

## **Quality Customer Service: Five Things You Should Do To Achieve Care Excellence in the Higher Education Sector**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze current literature and combine it with empirical data to present ways of achieving quality customer service and care excellence in higher education. The authors define teaching as sharing one's knowledge with others; a professor should do so with passion and enthusiasm. The findings revealed that the professor working in conjunction with administration contributes significantly to the success of customer satisfaction through flexibility and by working together with learners. Educators need to show passion for what they do to make recipients feel comfortable and satisfied in the learning environment. Learners espouse the behaviors of their education providers and can transfer or communicate those behaviors to other people and organizations. Current learners want quick service, flexibility, and timely feedback from facilitators.

*Keywords: Customer service, Passion, Anticipate needs, Adaptive Leadership, Time Management*

### **Introduction**

Quality customer service in the education sector is more essential today than ever before as customers actively participate in the creation and delivery of education. In education, the professor is the primary facilitator of quality service. As a result of rapid advances in technology, teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires prompt response along with personalized attention. The higher education sector is growing at a fast pace and service providers can benefit from it in a magnificent way by retaining students and lowering attrition rates (Chavan, Bowden-Everson, Lundmark, & Zwar, 2014). Online students look for the same type of attention and caring as they do in traditional brick and mortar schools.

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Although not all learners will look or read our personalized feedback, we should provide examples to guide and satisfy some of them. Some students are procrastinators; it is our job as educators to be flexible and work with them. Why? Because they are customers! Exceeding learners' expectations leads to positive experience and customer loyalty. Providing excellent customer service and a welcoming environment in the higher education sector entails full commitment from professors. Unlike other industries where consumers use products, learners in the higher education sector tend to wait until graduation day. Meanwhile, learners expect to receive quality service to achieve their academic goals.

## Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted on customer service, and the researchers have focused on different areas. However, research on customer service in the education industry does not seem to be getting as much attention as it should (Choudhury, 2015; Das & Haque, 2013; Chavan, Bowden-Everson, Lundmark, & Zwar, 2014). Educational professionals should receive adequate training on customer service to deliver better education (Ngee Goh, 2014). The two main types of strategies for achieving impeccable service in the education sector are quality and attention to detail (Kalargyrou & Woods, 2011).

In education, the professor is the primary deliverer of quality service by presenting empirical evidence in a professional manner to students (Kamble & Sarangdhar, 2015). Delivering quality service with compassion to students distinguishes a premier educational institution from other institutions (Liu, 2016; Wattanasupachoke, 2014). Quality service leads to distinctive socialization between the provider and the customer; it translates into immediate acceptance (Rashid, Abdullah, Yusuf, & Shaari, 2016; St Hill & Yazici, 2014). Outstanding customer service is not challenging to achieve if one employs a caring strategy, embraces a unique culture (Zhou & Xu, 2015; London, 2014). An educational organization embracing service quality is likely to attract goal-oriented learners and retain them through the end, graduation day.

Jain, Sahney, and Sinha (2013) conducted a study on learners' perception of service quality in India using a teaching framework and found that mutual understanding between the professor and the learner is one of the significant elements in delivering exceptional education. The researchers discovered that quality service in higher education is achieved when management, librarians, professors, and support personnel work together to create a different learning experience. Habib and Jalloh (2016) pointed out the importance of working together to provide quality service and effective teaching externally. When one provides excellent customer service in an educational institution and in good manner, the learner feels a level of satisfaction and passes the message around to other learners (Chong & Pervaiz, 2014; Valiee, Moridi, Khaledi, & Garibi, 2016; Sharabi, 2013; Sahin Dölarslan, 2014). It creates organizational as well as personal reputation, which is what one should strive to attain everyday.

Shao-Chang (2013) suggested that in order to provide excellent customer service in the higher education sector, educational institutions need to start treating learners as valuable customers. Vasquez (2015) concurred with the researchers and posited, "Students are not just students; they are customers who have service expectations" (p.11). Shao-Chang pointed out that quality service demands accurate attention as it involves continuous evaluations by customers. Because

service is intangible, each education supplier needs to show special value and consistency to learners (Ibrahim, Wang, & Hassan, 2013; Zaitseva, Goncharova, & Androsenko, 2016).

