable for the basis of this research and with slightly differing concepts is:

First, services are basically intangible. Because they are performances and experiences rather than objects, precise manufacturing specifications concerning uniform quality can rarely be set.

Second, services – especially those with a high labor content – are heterogeneous; their performance often varies from producer to producer, from customer to customer, and from day to day.

Third, production and consumption of many services are inseparable. (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990, p. 15).

Customer Service – Private Sector

For the private sector, the competitive edge is the driving force for business. Volumes have been written about customer service and the philosophies of service providers. “If you are truly serious about making your enterprise successful, then your primary business objective must become to produce happy customers”. (Levesque, 1995, p. 3). The ever changing delivery of customer service is perhaps best stated in today's terms by Levesque (1995, p. 29). “Merely meeting customers expectations won't be

enough to give us a competitive edge, since our competitors will all be doing the same thing merely to stay in business; the customer experience must include a “wow factor” which exceed customer expectations.”

As businesses, managers, researchers and writers study the phenomenon of customer services and expectations, our own personal viewpoints must change to reflect the latest trend. This is best illustrated and explained by Karl Albrecht.

In the early days of the quality revolution when companies were fighting for survival against increasingly formidable competition, the game was making and selling products. Until the eighties, executives, academics, management writers, and quality experts gave little thought to the problem of creating quality in nonmaterial form, that is, in the subjective experience of the customer. Now we are coming to realize that the quality paradigm must embrace both tangibles and intangibles, *both objective value for the customer and subjective value*. [Italics added] (Albrecht, 1992, p. 62)

The private sector has learned that there is a revolution taking place with customers:

Five to eight years ago the quality wave was about to break over us. We discovered quality isn't enough. Today the customer service wave is swelling larger than the quality wave, and when it finally hits, those not prepared will be washed into history (Blanchard and Bowles, 1993, p. x).

“Customer expectations are at an all time – high and continue to rise.” (Levesque, 1995, page 12). An alarm sounded by all experts in the field of customer service.

“King customer – Decade of the Customer.” (Donnelly, 1992, p. vi) echoes what the private sector is focusing upon.

The most all encompassing viewpoint is best expressed:

The business organizations that will succeed are those that recognize today’s customer revolution and are fully prepared to meet the challenge with the highest standards of service. For any business or institution – public or private, for – profit or not-for-profit, service-oriented or product-oriented-now is the time to seize the competitive advantage. (Desatnick, 1987, p. 1).

As more and more service industries put customer service as their guiding principle, we experience an increase in quality and overall customer satisfaction. These businesses are defining and refining the various means that customer service can be measured. “Winners emphasize customer expectations, research customer needs, use customer – based quality performance measures, formulate quality control objectives for all functions.” (Peters and Austen, 1985, p. 53). Zeithaml et al. (1990) adds “Knowing what customers expect is the first and possibly most critical step in delivering quality service, stated simply, providing services that customers perceive as excellent requires that a firm know what customers expect.”

Andersen and Norus (1998) contend that customer value models be created to assist in determining exactly what customers really want. The most common form of measurement is the field value assessment. Suppliers of products or services gather data from customers firsthand. This information affords the organization the opportunity to build a value model based upon their customer responses.

Measuring and monitoring customers can realize great benefits.

Berry (1995) suggests that there are five categories that customers universally use in judging service quality. They are reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. He further explains that great service companies provide outstanding customer service not only with reliability, but by creating emotional bonds with their customers as well, building deeply felt loyalties.

On using customers as the sounding board for service improvement Glen (1990) says “*Find out what they want , and how they want it and give it to ‘em, just that way’*” [Italics Added] (p.135). Blanchard and Bowles (1993) add even more to the equation. Decide what you want to offer your customers, discover what the customers want from your service and then, deliver, plus one. The plus one refers to one percent more than they expect, continuously, and over time your level of service will increase in value.

