



Public Sector Reform Column



THE CUSTOMER IS KING

If organisations are to demonstrate the competitive advantages of strong customer service and product quality, they will have to accept the fact and understand that the customer is king. In the March 2003 public sector reform column, I wrote about the vigilante customers who demanded good old fashioned value, convenience, choice and plenty of attention. These customers are empowered customers who should not be taken for granted. They are well-informed and know what is what. They have choices with the power and freedom to exercise those choices. Therefore, it is up to organisations to provide quality service and give respect to customers. In the private sector, the customer is at the core of business management and in the public sector our customers, the citizens, require timely, efficient, courteous and transparent services. They are also at the core of public service.

Empowerment and Respect

Organisations that live by the rule that the customer is king tend to do very well, whilst those which do not walk the talk disappoint customers time and time again. Organisations which do not understand or recognise that the customer is king will undoubtedly have a short life span. How many times have you had to stand in a long queue only to see staff boldly doing nothing whilst cashier desks remain closed? How often have you been charged for a whole day's service when you only received three or four hour's service? I'm sure we have all experienced this feeling of disappointment at some time in our lives. Organisations need to ask themselves what harm it would do to open that extra cashier desk during peak business times. Is it too much for a customer to be billed for the hours of service they actually received? All organisations should know that the citizen is a customer and the customer is

king. We, as service providers, need to empower and respect our customers and provide genuine products and services tailored to the needs and satisfaction of customers.

Business Development

By accepting the concept of empowered customers, an organisation can direct itself to be more accountable to its customers and gear its management services directly to the customers' benefit. Also, organisations are forced to be more creative with their products and services to give customers wider and better choices. The idea of customer empowerment has developed to a point where businesses can no longer afford to ignore it or even escape it. Traditional business practices of the 70's, 80's and even the 90's have not brought the desired level of customer satisfaction needed to maintain customer loyalty and commitment in the millennium. This is the main reason why several organisations have had to rethink their roles and functions and make themselves more customer oriented and focused. Today, almost every airline is offering air miles or air points. Magna Reward Points are widely accepted and used by customers across Barbados, because the stores that accept Magna Cards have realised that their customers should be thanked and rewarded.

Innovation

Trends have shown that millions of dollars are being spent across the globe to achieve the best value from developments in new technology, markets, products and people. Governments have realised that this new way of thinking and doing business makes way for several improvements in the quality of public management and public services. Our Government is no exception to this trend and several reform initiatives have already taken place in the area of new technology. For example, e-governance has seen the development of Corporate Affairs and Intellectual Property's (CAIPO) website, where customers can download or search vital business information without having to wait and stand in line. Decentralisation is also playing an important role to give customers more choices in the types and points of services. The General Post Office now offers a range of services and products to complement its core functions and customers can now purchase the post card as well as the stamp all at the same time. Customer Charters are now being developed in several key customer oriented

departments. The emphasis is placed on improving service delivery through accountability and the first Customer Charter in the public service will be launched in the new financial year.

Public Sector Challenges

Implementing practices for customer empowerment in any kind of organisation can bring some critical challenges to the surface. In the public sector, ministries and departments have had to act swiftly to create effective market and customer based strategies that can be effective in a public sector environment. Emphasis is being placed on changing the mindsets of individuals to take on a whole new perspective of the customer, contrary to what has been believed since the early days of the service. Government has had to find the balance between the need for business-minded management to be implemented in such a way that it does not disadvantage less privileged members of society and the public service customer must feel as empowered as their private sector counterpart. In general, the Barbados public service does not have a consistent way of providing all of its services. It makes sense that different approaches and methods must apply for different types of customers using the various services.

Customer Pressure

The strength of the empowered customer is such that the pressure is on to find new and improved ways of managing business, especially in those organisations in the front-line dealing with customers face-to-face. These organisations are in the hot seat receiving cynicism on a day to day basis, but they cannot let themselves be deterred by the very same cynic attitudes displayed by their customers. We have to listen to our customers as they are the ones that will tell us what they want and how they want it. A report entitled 'Best Practices in Customer-Driven Strategic Planning' February 1997, says "Nowhere is the voice of the customer more important to heed than in the direction-setting process." Customers must be given the best value and quality service possible. The findings of a recently completed Public Sector Reform Survey should assist the Office of Public Sector Reform in addressing the opportunities available to improve service delivery in the public sector.

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