



CUSTOMER SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

Over recent months through this column, I have received quite a lot of feedback. It seems that people have enjoyed what I have had to say while also discovering some of the inner workings of Council. Councils by their nature can sometimes appear quite impersonal in their dealings, even downright boring, but, to be fair, Councils have a lot of compliance issues and protocols to contend with, and given the sensitivities associated with many individual case issues, there is no one size fits all solutions to much of what they have to deal with. Contending with the modern media also adds a further dimension to the way they deal with things.

Many Councils have a Customer Service Charter that lets residents know what they are entitled to expect from Council, for example, the timescales for responses and the aspiration that your issue will be resolved as quickly as possible (that is your phone call will not be transferred round and round in circles with nobody taking responsibility for it). I had difficulty finding a Customer Service Charter on the websites of our nearby councils until I found Dubbo Regional Council's Customer Experience Charter that included this.

OUR COMMITMENT TO YOU

We will:

- Act in a way that reflects and upholds our core values – Progressive, Sustainable, One Team and Integrity
- Listen and respect your issues and concerns
- Set clear expectations and deliver on those commitments
- Be professional, considerate and courteous
- Train our staff to deliver information and services
- Provide clear and concise information in a timely manner
- Recognise and respond to the diverse needs of our community and act with proper regard and sensitivity
- Actively measure and monitor our performance against the Customer Service Standards

On further digging on Dubbo's website it seems that there are different Customer Service Standards for different services, and they are not easy to find, so difficult to hold Council accountable to.

An English council I worked at had a customer service standard that telephone calls would be answered within 5 rings. Staff discovered that if they answered the phone after more than 5 rings this would be recorded in the system and be reported back to management as poor performance. If they could not answer within 5 rings and did not answer at all the call would not be reported on the system, so it was as if it had never happened. So, staff would just let the phones ring and their performance was reported as good. The unintended consequences of measurement is a very interesting topic and the way to overcome it is to have regular (possibly every 2 years) customer satisfaction surveys so that the customers can give qualitative evidence about how they feel about various services, to be added to the numbers for a proper evaluation of performance and how the community feels about their council.

I am often asked what level of customer service can be reasonably expected when dealing with Council. It is a good question so I thought I might touch on a few examples that readers may find helpful, especially following some of the horror stories we hear about the time Council takes to answer or respond to various issues.

One of the main issues that people raise with me in Orange is the inordinate length of time it can take the Council to resolve Development Applications. As large organisations Councils often find that one area seems to be working in the opposite direction to another. If you look at the Activate Orange strategic vision, which outlines how Orange Council will support economic and employment growth, the Development Department seems to be doing the complete opposite. I started

out in local government in economic development and had many struggles with the Planners to make sure they followed through and treated businesses with proper care and attention to secure economic and employment growth. Of course, I ended up in charge of the Planners so that I could ensure a seamless quality service for all customers!!

Feedback I have received to my Orange City Life columns has included the issue of noxious weeds, particularly where a property owner was allowing weeds to grow and the seeds were blowing on to a neighbour's land and spreading the weeds and neither the council nor Local Land Services would do anything about it. There was an article about a blackberry bush in Orange this week which ended up with the Council and State Government pointing fingers of blame at each other. It is often difficult for customers to find who is accountable for issues like noxious weeds when they are batted backwards and forwards between local and State government.

I wrote last week about cost shifting from State to local government and there is also a lot of responsibility shifting from State government to councils. There is also a habit of the NSW Government reducing its resources and therefore, service levels, that tends to leave the Council holding someone else's baby. This is where Council and Councillors should display their worth to local communities by advocating on their behalf. However, the NSW legislation that requires that Councillors act like a Board of Directors has tended to reduce the willingness and ability of Councillors to represent the community. I have been contacted by people seeking advice from me that I would normally see as the role of Councillors.

Based on my experience as the General Manager of Hay Shire Council, let me give you a very general idea of the most common issues that the public raise with Councils.

They include:

- Development Applications – for/against and delays that are costing money
- Waste management – including bins not emptied and the management of the tip
- Traffic and road issues – including State roads
- Allegedly dangerous trees – chop them down, stop them dropping leaves and seeds
- Neighbour issues e.g. barking dogs
- Water quality, pressure and leaks.

Some customers can be unreasonable. At Rockdale City Council we used to get phone calls from customers asking council staff to come and clear up the leaves falling off trees onto their property. That is not a council responsibility, but I remember one occasion when a customer came into the council to protest and emptied a black dustbin bag full of leaves all over one of the customer service staff. The core responsibility of all staff is customer service and the customer service staff can often get the brunt of customer reaction to the poor performance of their colleagues.

Most councils have a Customer Request Management system, but I could only find Customer Request forms on Blayney's website of our 3 local councils. There is also an App called Snap, Send, Solve. I am not sure how much that gets used locally so I might try it out!

The good thing with a Customer Request Management system is that it can provide statistics about the issues that are being raised by customers; which staff are dealing with specific issues; whether they have been referred to another organisation, and how quickly they are being resolved. This is a useful management tool about performance, service standards and the distribution of resources. It is also a good way to assess whether staff are taking a 'can do' attitude and taking responsibility for ensuring outcomes for customers, or flicking issues on to others.

I have received feedback that many people find these columns informative and I am happy to receive comments from readers about this column and other issues you would like me to cover so please either contact me at Orange City Life or aes@amandaspaldingconsulting.com