

The essence of marketing is the
quality of the product, and
customer service is how you
communicate that quality.



Customer Service— The Core Of Every Marketing Program

It's no coincidence that customer service is one of the first components in the marketing lineup. The essence of marketing is the quality of the product, and customer service is how you communicate that quality. It costs little to implement, yet yields abundant benefits. Get it right and you have record-setting occupancy; get it wrong and it costs you business. So before we go bounding off on a discussion of how to perfect your sales presentation or produce a slick new brochure, let's cover the basics of customer service.

While customer service is a critical marketing component, it is the one component over which marketing has the least control and accountability. We know that it's primarily the actions and attitudes of the frontline staff that define a community's image and reputation. However, frontline staff don't report to marketing, they report to operations. Marketing's role is to work with management to implement or improve the customer service standards that are practiced by staff.

In reading through this chapter, you may find that you're familiar with many of the customer service concepts being presented. After all, customer service is really nothing more than good old-fashioned manners and business etiquette. However, the issue goes beyond your customer service expertise; it's about the staff's customer service understanding and expertise. For these very reasons, the chapter's principles have been deliberately fashioned so they can be shared with and easily understood by the entire team. At the chapter's conclusion, we discuss the ways the marketing department can contribute to community-wide customer service initiatives.

Customer Service Concepts

Think back on your environmental scan and the subject of your unique selling propositions, or USPs. If you identified and are touting “quality service” or “quality care” as a USP, you might want to think again about your use of these overused phrases. Just call a few communities and you'll find a whole lot of halo polishing going on—they all expound upon their kind staff and exceptional service as if

With so many providers mouthing the same words, customers tune out the sales hyperbole and tune in on how they are treated.

they were extraordinary offerings. With so many providers mouthing the same words, consumers tune out the clichéd sales hyperbole and tune in on how they are treated. In fact, research has shown that customers tend to judge quality based more on the attitude and attributes of the person providing the service than on the actual quality of service being delivered—in other words, personal attitude trumps procedural efficiency. How many times have you encountered crackerjack service personnel whose dour faces would splinter if they attempted a smile? Or been served by someone who fumbled and bumbled his way through a transaction, but whose good nature made the experience acceptable and even pleasant?

Staff need to be keenly aware that their actions and attitudes speak volumes about the quality of service that your community provides. The perceptions they create are more powerful than words alone. It's not enough to say that you provide quality service; it must be demonstrated in everything that everyone at your community says and does.

While service excellence is acknowledged by all communities to be central to their operating mission—it can be a challenge to achieve. The pursuit of service excellence and quality customer service can come off as so much fluff to staff who may be struggling to make ends meet, to get and from work, and to figure out who is going to care for their kids while they are busy taking care of others.

So how do you train staff on the necessities and nuances of quality service? An easy approach is to break service concepts and staff training down into the four elements that profoundly influence customer perceptions and satisfaction. We'll examine all four areas as a customer service training framework:

- Telephone Reception
- Physical Plant Appearance
- Staff Appearance
- Staff Attitudes and Actions

Top-Notch Telephone Reception

Telephone reception is the place where most customers form their first impression about your community. Create a bad first impression and what comes later, no matter how wonderful, must overcome a huge hurdle.

Managing the first impression is a tough task, especially in our business. Consumers have heightened service expectations when they contact service purveyors compared to product vendors. When it comes to senior housing, consumers expect to speak with someone who is professional, polite, and sensitive to their needs, someone who will listen to their problems and help them find solutions.

Answering the telephone promptly and professionally should be one of the easiest aspects of our business, yet this area is fraught with customer service land mines. Because of heightened expectations, seemingly simple telephone transactions can turn into appalling customer service transgressions. Innocent statements such as, "They've all gone home for the day" or "There's no one here right now, you'll need to call back," give the impression that your community is understaffed or uncaring. Making prospects listen to the entirety of The Beatles' "Hard Day's Night" as they wait on hold can quickly disenchant someone who is not all that enthralled with retirement living to begin with. Delays in answering the phone or encountering a rude receptionist or robotic voice mail are additional incidents that send consumer confidence into a nose dive.

So what are the solutions to these common problems? The answer is to use less technology and more high-touch personal service that is achieved through a blend of telephone protocols and training.

Let's start with the use of voice mail, a tool that is fine for business-to-business communications, but a disaster in working with senior consumers. Although voice mail is viewed as a cost savings measure, consider its cost in lost customers who refuse to use, or do not know how to navigate, this technology.

Voice mail technology is fine for business-to-business communication; it's a disaster in working with senior consumers.