Donnelly (1992) included the value of customer inputs by observing that there are three areas of importance we can determine from our customers. First, we are all customers and can gain personal insights from that perspective. Second, in that capacity we can learn what works and what does not from our interactions with employees in a number of organizations. Finally, through our observations, we can see the best and worst customer service and will be able to learn something about the leadership involved in great customer service.

Zemke and Schaaf (1990) stated that customers value both the process and the outcome in an exchange with the service provider. Creating a great service organization entails not only a painless and easy process, but enjoyable as well. When management understands the customers pre-purchase expectations, the post purchase quality

evaluation by the customer and acts upon that knowledge, the only outcome will be positive.

The philosophy of management in providing exemplary customer service must also reverberate throughout the organization. “The psychologists agree: Behavior changes attitudes, not the reverse. That is, if employees are inundated with practical customer information rather than vague exhortations, they won’t be able to keep their distance – and maybe, even start to dream about customers.” (Peters, 1994, p. 5). In addition, (Peters, 1990, p. 101) “Quality is not a technique. It’s a commitment by management to its people and product, stretching over a period of decades and lived with persistence and passion.” Nordstrum’s, the highly respected service company is a shining example of that mindset in the real world. Their philosophy, stated by Zemke and Schaaf (1990) is the best service, selection, quality and value, in that order. This is particularly noteworthy and every employee possesses the knowledge that not providing the best service possible to every customer would result in them being fired, followed by stealing as the number two reason for dismissal.

Donnelly (1992, p. v) offers the peak performance formula which is, acceptable performance and discretionary efforts = peak performance. This is best illustrated by the story of the Nordstrum’s sales associate who provided a customer a full refund for a set of tires purchased without question. The amazing part is that Nordstrum’s doesn’t sell tires.

The companies that are excelling in customer service and profiting from it recognize the value added benefits of their efforts in providing time, resources and energy into customer focused operations. Zemke and Schaaf (1990, p. 15) observed that successful, service-focused organizations were:

- Obsessive about listening to, understanding, and responding to changing customer wants, needs, and expectations.
- Create and communicate a well-defined, customer-inspired, service strategy.
- Develop and maintain “Customer Friendly” service delivery systems.
- Hire, inspire and develop customer oriented frontline people.

Desatnick (1987, p. 10) identified the ten characteristics that superstar organizations share

1. Recognize the fact that employee relations mirror customer relations.
2. Create an awareness of the importance of customer service in the minds of all employees.
3. Develop and implement support systems needed to teach and reinforce expected behaviors.
4. Recognize that everything that happens in an organization has an impact on customer service.
5. Define and implement precise and demanding performance standards.
6. Train managers, supervisors and employees to reinforce and maintain those desired behaviors once they have been established.
7. Define carefully the roles of managers and supervisors in promoting continuous service superiority.
8. Provide tangible and intangible recognition and rewards for exemplary behavior.
9. Use quantitative measures to monitor effectiveness of service.
10. Build in strong, continuing reinforcement to sustain customer-oriented value systems and management practices.

In addition to looking to the customer for service improvement guidance, companies must also seek guidance from within.

Albrecht (1990, p. 6) offered the following:

Hardly anybody would argue against the concept of internal service, i.e., the idea that all of the people, structures and resources in the organization should be aligned behind the moments of truth to create the best possible impact on the customer's perception of service quality.

Through education, training and communication, the employees must be indoctrinated from the beginning to the end of their employment, with a customer value philosophy. The total approach of the business, company, or profession should be the driving force behind the operation of any organization. In other words, "Take care of your employees and they'll take care of the customer." (Albrecht, 1990, p. 4) This relates to customer and service success in that, "Achieving and maintaining a superior level of service that will give the company a competitive advantage starts with understanding and managing the customer interface. Your service only exists for the customer at the moments of truth." (Albrecht, 1990, p. 6)

Peters (1994, p. 5) stated "15 percent of customers have left because of quality problems, 15 percent have left because of price, 70 percent hit the road because they didn't like the human side of doing business with the prior provider of the product or service." This provides an even greater insight into the importance of the value of customer service.

