

Quality Qorner

Recovery From a Customer Service Issue: Lesson Three

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In my last 2 columns I explained how to identify the customers of your laboratory's various work processes, which is important for 2 reasons. First, knowing who the customer of the process is will help in designing the process to best meet the customer's needs. Second, knowing who the customer is will greatly help in the service recovery process; that is, the remedial and corrective actions needed to soothe a disgruntled internal or external customer and fix the underlying problem.

The service recovery process is an attempt to get things back on track after a customer has complained about a service issue and should begin at the time a problem becomes known. The example of nurse Wanda and her patient's lost H1N1 swab sample is an example of an external customer service problem, with Wanda being the customer of the laboratory staff members who answered the telephone. The internal service problem is represented by defects in the sample accessioning process such that the swab sample's receipt in the laboratory was not properly recorded.

The following 6-phase process¹ should be part of every new laboratory employee's customer service training program.

1. *Apologize.* Even if what happened is not your fault, just apologize. The laboratory staff members who took Wanda's calls inquiring as to the status of the patient's swab sample should have apologized for not being able to quickly retrieve that information. When a waiter brings your high-priced entrée improperly prepared, don't you want him to say that he is sorry?

2. *Listen and empathize.* Customers want and need personal care. The laboratory call receivers should have perceived that Wanda was a customer at the end of a problem waiting for resolution that affected her customer, the patient. They should have shown Wanda they cared about the situation and the patient. How do you feel when you are telling a store's customer service staff an item is defective and the person seems disinterested? You want someone to hear you.

3. *Say what you are going to do about the problem.* Customers want what they expected. Wanda was not asking too much of the laboratory to find the patient sample she had sent there. Whatever else was going on, someone should have told Wanda that she would immediately look for the sample and should have taken Wanda's phone number to get back to her. When you are reporting a service problem with your Internet connection, don't you want to know what is going to be done about it?

4. *Offer atonement.* Many hospitals have implemented service recovery programs giving staff the authority to issue small tokens to a customer experiencing a problem, however, usually the tokens are given only to patients. So, perhaps these programs should be expanded to include internal customers as

well, or maybe the laboratory should start its own token program. Nurse Wanda could have collected a coupon for a free cappuccino from the coffee bar. When your airline flight is severely delayed or canceled because of mechanical problems, don't you like getting a food voucher?

5. *Deliver on your promises.* Customers want you to do what you said you were going to do. If the laboratory call receiver had told Wanda that he or she would look for the sample and get back to her, then that is exactly what should have happened but unfortunately did not. However, just be realistic about your promises and only make assurances that you can really deliver. Don't you get annoyed when the cable guy says he will be there for sure at 10:00 AM and does not show up for a few more hours?

6. *Follow up.* Find and remove the root cause. In an established nonconforming event (eg, occurrence) management program, the missing sample incident would have been recorded and submitted for further investigation. Analysis would likely have revealed the laboratory experienced several of the same type of nonconforming events in past months. It would have initiated a root cause analysis, modified the sample receiving process accordingly, and verified that the fix was satisfactory. Wouldn't it be nice if you never experienced the same problem twice with any company?

My former hospital employer had 2 organization-wide performance standards entitled "Hospitality" and "Response to Change." At appraisal time, staff demeanor to internal and external customers and response to process changes accounted for 20% of one's performance evaluation. You could be technically excellent and still only get an average appraisal score—and a resulting average wage increase. This got people's attention!

1. Gee G, Richardson W, Wortman B. The Quality Manager Primer. In: *Quality Council of Indiana*. 2nd ed. West Terre Haute, IN: Quality Council of Indiana; 1996.

This Month's Quality Quote:

"The customer deserves to receive exactly what we have promised to produce—accurate results in a timely manner."

—Philip Crosby
(as modified by Berte)

Lucia M. Berte is President, *Laboratories Made Better! PC*. Send your comments and questions to lbberte@LaboratoriesMadeBetter.com.



Lucia M. Berte
MA, MT(ASCP)SBB,DLM;
[CQA\(ASQ\)CMQ](mailto:CQA(ASQ)CMQ)