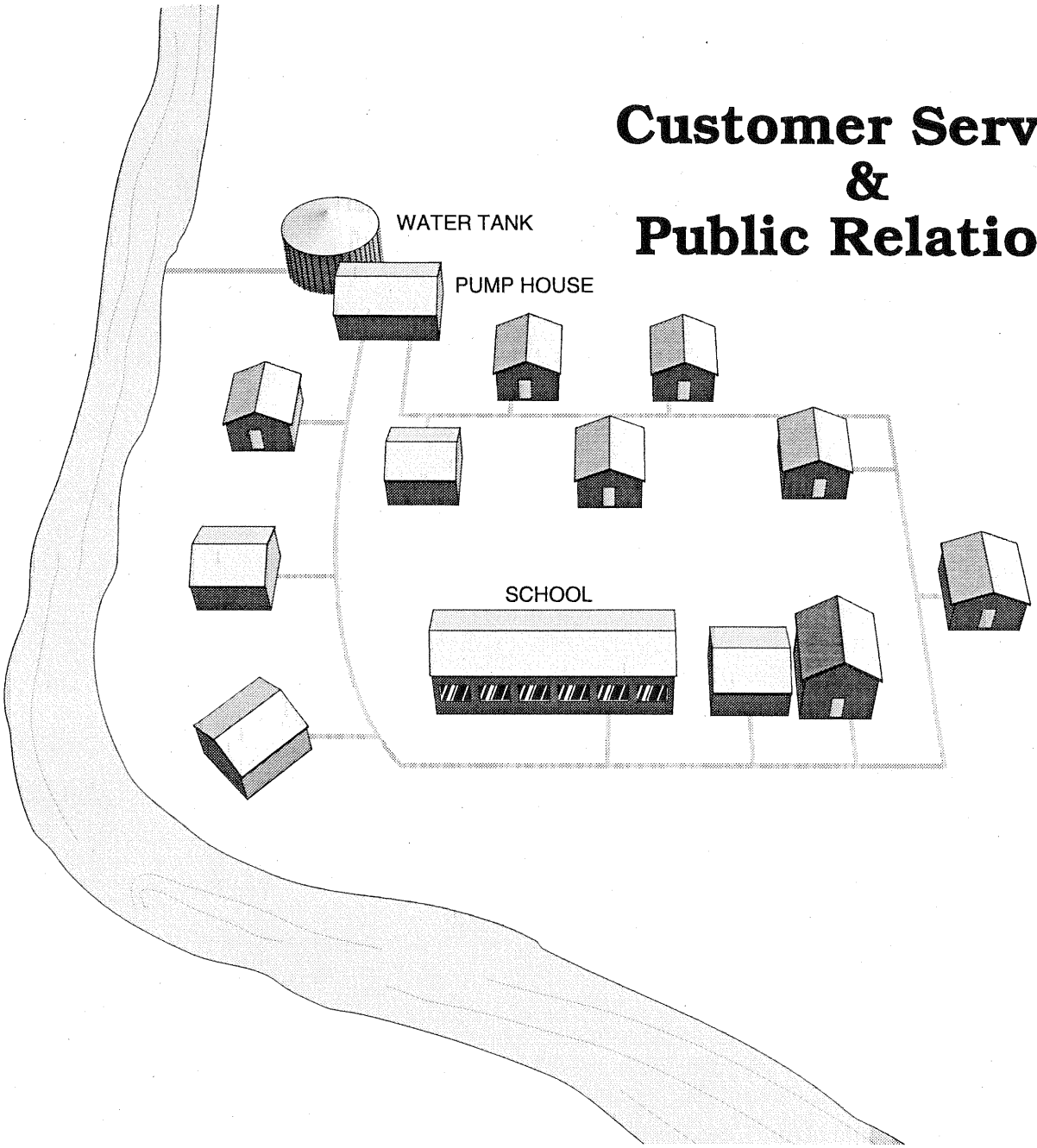
O & M of Small Water Systems

Customer Service & Public Relations



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CUSTOMER SERVICE & PUBLIC RELATIONS

WHAT IS IN THIS MODULE?

1. The goals of customer service.
2. Actions that improve customer service.
3. How to deal effectively with a customer.
4. How to effectively deal with customer complaints.
5. Methods of effectively sharing information with customers.