In 1994 Glen offered the following:

The best companies of the future will balance discipline and creativity. That means that the manager is going to have to be both a disciplinarian and a creative force. He must instantly compute which is which, what is the right proportion, what is the right sequence, what is right in an emergency, what is most important, what is most profitable (p. 150)

Companies will also have to equip their employees the technical, interpersonal, product and service knowledge and customer knowledge skills that are necessary for them to perform their job well. (Connellan and Zemke, 1993, p. 89)

The literature, when reviewed in total, supports without refute that customer service, its planning, execution, and follow up is paramount to success. It is perhaps best expressed by Levesque (1995, p. 3):

Adopt or perish – it's the law of survival. In a changing world, either we change to conform as best we can to the new circumstances or we attempt to resist the tide of change until it eventually, inevitably, sweeps us away.

Summary

Customer service is a concept. There is no hard and fast definition. With every individual possessing their own opinion of customer service, it becomes a very tedious task of developing what we think of as a quality, consistent delivery program. The key to success appears to be listening to the internal and external customer, developing an organization-wide policy and maintaining a periodic feedback mechanism to adjust the program. Rosenbluth (1992) provided the simplest explanation with, "Its not easy to

provide good service. There's no one way to do it. We all have to do our best to develop our own formula for service.

PROCEDURES

Population

Hill Air Force Base Utah has a total population of approximately 23,000 inhabitants. For the purposes of this research project it did not seem to be feasible to attempt to obtain in excess of 375 randomly chosen subjects to complete the questionnaires. The correlation between external and internal customers was much more important for the purpose of obtaining local information about the disparity between those two groups. Based upon the information compiled, we could then begin the development stage of our new customer service delivery program.

A survey was conducted of two groups located on Hill Air Force Base, Utah.

They were:

- Fifty (50) members of the Hill Air Force Base Fire Department
- Fifty (50) employees of Hill Air Force Base

Instrumentation

A four part questionnaire was administered to one-hundred (100) individuals on the installation. The purpose of the surveys was to compile and evaluate the perceived climate of customer service as it applied to the internal and external customers. The questionnaires were distributed at random, which included managers, supervisors and employees, for both sets of participants. Instructions were included that explained the dual purpose of the study and return mailing procedures.

Anonymity was encouraged although anyone who wished to be identified could sign the survey.

Of the fifty (50) surveys distributed within the organization, thirty-seven (37) were returned. The questionnaires (see appendix A) asked four questions. Question one asked for the individual's own definition of customer service. Question two asked what the internal customer thought that the Base Populous rated the level of customer service the fire and emergency services division offered. Question three queried the internal customer as to what services the organization could, or should provide that it currently did not. Finally, question four afforded the respondents the opportunity to provide any narrative description they might wish to add for consideration.

Thirty-six (36) of the fifty (50) questionnaires that were distributed throughout the base were returned. The survey contained four questions (see appendix B) and a brief narrative that explained that not only would their responses be recorded for the purpose of this research project, but would also be used for future improvement and/or expansion of customer service policies for this organization. Question one asked what their definition of customer service was. Question two required the participants to rate the level of service they perceived they were receiving from the Base Fire Department. Question three queried them as to what additional services we could provide to them. Question four allowed the respondents to provide any comments they thought should be reviewed, considered or acted upon.

As a result of the answers received in the surveys, a customer service survey was developed and put into use immediately. (See appendix C) Each time an employee provided a service to our customers, they would give the customer the survey to fill out and return to the Base Fire Marshal. By routing the survey first to a higher authority outside the organization, it was thought that responses would tend to be more accurate and we would also benefit from higher visibility and understanding from superiors as to

the level and number of services we provided. Of the sixty-six (66) surveys returned to date, all have been positive.

