

IMPACT



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Customer Service Program Impacts County Residents

The Situation

Businesses, county governments, and non-profit organizations seek high quality customer service and employee training that is also affordable and convenient for employees and managers to attend. For rural communities, high quality training keeps small local businesses competitive with larger businesses in more urban areas that attract customers. In addition, companies that deliver high quality customer service are more likely to retain customers and have customers who speak highly of the business to other customers.

To obtain customer service training, people in Idaho's rural communities either pay trainers to travel to communities or send a few employees out of town for training. Seldom are all employees given training opportunities or is training provided uniformly across the company.

Our Response

We started offering customer service classes in response to a request from Bonner County Commissioners who wanted training for county employees. Extension Educators worked with department heads to determine educational needs, and then adapted a customer service curriculum from Oklahoma State University, "Oklahoma Pride." Information on conflict management and a video from University of Idaho Human Resources Dept. was also used.

Customer service for county employees workshops were 2 hours long and were offered 6 times. Eighty-six county employees attended from nearly every county department.

Our next series of workshops were delivered to library employees through the East Bonner County Library District in Sandpoint and Clark Fork. Thirty-six library employees attended the workshops.

Through relationships with local business people in the chamber of commerce, Extension shared information about customer service programming. We partnered with a sub-committee of the Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce to develop workshops on customer service for local businesses.

The customer service program evolved with input from participants and the advisory group. The purposes of the workshops for county and library employees were to:

- Enhance the quality of customer service delivered in county and library offices.
- Develop a better understanding of what goes into providing quality service.
- Understand how to handle customer complaints.
- Review and evaluate customer service skills.
- To learn how to better support employees in their customer service endeavors.

Through the chamber's subcommittee we developed a business advisory group who worked with us on curriculum design. The advisory group also developed the initial design for a customer service

program called “hometown service” that allows local businesses to join a group who’s goal is to offer customers an exceptional customer service experience. Businesses that participated in the group sent employees and managers to trainings and then participated in ongoing evaluations through UI Extension. Initial workshops in the hometown customer service series attracted 59 managers and employees.

Program Outcomes

As a result of these workshops other community groups learned about University of Idaho Extension’s ability to deliver a customer service program.

Workshop evaluations revealed that the purposes of the workshops were largely realized. Participants indicated:

- Increased confidence in ability to diffuse an angry customer.
- Increased ability to make the most of first impressions with customers.
- Increased knowledge in the skills necessary to deliver great customer service.

Evaluations revealed that after taking the workshop participants:

- Agreed that creating and keeping customers is an important goal of any employee.
- Agreed that delivering service that makes a positive lasting impression takes more than simple courtesy.
- Were able to list the six pillars, and talk about the meaning of the qualities in their work.

Qualitative comments from participants revealed the impact of the program:

- “Service is more important than the product being sold.”
- “Something new I learned is that it is my choice to make customers have a good or bad experience.”
- “Make my customers know they matter.”
- “Choose my attitude—simple choice!”
- “Take care of your customers like you would your grandmother.”

- “I’ll remember the six attributes of customer partnership—generosity, truth, vision, balance, and grace.”

The future

We are excited about the future for customer service training programs in Idaho. We plan to consolidate the curriculum changes we have made and continue to work with businesses in Sandpoint on evaluation of effective long-term customer service strategies and their impacts. We also plan to share the curriculum with other educators and communities.

For More Information

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