

Turning Complaints Into KUDOS

Here's what FMs need to know about why occupants complain and how to respond

by stormy friday

Your FM organization is thriving and successful. You haven't had a call from "upstairs" about a problem in more than two months or received an email from an irate customer in about three. Life is good, or so you think.

Sadly, you may have lulled yourself into a false sense of security. Fewer than half of unhappy customers ever bring a complaint to the facility organization's attention. Of those who don't make an actual complaint, they tell an average of 11 to 15 other people how poor facility service is. In this case, no news is not good news. While it may seem to be counterproductive, receiving complaints from facility management customers actually is a positive thing. Complaints from customers can provide an opportunity to turn unhappy customers into advocates and supporters. The facility management philosophy should be "bring on those customer complaints."

Anticipating complaints and having a complaint prevention and response strategy is a tested approach to achieve customer approval and accolades. Here are some of the key principles for ensuring good facility customer service.

Provide thorough customer service training. Facility managers need to establish a service environment in which staff feel empowered to perform their jobs and make decisions when they are interacting with customers. But empowerment without accompanying

customer service training will not work. In addition to training on customer service techniques, facility managers should provide mock problem solving exercises so staff are prepared with an appropriate response when a real-life customer problem occurs. Facility staff need instruction in the various types of complainers and how to handle them, as well as schooling in the fine art of saying "no" to a customer. The goal is for staff to have experience with all types of customer issues and complaints. A facility organization needs to make customers believe the facility team is working in concert with them to solve their problems so they become the organization's allies.

Treat all customers as if they have 10,000 Twitter followers. Writer Myers Barnes offers that advice for managing customer relationships, and it is particularly applicable to facility managers. If you stop to think about it, customers have a broad corporate audience at their disposal, so when they have a negative facility experience, they are bound to broadcast the information to a multitude of employees. Disgruntled customers seem to have elephant-like memories with a tendency to communicate negative, not positive, information. Striving to ensure customer communications are more positive than negative is a practical objective for facility organizations.

Listen more than you talk. A recent hallway conversation went something like this: "I had a meeting with FM yesterday and I couldn't get a word in edgewise. All they did was talk at me and didn't bother to listen to my story. They just wanted to give me the standard party line and didn't care about what I had to say. It is no wonder they don't get good marks on the customer satisfaction surveys with that attitude."

Customers with problems want to blow off steam and vent a bit. While facility staff



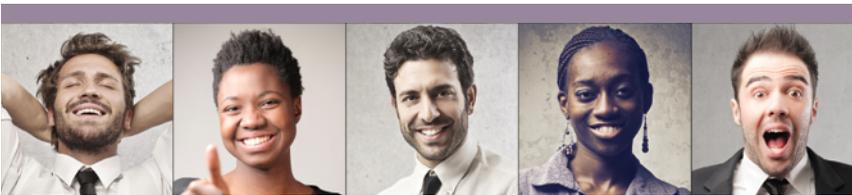
should avoid letting a customer encounter turn into a grudge match, it is important to let customers express their feelings at the outset. That means letting the customer do most of the talking at first. While the customer is talking, facility staff members might try using such phrases as “I see,” “Tell me more,” or “I can understand how frustrating that is,” in order to let the customer know they are not reacting, but listening. After the customer has calmed down, it is time to start talking about how to solve the problem. Until customers reach this more placid state

of mind, they won't hear or pay attention to what the facility organization is proposing to do. Only when they reach this state of mind should facility staff respond with, “So if I understand you correctly, the problem is....” Then staff should be quiet so the customer can validate what has been said. The goal in this situation is to have customers believe the facility organization listens when they explain a problem. Good news about listening travels fast among the customer population.

Engage customers in developing their own solutions. Seeking a solu-

tion that meets the customer's needs requires the customer to be part of the decision making process. Keeping in mind there may be a giant gap between what customers want and what they need to get their job accomplished, it is essential for facility organizations to create service solutions based on input from customers as well as their buy-in. Starting the dialogue with, “What would be an acceptable solution to you?” establishes a baseline for discussion. In reality, what customers need usually is less than what they articulate that they want, so it is critical to ask them exactly what they see as the solution to their problem. If their solution is unrealistic, then the job of facility staff is to convince them of what really makes sense. Facility organizations have documented the fact that customers who feel included in the solution process accept a far less “dramatic” resolution to a problem than they originally required when they lodged a complaint.