KEY WORKS

- Customer Service
- Customer Complaints

MATH CONCEPTS DISCUSSED

- Averages
- Max & Min range
- Check List
- Pareto chart

SCIENCE CONCEPTS DISCUSSED

- Perceptions
- Values & beliefs

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

- No safety topics are discussed in this module

MECHANICAL EQUIPMENT DISCUSSED

- No mechanical equipment was discussed in this module

INTRODUCTION

Why Customer Service

It is ironic that large utilities usually have very effective customer service programs and small communities have little or none. The ironic part is that large utilities are not impacted as greatly or as quickly as small utilities by the beliefs and perceptions of the customers. The result is the small community can gain a greater benefit than the large one from an effective customer service program.

What Does it Do

An effective customer service program identifies the level of service expected by the customer and attempts to meet those expectations. In meeting the customers expectation for service, the customers level of satisfaction with the utility is improved. This in turn improves the relationship between the utility and the customer, which results in improved collections and support for system improvements.

Does the Customer Care

Often it is said of water and wastewater utilities that the customer does not care about the system until it does not work. However, this is the way that it should be. The customer should not have to think about or worry about the water system. The system should be able to provide all the water that they need, when they want it, at an acceptable pressure, safe to use and pleasant to drink.

Collections

When a customer says that "the water bill is too high," they are often not referring to the price of the water but to the perceived quality of service and quality of product. They are saying, "for the service I get, the price is too high."

What Have We To Sell

Water is free. In the water utility business, we are not selling water but are providing water service. We are acquiring the water, treating it, delivering it and monitoring it to assure that it is safe and pleasant to use and drink.

What is Customer Service

Customer service is attempting to meet the customer's needs; communicating clearly with the customer about the utilities condition and expectations; listening to the customer and responding to their needs in a polite and pleasant manner.

Customers Perception

The customer seldom has a realistic view of the functions, process and cost associated with a water utility. What they have is their perceptions, about the quality of the water, how hard people who work for the utility work, what it costs to produce water, how well the utility is managed, and etc.. While their perceptions are not always the truth, they must be treated as truth. The key is to develop an understanding of these perceptions and develop an action plan of correcting the perceptions when they are wrong. Perceptions

were not formed overnight and cannot be changed overnight. One of the best ways to help develop perceptions based on truth, is a slow process of constantly providing the information the customer needs to make intelligent decisions about the utility and listening to what they believe so corrective action can be taken.

ACTIONS NECESSARY

Expectations

The customer has every right to know what the utilities expectations are. These are best communicated in writing. Some type of small pamphlet should be developed by each utility that spells out the following:

- A brief description of the water system. Its operation and management philosophy. Its size, shape and conditions.
- A detailed description of the services provided by the utility.
- How to make application for a new service connection. This should include each step and expected time lag.
- A detailed listing of the fees associated with new services. How those cost were arrived at and what the money paid by the customer pays for.
- A detailed listing of monthly charges. How much of this money goes to routine operations and maintenance, how much is for debt retirement and how much is for future construction.
- A detailed description of the process used to deal with late monthly payments. This should include a description of how to ask for special assistance when personal situations prevent timely payment of the monthly fee. The description should also include what the process is and the cost that will result should service be disconnected for lack of payment.
- A brief description of the operating budget of the utility in broad general categories. Typical categories would include:
  - ❑ Labor and benefits
  - ❑ Overhead, training, travel office supplies
  - ❑ Testing
  - ❑ Electricity
  - ❑ Chemicals
  - ❑ Fuel
  - ❑ Monitoring and testing

- ❑ Maintenance and repair materials
- ❑ Retirement of debt
- ❑ Contingency fund

- A brief description of utility income, categories and amounts.
- Summary information on the financial value of the assets of the system and the utilities financial health.
- A detail description of how to contact the utility about a water quality complaint. This description should include who to contact by name and phone number for normal, as well as, emergency situations. This portion of the pamphlet should include how the utility expects to respond to emergencies and water quality complaints. (Some utilities, say they will respond to emergencies within the hour and water quality complaints within 24 hours).

DEALING WITH THE CUSTOMER

Who is a Customer

A customer is a person, a member of the community, the reason that the utility exists. Without the customer, there is no water utility and no need for one.

Expectations

Therefore, the customer has every right expect to be treated in a polite and supportive manner.

Appearance of Payment Area

The payment desk or counter should be neat and clean. The customer should be acknowledge as soon as they appear at the counter or desk. Even if the reception clerk is on the phone they can give a physical node or in some way make an attempt to let the customer know that they know they are there.

Phones

The individual collecting money from a customer, or providing information about services should not interrupt the conversation to answer the phone. If at all possible arrange for another person to answer the phone when the reception clerk is dealing with a customer. If there is only one person in the office, let the customer know that they may be interrupted.

