**Customer Service**

**Considerations for School Leaders and Teams**

“School leaders who embrace, design and implement customer-driven systems will be the ones who thrive in the future.” – Ellan Toothman, 2004

As those who work in public schools, we have a special obligation to provide exceptional customer service to our students, families, and community partners. As our education system evolves, schools can no longer afford to be isolated in the community. The more committed we are to serving our families, community partners, and guests, the more invested they will be in supporting the academic success of our students. The following are simple best practice suggestions for school leaders and teams to consider. They are designed to create a welcoming environment and promote a high level of proved customer service.

1. **Directional Signs: Clear, Concise, and Culturally Sensitive**

Many schools are complex mazes that can be difficult for guests to navigate. The more effort put into helping people find their way around and through the school, the more likely that they will make repeat visits. Guests feel welcome and comfortable in a school that includes directional signs and written information in their primary language.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Pretend you are a guest to your school and you are standing on the edge of the property. Can you find the parking lot? Are you able to find the places you want to go from the parking lot? If not, create signs and directions that make navigating your school easy for all.**
2. **Again, travel to the edge of your school property. Follow the instructions in the suggestion above but, this time, pretend you do not read or speak English.**
3. **Work with community groups, local businesses, parent groups, and staff to secure the signs necessary to make navigating your school and grounds easy for all.**
4. **In addition to language, assess the degree to which directions are clear for guests and families who are blind or visually impaired.**

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1. **Family Parking Only**

Providing designated parking sends a clear message that thought and care regarding the busy and complicated lives of families is foremost in the mind of the school. What a tremendous impression you could make on family guests if you replaced the “principal parking only” sign with “family parking.”

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Designate 10 parking spaces for families at your school by creating signs that say “(Name of School) Family Parking.”**
2. **Assign and advertise additional “VIP” parking during family events.**

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1. **Fabulous Feedback**

Businesses understand that customer satisfaction is vital to success. Almost all restaurants, retail stores, and service providers utilize some sort of survey to gauge customer satisfaction. Families and community members visit schools daily to get information, volunteer, or drop off forgotten lunches or homework. These guests leave with an impression of the school, but we rarely ask for their feedback. Consider inviting them to fill out a short customer service survey before they leave. This feedback is vital in establishing a positive experience for students, families, staff, and the community.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Develop a service response card that is customized to meet your school’s needs. Some possible questions are:**

* **Did you find what you were looking for?**
* **Were you treated with respect?**
* **Was our staff helpful?**
* **If you came in with a problem, were you able to resolve it to your satisfaction?**

1. **Monthly, record the responses and provide staff with ratings of guest experiences. Work to improve ratings or maintain them if they are already good.**
2. **Use incentives that will motivate staff to provide excellent customer service.**
3. **Develop a “strive for a five” (the highest rating) mentality among all school staff.**

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1. **You’ve Got Company**

When you invite guests to your home, you normally make sure that everything is in its place. You put away clutter and wash the dishes. These efforts make your guests feel comfortable and welcome in your home. The same should be true for your school. First impressions of guests influence their generalizations about campus safety, security, and cleanliness. As parents bring their students to school, as students disembark from buses, and as neighbors drive by, they make judgments about the school. Your attention to detail will increase the likelihood of positive impressions.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Assign a staff member (this could be a member of the custodial staff) to check main entrances each morning and afternoon before arrival and dismissal times.**
2. **Ask the following questions:**
   1. **Are the grounds near the front entrance litter-free?**
   2. **Are driveways used by parents and buses clear?**
   3. **Are the major road and sidewalk areas near the front of the school clear of trash?**
3. **Before a family night event, work with custodial staff to ensure that the school hallways and bathrooms are clean and ready for guests.**

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1. **Replicate the Wal-Mart Way**

