

Customer Service: What It Is & Why It's Important

by Ray Quay

If you read the business section of any news magazine, you have seen articles about the changes in our economy.

These articles have explored how shifts from manufacturing to service have changed our workforce. These trends have also changed our traditional view of management. Control of resources and the production process is no longer management's primary concern. Their focus is now on customer service and the quality and timeliness of service delivery.

Neither local government or planning is immune to such changes. Planning officials are now finding themselves interacting with a smarter, more sophisticated, sometimes hostile public. People like this new emphasis on service and expect the same from local government. Unfortunately, for this reason some planning programs have lost their credibility.

After twenty years of planning, people are looking around and asking what difference planning has made in their lives? In some cases none, and people have begun to doubt if it ever will. In response we are seeing a resurgence in demand for advocacy planning. Not the advocacy planning of the 60s, but advocacy that puts people in charge of their destiny and environment. Planning that gets results.

These changes have occurred in an environment of declining federal, state, and local resources. In response, communities are tightening their belts. Services and capital investments are being reduced and in some cases people are being laid off. Yet with these reductions come demands for more ef-

fective service delivered in a timely fashion to match the community's rapidly changing agenda of issues. Unfortunately, people do not care about declining resources, they want the same service they get from Federal Express. How does one survive in such an environment?

**"UNFORTUNATELY,
PEOPLE DO NOT CARE
ABOUT DECLINING
RESOURCES, THEY WANT
THE SAME SERVICE THEY
GET FROM FEDERAL
EXPRESS. HOW DOES
ONE SURVIVE IN SUCH AN
ENVIRONMENT?"**

Well some planning programs are not only surviving, but thriving. Programs that have become valued partners in the community's agenda. These programs have adopted a new view towards planning in their communities. This view is more pragmatic about how planning should be conducted and expects results, quickly.

People are viewed as customers who have problems that need to be solved. Programs are structured to help people learn how to solve their problems on their own or in partnership with local government. Such programs focus on customer service and the quality and timeliness of service delivery.

To understand customer service one must understand what "service"

means. Open up a dictionary and look up the word service. You will see definitions like: "Something you do for others." "Something that people can use to help themselves." Put these together with a planning viewpoint and you get "Something planners do to help others help themselves." This raises the questions, "What is this something and why are we doing it?"

Very likely you were appointed or elected to be a planning official because someone thought you would be good at solving planning problems. As a result, people come to you and ask (sometimes demand) your help. You have likely experienced people stopping you in the street and unloading their problem on you. This is not an emotional release. They do not say "Oh I am so glad you have taken this problem from me. Now I will never have to worry about it again." Likely such people have been trying to solve their problem for quite a while.

After they talk to you, they will likely continue to try and solve their problem. After all the problem is still theirs, not yours, and until solved will continue to exist. What they are asking from you is help in solving their problem.

That is exactly your service. As a planning official, you are helping others to solve their problems. Actually, this is the basis of any service related business. McDonalds serves hamburgers because people have a problem. They are hungry. McDonalds helps solve that problem by providing food. McDonalds does not actually solve the problem. Each person solves their own problem by eating. McDonalds simply

continued on page 7

Customer Service...

continued from page 5

helps them understand the alternatives, make a decision, and provide the resources needed to take action. Sounds like planning doesn't it?. But planning from a customer service point of view.

A quick fairy tale. A community fears development will destroy views of its mountains. Developers own the mountains, but must make money or bust. Community has housing shortage. Classic deadlock, classic problem. Planning Commission works with both groups. A consensus is formed, higher densities at the base of mountains with no development on sides or top. Everyone is happy (This is a fairy tale remember!).

Is the problem solved? Nope. Developers still need to make money and community still needs housing. So developers build housing and community moves in. Now the problem is solved.

The Planning Commission did not solve the problem. They simply facilitated a solution. The community and developers solved their own problem, they just needed help. This is a customer service view of planning.

Ray Quay is currently a Deputy Director of Planning for the City of Phoenix, an adjunct faculty member at Arizona State University, and a partner of McQuay Technologies, a microcomputer software consulting group. Ray is the former Assistant Director of Planning for Arlington, Texas. He is also the author (with Bruce McClendon) of Master Change - Winning Strategies for Effective City Planning, published by APA Planners Press and has written numerous articles on various planning and computer issues.