Overload customers with feedback on progress. It seems dubious, but irritated customers can be very forgiving if they are kept informed about what the facility organization is doing to resolve their problem. Keep in mind that customers only worry about their own issues. Customers don't care if the facility organization has a million other things to do or is trying to resolve a dozen other customer issues.



three ways to reduce customer complaints

1. Facility management organizations utilizing service level agreements (SLA) with customers have experienced great success in reducing customer complaints. SLAs articulate expectations for customer departments, as well as expectations from the facility organization about information needs and mission changes being provided on a timely basis. SLAs are customized for specific customer departments because service standards may vary according to the customer need. Higher service levels may be specified for “white glove” customers in SLAs, which serve to manage expectations for this category of customers. SLAs are successful when they are viewed by both the facility organization and the customer department as working documents that guide the service relationship.
2. One pharmaceutical company required customer service training for all facility staff and external providers. When customers were surveyed 6 months after the customer service training program, 90 percent reported significant improvement in the attitude and orientation of facility staff, improved communication and follow-up on service requests, reduced need to complain about service problems, and overall enhanced satisfaction with service delivery.
3. A “Listen and Learn” program, where facility staff, on a rotating basis, attend customer department meetings to listen and learn about facility-related issues, has proven highly successful. At these meetings facility staff also obtain advance information about changes to customer department mission and business objectives. As a result of these sessions, the facility organization was able to reduce time spent on customer complaints by 55 percent.

— Stormy Friday

80%

of FMs using service level agreements (SLAs) reported a decrease in complaints about service standards and turnaround times, according to one study.

Source: The Friday Group survey of clients

By keeping customers informed about every step of the facility organization's action plan to resolve the complaint, a facility organization can mitigate the impact of customer impatience. Although time is of the essence and all customers want to be reassured their issue is considered a priority, they usually stop pestering the facility organization if they have good feedback on a regular basis. A steady bombardment of timely and informative feedback is the best way to counter customer expectations for expedited action.

Balance customer complaints

with staff innovation to move ahead. Customer complaints contain insight into how well a facility organization is performing, but not everything customers complain about should be channeled into action plans for change. It's essential to strike a balance between what customers want and a facility organization's ability to forge ahead with its own innovative ideas. This may seem counter to everything you've just read, but it really isn't.

Facility organizations know

56%

of FMs took steps to cut subjective or frivolous complaints or requests.

Of those FMs, 96 percent said facility staff training worked, 95 percent said education and communication with customers was successful, and 81 percent said new policies helped minimize those complaints and requests.

Source: BOM survey

not every customer is an expert in facility management even though they think they are. While customer complaints and suggestions shouldn't be ignored, they shouldn't stifle creativity within the facility organization either. Complaints offer valuable insight, but they shouldn't become the only driver for the facility organization's strategic direction and innovative thinking.

Facility organizations can take a cue from one entrepreneur well known for his company's innovative strategies. Steve Jobs was famous for not paying attention to customer input. He was particularly averse to feedback from focus groups even though marketing and customer service experts tout focus groups as an exceptional tool for product and service development. Jobs believed people really didn't know what they wanted until someone showed it to them after it was developed. He didn't believe asking customers what they liked or didn't like really mattered.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, is the experience of former J.C. Penney CEO Ron Johnson, who came from the Apple environment. During his tenure at Penney, he completely changed the Penney way of doing business by eliminating discounts and redesigning the stores. He didn't bother to consider customer complaints or opinions about what they wanted. Retail sales plummeted. Johnson didn't believe in consulting customers before changing Penny's operations. After all, he came from Ap-



types of complainers

Establishing profiles of customers that complain can help facility managers determine motivating factors behind complaints, which helps get to the root cause of the complainer's problems. A recent article by Allen F. Wysocki, Karl W. Kepner, and Michelle W. Glasser, professors affiliated with the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, identified categories of complainers:

