



Physical Plant Public Relations

By Matt Adams, P.E.

There is a well-known expression: “Perception is Reality.” The meaning of this expression is clear but it’s often difficult to recognize that it can, and does, apply to our own professional environment. In fact, this often unfair gauge applies more to the facility management professional than many others. If the perception at your institution is not realistic, then those perceiving it must lack a functional understanding of the facility management profession. More specifically, they must not fully understand the role of the facilities department on campus. Unfortunately, people often assume the worst when given inadequate information.

VARIED PERCEPTIONS

If perception is reality for us, what do our customers and peers on campus actually perceive or see? It’s not just about employees leaning on their shovels or taking frequent breaks. This concept delves much deeper into our reputations. For example, other than faculty salaries, the slice of the pie represented by operations and maintenance is the next largest. Annual reports and other budgetary documents that are readily available all reinforce the notion (and reality) that the facilities department expends a considerable portion of the campus’ annual budget.

The significance of this perception is easily illustrated by the two polar opposites on campus. To the supervisor within the trade shops, this budget is perceived to be inadequate, while a staff member in the library might perceive this allocation to be suspect and very

generous. Aside from any self-interest, what is the real cause of this varied perception? It’s the lack of meaningful understanding of facilities operations.

One of our primary difficulties with how others perceive us, is that the “us” represents so many unique and distinct job functions. In other words, we work in organizations that provide a wide variety of services from housekeeping, HVAC maintenance, steam generation, architecture, and so on. There isn’t a homogenous face for the department.

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Our departments are often big, and they are technically complicated. But to those looking in, we are simply big. This lack of understanding and inaccurate perception creates what Stephen Covey refers to as the low-trust tax. The facilities department is given a second and third look during every budget review. Each and all invoices for small projects are immediately perceived to be excessive. While impossible to estimate in terms of reduced productivity it is clear that this tax impedes our operation in many ways.

Education is hard work and it takes time, talent, and technique. Education of our customers requires the same, and

most of our peers place a low priority on it. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that most of our peers see education as important, but in a world of growing expectations and reduced budgets there is simply no time or money for formal education of customers. This is unfortunate because in a world where we must continually do more with less, a formal program of public relations that includes education of campus customers offers a very quick return on investment and profound long-term benefits.

If we understand how some might incorrectly “see” our operations and create incorrect perceptions, we should decide how to correct these misconceptions. How do we want our customers to perceive us and do we get to that point? The answer lies in the statement used earlier: people assume the worst when given inadequate information. More specifically, people will have negative perceptions when the information they are given is either inadequate or in a form that is unusable to them. Supplying our customers with information that is unfamiliar to them is ultimately useless. And a cardinal sin in our industry. In the hurry to get everything done we typically communicate to our campus stakeholders in a language that is technical and only understood by those within the facilities department. This is especially true of budgetary and cost communications.

EDUCATING THE CUSTOMER—AND THE BUDGET OFFICE

An example of the need for better education of customers can be seen in small

project work. For most of us, the billing for this work is often perceived as excessive—or worse—compared to work that customers have had done in their homes. This negative perception is a result of a lack of understanding of the university business environment. A small HVAC contractor can install a window air-conditioner very inexpensively by himself.

However, our customers within the university must be educated to better understand that by being a part of the university, we have made a commitment to adhere to a high set of standards. On our website, our newsletters, presentations, and even at a presentation of a cost estimate, we should be illustrating in lay terms the impact that our higher

standards have on cost and how each bill is affected. For example, unless paid over time, our staff works an 8-hour day just like our customers. We adhere to all building codes and workplace safety standards. This is part of the higher standard that comes with working for a university. We use only high-quality materials and install them to last many years—a higher standard than is expected in residential contracting. This information should be communicated to our customers in terms they can understand, and done frequently.

Each and every interaction we have is an opportunity to inform and educate those around us. This is most important when it comes to submission of budgets. The typical budget in our industry has little or no explanation of service levels associated with resource expenditures. When times are tough, a budget that is perceived as large will be assumed to have room for reduction and/or improved productivity. When cuts are made, a large budget that is not fully understood will be “taxed” and forced to absorb more service responsibility without a corresponding increase.

What should happen is that every budget for every service center is communicated, in a variety of modalities, showing a clear cause and effect mathematical relationship of service level and resources (staff and materials). For example, the budget office should understand that for every new X gross square feet of space maintained to an APPA service level of 3, an HVAC technician is required. Furthermore, this formulaic relationship works both ways. To add space without budget requires a reduction in service level. Only when the budget officer understands this mathematical relationship and sees it in your documentation, will his or her perception of your operation be accurate. ☹

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