Collection of Data

Raw data was collected and compiled into categories. In those areas that were subjective in nature, such as the definition of customer service, any additional services could provide and the general comments were reduced to a smaller number than was originally received.

The specific rating of the level of customer service is perceived by the internal and external customer was calculated for both sets of respondents and again as one entire group.

The open ended narrative questions were included for the practical application portion of this study. In order to determine what our customers really think is important, how they perceive customer service and what services we should provide were and are relevant.

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed that respondents would provide an insight to what they truly thought and felt as the instructions declared that their inputs were to be used to shape the organization's future customer service policy which has a tangible effect upon them. Since the survey was conducted with anonymity, it was further assumed that participants would answer openly and honestly. Limiting factors of the survey were the open-ended questions, which resulted in many differing responses to the same question. Additionally, the small number of external customers surveyed may not have given true representation of the base populous.

RESULTS

Responses were tabulated for the first survey question by category. The participants provided numerous definitions of customer service and the top four were used. They were grouped as closely as possible based upon the particular verbiage used.

TABLE I
CUSTOMER SERVICE DEFINITION

Rank	Indicators	Votes
1.	Meeting Needs & Expectations	33
2.	Fast, Correct, Courteous Service	21
3.	Best Possible Service in Shortest Time	13
4.	Helping the Customer in Anyway Possible	6
		73

The seventy-three (73) respondents answered question two of the survey, rating their perception of the level of customer service from (1) Superior, (2) Excellent, (3) Average, (4) Substandard and (5) Unacceptable. The responses were tabulated and assigned percentages by three (3) different means. (1) an overall rating based upon all respondents, (Table 2) (2) a rating by the internal customer (Table 3) and (3) a rating by the external customers (Table 4).