Customer Complaints

Customer complaints should be handled in a respectable and efficient manner. Listen to the customer and obtain the pertinent information. (A sample customer complaint form is provided below.) If a customer complaint form is available, fill in the appropriate information. Give the customer feed back by paraphrasing the nature of the complaint and providing information on what will happen next. One effective customer service process is to let the customer know that they will be hearing from a specific person on a specific date, and if they do not hear from the person

on that day to call back.

The Irate Customer

Customers are people, they are emotional and irrational, just like you and me. As such, they will at times become irritated. **Do not argue with an irate customer.** Take their information, be polite. Often giving feedback such as, "I can see that your are upset, if that happened to me I would be upset too", is all that is needed to defuse a hostile situation.

Abusive Customers

There is no reason to put up with an abusive customer. If they are abusive, hang up the phone, ask them to leave the office, or get up and leave the area. Report the incident to the manager.

RESPONDING TO CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Attitude

Customer complaints should not be perceived as problems, but as an opportunity to provide service to a customer. The system is not meeting their expectations.

Logging

When a customer complaint is received it should be logged by the person receiving the complaint onto some type of complaint form. (A sample is attached).

Response

The customer complaint should be responded to and the outcome noted on the form.

Categories

A listing of standard categories of customer complaints should be developed and the complaints placed in these categories for evaluation and analysis. A typical list might include

- ❑ Pressure
- ❑ Dirty water
- ❑ Taste
- ❑ Odor
- ❑ Color
- ❑ Chlorine
- ❑ Stains
- ❑ Cost
- ❑ Operation
- ❑ Maintenance

Analysis

Once a month the data should be tabulated and analyzed. There are various methods of analyzing customer complaints. However the check list and the Pareto chart often prove the most beneficial.

Check List

The check list is composed of a listing of the complaints along the side and days of the month or weeks placed along the top. (Location in the community

could also be placed along the top.)

When to Use a Check List

Use a check list when you need to gather data based on samples, in order to begin to detect patterns. This is the most logical point to start in most problem solving processes.

Complaint	May				
	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Total
Pressure	IIII	~~IIII~~	~~IIII~~ ~~IIII~~	IIII	23
Dirty water	III		III		6
Taste	II	~~IIII~~ II			9
Odor					
Color					
Chlorine				~~IIII~~~~IIII~~ IIII	14
Stains					
Cost					
Operations					
Maintenance					

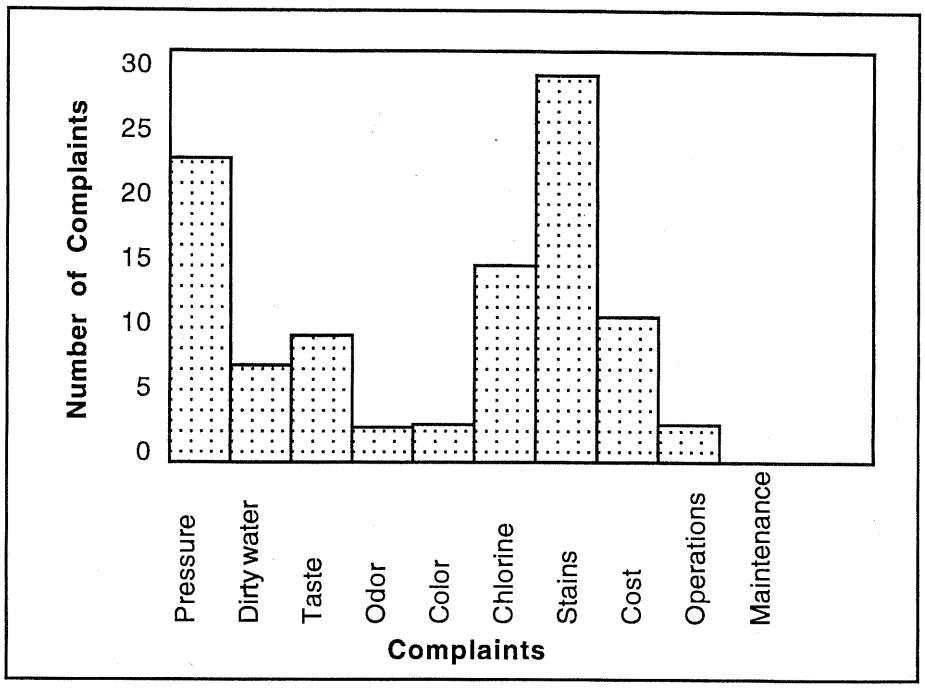
The check list does not directly answer any questions. What it does is allow you to see if there is a pattern. In many cases, this tools allows the operator to proved feed back on conditions that contributed to the problem.

