

Customer Service

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Facilities Management

By Mark Crawford

Without exceptional customer service, no company, organization, or institution can thrive—including higher education. Students and their families will lean toward colleges and universities that excel at delivering their mission and fulfilling their promise of a rewarding student experience. The key to this success is building a deep customer-service culture across all departments and all job levels. In fact, facilities management (FM) may be the most important part of this process, because it impacts every department and touches on so many aspects of the student experience.

“We have the silent support staff keeping the lights on, cleaning buildings, repairing broken or dysfunctional systems, mowing the lawns, and shoveling the snow—a 24-hour service,” says



Alexandria Roe

Alexandria Roe, associate vice president for capital planning and budget for the University of Wisconsin System Administration in Madison. “Facilities staff have the technical skills to operate and maintain complex building and utility systems. And a good design and construction division will ensure that facilities is an integral part of the design and construction process for all capital improvements.”

FM also impacts customer service by providing well-designed and maintained landscapes that offer opportunities for outdoor recreation, learning, socializing, and inspiration. Well-designed and maintained buildings provide an environment that is conducive to learning. “Imagine trying to learn in a classroom with broken chairs, shades that don’t screen the sunlight, heating systems that aren’t functioning properly, lights that flicker, poorly located electrical outlets—even squeaky



Joyce Topshe

doors,” says **Joyce Topshe**, associate vice president for facilities at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. “Any of these issues could become a distraction from the learning environment.”

When a facility is well maintained and working properly, it simply becomes the backdrop. The FM goal is to create facilities that enhance the learning environment by creating comfortable seating for students to interact with facility, providing power and Internet to enable learning in a variety of spaces both inside and outside the classroom, and constructing sustainable buildings that are energy-efficient, comfortable, and durable.

Creating and maintaining an excellent customer-service culture is not an easy thing to accomplish, and depends greatly on shared vision and buy-in at the top. Without these, an educational institution will limp along, losing student prospects to other universities. However, a sharply focused, customer-centric FM plays an essential role in engaging students, helping them to succeed, and fulfilling the school’s teaching and research missions.

“Further,” adds **Michael D. Gardner**, director of physical plant services for the University of the South in Seawee, Tennessee, “outstanding customer service is



Michael Gardner

critical for communicating to our stakeholders that we are managing our resources in the most cost-effective manner possible, as well as adding value to the university's mission."

DEFINING CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer service is the ability to understand, acknowledge, and exceed the needs of the customer. This includes providing positive, professional, timely, and fair responses to student inquiries. By providing high-quality, safe, and clean facilities, FM strengthens recruitment and retention. Every square foot of



Keith Woodward

building space should be purposeful and well maintained. But customer service is not just about mechanical prowess and speed—it also requires dedicated staff who are attentive, personable, patient, and truly care about the customer experience.

"I want anyone who interacts with our facilities to feel respected and listened to," says **Keith Woodward**, associate vice president of facilities operations at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut.

"I want them to feel satisfied by the experience."

Chuck Scott, APPA President and executive director of facilities management, parking, and transportation for Illinois State University in Normal, agrees.

"People don't need to set foot on my campus to form an opinion of Illinois State University," says Scott. "They may drive



Chuck Scott

by or simply locate us on the web. Our marketing materials certainly depict students and their various opportunities, but they also show our work. I periodically remind facilities staff of their importance in helping our university advance its mission."

Those who deliver superior customer service are mindful of the moment, pay attention, and listen. Facilities staff interact with students on a daily basis. Students often participate with staff on facilities committees—for example, building design, sustainability, and annual major maintenance. FM staff must bear in mind that the community's perception of facilities is their reality. "I think a lot of people believe customer service is about saying 'yes' all the time, and that's not true at all," says Woodward. "It's about delivering your service to the end user in a way that aligns with the university mission."

Perhaps the greatest impact of outstanding customer service is on the morale of facilities staff, and being sure they take pride in the essential role they play in the student experience.