- **Meek Customer.** Averse to conflict and complaining, so when they do complain, it's a real problem. Meek customers may have to be asked pointed questions aimed at getting information about the real issues.
- **Aggressive Customer.** Chronic complainers who can spread negative stories about how they were treated. Being defensive only fuels their fire. Instead, "kill them with kindness" by trying to understand if there really is a facility-related problem. An apology may steer the conversation in the right direction.
- **Barnacle Customer.** Don't want the immediate problem solved. Rather, they want the facility department to give them extra service or something they aren't entitled to (e.g., more space, better furniture, or a parking spot closer to the door) as compensation for even minor problems such as failure to keep a trash can empty. Make sure adjustments in service are in keeping with what would normally be done for other customers. The FASI professors call these "rip-off" customers.
- **High-Roller Customer.** The facility department's premier customers, who expect the very best and who wield substantial influence in the company. It is extremely important to pay attention to their problems and issues. Manage these folks carefully by always having accurate facts and figures to support service strategies and decisions.

For more about different types of complainers and how to handle them, go to www.facilitiesnet.com/15930 BOM.

— Stormy Friday

96%

of unhappy customers do

NOT lodge a complaint

Source: 1st Financial Training Services

ple, where most customer input was discounted. But the Apple approach didn't work out so well at J.C. Penney. Johnson is no longer CEO.

Countless facility staff report they get "demoralized" by customer complaints, so they need to be reminded that complaints are a great indicator of where their service is failing or less than satisfactory. The trick is to strike a balance between gathering and using data on customer complaints exclusively when considering innovative solutions, and allowing the creative talent of the facility staff to charge ahead without regard to customer input. As Henry Ford once said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." He listened to his customers, but didn't let them control his quest for innovation.

Apologize when wrong. Some of the best kudos for facility organizations can be attributed to customers who said, "The facility organization simply apologized and then made it right." What more could a facility organization ask for than a customer acknowledgement like that? A sincere apology without any fluff around it

(such as blaming another staff member or another department) is one of the best ways to disarm a customer's complaint fuse.

Solve the problem or become the "go to" organization for problem-solving assistance. Since the facility organization is considered to be the "fount of knowledge" for what is happening in a company, it stands to reason that one way to gain kudos is to be known as the consummate problem solver. Facility organizations spend a lot of time fielding questions and issues unrelated to facility management, so there is merit in being recognized throughout a company as the "go to" organization. No matter how much attention facility organizations pay to educating their customers about the types of services they provide, customers most likely will continue to contact them to solve almost any and all problems. One way for facility organizations to achieve success as the "go to" organization is to establish a sophisticated network of company individuals who also are known as problem solvers. This network can be invaluable to the facility organization in terms of assistance and sometimes rescue. Knowing where to go and who to talk with is the key to being recognized for turning challenges into accomplishments.

It seems evident that customers are not shy about identifying what makes them miserable and unhappy with a facility organization and its services. What needs to be reinforced constantly is the role of a facility organization in predicting how to satisfy and make them happy in the future. ■

11-15

Number of other people that
unhappy non-complainers tell
about poor FM service

Source: The Friday Group

Sound Familiar?

If any of these sound familiar, your department may be suffering from a lack of attentiveness to your customer complaints.

- "The phone rings and rings and no one in facilities ever answers it."
- "The technical staff arrive in the morning before we are at work and leave early in the afternoon so there is no one around to help with our problem when we are here."
- "Whenever we have a problem, we always get transferred from one person to another in the facility organization."
- "We never hear the full story from facility management. They only tell us the part of the story they want us to hear."
- "The facility organization promises one thing and delivers another. They always break their promises."
- "The facility staff aren't customer-oriented. Their favorite words are 'we can't' and 'yes, but.'"
- "They don't keep us informed about their progress to resolve our problem so we can't inform our folks."

For more about why customers complain, go to www.facilitiesnet.com/15937BOM.



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