

RETENTION

Customer Service: The Key to Enrollment and Retention Success

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There is a simple set of facts that should be at the top of every school's list of issues to concentrate on. First, the cost of attracting and enrolling new students is a significant expense for a school and most schools spend much more money than they need to. This expense is especially high if the student leaves within the first semester. Second, it is the retention of students that makes money for a school, but could make even more. And three, the success of each is controlled by one key factor. A factor that could improve enrollments by as much as 12%. The same core factor can increase retention by as much as 20%. And what is the key? **Customer service.**

Our research has found that it is customer service or the lack of it that either propels students to enroll or causes 12% of them to turn away *once they have had contact with a school.* That may bear repeating. Twelve percent of potential enrollments who have expressed interest in attending the school lose their motivation after actual contact with the school. That first contact tends to occur through three entry

points - a school's website, telephone calls and actually coming on campus. Correspondingly, it is actually customer service that will make a student want to stay at the school or switch to another at ever increasing rates as found in the research and the recent 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement report.

But it is not the customer service of retail or B-2-B sales. Customer service in schools is quite different. Retail and B-2-B sales are almost always a single event that has a focus on the purchase of a product or service with delineated time considerations; not an investment in a service meant to last a lifetime. The retail or B-2-B decision is a more limited one that is meant to satisfy a short-term need. It is often based on price and/or immediate or temporal need. The investment is thus not a deep one, so the expectation of service is correspondingly limited. Yet, when a person decides to enroll at a school to gain a career, that individual is seeking to positively affect his or her entire life and the value of it. As a result, the investment is profound and expectations high but certainly achievable by a school.

So, though students will generally state their reasons for leaving a school as either personal or financial, they are covering up a deeper dissatisfaction with the service they were provided at the school. For example, when a student says that he or she is leaving due to the cost of the school, yet transfers to another school of approximately equal or even greater cost, the given reason of finances does not hold true. And, 83% of personal reasons have been found to be general dissatisfaction with the school and its customer services.

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Moreover, it has been seen that students who have left one school often enroll in another so the “personal reasons” do not actually hold back a student who is seeking a career. If they believe the school really cares about them learning and will help them achieve their career goal, they will walk miles to get to classes and do all they need to do to graduate.

As we probe attrition, we have found that it is generally poor customer service that leads to students leaving a school. The corollary is that good customer service retains students both through the enrollment process and the school to graduation. And it is retention that builds population, increases margin and cuts costs. Studies show customer service will also increase cash flow, on-time payments and greater acceptance of tuition increases.

Customer Service to Increase Enrollment

Students define customer service in terms of how they perceive the communal equity in a school as well as their sense of three types of return on investment: financial, emotional and associative.

Communal equity refers to an individual's perception that “I am valued by the community. I am an important member of the community.” For students, that means that they believe they are important to the school and that importance is constantly indicated. They want to believe that the school does not agree with Snowball in *Animal Farm* who wrote “All animals are created equal. Only some are more equal than others.” Students wish to know that their time and issues are at least as important as the administrators and others at the school.

For instance, when a student has a problem, it needs to be addressed quickly and a solution provided. It does not mean that the problem is necessarily solved in the student's favor. There are numerous times when rules and regulations may not allow for that and students do realize that. Students know better than anyone that the customer is not always right. They take exams after all. Students want to be reassured that the issue has been given sincere, full review and consideration; not just brushed off or go unexplained. They do not just want to be told “it can't be done.” Or “I spoke to the professor and was told no.” These sort of too common responses to students tell them they are not valued enough or are important enough to spend time on. Again, it is not the solution but the process and the communication of the resolution.

It is also found in the hours offices are open. Too many schools close at 5:00 p.m. just as evening students arrive. What does that say about their status in the community? Faculty not there for office hours? Or parking close to the building is reserved for faculty and staff? Or, even worse, dirty bathrooms? What about poor telephone protocols? Phones that are not answered? Messages not returned? Rude, impolite or obviously unsmiling “hellos!” that sound like “Yuh. What?” and so on. Poor phone protocols are a major reason why 12% of potential enrollment is lost at first contact with the school? They say to students “you are not valuable enough for me to spend my time on. My time is more important than yours.” And these service issues are easily addressed with simple customer service training and mirrors.

We have found that mounting a small mirror just over a telephone helps remind people to smile when answering. If a person smiles while answering the phone, he or she cannot help but be friendly and polite. The mirror also reminds people to answer the phone promptly.

Another quickly fixed equity issue is parking. Too many schools provide the best spots to faculty and staff. Students have to park further out. What that says is that students are not as valued as others, yet schools all say they are “the reason we exist.” Work the politics and let parking be a first come, first served resolution. That says social equity and true customer service.

An overlooked representational equity issue is clean bathrooms. A dirty or dreary bathroom makes a strong negative customer service statement. This is an area in which people want to feel absolute privacy and comfort. An unkempt bathroom says that the users comfort is not a matter for the school to be concerned. This is doubled if the rooms are not well lit. Weak or gloomy lighting creates a sinister feeling that can even make people feel threatened. If they feel that way, they will blame the school and its lack of concern for students. Paint and clean bathrooms and boost lighting and you will increase enrollment and retention.

Returns on Investment (ROI)

Students expect that their investments in the school will yield fiscal, emotional and associative returns. Fiscal ROI refers to students' expectation that they will get their money's worth at the school which in turn will lead to a job in the career for which they studied. Getting their money's worth is not gauged in good grades, but that they will be provided a caring environment that will give them a fair opportunity to learn and achieve good grades.

Emotional ROI recognizes that when students choose the school, they become engaged to the school. They invest their emotions in the school and expect that the investment will be returned by faculty, staff and administrators who reciprocate their “love” of the school. That love is displayed by faculty who care and are there to help; staff who treat them with thoughtfulness and humanely.

Finally, associative ROI refers to students desire to gain status by being accepted and thus associated with the reputation of the school. This associative ROI works the same as when a person purchases an expensive car so people will connect the person to the status of the car. The same holds true for a school. If its brand is positively strong in the community, being associated with it boosts the student's standing. If not, enrollment and retention will be a battle.

Concentrating on customer service by focusing on these ROI's will increase enrollment and retention. Then the question is how? Begin by assessing the customer service levels. Identify any weaknesses and get a program of continuous training started. Customer service is an on-going need. A one time shot and brochure will not do it. Invest in customer service and you will invest in your school's success. ●

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