"It's powerful to hear FM staff tell you why they are important to the institution's success," says **Michelle Frederick**, assistant director of workplace learning and development at American University in Washington, D.C. "For example, knowing they are contributing to student learning by making sure dorms and buildings are at their best for their living and learning. When they understand this, they feel empowered to make decisions that benefit the customer, the facilities department, and ultimately the institution."



Michelle Frederick

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CAN ADD VALUE TO CUSTOMER SERVICE



Social media (SM) provides facilities managers with an additional option for providing exceptional customer service, especially to students. Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and texting are all effective means of communication.

SM can be an effective way to communicate with customers and to market the facilities department. "It really is best used as a source for information sharing information about projects, closures, and statuses, and educating customers about accessing facility services and changes to services," says Michelle Frederick. "However, this does not mean facilities needs to feed the social media beast on a daily basis, but rather can use it as a strategic tool in their marketing and communications planning."

If the purpose is to reach out to students and faculty, states Alex Roe, "then the facilities management organization should invest in communication strategies to reach them." Another approach is possibly partnering with university media departments to help distribute the FM message. Also, says Roe, "we need to begin to transition our organizations into a communication style that millennials use."

Further, SM is not just for sending out notices and good news—those involved must be ready to respond quickly and effectively to bad or disruptive news. "Any misstep by any department—not just facilities—can be out on social media in literally seconds. This requires a social media team that is nimble and follows a well-devised strategy for addressing negative comments," says Bob Carter.

PROVIDING ENOUGH RESOURCES

Customer service starts during the interview phase. There is no question hiring for skill is paramount, but hiring people who fit your culture and can interact positively with students is equally important. The reality is that students will likely spend as much time, if not more, with students than with the custodian in their residence hall than with faculty members. “There is value and comfort in knowing that an employee can do their job and handle themselves under the pressure of external forces,” says Woodward.

Maintenance staff have the knowledge and technical skills to get the job done. Some maintenance staff are naturally good at customer service; others require training. Frontline staff must be empowered to make decisions without fear. Technology, tools, and financial resources are also needed to support training and development.

“Training and clarity for facilities staff about how to interact with customers and how complaints, concerns, and issues are addressed without becoming a problem is essential,” says Roe. “There needs to be a clear process for dealing with disputes.”

Many institutional leaders are academics and may be too data-driven or rely too much on statistical analysis, ignoring the human element, especially when dealing with some of the lowest-paid staff at the university. It is paramount that senior leadership fully comprehend the importance and the diverse range of the services FM delivers (and the “FM value”



Robert Carter

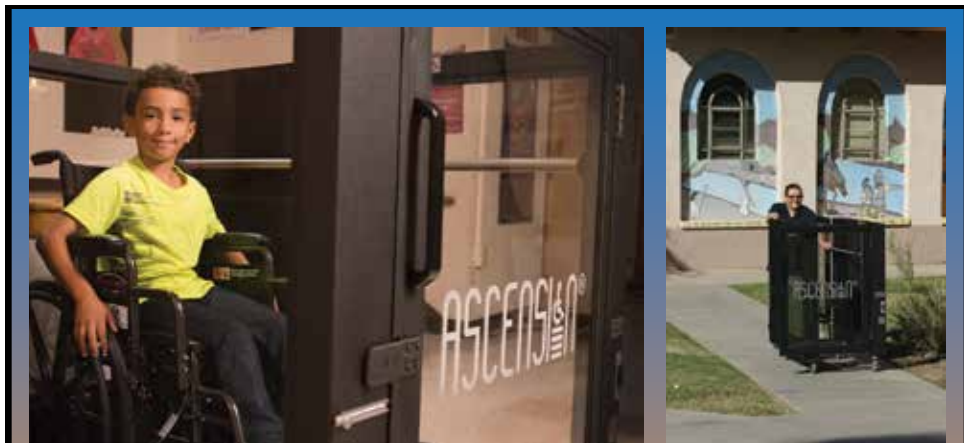
when budget allocations are decided). A lack of knowledge in this area can lead to erroneous assumptions about the challenges

FM faces in providing effective customer service. Senior facilities officers often find themselves lobbying for necessary resources; the resources that APPA provides are invaluable to this effort. “For example, APPA’s custodial staffing guidelines have been particularly helpful to our facilities team in making the case for sufficient resources,” says **Robert J. Carter**, as-

sociate vice president of physical resources for the University of Guelph, Ontario.