Describing apprentices as consumers set a precedent of expectancy and personalized feedback, it leads to the application of best service quality (Hurst, 2013). Providing the best service to learners signifies commitment and dedication to excellence from the University and the professor (Hurst, 2013; Wattanasupachoke, 2014; Yusof & Ghouri, 2013). Quality service is initialized by the organization and implemented, carried out by the lecturer through eloquent delivery (Ibrahim, Wang, & Hassan, 2013). In an educational setting, quality service is the process of keeping consistency in customer satisfaction and growing innovation to create momentum in the institution.

Supplying quality customer service to learners is significant because it leads to self-motivation and the development of enthusiastic persons. Das and Haque, (2013) suggested that the availability of the professor is the utmost contributing factor in delivering extraordinary service to learners. Learning encompasses many elements, pleasing students requires the incorporation of those elements in a methodological way.

It is important to understand that on-ground students look for the same type of attention and caring as those studying in an online setting (Murthy & Murthy, 2014). Quality customer service should be the top priority of an educational organization. Sahin Dölarslan (2014) pointed out that consumer contentment tends to associate with the long-term professional relationship. When a university exceeds learners' expectations, it experiences customer loyalty, which is paramount (Das & Haque, 2013; Harrison-Walker, 2014). Although efforts to warranty the experience of clients may not be a novel idea, advanced educational institutions seem to have undervalued customer alignment when compared to other business establishments (Alzamel, 2014).

Current customers want rapid and courteous service (Sharabi, 2013). Today's customers evaluate service providers internally through personal observations and externally via social media. If customers like the service they receive, many future customers can learn about it. If they dislike the service, the whole world is going to learn about it on social media. As the review of the literature indicates, each person in the education sector should provide quality customer service to gain momentum.

## **Methodology**

The authors used desk research, expert assessment, and empirical data in the process of quality customer service and care excellence in the higher education sector. Based on the recognized gaps, the authors suggest that future research be carried out on customer service from an educational perspective.

## **Findings**

### **The Importance of Working Together in an Educational Setting**

The results revealed that a mutual understanding between the professor and the learner is one of the significant elements in delivering an excellent education. The availability of the professor is the primary factor in delivering extraordinary service to learners. A very significant finding revealed that quality service in higher education is achieved when management, librarians, professors, and support personnel work together to create a different learning experience. Another key finding was that when a university exceeds learners' expectations, it experiences customer loyalty.

## Discussions and Developments

**Show Passion for What You Do:** Learners can identify your level of enthusiasm based on your responses and tone of voice. Whether you teach in a traditional brick and mortar or in an online environment, please remember to keep a sincere smile. On the ground, teaching requires positive eye contact and posture. It is important to know that learners are watching not only everything you do, but the approach you take to do it. In an online atmosphere, you should not assume you are only behind a computer screen and neglect others.

Learners read your words, tone of voice to judge you. For example, you can demonstrate that you are passionate about what you do by providing exemplified feedback. Can a service provider satisfy all learners or customers? The answer is no because each learner or customer has a different set of expectations from an organization. Even though not all learners will look at your personalized feedback, providing examples within your feedback is an effective way to satisfy some of them. In many cases, students express concerns about the feedback they received from their professors.

Educators who provide examples with feedbacks help learners to improve where there might be needs for more clarification (Anderson, & Teare, 2011; Cheng, Sok, & Foo, 2012; Stephenson, 2011; London, 2014). By doing so, educators also help learners realize and acknowledge that the grades they received were fair and justified. Learners are as busy as the professors and really value when professors take the time to show passion and eagerness to serve. When an educator does so, he or she encourages learners to continue learning. Can one motivate others? The answer is also no because educators cannot motivate everyone. "Motivation comes from within a person; encouragement from others" (Vasquez, p.75, 2015). The professor encourages students to motivate themselves when he or she demonstrates a true passion for teaching.

Physicist Albert Einstein said, "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." As expressed before, teaching is sharing one's knowledge with others, and a professor should do so with passion. One needs to show passion for what he or she does to make recipients feel comfortable and satisfied at all times. Learners espouse the behaviors of their education providers and can transfer or communicate those behaviors to other people and organizations.