Table 2
ALL RESPONDENTS
CUSTOMER SERVICE RATING

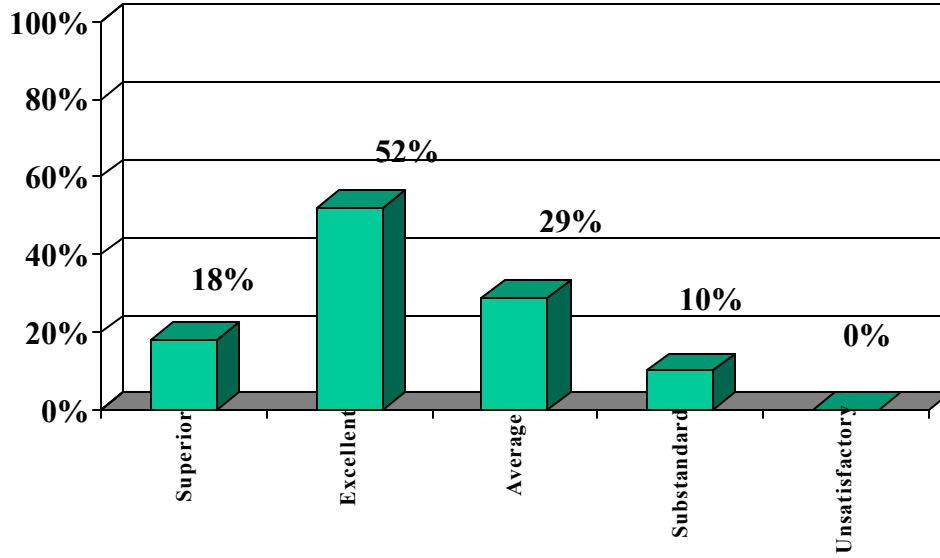


Table 3
INTERNAL RESPONDENTS
CUSTOMER SERVICE RATING

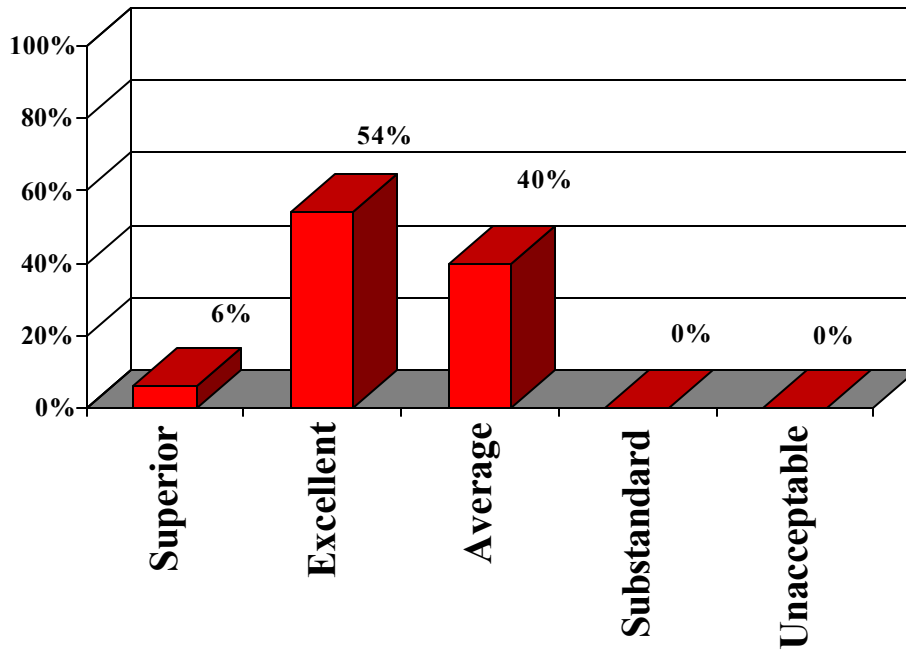
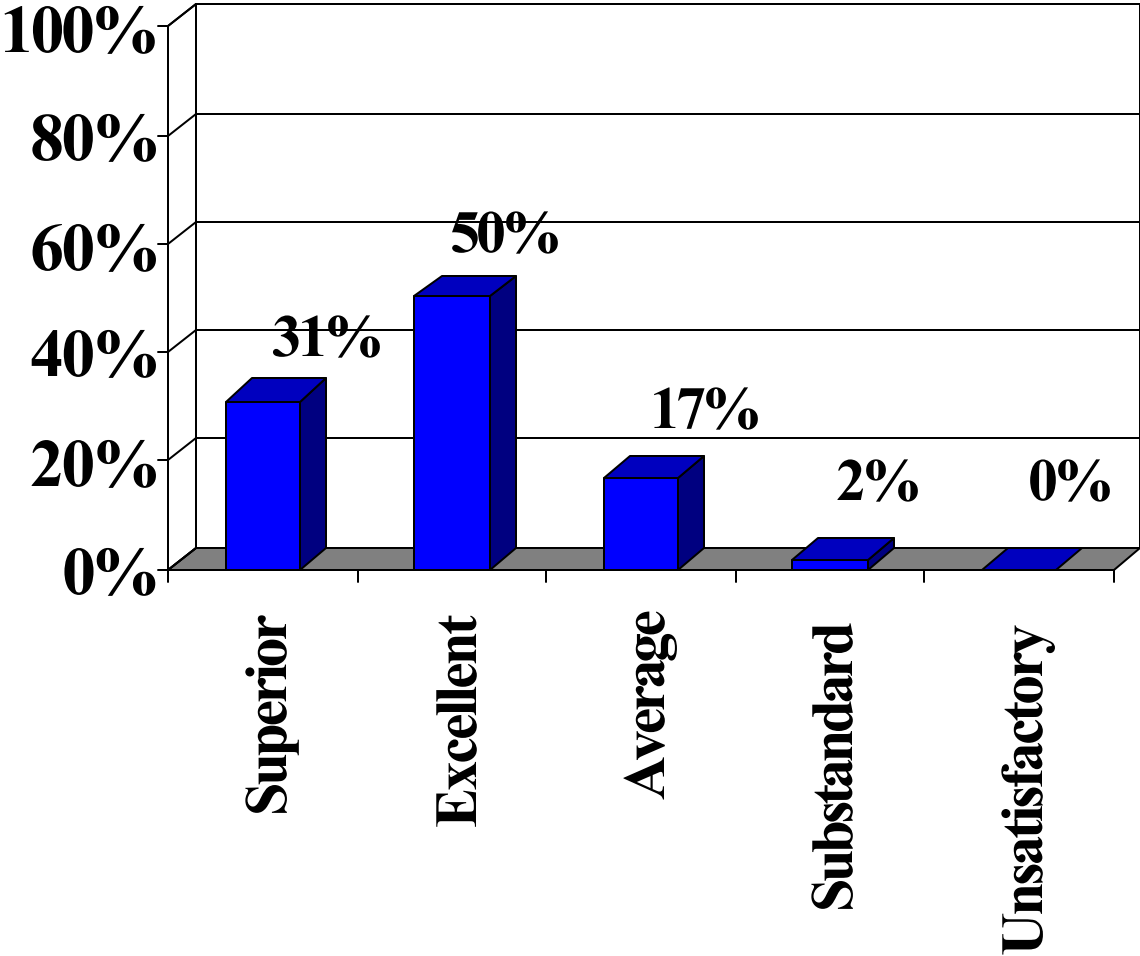