There are always pressures on facilities staff—especially when funding is tight. A good start for managing expectations regarding customer service is to inform the users themselves (students, staff, and faculty) about the level of services available for particular issues. This can reduce misunderstandings about customer-service expectations—for example, frequency of cleaning and trash removal, or time needed to complete a work order. “If a facilities department isn’t well staffed, it’s hard to communicate to customers if employees are spread too thin,” says Roe. “The organization must set up protocols for communication.”

Data is also needed to make informed FM decisions. Data can be derived from surveys, work orders, and interaction with community members. Benchmarking data with peers is essential for understanding how the college or university operates relative to peers. It’s also valuable to benchmark outside of higher education and look to the hospitality industry for lessons in customer service. Another approach is hiring a third party to assess the conditions of the campus relative to peers and to monitor the performance of the facilities organization.



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FEATURES OF EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE



“Deliver and communicate. When something is going to be done, make sure it’s done with communications along the way.” —*Keith Woodward*

“Email or web-based requests should be automatically acknowledged to the customer. Follow-up emails to the customer regarding the status of the request are always appreciated.” —*Joyce Topshe*

“FM leadership must establish an operational service vision, standards and measures, and [provide an] opportunity to learn and grow and trust.” —*Michelle Frederick*

“Customer service is timeliness, positivity, professionalism, and sometimes saying ‘no,’ while making them feel okay about why the answer is no.” —*Michael Gardner*

“The key is making it a ‘one-stop-shop’ experience for the customer and not telling the customer to do the legwork.” —*Robert Carter*

“If a facilities department is not well staffed, it will be more difficult to communicate effectively with the customer.” —*Alexandria Roe*

Changing operations to become more customer-centric is a long-term goal that doesn’t happen overnight. It requires a major shift in organizational culture. The SFO must be an effective leader and be committed to providing excellent stewardship of FM resources and services.

When a department embarks on service-culture journey, a lot of innovation can happen quickly, which can create uncertainty. So it’s important to stay positive. “It is a marathon, not a sprint,” says Gardner. “[FM needs to] maintain a broader perspective, to be transparent and manage expectations.”

The payback in building a customer-centric culture can be huge. Of course, there is the increased satisfaction from students and their parents, which leads to improved credibility and higher enrollments. For Frederick, the

most important result of outstanding customer service is higher employee engagement. “Studies show that if staff understand their purpose, and feel they contribute not only to their personal success but also the success of the department and the institution, they come to work almost every day bringing their A game. Organizations driven by purpose and values outperform comparison companies sixfold.”

Working in a facilities department is about customer service. Although FM doesn’t teach, place students in internships, or perform on a court, stage, field, or arena, it ensures all those environments are performing at peak potential. “I think having a relational leadership style goes a long way toward the success of the facilities organization,” says Woodward. “Your opportunities for success are greatly enhanced if you have spent time cultivating positive relationships within the organization, even when things aren’t operating at 100 percent.” §

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“We’ve been using APPA FPI information (Facilities Performance Indicators), as well as using a capital/condition assessment consultant, which we had never been done before. These are great tools in explaining our resource challenges to our formerly ignorant customers,” says Gardner.

Facilities leaders should frequently tour their own campuses with the admissions group and see the campus from the perspective of prospective students and their families. Focus groups and other individual sources can also generate meaningful data—however, if you ask for their participation, “be sure to use the data, identify doable changes, and most importantly, communicate this back to the customers,” cautions Frederick.

MOVING FORWARD

Higher education is a competitive marketplace and facilities management plays a major role in the recruitment and retention of students on campuses. The built environment is the “packaging” for the educational product. “If our customers do not find the campus in great condition and/or are not satisfied with our customer service, they can choose another college without ever acknowledging the reasons,” says Topshe.