If the behaviors are positive, then, you are on the right side as an educator. If the behaviors are negative, you enter the criticized zone. Which side are you on or would like to be? Show passion for what you do and learners will remember you as their education hero! Education is not for everyone, and an educator needs to realize that because "There is no place in education today for

mediocrity; we should not accept it from students, administrators, policy-makers and, most importantly, ourselves as teachers” (Ellison & Woods, p. 19, 2016). Even though not everyone wants to learn, every professor needs to show passion for teaching him or her. Not doing so discourages the person who needs personalized attention for progression. When you show passion for what you do, you inspire learners and transform their lives. When you show passion for what you do, you are better understood. When you show passion for what you do, you feel a sense of accomplishment, and that is what the education profession should be all about (Shao-Chang, 2013; Mahajan, Agrawal, Sharma, & Nangia, 2014; Erin, 2015). When you show passion for what you do, you can guide others with fewer complications and create lasting impressions. You also create lasting memories which are paramount in the education sector. Showing passion for what you do encourages two things: (1) putting yourself in someone else’s current situation and (2) remembering the lasting memories of passionate professors.

**Be on Time by Promising Less and Delivering More:** Today’s customers want fast service in the education sector. They want it the right way. Have you ever sent an e-mail or placed a phone call and waited for someone who took an unreasonable amount of time to reply? How did you feel as a customer? Answering these two questions allows you to assess the situation from the client's perspective. It also reinforces the importance of being on time. The practice applies when teaching online, why? The student may have a question like where to post a discussion or about an assignment or the student may be new to the university or learning environment.

The student who is familiar with the system may also have a paramount question that cannot be taken for granted or forgotten. One should remember that students are not just students; they are high paying customers who expect prompt responses from everyone that they come in contact with (Vasquez, 2015). The education business is a fascinating one because it prepares individuals for unlimited possibilities. Education providers prepare learners through delivering initial promises and setting examples. If a professor provides timely feedback when posting an announcement, the professor could be heralded as an academic hero (Bellingkrodt & Wallenburg, 2015). Some learners are eager to know how they did on their projects or term papers.

Learners feel pleased when they receive their results on time. This is also an important part of the learners’ experience when they need to provide unofficial transcripts to their employers (Ament et al., 2014). It is imperative for you, the professor to deliver content in a timely manner time because your customers depend on you so they can be efficient in the delivery of goods or services to their clients (Naude & Rudansky-Kloppers, 2016). Promising less and delivering more can lead to customer satisfaction and customer acquisition, why? Because you are being watched not only by learners but also by employers and, of course, family members.

When you under promise and over deliver, you earn more trust and likability from those you serve. Will everyone trust or like you the same way? Absolutely not, each person behaves and thinks differently. Then, should you be late or deliver an inferior service? Timely feedback is a win-win situation for both the learners and the professor. The principal goal of quality service is the commitment of a professor to be on time and model distinction to learners.

## Vasquez and Davis

Some people become effective because they assimilate good business practices from their mentors, managers, and professors. Therefore, everyone in a position of authority needs to model positive learning attributed by creating and presenting excellence. Concentrating on quality service is vital as it can increase institutional likeability and overall image (Vasquez, 2014). One should never compromise on delivering timely service to learners especially after a promise is made. When a service provider makes a promise, he or she needs to honor that promise.

If the service provider does not keep the promise, his or her trust gets lost, and customers may walk away. For the most part, learners tend to remember what is promised to them and sometimes forget what is required of them. For example, when a professor makes a promise like “Grades will be posted within 48 hours” after the class ends, learners do and will remember that statement. If grades are not posted within the stated timeframe, learners can draw a conclusion of overpromising and under delivering; that is intolerable when making the attempt to provide quality customer service. It is all about them, the customers and a service provider (professor) ought to understand customers (learners) look for timely guidance and provision to achieve their missions.

Because technology and globalization have transformed the way pedagogy is delivered, learners have many educational institutions to choose from. Learners stay with universities that make timely delivery part of quality education and overall educational experience. Two competing universities may have similar programs, the same accreditation, credentialed professors, compatible facilities or online systems and one performs better than the other. Why? Because it is everyone’s objective to be on time while under promising and over delivering. Collaboration is indispensable, and every employee must keep the learner (customer) in mind at all times. Everyone is punctual on graduation day, and the ceremony starts right away. One needs to practice being punctual; that is, from the moment learners commence to learn until the moment they graduate.

