

How to delight your customers

from a talk given by George Pickering at IATEFL

George Pickering is Director of Eurocentre Bath Summer Centre and has been involved in a number of customer care initiatives for Eurocentres UK. He is the Promotions Officer of FIRS. This personal perspective was delivered from the point of view of an ELT organisation in the UK.

Introduction I have deliberately chosen the word *delight* in the title as it implies that we need to go beyond mere satisfaction, if we want our customers to re-enrol on courses and actively recommend our services to others. I also prefer to talk about delighting customers rather than using terms such as TQM or quality initiatives, because it is easy to forget that such measures are only means to an end, which is a state change in the people we work to serve. This confusion between means and ends is illustrated by the bus company whose quality measures included ensuring that its drivers kept strictly to the timetable. This led to empty buses not stopping for bemused passengers, as the drivers did not want to fall behind schedule!

If we want to delight our customers, we must be customer driven and move away from being "inside-out" organisations that develop their products and services and then hope that through promotion activity people can be persuaded to buy them. A customer-focused company starts at the outset from the needs, wants and desires of its customers.

My belief is that customer delight cannot be accomplished through any single service or product improvement but by a myriad of measures in the key areas of: product quality, service, price and image. These measures should be carried out within a corporate culture committed to continuous improvement.

Attempts to delight customers will have a greater chance of success if implemented systematically. One way of doing this is to seek to answer four simple questions:

- Where are we now? ‡ Analysis
- Where do we want to go? ‡ Mission
- How do we get there? ‡ Strategy & Implementation
- How are we doing? ‡ Evaluation

Through analysing your current situation, being clear about your goals and values, implementing a coherent strategy and evaluating your progress, you are more likely to move towards an organisational state that bears some resemblance to the one you set out to create.

Quality

We are all committed to providing quality products. Only those who share Gerald Ratner's apparent self-destructive tendencies would claim that their courses were anything

else, but who ultimately decides what is a quality product? I would suggest that "*Quality is not the absence of defects as defined by management but the presence of value as defined by customers.*"

In order to achieve customer delight, it is necessary to listen to, understand and even anticipate customer needs and take steps to meet their requirements. Before you can exceed client expectations you must know intimately what these expectations are. Most organisations feel that they know what their customers want, and incidentally, what their employees want, but do they really know?

My interest in this question can be traced to my parents' 30th wedding anniversary. We were sitting in the kitchen and I asked my mother, "Why do you always do the vegetables in the pressure cooker?"

She replied, "Because that's the way your dad likes them." "No it isn't," interjected my father.

"Yes, it is," insisted my mother, "You've always liked them like that."

To which my father replied, "No it isn't, you've never asked me!"

As you can see the real problem was that my mother had not empowered my father to cook his own vegetables, but what I am trying to suggest is that if my mother could get it wrong after living with my father for thirty years, it's just possible that we do not know our customers' requirements as well as we imagine.

We employ a comprehensive client feedback system within Eurocentres UK to ensure that students have a variety of channels through which they can express their needs.

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- Week-one questionnaire
- Weekly review
- Weekly plan
- Class Representatives' System
- Focus groups
- Leaving questionnaire

The week-one questionnaire, an idea we got from Richard Language College, Bournemouth, helps us to identify problems at a time when we can take steps to solve them. It consists of a mixture of closed and open questions. The closed ones help us to see at a glance how students feel about our services. The open questions help us to find out what is important to the students. It is a sad fact about human beings that we tell twice as many people about poor service as we inform about good service. We want our students to complain to us rather than to their colleagues or friends back home.

Our customers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and choosy; Marketing Week called today's consumers sceptical butterflies, flitting from product to product. We can't assume loyalty - we have to earn it these days. What most people want today is to be treated as an individual and so desire a more individualised service than we have often hitherto provided. One way forward would be to offer general course students the same benefits as those traditionally accorded only to participants on premium courses.

Measures to individualise the service to students might include:

- individual needs analyses
- interviews with individual students in learning centre lessons
- self-study suggestions
- self study materials for specific needs of particular groups. (See Michael Swan's useful book *Learner English*.)
- individual advice on post-course learning strategies

We need to bear in mind that what we are offering in the UK classroom is not necessarily distinguishable from what many of our potential students can get in the school down the road or in other anglophone locations. Our challenge is to answer the knocking copy of a school in Switzerland, which says, "Why go to England to take the First Certificate and fail?" We must think about the total experience of customers who want entertainment as well as education. Of course, the entertainment can be educational and the education entertaining.

Students regularly stress the importance of their host family accommodation but what do they actually want from a host

family? My own research would support the findings of the survey reported in *ELT Management Newsletter* no. 14 February 1994, where 71% of respondents rated spending time in conversation with the family as "very important." Unfortunately, only 38% rated this feature of their stay as "very good." Some of us also need to improve the pre-course information we give. Many schools now provide students with a profile of the family they will be staying with. I understand that the host families of International House, London introduce themselves to their students by writing to them before the course begins.

We also need to ensure that students have sufficient accommodation choices to meet their requirements. Although schools tend to offer a range of language courses this is not often matched by a similarly comprehensive array of accommodation options.

