

The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
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Broadcast Operations

The Key to Great Customer Service in the Station



By Kevin Trueblood

[October 2013] It is worth remembering that radio engineering is essentially a "customer service" function. That is why some managers see the tech department as merely a cost.

On the other hand, by providing extraordinary customer service great engineers not only keep operations running smoothly, they also often end up saving significant money to the bottom line.

Unfortunately, all too often the staff in most broadcast stations only interacts with the tech department during stressful times.

It starts when something has gone wrong: the transmitter is off the air, the server has crashed, something has broken – and everyone becomes panicked or frustrated.

How those situations are handled says a lot about the engineering department. Is the solid technical competence matched by superior personal interaction? Or is the staff made to feel like they just destroyed the engineer's life?

SERVICING MORE THAN GEAR

Engineers themselves place a lot of value on customer service.

We usually base a lot of purchasing decisions on which companies offer the best customer service. Whether it is the tech whose cell phone number you have and can call at any time or the sales rep who knows your facility and can make the right recommendations to help you get your job done, those are the folks we rely upon and call when we have a need.

Similarly, although our basic job is solving and preventing technical problems, essentially we are in customer service. Our customers are the station staff – the people whose work is made possible in large part because of what we do.

How would your station staff rate your service? Are you the "go-to" guy when something happens, known as a helpful and patient person? Or are you the grumpy curmudgeon who never gets things done for them?

Which type do *you* prefer when you call tech support?

THE ISSUE IS CUSTOMER SERVICE

We all have known engineers that range from one extreme to the other. Some we love to work with, others we would do anything to be "somewhere else" when they are around.

Station staffs really do appreciate the helpful and patient types, the ones who respond as promptly as possible to problems and teach the staff how to deal with problems.

The other kind of engineer really ends up creating an unfortunate situation for the staff. When they approach the grumpy engineer, they learn to expect being talked to in a condescending tone or yelled at about the problem (whether it was their fault or not), and told the problem will be fixed eventually, when it is its turn.

In the end, the staff becomes afraid of approaching that kind of engineer, resulting in problems often going unresolved or made worse because no attention is given to them.

PROBLEMS AFFECT EVERYONE

It is easy to forget about problems when there is a long list of them, a common situation.

A good place to start is to remember that a problem is not only a problem for you but for the other person as well.

For example, if the transmitter is off, yes the pressure is on you if you are the engineer. But the station is also off the air for everyone else, too. And they do not know what the problem is nor how long it will take to restore the signal.

In other words, they are at your mercy, not just for repairs, *but for information* they can process and use to understand just what is happening and inform others.

For instance, when your hand is in the exciter of a dead transmitter and the Sales Manager calls to ask how much longer you are going to be off the air, what do you do? Do you yell at them for even asking such a "stupid question?" Or do you give them an honest and direct answer so you can both get back to work?

You may truly feel annoyed for being distracted at that point in the process, but the Sales Manager just might need to explain to a client why their promotion will not run that afternoon. (Of course, if they keep calling every five minutes, that is another story!)

Which response do you think will best contribute to good "customer relations?"

UNDERSTANDING THEIR VIEWPOINT

Without any question, it is getting tougher and tougher to be patient and understanding when we are stretched thin with limited resources. Yet, how you behave under stress and frustration is critical.

Just consider this: many of the staff typically really feel totally helpless when it comes to handling technical problems.



The afternoon jock does not know a microphone preamp blew up in the studio, he just knows he cannot do live breaks until you come and fix it. The news guy does not understand how news gets to his computer, he only knows without the newsfeed he cannot report very much.

And the traffic manager rarely knows how to solve a "printer not found" problem – and might even be afraid to try any troubleshooting – but without the log, everything will come to a rather unfortunate halt.

In other words, what may seem like a simple diagnosis to the engineer can be mystifyingly frustrating to others.

One day the light really turned on for me. I realized there are several people on staff with whom I speak *only when something is wrong.* Their only impressions of me are almost always at those times when I am stressed and frustrated.

This was especially so when I was doing contract work and taking trouble calls from someone in another city I had never even met before.

Now, more than ever, being able to exhibit the quality of "Grace under fire" is very important to me. Those are real people with whom I am dealing – people who genuinely need my help.

BALANCING PRIORITIES

Of course, when you cannot make your regular transmitter rounds because you have got three "I can't print" issues it can be very frustrating.

There is a longstanding argument about which department of a station is superior to the others. Without programming there would be nothing to sell, without sales there would be no paychecks, without the engineer, the place would be very quiet, etc, etc, etc.

The reality is *everyone exists because everyone exists.* Engineering's job is to make it possible for everyone else to do their job. So if you have to maintain an email server, you have to make sure the station staff can use it. Take care of both the server *and the people* who use it.

Now, I am not saying every time you answer a call it must be all sunshine and roses. We all have bad days. And a 3AM phone call, even if it is necessary is never welcome.

Plus, it does seem every station has at least one "Drama Queen" for whom everything is an emergency. When you are deep in repairing a blown capacitor in an ATU, the phone call from the office demanding you immediately change someone's phone extension so they can get messages in the next cubicle over may make it hard to control the urge to quit and head for the nearest adult beverage.

Perhaps some university should offer a Doctorate for "handling Drama Queens without causing injury."

But seriously, developing a sense of humor (and irony) about the job, plus a little understanding about the people on the other end of the phone, will go a long way to get things accomplished and establish a good rapport with the staff.

In the end, good customer service will result in a happy station and true job satisfaction.

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