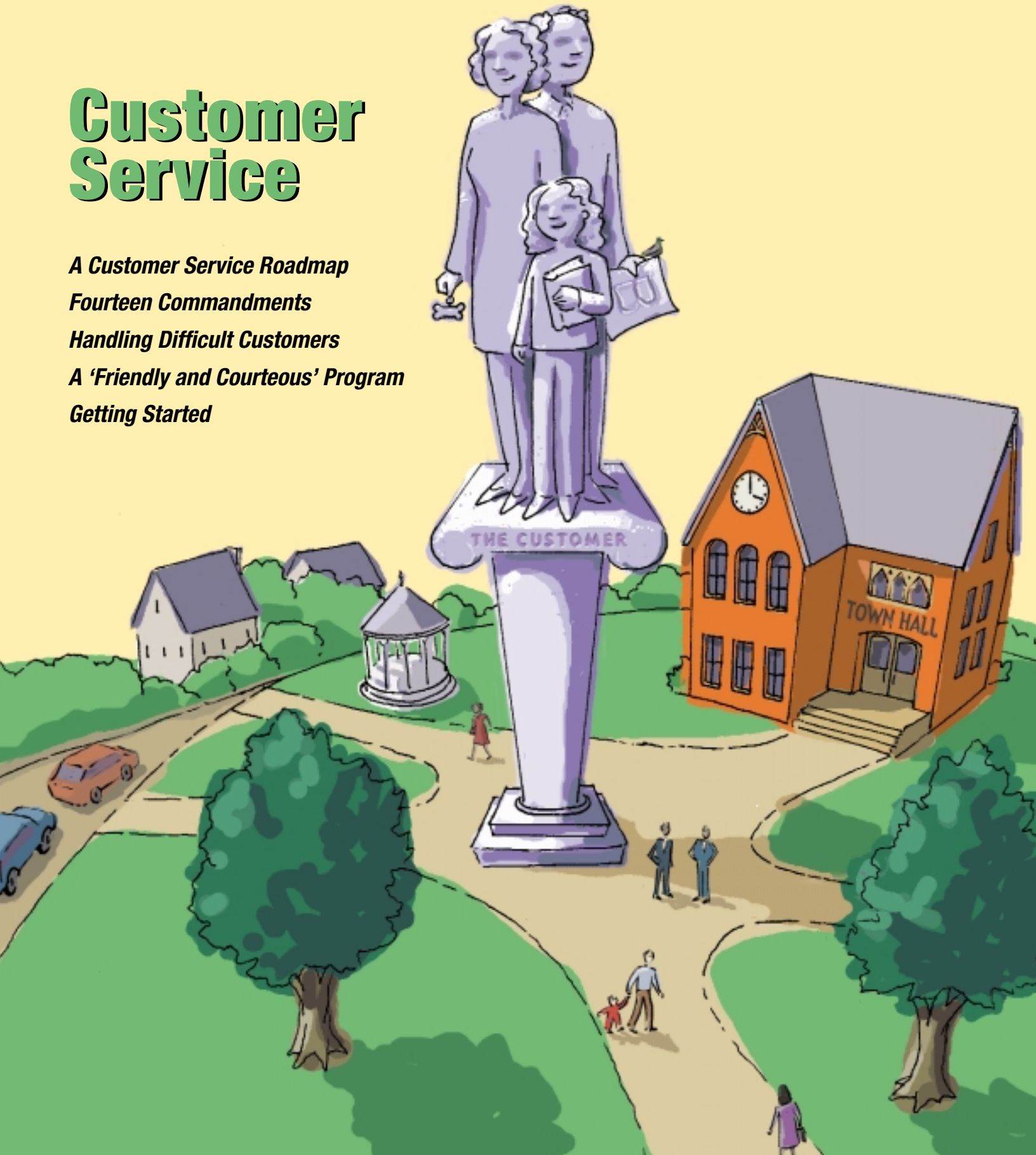


Municipal Advocate

The Massachusetts Municipal Association

Customer Service

*A Customer Service Roadmap
Fourteen Commandments
Handling Difficult Customers
A 'Friendly and Courteous' Program
Getting Started*



Providing 'Meaningful and Memorable' Customer Service

Here's a Roadmap to Make It Happen

BY STEVE WISHNACK



Today's highly competitive global economy offers consumers a world of choices and unprecedented convenience. In order to thrive, businesses must deliver exceptional customer service. Good is not good enough anymore; adequate is unacceptable.