What is the difference between yoghurt and the UK? Yoghurt is a living culture. This joke might be believed by students whose social programme consists of trips to monuments and museums in towns of "historical interest." In addition to opportunities to sample the wares of the heritage industry, students want activities that are relevant to their professional needs and social interests. Sheila Levy, Cambridge Academy, has outlined a variety of ways in which a school can help students interact with their local environment. A school such as Churchill House, Ramsgate, which owns its own pub where students can meet locals, has a competitive advantage over many of us.

If we are to continue to attract students to the UK we must exceed customer expectations in all aspects of their stay. The homestay experience and opportunities to interact with British people and their culture contribute to differentiating our product from that of our competitors.

Questions

How can you be sure that you know the needs of your customers?

What communication channels are available to students to express their opinions and needs during the course?

What differentiates your product from that of your competitors?

How individualised is the service you provide?

What do your students take away with them when they leave your school?

Service

"If the company has a service department, what are the rest of the people doing?"

Any organisation seeking to delight its clients must accept that other schools will be offering similar teaching prod-

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ucts. Most schools are staffed by highly motivated, qualified, experienced teachers whose pedagogical orientation is "eclectic", who use a range of communicative techniques and an appropriate level textbook which contains either Headway or Matters in the title. Excellent customer service is one way that an organisation can differentiate its product from that of its rivals. The British have turned poor service into an art form and the "Basil Fawlty syndrome" can still be found in the ELT industry.

General impressions of individuals are reputedly formed in the first four minutes. Customers make similar immediate judgements about companies on the basis of the initial warmth, efficiency, politeness and friendliness of staff. The importance of service is underlined by the finding that whereas only 9% of customers stop doing business with companies because of price dissatisfaction, 68% do so because of the treatment they have received.

Although based upon a number of "intangibles", there is nothing magical or clever about customer service. Superior customer service is all about getting some basic things right. In *Incredible Customer Service* (1993), David Freemantle enumerates fourteen key tests for incredible service.

- Keeping the service promise
- Five second telephone responses
- Documentation responses within two days
- Five minute maximum waiting time
- Positive employee attitudes
- Proactive communications
- Honesty and openness
- Systems reliability
- Swift reparation
- Being in the know
- Front-line ownership
- Little extras
- Attention to detail
- Immaculate appearance

Each of these areas is relevant to the ELT industry and service standards can be set in many of them.

Questions

- What is your customer service policy?
- What training do your staff receive in customer service?
- How customer-focused are your staff at present?
- How do you currently facilitate interdepartmental co-operation?
- Do you have a student's charter?
- What little extras could improve your customer service?
- How does your service compare with that of your competitors?

Price

"If he overhold his price so much, we'll none of him."
Schools with excellent price/quality ratios enjoy a considerable competitive advantage during the current world recession. Customers are "downgrading" in a range of product markets, concerned with genuine quality and benefits rather than just badge status. Organisations which use their own claims of quality as justification for charging a price premium are increasingly being asked, "Where's the beef?" Customers today realise that high price may indicate cost inefficiencies rather than guaranteeing quality.

However, following the trend towards "low price, no frills" courses is not without its dangers. If students have to pay for all course extras, this may set up a negative impression which lingers long after the low course price has been forgotten. Market research has indicated that a price can be set too low as well as too high in high risk purchase markets. Some customers may equate low price with additional risk. At the least, some prospective clients may need to be reassured that economical price does not equal low quality.

Questions

- What do your customers think of your prices?
- Do they think you offer value for money?
- Was price an important factor when choosing their course?
- Would your customers be prepared to pay extra for additional services?
- Would they prefer to pay less for a more basic course?
- Do you offer a range of differentially priced courses?
- How competitive are your prices?
- What additional services do you offer to justify charging more than your cheaper competitors?

Image

"The appearance of everything the customer sees in the company should be immaculate."

The image of a company, how it is viewed, is intimately connected to its reputation, what is said about it. In an image conscious age, a company ignores impression management at its peril. Positive image is vital in securing a customer's confidence that the service to be provided is reliable and of high quality. It relates to every aspect of the organisation's business.

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The features which are of special significance include:

- the personal appearance of employees
- the prospectus
- the house style and quality of all correspondence
- reception areas
- classroom displays
- sheet materials
- posters
- available technology

With the advent of desktop publishing, impressive in-house materials are much easier to produce. Documentation soon appears dated if not produced on state of the art technology. All facets of a business must be constantly audited with a view to being continuously updated.

Questions

- What image do your customers have of your business?
 What do they think of the prospectus and other promotional literature?
 How many of them read the prospectus?
 Do you have a house style?
 If so, when was it last updated?
 Does your reception area project the image that you want it to?
 What is the quality of the handouts that your customers receive?
 What could you do to improve the image of the school?

Within the confines of this talk I have dealt primarily with what needs to be done rather than how a customer-focused culture can be strategically planned and accomplished. The appropriate strategy would vary according to type of organisation, market position, available resources and the desired future state. My own feeling is that efficient systems and procedures are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the achievement of customer delight. The most important factor is the exceptional performance of a well trained staff whose own needs have been responded to. Superior service will only be provided by staff who themselves receive superior service. As Huxley put it, "*There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving and that's yourself.*" Perhaps the starting point for many of us should be the short leadership course devised by John Adair.

- The six most important words *I admit I made a mistake*
 The five most important words *I am proud of you*
 The four most important words *What is your opinion?*
 The three most important words *If you please*
 The two most important words *Thank you*
 The one most important word *We*
 The least important word *I*

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