In 1969, Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, set out to create an improved shopping experience for America. Today, Wal-Mart is perhaps the single most successful retail business in the world. An important component to that success was Walton’s belief that valuing people is the key to creating a successful business. With this in mind, Sam Walton created the “Wal-Mart Greeter.” You can replicate the Wal-Mart idea by designating a greeter to welcome students and guests to your school.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Work with parents, senior citizens groups, clubs, and organizations within your community to build a network of people willing to volunteer to be greeters at your school.**
2. **Invest time teaching and providing new greeters with information about your school. Supply them with answers to frequently asked questions, familiarize them with the building, and provide them with maps and other materials to help them be effective.**
3. **Remind all greeters to smile and be enthusiastic about welcoming parents and families to your school.**
4. **If your school serves a multilingual community, use greeters who are fluent in different languages. Advertise to the community when they will be available to assist families.**

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1. **A Follow Up to a Visit**

Our district security plan requires all guests to sign-in. At the end of each day, review the sign-in sheets and choose two names. Take a minute to call and ask visitors about their experience in your building. Were they treated courteously? Did they have any problems with parking or locked doors? Did they know where to go? If they needed help, did someone assist them? One three-minute phone call pays huge dividends when establishing a warm and welcoming environment for the school.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Determine how many “sign-in” or “sign-out” documents there are in your building. Check the main offices, nurse’s office, and classrooms. You might be surprised at the guest records they have available.**
2. **Look at the notes that parents and families write for early releases. This is another area of data that helps you understand who is coming and going in your building throughout the day and why they are visiting.**
3. **Pick two or three guests to call each day. Ask them about their experiences during their visit. Thank them for their support and invite them back.**

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1. **A Positive Sign!**

We often use “negative” signs in schools, such as “No Parking” and “No Entry.” Whenever possible, turn your negative signs into positive signs. For example, many schools might have signs that say “Faculty Parking Only.” If you are a guest, you are confronted with a somewhat negative sign and no knowledge of where to park. A remedy to this is to direct guests to where they may find parking. For example: “This area is for faculty parking. Family/Guest parking is located behind the gym.” At entrances, instead of, “No Entry,” consider, “Welcome! Our Guest Entrance is located near the flag pole.”

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Take inventory of your “negative” and “positive” signs.**
2. **Work to create positive message signs that direct, encourage, and support all parents, families, and guests.**
3. **Set a goal of replacing all of the negative signs with positive ones!**

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1. **Invite the Return**

We can learn much from professional marketers and salespeople, whose livelihood depends on repeat customers. Making sure customers know they are welcomed and encouraged to return is a cornerstone of successful business practice. By taking the same approach with parents and guests to your school, they will know they are welcome any time and that you are happy to see them.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Train all staff, including teachers, support staff, and clerical staff, to invite guests back to school any time they see one leaving.**
2. **Create signs that thank guests for coming and invite them back again.**

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1. **A Simple Bookmark for All Guests**

Student safety and building security are top priorities in schools today. Schools want parents and guests to sign-in and obtain guest badges. In addition to providing a guest badge, consider handing every guest a small bookmark. Print school contact information on one side of the bookmark. The other side can include information that is important for families to know and can be changed periodically. For example, as the testing period approaches, the bookmark might have a copy of the testing schedule, a reminder of the importance of attendance on test days, and suggestions for a good breakfast for their child. A sample bookmark template can be found on the family engagement website: familyengagement.weebly.com.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Create bookmarks for those who sign in at your building.**
2. **In your next survey, ask families how they prefer to receive information about the school. List the various methods you have used to disseminate information, including newsletters, bookmarks, phone communications, and school marquees. Use their responses to determine the effectiveness of the different methods of communication.**

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1. **Personal Greetings**

Consider assigning staff members to greet students being dropped off at school each morning. Have them open car doors for students and smile and wave good morning to the driver and any other passengers. Students and families will love the personal attention and the “we care” and “welcome” message is obvious.

***Steps to Follow:***

1. **Schedule the staff duties to include some personal greeters during the morning arrival period.**
2. **Open car doors and welcome students to school. Thank families for their support for student success. Tell everyone to “make it a great day.”**
3. **For those students who are late, take a minute or two to have a discussion with the parent and student. Create an “on-time” plan for the next day. When the tardy student arrives on time, be sure to reinforce this behavior by praising the student and thanking the family for their help.**

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*These considerations were excerpted from 101 Ways to Create Real Family Engagement, 2008*