Table 4
EXTERNAL RESPONDENTS
CUSTOMER SERVICE RATING



Answers to question three (3) of the survey were tabulated by order of importance to the participants. They were (1) ambulance services, (2) public education, (3) training, i.e. (fire extinguishers, CPR, first aid) and (4) none they could think of.

Table 5
Additional Services The Base Fire Department Might Offer

Rank	Indicator	Votes
1.	Ambulance Service	22
2.	Public Education Programs	20
3.	Training	17
4.	None	14
		73

Question four (4) answers were compiled into the top three (3) categories. The three were (1) no comment, (2) greater visibility, and (3) great/outstanding services.

Table 6
Additional Comments by Respondents

Rank	Indicators	Votes
1.	No Comment	39
2.	Greater Visibility	21
3.	Great/Outstanding Service Provider	13
		73

DISCUSSION

The results of this study fully supported the literature reviewed. When asked the definition of customer service, every individual provided a different perception of what the term meant to them. All the authors concluded, in one way or another, that this concept had an individual, internal meaning to each of us. Additionally, the idea that exceeding customers expectations was what customer service is about in contemporary society was proven by some of the survey respondents who wrote just that. The portrait of the customer as “king” adds more credence to the importance of an organization focusing upon this aspect of delivery.

The study also supports the literature in that many of the respondents, both internal and external , had suggestions for new or additional services the organization could or should provide. Listening to those suggestions, planning for and acting upon the ones that are possible would increase the level of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Further, the survey documentation leads to the literature suggestions that everyone provides customer service to some degree and improving that process can only lead to continued success for an organization. As the literature suggests, the service provider must approach this subject with planning, resources and commitment in order for it to become part of it’s corporate culture.

It is the author’s opinion that many customers are unaware of what level of service this organization provides, or that their expectations could be exceeded by the manner in which we deliver those services. Further, the organization has not devoted enough resources, energy, or time to developing a customer driven philosophy of how

to provide our services. Also, the organization did not provide enough visibility and interaction to its customer base. Many of the external respondents were unaware of the various ancillary services that were already available to them.