The standards for defining quality service are rising everywhere.

This is true not only in the world of business, but also in the business of providing services to the public. Local government is being challenged to continually adapt to satisfy the rapidly changing needs of constituents. The customer base is more diverse and demanding than ever before. People are better educated, earn higher salaries, and pay higher taxes. Their service expectations are also higher, particularly now that many of them have been exposed to quality improvement programs at their places of employment. Local government's customers are familiar with the benefits of the choices available today. As a natural consequence, they've come to expect high standards of service.

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In order to keep pace, municipalities have an urgent need to raise the bar in all areas of customer service and to create new approaches to service that involve employees at every level of the organization. How municipalities integrate changes into service performance will be the measure of their success. There's a lot at stake, but also much to look forward to.

It all begins with an open mind and a fresh look at customer service. A customer service strategy focused on delivering "meaningful and memorable" service is now a necessity. It can also produce surprising results.

We devote at least one third of our adult lives to work and work-related activities. Serving the public offers daily opportunities for personal satisfaction that

are not available elsewhere. Starting each day with the knowledge that someone will be helped as a result of our efforts can be especially rewarding. Our jobs can be more enjoyable and less stressful, and positive feedback from satisfied customers can go a long way toward making the day go by quickly. Our work in public service can even result in lasting friendships with customers.

Certainly, people employed in the public sector want to do a good job. They take pride in their work and derive personal satisfaction from serving others. They will likely accept and support changes that help them do a better job. And approaches to customer service that encourage their participation will enhance their self-image and help build internal

customer loyalty. Meaningful change is not easy, but it is attainable.

Commitment, Communication, Education, Leadership

Achieving meaningful changes in customer service requires commitment, communication, education and leadership. It must be top-down and bottom-up, with participation throughout the organization in a team approach. No one is exempt from the process.

A superior customer service program begins with a commitment from upper management and widespread communication of the high-level goals and objectives of the organization. Ideally, this is expressed as a mission statement, which defines the vision, purpose and objectives



Sample Mission Statements

(see sidebar, right). Regardless of the form, it should be clear, concise, and reflect the commitment and values of the organization in its support for the community. These values and objectives must then be adapted by employees at various levels to reflect the specific needs and priorities of their customers. Only when top management makes superior customer service a priority will the rest of the organization take it seriously. And only when it is communicated all the way to the front line will it be truly integrated into the attitudes and work habits of employees.

Managers need to motivate, coach and empower their employees. They must find creative ways to spread the message. They must lead by example and raise their own service standards. Managers who find ways to make their employees feel special will be surprised in ways they could not have predicted. To reinforce the principles of customer service, managers must acknowledge and reward employee actions that support a customer-centered culture. This can be accomplished by identifying daily opportunities for delivering service to employees (internal customers), beginning with the way employees are greeted, encouraged, appreciated and recognized for their contributions to serving the team efforts. People will respond when it becomes personal, when they see and feel what it's like to be treated as a customer. Employees need to be part of customer service in action.

Employees also need continuing education in order to deliver superior customer service. Today's employees are increasingly seeking positions that provide opportunities for professional development to enhance their career paths. Municipalities that offer training courses to improve competencies such as leadership and customer service will be in a position to attract and retain the most-qualified and motivated candidates. Better-trained employees, with improved customer skills, will be more effective and confident and will project a more professional image. As they become more directly involved in processes that affect quality and continuous improvement, employees will gain an appreciation for the difference each individual can make.

Here are two suggestions of mission statements with a customer service orientation. You may want to work with one of these, or create one of your own.

