

Every Employee Is a Chief Experience Officer

Create a quality consumer experience brand | BY PATRICK IBARRA

Great service and creating memorable experiences should not require heroic efforts by you, your employees, or the customer. Service design and delivery should be efficient; effective; and, if not error-proof, error-resistant. Employees should not have to be superheroes, twist the rules, or take shortcuts to give customers the quality experience you promise. It should be easy, accessible, and reliable for a consumer to interact with and do business with your organization at every stage.

The idea and practice of customer service has been circulating through local government since the early 1990's and I'm seasoned enough (i.e., old) to remember *before* residents were referred to as customers. In the last few decades, a number of local governments have developed a customer service policy and then provided "smile training" to their employees. Such an approach is well intentioned, but generally an insufficient response to the growing trend that ours has become an "experience economy" in which people have shifted from functionality and utility as the primary drivers toward value and quality of the experience. I contend that government is not in the business of customer service but is the protagonist for a better quality of life, and in that pursuit, it creates a multitude of experiences.

Going Beyond Gimmicks

In my work as a consultant, I often come across employees who are weary of another "flavor of the month" approach to customer service: a gimmick to emphasize its importance that has limited influence. In fact, most office break rooms are filled with mugs that feature a cute tagline about customer service.

Principles. My observation is first, customer service isn't about a program, it's about principles. Programs come and go, whereas principles are timeless. Principles are liberating, whereas policies are constraining. Principles are guardrails that can help your employees make decisions in all kinds of situations. Policies, on the other hand, restrict, constrain, and reduce the human element all in the name of predictable outcomes.

Ongoing efforts. Second, when the mug lands in the break-room cabinet, the energy behind it fades. Successful organizations don't so much make a commitment to an improvement "program" per se as they build improvement into the way they operate on an ongoing basis, every day.

Service evaluation. One of the maxims in the public sector is that "perceptions are reality." Services and programs are experiences, and the only quality measure that matters is subjective: how the customer perceives the experience. Service quality is the difference between the purpose (i.e., what consumers expect) and your performance (i.e., what they get). And, here's the thing, experiences come in all shapes and sizes. Review the following list and consider how well your agency is doing in fostering a strong brand by creating a pleasurable and memorable experience and thus, fortifying your role as a credible community builder:

- The cleanliness of restrooms in public facilities and condition of parks, playgrounds, and offices.
- Conducting business on your website—accessing a public record, registering for a program, making payments, submitting building plans, and applying for a job.
- Your official refund policy for dissatisfied customers using parks and recreation services and programs.
- The reflectivity of street signs and condition of your road, bridges, and sidewalks.
- The appearance of your cars, trucks, and other equipment. FYI: Elected officials often interpret dirty cars and trucks not as they're being used, but more as neglect.

This list of "moments of truth" goes on and on and my point here is that an experience with your agency is not solely from a customer speaking with your employees in person or on the phone, but in those seemingly passive ways that shape the opinions about your brand as a credible community builder. Your brand is your reputation and is not easily refreshed because you adopt a new logo.

Employee empowerment. For your employees to be effective, they need to understand the organization's



PATRICK IBARRA is a former city manager and co-founder and partner, The Mejorando Group, Glendale, Arizona, an organizational effectiveness consulting practice (patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com).



purpose/mission. But even if employees do, they can only respond effectively if they have the freedom to do so. In other words, people need to be trusted so they can be empowered to make decisions.

Most governments don't give their employees the discretion and autonomy to act decisively and proactively to meet customer's needs. Government tends to value conformity instead of creativity, so empowerment can be tricky. If in doubt, most employees will rely on past practices to ensure they "don't get into trouble." Comfort (i.e., "We've always done it this way") can breed complacency and that's the greatest impediment to promoting creativity and innovation in improving service outcomes. What is crucial is a shift in mindset to realizing that employees need freedom within a framework.

The right mindset. Providing a pleasant and enjoyable customer experience has less to do with the size of budgets and more to do with the attitudes of elected officials, managers, and the workforce. The thinking should be this: It's not good enough to just meet the minimum threshold of satisfying the utility or functionality in the delivery of services and programs; the goal should be to enrich the emotional connection customers have with the program or service.

By the way, which employees have responsibility to deliver high-quality customer experiences every day? Can we agree that it is everyone's role? Yet those responsibilities are often absent in job descriptions, performance appraisals, and the hiring process except for select persons/jobs. The not-so-hidden message here is that creating a quality customer experience is an afterthought.

Nine Key Dimensions

Many organizations suffer from an "imagination gap" not realizing that the only way to change the way you do things is to change the way you think about them. Here are nine dimensions that characterize successful service organizations:

1. Align promise (what you say you will do), purpose (what customers/consumers expect), and performance (what they get) as closely as possible.
2. Design the systems with the customer in mind first. In other words, they have customer-friendly service systems. Amazon founder Bezos explained that, "You start with the customer and work backwards." Consider that West Virginia was the first state to allow overseas voters to vote absentee via blockchain.
3. Operate with a customer service strategy that is clearly developed and clearly communicated. People wearing government uniforms are often viewed as having all the answers so every one of your employees should carry business cards and know what to do when asked a question by a visitor, business owner, or residents as these are your customers.
4. "Talk" service regularly. As I like to say, "What gets talked about, gets done."
5. Foster a workplace culture that is customer-centric and not task- or activity-centric.
6. Recruit, hire, train, and promote for service. This means not only people with technical skills, but also those who understand customer experience and the practices needed to deliver it. Training isn't about learning how to smile while saying sorry but is about equipping employees with the skills to deliver an exceptional and memorable experience every time.
7. Reward and recognize employees who provide exemplary service.
8. Market services to your customers. Yes, marketing of your services is mission-critical because there is nothing automatic in your community, and often, your own residents aren't aware of the value proposition of living in your community. Visit [Yelp.com](https://www.yelp.com) and [TripAdvisor.com](https://www.tripadvisor.com) after you finish reading this article and read the reviews of your parks and recreation programming.
9. Know what customers care about and build capabilities and strategies that reinforce the organization's advantages over time, continually looking for ways to improve services.

Granted, your local government won't go out of business if it doesn't exceed consumer expectations or provide quality experiences, but your credibility as a community builder will be negatively impacted.

Residents volunteer to live in your community. Business owners volunteer to operate their enterprises in your community. You and your employees volunteer to work for your organization. Your governing body members volunteer to serve.

When we realize people volunteer to do these things, we recognize that choices do exist. The question for you is: How is your organization creating memorable experiences and adding value to reinforce those choices? **PM**