**Exhibit Patience and Anticipate Needs:** Not all learners learn the same way; some students grasp things right away, others may take more time. When one exercises patience in the learning environment, he or she can encourage more interaction and productivity among participants. Why? Exhibiting patience leads to more collaboration; it signals a sense of caring. An effective professor understands that every learner learns at a different pace.

Providing excellent customer service to learners entails a pedagogical technique centered on socialization between the service provider and service receiver (St Hill, & Yazici, 2014). Sometimes learners challenge the facilitator to understand if he or she can maintain or lose control. The challenge can take place in an on-ground or online learning environment. For example, a student may ask for an explanation right after the professor explains it. If the professor exhibits impatience gesture or changes his or her tone of voice, another student may deem that gesture or tone of voice as poor service. Another example would be in an online setting where a student may post a question in a public forum such as under “Ask your Instructor” section to judge the reaction from the professor. Achieving excellent customer service requires the provider to anticipate needs, one ought to plan accordingly because learner needs may arise at an inconvenient time. It is important to think outside the box and plan for unexpected occurrences.

Sometimes an educational institution's representative may give the benefit of the doubt and go the extra mile to maintain positive interaction and create customer satisfaction. Giving the benefit of the doubt can lead to customer retention and a better reputation; the learner may notice the level of service and share with others (Singh & Kumar, 2016)! Serving learners requires patience across every industry including the education sector; it is about exhibiting commitment to serve in the most efficient way. Anticipating needs is part of the efficient planning and proper execution, it is crucial in education. As a professor, your goal should be to guide and serve learners each day without losing patience while anticipating their needs and helping them succeed.

**Display Adaptive Leadership:** As a professor, one should adopt a style for each occasion and recognize that every customer requires a personalized direction. Serving learners today is entirely different than it was two or three decades ago. In the past, most class interaction occurred face-to-face; now, it occurs online. Adaptive leadership is grounded on practical principles and a person's abilities to engage and perform with everyone onboard (Randall & Coakley, 2007; Stephenson, 2011). It recognizes that one must be adaptive to create and facilitate positive learning outcomes. Adaptive leadership is needed in the classroom/online environment to engage learners and demonstrate an action (Brothers & Schnurman-Crook, 2015).

Displaying adaptive leadership is not only reserved for one person such as the CEO or a top education administrator, but for all individuals involved in preparing new leaders. Leadership is the process of guiding employees or participants to accomplish stated goals. It is an important process because the leader cannot accomplish all goals alone (London, 2014). There are many leadership styles, but researchers have not yet coined a style that is universal.

To achieve a goal such as quality customer service and care excellence, the leader needs to adopt a leadership style suitable for the environment. In an educational workplace environment, everybody is a leader and should be adaptive to different scenarios (Hofmeyer, Sheingold, Klopper, & Warland, 2015; Vohra, 2015). Every employee plays an adaptive leadership role when interacting with a student by initiating a satisfactory state of mind each time an action occurs. For example, the person answering the telephone or chatting with a prospective learner initiates a cordial conversation with an adaptive approach to gain trust.

Once the prospective learner becomes an active learner, the Registrar enrolls the student as part of proper orientation. By doing so, the person is taking an adaptive leadership role and setting the stage for a new, promising journey. The professor recognizes that there is a new learner in class and displays an adaptive leadership approach by working with the learner in a steady way to make him or her feel welcome; and comfortable. It is important to realize that it takes combined efforts and adaptive leadership to succeed.

A study conducted by Cheng, Sok, and Foo (2012) found that adaptive leadership is the foundation for building great relationships with learners. The study also found that leadership is more effective when the leader presents guidelines to form an enthused service distinction atmosphere. Adaptive leadership is designed to serve learners in distinct ways by fulfilling their

expectations while making a collaborative progression. Adaptive leadership contributes to greater exchanges between customers and those serving (Ibrahim, Wang, & Hassan, 2013). Education is connecting nations as a result of globalization, and displaying an adaptive leadership style today is profoundly important.