■ "Serving the best interests of the community is our number one priority. We will strive to deliver superior customer service in all our dealings with constituents and coworkers. We will perform our duties and responsibilities in a knowledgeable, friendly and helpful manner in order to build teamwork and strong relationships with coworkers and constituents."

■ "Our community and its residents and businesses are our number one priority. We will provide superior customer service and treat everyone with friendliness, dignity and respect. We will work together as a team to develop strong relationships with our colleagues, appreciating their unique value and recognizing the special contributions that each individual makes to the overall success of our efforts to best serve our constituents."

— Steve Wishnack

The multiplied effect of this empowerment can have positive and powerful consequences for the entire organization.

Defining Customer Service

All employees should be actively involved in defining ways to meet the needs, wants and expectations of their customers, and there are a variety of processes that can involve them in answering questions such as:

- Who are my customers?
- What value does my job add to my customers?
- How do my customers measure the quality of what I provide them?
- What standards of service must I meet in order to satisfy my customers?

Everyone in the organization must understand what it takes to deliver good customer service. They must also recognize that customer needs, wants and expectations change, and that the improvement process is ongoing and continuous. When this way of thinking permeates an organization, its people can begin to anticipate changing customer needs and wants and create solutions that can truly delight customers in meaningful and memorable ways.

What is good customer service? Simply put, it's about making the customer

the number one priority—finding customer-friendly ways to deliver quality in every aspect of the way municipal services are provided. Service is all about people, the people who live and work in a community. Good customer service begins with recognizing and satisfying fundamental human needs, including those of municipal employees, the internal customers who work to provide community services on a day-to-day basis. Internal and external customers share these basic needs: to be acknowledged, listened to, appreciated, trusted and respected.

Within departments, standards should be determined in accordance with the specific organizational needs, and those standards, in turn, must be aligned with how they can best satisfy all customers, both internal and external.

Making Service 'Meaningful and Memorable'

Raising the bar on customer service is not easy, but it is fundamentally simple. It's about improving customer relationships, both internally and externally, with a focus on little things that make big differences. Think of these little things as the ABCs of customer relationships—the Attitudes, Behaviors and Connections we have with customers.

- Attitudes are the way we feel about customers.
- Behaviors are the ways we act with customers.
- Connections are the way we get involved with customers.

These ABCs are contained within five simple service rules, and when applied, along with a little customer MAGIC (more on this a little later), they can produce meaningful and memorable results.

**Service Rule No. 1:
Attitude is Everything**

Attitude is defined as our emotional responses to people, places, events and ideas. It's about how we feel, and it's demonstrated in our appearance, facial expression, body language, tone of voice, and the words we use. Attitudes leave impressions and impressions last. It's these mental impressions that will be recalled when people talk with their friends, relatives or business associates. Attitudes also determine people's actions, either at the ballot box or when their support may be vital to issues directly affecting municipal employees, such as appropriations for a new school or salary increases.

There are fundamentally two kinds of attitudes: healthy and deadly (see sidebar, above right). Healthy attitudes connect people. They are attractive, positive and productive. They are expressed with friendly greetings, warm smiles, patient listening, and sincere thank you's. Deadly attitudes disconnect people. They are

**Healthy Attitudes
and
Deadly Attitudes**

Healthy Attitudes

- I like you.
- I respect you.
- I care about you.
- I want to help you.
- I appreciate you.

Deadly Attitudes

- I'm not interested in you.
- I'm more important than you.
- I'm too busy for you.
- I'm right; you're wrong.



ugly and destructive. They are demonstrated by a lack of attention, frowns, smirks, unkind gestures, arguing, or—most deadly of all—ignoring customers. And since attitudes are contagious, it is important to work at spreading the healthy ones, those that are worth catching.

Attitudes are often expressed in words. Two of the most magical words are “thank you.” Use them often. They tell people that you care, you respect them and you appreciate them. They go a long way to removing negativity and reinforcing customer confidence. Every

day presents many opportunities to use “thank you” in a variety of customer situations. When an employee completes a transaction, whether at a communications center or the clerk's office, it's an ideal opportunity to say, “Thanks for coming in today.” When a resident presents a complaint or problem, it's an opportunity to say, “Thank you for bringing that to my attention.” And when someone retrieves a call that has been placed on hold, that's a great opportunity to say, “Thank you for waiting.”

