



Customer care for churches?

TN86 Training Notes series: Management

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We are used to the idea of a 'customer care policy' for a commercial enterprise, especially for a retail outlet.

It makes good business sense to treat your customers well so that they return to you again and again. A small investment, so that your staff know how to serve your customers well, can have a major impact on your profits.

But the idea of 'customer care' for a church may sound somewhat out of place. We don't see ourselves having 'customers' in the normal sense of the word.

Someone who phones midweek to ask about your Sunday services is an 'enquirer'. When they then appear on Sunday morning, they are a 'visitor'. Those who live in your parish or neighbourhood are 'parishioners' or 'neighbours'. The people who book your premises for their Tuesday afternoons Zumba group are 'hall users'.

But in fact all these people are customers in that you serve them by meeting a need or providing a 'service'. Perhaps they are more than this, but how about trying the normal structure of a commercial 'customer care policy' for your church? These notes show you how. It may be that you are missing something in your witness by failing to value this tool.

As I write this I am in the middle of a series of training days for Church Administrators applying customer care ideas to the church office. These notes are a little different although there is overlap. Here I am using the local church as the enterprise and anyone who comes into contact with it is a customer.

So for these notes I exclude church members (internal customers) because they are part of the organisation. When considering just the church office it is different. And I include people who have you in view even if they are not strictly customers: from the postal worker who delivers the church mail to the person living in the road where you meet on Sunday.

Who are your customers?

It is worth drawing up a list of those you seek to serve – which may be wider than you first think. Here are some ideas.

- Any enquirer who approaches your church on any day in person, by phone, by email, or through social media.
- Any visitor or newcomer at a Sunday or other service up until the time when they would be regarded as having become members.
- Those who book your premises for external activities.
- All who attend activities on your premises whether run by your church or not.
- Those who are involved in booking and attending 'occasional offices' such as (for some denominations) baptisms, weddings and funerals.
- Groups who visit your church for special events (eg. schools).
- Vulnerable adults in special need who seek food, shelter or other help.
- Tourists.
- All who visit your website.
- Those who live in your neighbourhood (or, for some churches, the 'parish').
- You could also include those who visit your church in the course of their service of you: delivery people, maintenance engineers.

Although these notes do not consider internal customers, you might like to add to the list to include them too for your policy. If you don't like the word 'customer', try 'visitor' or similar.

What is your motivation in devising this policy?

This is the one point where you will differ from a commercial enterprise where the bottom-line motivator is profit.

In sessions with Church Administrators we have studied Philippians 2:1-11. These famous verses are often seen as lessons in humility, but in fact they tell of how Christ went to the extreme to serve us – and our role is now to follow his example and serve others. Verse 5 says, "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus..." (NIV) and if that applies to our Christian brethren, how much more to those whom we serve outside the family of faith.

The normal idea of a policy is to cover the standards to be met for the customer's experience of the organisation through the way they are treated, the quality of the amenities, the level of service they are given, and the image of the organisation built up as a result. This is clearly tightly bound up with your church's 'values'.

Who delivers customer care?

In the case of a church the answer is that it is every member, which gives you some control problems. But in particular it will be:

- The Minister – who will be seen as 'the church' by many people.
- Other staff who are around midweek, in particular the Administrator or Receptionists.
- Welcomers: whether on site midweek or on duty on Sundays.

- The whole congregation on a Sunday.
- Specific office-holders (eg. webmaster, caretaker, service leaders, caterers and refreshment providers, church activity organisers).

What might a policy include?

To answer this question, here is a sample policy for a church running a range of activities. The idea is not to copy this but to use it as a starting point.

Getting this subject on the church agenda is more important than the detail of every sentence in the policy. If you make the policy too complicated it becomes another piece of bureaucracy that will be ignored rather than a means of Christian witness. Keep it simple!

Overview of visitor care

To be servants of Jesus Christ and representatives of his Church as a living witness to all whom we meet, particularly visitors and those with special needs.

Sunday welcome

We want visitors to Sunday services to relax and feel welcome, to sit wherever they feel comfortable, to take whatever is appropriate to them from the service, and to take an appropriate next action (eg. to fill in a visitors' card, to engage with a church member).

Our welcomers will seek to note each newcomer, to be sensitive in how they approach them, to remember names as far as is possible for return visits, to introduce them to others and to be knowledgeable about information to provide,

We shall offer welcomers and refreshment providers regular training to ensure standards remain high and testimonies of our quality of welcome continue to be received. Our welcome is to everyone irrespective of age, race, sexual orientation, etc.