The implications to the organization are that just because we are the only source to provide our services to our customers today, we may not be the only one tomorrow. As more privatization occurs in the public domain, it is going to behoove fire and emergency services agencies to be more competitive, or face extinction. As a non-profit entity we can't accomplish all our tasks cheaper, but we do have control of delivering our services **better**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the information collected for this study, the Hill Air Force Base Fire department realized that there is sufficient cause to develop and implement a customer service program. All the data supports the initiative to place more emphasis, resources, time and energy into improving our customer service. Based upon some of respondents answers, it is clearly evident that our customers and employees were operating in an environment that was not considering customer service and quality delivery in terms of current practices. Our efforts in empowering our personnel, establishing working groups, developing and delivering new services, while all noteworthy pursuits, did not include our customers inputs. The absence of that information caused the organization to haphazardly, and with a narrow focus, implement processes and programs that may not be relevant to our customers. It is much likened to a one way mirror. The department on one side, operating on a daily basis, providing all these services and our customers on the other, unaware of what they can be served, or how it could be served.

A systematic approach to solve this problem should be employed. Beginning with a project team, the organization should formulate a strategic plan, analyze the services provided and how they are delivered, acquire the necessary skills, resources, equipment, etc. in order to transit into the implementation stage. Finally, periodic evaluation of the implemented program should be accomplished to determine if the program requires adjustment, what level of success the new process has and what value has been added to the organization and the customer.

The organization's policy must include as part of its core, an indoctrination and training program that emphasizes the importance and value of delivering consistent, high-quality service delivery. Investing in new employee orientation should be a priority, as well as, initial and recurring educational curriculum for current employees.

By no means, this will not be an easy, or short term process. It will require commitment, patience and the organization's collective desire to bring about a change in the way it delivers customer service.

The benefits to be reaped from redesigning the customer service delivery system are numerous. In the private sector it translates to higher sales, more profit and long term customers. For fire and emergency services, public opinion and sentiment improve, public officials are more likely to support department initiatives and curtail cutbacks, employees gain more job satisfaction and security.

Creativity and innovation in the application of a new service program are the two key components for success. With the motivation of organizational survival combined with the basic principle of "Do the right thing", anything is possible.

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APPENDIX A
INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY

November 1998

1. In general, please provide your definition of the term, "Customer Service".

2. How do you think our customers rate the level of service(s) we provide to them?
 - A. Superior:_____
 - B. Excellent:_____
 - C. Average:_____
 - D. Substandard:_____
 - E. Unsatisfactory:_____

3. What service(s) could the Base Fire Department provide to it's customers that it presently does not?

4. Additional comments?(optional):

APPENDIX B
EXTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEY

November 1998

1. In general, please provide your definition of the term, "Customer Service".

2. From your personal experiences, how would you rate the service(s) provided by your Base Fire Department? Please check one and add comments if you prefer to.
 - A. Superior: _____
 - B. Excellent: _____
 - C. Average: _____
 - D. Substandard: _____
 - E. Unsatisfactory: _____

3. What service(s) could the Base Fire Department provide to it's customers that it presently does not?

4. Additional comments?(optional):

**APPENDIX C
CUSTOMER SURVEY**

**DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS OGDEN AIR LOGISTICS CENTER (AFMC)
HILL AIR FORCE BASE, UTAH**

FROM: 75 CEG/CEF (Hill Fire Department)
5935 "C" Avenue
Hill AFB, Utah 84056

TO: _____

SUBJ: Customer Service Review

1. Please complete the form to the best of your ability and return to 75 CEG/CEF Hill Fire Department. Our efforts in providing you, the customer, with continuously improved services is very important to us. Your cooperation and input will be greatly appreciated.

2. Date of Contact _____

3. In what capacity was your contact with the Fire Department?

_____ Emergency	_____ Non-Emergency
_____ Administrative	_____ Educational
_____ Other (please explain)	

4. Please provide a brief commentary as to how and what level of service was provided (be specific).

5. What recommendations would you have for improving our services?

6. Remarks:

Signature (optional)

Phone (optional)

FOLD AND STAPLE