Just as a professional baseball player's batting average can improve with each at bat, every municipal employee can improve his or her service performance by taking advantage of each thank you “at bat.” Customers feel special every time they hear those magical words, and when they respond with “you're welcome,” a valuable customer connection has been made. Managers set an example with every thank you to an employee or coworker, which helps to build internal customer loyalty.

**Service Rule No. 2:
Know Thy Customer**

To deliver superior customer service, you must understand and be ready to satisfy your customers' needs, wants and expectations. Ask questions and listen carefully to what customers say. Use a customer's name whenever possible. Most importantly, use your knowledge of how people want to be treated—with politeness, respect, patience, empathy, understanding and appreciation. Remember, we are all customers.

**Service Rule No. 3:
Every Contact Counts**

Every customer contact is an opportunity to make a meaningful connection with customers and a valuable deposit into your city or town's Customer Relationship Account—one that can greatly appreciate over time. In addition to answering questions and solving problems, there's great value in every smile, friendly greeting, kind gesture, or thank you, and they all add up. And when customers respond in kind, with a friendly smile or thank you, it helps to

How Do We Evaluate Service?

What are the standards by which people evaluate customer service? Research has identified the following five key performance criteria, which form the clever acronym RATER:

Reliability: accuracy, consistency, dependability

Assurance: knowledge, trust, competence, confidence

Tangibles: physical appearance of people and the workplace

Empathy: caring, attention and understanding

Responsiveness: timeliness and willingness to help



make the job a more rewarding and pleasurable experience.

Service Rule No. 4: Keep It Simple and Sensible

People naturally resist anything complicated or confusing. So it's important that all employees not only have a clear understanding about regulations, policies and procedures, but are able to explain them in terms that are easily understood. Applications and other forms should be readable and make sense to the customers who need to use them.

Service Rule No. 5: Practice Makes Permanent

We've all heard the phrase "practice makes perfect," but no one is ever perfect. We can, however, work at developing attitudes and actions that are positive, productive, and lead to desirable habits of performance that can delight the public we serve. Whenever those friendly greetings, smiles and thank you's are delivered consistently, a high standard of service performance will be clearly conveyed.

Customer MAGIC

"Making A Good Impression Counts." That's what Customer MAGIC is all about. It can be fun to surprise customers with the good impressions we make. Each customer contact presents three opportunities to practice Customer MAGIC and make three

Words to Use

Yes.
Certainly.
Of course.
I'd be happy to.

Words to Lose

I'm too busy.
You'll have to come back.
That's not my job.
You'll have to wait.



lasting impressions with how we connect, contribute and conclude.

The first impression is how we connect with the customer. This includes our greeting, smile (or lack of one), eye contact, attitude, and whether we use the customer's name.

The second impression is how we contribute to our customer's solution. Do we ask good questions and listen carefully? Are we patient, understanding and helpful? Do we actually try to do something positive for that person?

The third impression is how we con-

clude the interaction with our customer. Do we show respect and appreciation by asking if there is anything else we can do for them? Do we thank them for coming in, or for their patience, and do we wish them a pleasant day?

The telephone is another tool for practicing Customer MAGIC. On the phone, the first impression is formed by how we connect with the customer.

Do we offer a friendly greeting? Do we identify who we are? Do we use their name whenever possible? Is there a smile in our voice, and do we project a caring and helpful attitude? The second impression is how we contribute to our customer's solution. Do we ask good questions and listen carefully? Are we patient, understanding and helpful? Do we actually try to do something positive for that person? The third impression is how we conclude the conversation. Do we show respect and appreciation by asking if there is anything else we can do for them? Do we remember to thank them for calling?

Raising the bar on customer service offers a challenging and achievable objective for all municipalities. It will take commitment, imagination, creativity and the involvement of all public employees to lower the barriers of bureaucracy. With clarity of purpose, dedication, an open mind and consistent effort, positive changes will be realized.

