

Citywide Customer Service in Peoria

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Citizens living in Peoria, Illinois, have long wanted and expected service equal to or exceeding the standards set by top-performing private organizations, so the concept of customer service is not new to the city. Peoria's managers and employees are encouraged to examine their respective customer service roles regularly and to renew their commitments to the citizens they serve. The city, which is dedicated to ongoing service delivery improvements, offers comprehensive customer service training and consultation assistance to all its employees.

Project Objective

City administrators want to make further improvements in the way in which service is provided, to raise concern for special populations, and to increase efficiency by tapping into techniques of quality management, empowerment, teamwork, and benchmarking. To do these things, Peoria has partnered with citizens through community-based policing, open-space forums, neighborhood associations, citizens' training programs, and town-hall meetings. After considering their feedback, the city manager has called for a citywide emphasis on customer service.

In response to this directive, we have interviewed staff and council to measure organizational needs and to help formulate the customer service program's structure. Although each

This case study on local government customer service follows an article and "Customer Service Reports" published in the December 2000 issue of *PM*.

Figure 1. Elements of Peopria's Customer Service Program

Program Component	Description
Classroom Training	Two principal courses help employees understand basic customer service principles, while 14 elective courses develop the skill sets necessary to deliver good customer service.
Site Visits and Tours	Organizations within the community that have achieved exemplary customer service offer informational tours of their facilities, giving practical examples of how facility layout and appearance affect organizational efficiency and public perception.
Internal and External Consultation Services	A list of internal experts on various topics serves as the city's own speakers' bureau of internal consultants. These individuals help other divisions and departments with consultation and special training.
Training-Library Materials	The citywide training library has been stocked with new customer service materials, including videos, books, periodicals, cassettes, pamphlets, and brochures from localities throughout the country.
Public Forums/ Open-Space Events/ Surveys	City departments sponsor citizen surveys and public hearings to gain insight into service delivery and aspects that need improvement. Employees are encouraged to attend the hearings for a greater awareness of citizen concerns and city issues.
Intra- and Interdepartmental Quality Teams	Interdepartmental high-quality teams examine service delivery systems that require cooperation from two or more departments, and teams review internal systems. These teams are responsible for reviewing service objectives and taking steps toward process improvement.
Lecture Series: Help From the Experts	Several one-hour presentations (a continuation of a Breakfast Series) feature customer service experts from local businesses, medical centers, and utility companies that have developed finely tuned delivery systems for customer services.
Performance Measurement	Each department and division integrates measurable customer service objectives into its respective annual performance indicators (APIs). API statistics assist in measuring the progress of customer service activities.

individual had a different point of view, three common concerns emerged. Management should:

1. Assess how city staff interacts with citizens.
2. Enhance communication skills, as they are key to a successful customer service program.
3. Ensure that employees are fully committed to the program.

Research

To benefit Peoria's program, the history of customer service in other local government organizations was researched. As we collected information, the elements of successful programs continued to surface. Although many local governments embrace components of customer service, here is a summary of three communities that have put in place comprehensive programs.

Grand Rapids, Michigan

- Established a customer service focus in all areas of service.
- Established employee teams to offer input.
- Brought in representatives of private businesses to help train staff.
- Insisted that staff go the extra mile in serving others.
- Redesigned city hall to make it less of a rat maze and installed kiosks.
- Offered all employees name tags.
- Published a pocket-size, eight-page, waterproof city service directory for all employees.
- Believed, and believes, that if you give most staff the proper tools, they will do a good job.

Chesapeake, Virginia

- Began the "Year of the Citizen" program in 1991.
- Has established employee focus groups to answer questions like "What frustrates you?" and "How can we improve?"
- Trains new employees yearly.
- Has developed the *Customer Satisfaction Depends on Me* training handbook, course handouts, and a historic outline of the development of its customer service program.


Phoenix, Arizona

- Has appointed service-representative teams within each department to develop, administer, and evaluate customer service projects. The teams assess points of customer contact, service cycles, service blockages, and service delivery data and recommend improvements.
- Now, offers a one-day workshop entitled *Identifying Service Vision and Values* to department directors and top managers; a two-day *Systems and Structures Audit* workshop to service-representative team members; and a two-day *Building Customer Skills* workshop for all front-line workers.

Peoria's Plan

Peoria's program was put in place last year to help employees focus their attention on delivering high-quality service and customer satisfaction, using a customer service model to raise the overall efficiency of the city at the systemic level. Because of the size of the organization and the complexity of its mission, full program implementation could take 12 to 18 months. It is the staff's intention, however, to maintain an emphasis on customer service indefinitely. Figure 1 highlights the components of Peoria's program.

Classroom training is a critical component in conveying the customer service message. Peoria employees are required to attend a variation of the foundation course, *Providing Quality Customer Service*, which covers the basic elements. Department and division heads, supervisors, and key management personnel attend *Managing Customer Service Operations and Personnel*

Both courses help employees share a common vision of our service strategy. A series of elective courses also helps develop basic skill sets. Figure 2 lists courses that will be featured under the customer service banner. And, to complement these activities, two new courses have debuted in 2000: *Executive School for Municipal Leaders* and the *Supervisor Development Series*. 

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For information on customer service, visit ICMA's Bookstore & More online at bookstore.icma.org.

Figure 2. Customer Service Training Courses and the Times Allotted to Each

Course Titles	Course Times
Foundation Courses	
Providing Quality Customer Service	3.5 hours
Managing Customer Service Operations and Personnel	7 hours
Elective Courses	
Advanced Telephone Skills for Front-Line Operators	3.5 hours
Assisting Citizens with Obtaining City Services	1.5 hours
Basic Telephone Skills for Front-Line Operators	3.5 hours
Building Teams	7.5 hours
Conducting Focus Groups and Public Forums	7 hours
Developing Customer Service Questionnaires	6.5 hours
GO FISH!	3 hours
Increasing Communications	3.5 hours
Process Improvement	7 hours
Public Speaking	(2) 3.5-hour sessions
Serving Internal Customers	(2) 3.5-hour sessions
Serving <i>All</i> the Customers	2.5 hours
Understanding Personality Styles	3 hours
Verbal Judo	7.5 hours

Ideas in Action

4th Monday Trade Pays

On the weekend before the fourth Monday of every month, Texas City, Texas (46,000 population), hosts 4th Monday Trade Days in the city's traditional business district. Each month the city barricades the street and 50 to 100 vendors sell food, arts and crafts, and antiques while local performers entertain the crowds. The Trade Days were part of a plan by the city's economic development commission to revitalize downtown Texas City. Since the Trade Days began in October 1997, the district has changed significantly. Where there were only one or two shops and many abandoned buildings, now there are some 15 shops—many run by original Trade Days antique dealers. Several abandoned buildings have been demolished and parks developed in their place.

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