

# Quality Qorner

## Who Is the Customer?

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My friend Wanda (the former medical technologist turned staff nurse), recently sent me the following e-mail. I have reproduced it verbatim, so you can feel the steam coming off the top of her head.

*I have an ugly lab story, and it always just amazes me the things that are said. The lab lost an H1N1 swab, and it took me multiple phone calls and over an hour of my time to prove to them they needed to do something. They told me "they just didn't have it" and when I asked for a supervisor, they told me he was in a meeting and there was no one to talk to! When I kept calling and insisting (that) they got (the swab), they finally started searching and found it had been sent to the state lab without it being logged in Micro. No apology, no "I'll call you with the results." No customer service! Do something!*

From the first day of my medical technology internship our teachers emphasized that the laboratory's customer was the patient. Now, granted, my internship was a long time ago, but I ask you, did your teachers ever once tell you that nurses are also your customers? And if they did, then why is Wanda having the experience described above?

Wanda's story does not reflect the rudeness of a single person. What is most disturbing is that she got unhelpful responses from different microbiology staff. One of Wanda's other "ugly lab" stories was about chemistry staff, which indicates an underlying misunderstanding in that laboratory as to what customer service really means and for whom it is meant. Sounds like it is time for a crash course in Customers 101.

Much is contained in the quality management body of knowledge about customers. Indeed, all businesses cannot exist without them, and *it is the purpose of the process and the company to serve its customers*. Most quality professionals consider the customer to be "any individual or group that receives and must be satisfied with the service, work product, or output of a process."<sup>1</sup>

First we must be clear on which laboratory processes and services we are talking about. The laboratory's path of workflow is a series of sequential processes that starts with the placement of the test order; proceeds through preanalytic subprocesses of sample collection, transport, and receipt; analytic subprocesses of testing, review, and interpretation; and post-analytic processes of report preparation and distribution. The laboratory's ultimate service (work product) is the report of patient test and examination results and related information.

So, who is the customer of the laboratory's report? Do patients receive and study laboratory reports? Make diagnoses from the information they contain? Create treatment plans? Deliver plan-based care? I think not! I think the customer of the report, and any information that goes into deriving the report, is a lot more likely a practitioner than it is the patient.

Then when is the patient the customer? Well, the patient is the individual who receives and must be satisfied with the diagnosis, treatment, and care delivered through physician and nursing processes; therefore, it seems the patient is their customer and not that of the laboratory directly. You may, however, correctly argue that the patient is the customer of, and therefore receives and must be satisfied with, phlebotomy services. Whereas this is true, let us get back to nurse Wanda's story.

Wanda wanted to know the status of a sample sent to the laboratory. The laboratory's purpose is to receive patient samples, derive results and information from them, and provide this information back to the customer—who is, remember, the individual or group that receives and must be satisfied with the results of the service, work product, or process. The laboratory staff did not understand that Nurse Wanda, who needed laboratory information, was the customer. The staff did not act accordingly. End result? No customer service!

Wanda and I would like you to do a few things:

- 1) Make it your personal mission to serve your customers.
- 2) Be a role model in this regard to all other laboratory staff.
- 3) Teach students in laboratory professional training programs and new employees who their customers are and evaluate them on their willingness and ability to deliver true customer service.

I learned this lesson painfully in my new first job as an afternoon shift generalist technologist many years ago. The laboratory director called me into his office after he heard me be short and unhelpful to a staff nurse and saw me hang up the phone loudly in disgust. He gave me an undeservedly gentle "Who is the customer?" epiphany that day; I have never since forgotten that embarrassing moment.

1. Okes D, Westcott RT, eds. *The Certified Quality Manager Handbook*. 2nd ed. Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Quality Press; 2001.

### ***This Month's Quality Quote:***

"The truth is that when it comes to quality, the customer has all the votes."

—John Guaspari

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