Today, globalization in conjunction with technology allows learners to learn from anywhere. Learners come from different cultures and with learning styles into a teaching platform with one facilitator (Law, Niederhauser, Christensen, & Shear, 2016; Sanders, 2010). For the professor, adaptive leadership is about leading and learning to offer the type of service desired by learners. It is imperative to display adaptive leadership to lead learners on the right path toward completing their program. Adaptive leadership encourages the person leading the discussion and working with diverse learners to show a different perspective. Displaying adaptive leadership helps one understand that it is not about him or her, it is about them. Adaptive leadership requires every service provider's dedication and willingness to help the learner by influencing and modeling effectiveness the correct way.

**Bring Hospitality to the Learning Environment:** Share your expertise and be an excellent professor. A combination of theory and practice leads to achieving excellence customer service. Hospitality is the art of being hospitable, and welcoming; it is the process of providing the utmost customer service to consumers (Bevan, Hartwell, Hemingway, & Proença, (2015). Bringing hospitality to the learning environment is a way of treating students like VIPs in a hospitality establishment. As an education provider, one is likely to interact with learners from all over the world. The hospitality industry, as well as the tourism sector, is big Zaitseva, Goncharova, and Androsenko (2016) and students have numerous sources when seeking quality education. As the expert and educational leader, you should smile and show enthusiasm to all learners to make students feel at ease and engage in the learning process- congratulate learners who engage and encourage those who are less engaging to participate.

As a service provider, one needs to know that education is more valuable when learners interact with courteous employees and educators. It inspires learners to show more appreciation and respectful behaviors when they feel encouraged and motivated. As a service provider, one needs to do everything possible to pamper learners and create positive scholastic experiences (Muala, 2016; Crawford, 2013; Anderson & Teare, 2011; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2014). To pamper learners means adopting a personalized approach to teaching and serving in a candid manner.

Bringing hospitality to the classroom, the online environment is an astute technique because it can lower tense moments and anxiety. Some learners feel pressure when studying challenging subjects, working on big projects, or preparing for final exams. When those tense moments arise, the professor should be sympathetic, accommodating, and encouraging to instill confidence in learners (Gabriel, 2016). Hospitality is not exclusively for the hospitality industry (e.g. a hotel, restaurant, airline, or cruise) where most guests or passengers receive luxurious customer service and VIP treatment.

Hospitality is ideal for the higher education sector because education is an intangible service, it is beneficial to recipients if it serves its purpose (Chong, & Pervaiz, 2014). Teaching today

involves more than lecturing from a book, it involves presenting practical applications with a friendly attitude. It includes the integration of excellent service in a polite way to create “Wow” moments by bringing true gratification to all learners. Teaching includes inspiring and one should use consistency (Kalargyrou & Woods, 2011; Kashif & Ting, 2014). The professor can generate memorable, intellectual experiences if he or she is as hospitable as the cruise director of a cruise line.

Hospitality is destined to excite guests. It can equally excite students in the learning environment. If the professor adopts a hospitable strategy aimed at exceeding everyone’s expectations, he or she can build enthusiasm and impetus for loyalty (Padin & Svensson, 2014; Teimouri, Fanae, Jenab, Khoury, & Moslehpour, 2016). When one brings hospitality to the learning environment, he or she creates positive memories, and that is what quality customer service is all about.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The main limitations of the study included the gathering of data through literature review rather than through personal interviews or focus groups. Another limitation was time and funding to travel around the world or to visit as many nations as possible. However, the authors suggest the continuation of the research focusing on customer service in higher education institutions.

### **Conclusion**

In summation, this article provides empirical evidence supported by previous literature on quality customer service in the higher education sector. Serving learners requires patience across every industry, particularly in education. We found that students like to be treated like customers and expect exceptional service from the professor, administration, and every person they come in contact with. Quality customer service requires integrated commitment and willingness to serve each day.

### **Future Research and Recommendations**

Future research should focus on customer service from an educational perspective. Because customer service is intangible and challenging to measure, the research should be qualitative to elicit lived experiences from participants. Researchers should conduct empirical research studies to determine more conclusions and findings.

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