Pareto Chart

The Pareto chart is a special form of a vertical bar graph which helps the user to determine which problems to solve and in which order.

When to Use the Pareto Chart

Pareto Charts are used when you need to display the relative importance of all of the conditions in order to choose the starting point or to choose which item to start with.



Using a Map

Water quality complaints such as pressure, taste, odor, chlorine, color, dirty water and stains can yield effective information about the system and the nature of the complaints when they are plotted on a map of the system. This process can be accomplished quite easily using stick pins. A different color should be selected for each type of complaint.

Operation and Maintenance

Operation and maintenance complaints, as well as problems identified by the operator, should be placed into categories. Typical categories could include; leaks, pumping problems, water quality problems, chemical storage, personnel, etc.

Action Plan

Regardless of the nature of the complaint. Once a pattern is observed, an action plan should be developed. Those problems that are too large, complicated or costly to be dealt with by the operations staff or the utility should be documented and sent to the appropriate agency for help. This would include PHS, VSW and the regional DEC office.

What does a Plan Include

An action plan includes; a listing of the steps to be taken, the expected results, the expected date of completion, the expected cost and where the funds will come from.

Share with Customers

The action plans should be shared with customers. Listen to their feedback. This will give you the data you need in order to understand their expectations and perceptions. If there is false or confused data being circulated, just keep sharing the correct information.

Follow-up on Complaints

A good customer complaint program has a built-in goal concerning response time. In most instances a 24 hour response to a customer complaint is adequate. Even if a solution cannot be found, or the cause of the complaint is already known (flushing lines, etc.) the customer should be contacted by phone or in person, within 24 hours with the results of the investigation into the complaint.

SHARING INFORMATION WITH CUSTOMERS

Perceptions

At the beginning of this brief discussion, we mentioned customer perceptions. The only way to impact these perceptions is with constant listening and information. There are several positive ways to provide information to the community about the water system. The following are a few of the successful activities that have been used by other water utilities.

Annual Coffee

At least once a year hold a coffee, cookie picnic at the well house or treatment plant. Provide informal tours of the facilities. Place name tags on major components and provide written information about the water system. Keep this activity low key. This should be a good time to listen, share and allow the customers time for self exploration and the development of a better understanding of the water system.

School Tours

Work with the local school to provide tours of the facilities as part of the science classes. Include sampling and testing as part of the tour. Allow students to test for chlorine residual. This process should be much more structured and needs to fit closely with the teachers needs and expectations.

School Information

AWWA, AWMA, EPA, PHS, VSW and ADEC all have information that can be used by a classroom teacher to help stress the importance of water. In many cases this information is designed to fit directly into existing curriculums. You should offer to work with the local teachers to obtain this information. The regional DEC office can be of assistance, or contact AWWA directly at 6666 West Quincy, Denver, CO 80235, or 1-303-794-7711.

CUSTOMER SERVICE FORM

City of _____ Date/Time _____ / _____

Customer Name _____ Phone # _____

Address _____ Customer # _____

Nature of Problem

- ❑ Dirty Water
- ❑ Black Water
- ❑ High Pressure
- ❑ Other
- ❑ Red Water
- ❑ Low Pressure
- ❑ Chlorine

Received by _____

Action Taken by _____ Date/Time _____ / _____

Action _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

CUSTOMER SERVICE

WORKSHEET

1. A good customer service program can provide the following benefits?

_____ a. Reduce operating cost

_____ b. Develop support for system improvements

_____ c. Reduce customer complaints

_____ d. Improve collections

_____ e. Provide DEC with the data that is required under the SWTR

2. What a customer believes they know about the water system is called the customer's _____.

_____ a. Knowledge

_____ b. Expectations

_____ c. Understanding

_____ d. Beliefs

_____ e. Perceptions

3. Which of the following should be in a publication shared with the customers?

_____ a. Monthly service cost

_____ b. Last months bacteriological results

_____ c. Number of hours worked each week by the operators

_____ d. General water system operating cost

_____ e. What happens if a customer fails to pay for service

4. Which of the following are common customer complaint categories?

_____ a. Low pressure

_____ b. Low water velocity

_____ c. MCL violations

_____ d. Bacteriological quality

_____ e. Chlorine level to low

5. Which of the following analysis tools use a bar graph to help prioritize information.

_____ a. Check list

_____ b. Cause and Effect diagram

_____ c. Pareto chart

_____ d. Histogram

_____ e. Run chart