We aim to train all service leaders to have newcomers in mind as they lead worship, to explain any points that might otherwise seem strange, and to start and, as far as possible, to close the service on time.

Our Newcomers' Evenings will include a simple card for return that night where newcomers can advise us how we could be better at welcoming others in future.

All-week reception

We want personal visitors to our church midweek to be welcomed and put at ease, to be given accurate answers to their questions, and to find staff they meet to be professional, courteous and helpful.

We therefore expect training of our volunteer receptionists and all staff to be a priority on at least an annual basis. This should cover telephone manner, body language, eye contact, listening skills, dress code, use of names, writing style, record keeping, dealing with difficult or needy visitors, communication between relevant staff, etc.

We want all visitors to our site to be impressed at the care we take of our buildings, with particular attention paid to the standard of toilets, the provision of signage, and the availability of printed sets of information displayed attractively and neatly. Outside we want visitors to park without difficulty and to find their way in easily.

Regular visitors (postal services, deliveries, maintenance) will be greeted and given any practical help they need. We shall all be ready to explain our faith if opportunities arise. We shall treat vulnerable people who call with dignity and compassion but we do not provide cash and the safety of our people is paramount at all times.

If we recognise that we shall be unable to maintain any agreed deadline, we shall discuss alternatives with the visitor and seek to find a revised timing to suit everyone.

Welcome in other media

If visitors telephone during our office hours, we shall aim to answer the call quickly and courteously, to deal with any enquiry accurately, to arrange a call-back from a more appropriate member of staff if necessary and to be helpful in all matters.

If they telephone and receive voicemail we aim to get back to them or deal with the call within one hour of the next office opening, and to ensure our voicemail message is positive, helpful and accurate.

We aim to answer email and website enquiries within 24 hours in a manner as above and all emails within 48 hours. For more complex enquiries we aim to send a holding email within 24 hours giving the likely time when we shall be able to give a full reply.

We seek to ensure that our website is updated at least weekly with no out-of-date pages. We want visitors to the site to find the information they are looking for without frustration. We seek to discover and provide the answers to questions visitors are asking.

We seek to come across in our letters, email signatures, out-of-office email messages, promotional literature and printed information as professional, colourful, human and caring.

Other 'visitors'

We want those living near our premises to have a positive view of our church, never to be inconvenienced by parking on Sundays across their driveways and not to be disturbed by groups leaving the building in the evenings. We shall conduct personal enquiries on an annual basis to ensure we are meeting this standard.

We aim for all those who hire our premises to find our forms straightforward, the rooms they have hired always set out as requested and on time and the premises clean and tidy.

We aim to send out accounts to those who owe us money within three days of the activity on site and for these to be accurate and as discussed with the client prior to booking. We aim to pay all accounts submitted to us within one week of receipt.

For tourists, event attenders and all visitors we shall offer a well maintained and clean building which complies with all expected health and safety and hygiene standards. We aim to provide clearly signed facilities, attractive displays and tidy information racks.

We shall aim to monitor customer satisfaction by selected personal interviews every six months for room hirers and other visitors.

Complaints policy

We shall do all we can to avoid the need for anyone to complain about the service we offer, but we shall in clear notices offer visitors the opportunity to express dissatisfaction so that we can improve our service.

If any church office holder or staff member receives any complaint, however trivial, from any visitor or other person they are to show empathy, to apologise gracefully, to clarify the details, to promise action and a personal response, and then to record that in the office complaints book and report this to the (member of staff) who will use their discretion as to how to action this within 24 hours.

We shall then do all we can to personally contact anyone who has made a complaint to explain the action we have taken and to thank them for helping us improve our service.

Review

The (staff member) will ensure that this visitor care policy is monitored and make a six monthly report to the Leadership Team on our levels of achievement and changes made.

A note on performance standards

The example above includes a few specific targets but in general is deliberately less specific than some people might expect from secular experience. An over-rigorous target-driven approach is simply not appropriate for a church. And, as I said earlier, keep it simple.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN86. See also Article A27, *Reliability in ministry*, and A31, *Helping people back to church*, plus Training Notes TN14, *Setting up a Newcomers Team*, TN105, *Recording a voicemail message*, TN107, *A church policy on hospitality*, TN109, *A test for your church's welcome*, TN113, *What to avoid on your website*, and TN146, *Be hospitable...*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of his running a workshop on any aspect of welcome or customer care.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN86 under Management (with a link to Administration).

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