



Customer Service Strategy

November 2008



TAUMARUNUI LIBRARY STAFF KAMU LALA AND SHANE HASTELOW

Contents

1	Introduction	3
	<i>The place of customer service</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>Who is a customer to Council staff?.....</i>	<i>4</i>
	<i>Customer service improvement at RDC.....</i>	<i>4</i>
2	Customer Service in a Local Authority	5
	<i>The Customer Service Model.....</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>Customer expectations of Council.....</i>	<i>5</i>
3	Customer Service Looking Forward.....	6
	<i>Example 1: At the counter.....</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Example 2: On the phone.....</i>	<i>7</i>
	<i>Example 3: On Internet</i>	<i>7</i>
	<i>Example 4: A resource consent enquiry.....</i>	<i>8</i>
4	Strategy and Implementation Plan 2008/09	8
	<i>RDC is a customer focussed organisation</i>	<i>9</i>
	<i>RDC delivers excellent customer service.....</i>	<i>10</i>
	<i>RDC actively seeks improvement in customer service performance</i>	<i>11</i>
	<i>RDC faces up to its customer service failings and fixes them.....</i>	<i>11</i>
5	Customer Service Charter March 2008	12
	<i>Our commitment.....</i>	<i>12</i>
	<i>Our service standards</i>	<i>12</i>
	<i>Our responsibilities.....</i>	<i>12</i>
	<i>Feedback on our services</i>	<i>12</i>

1 Introduction

This Strategy is based around the 2008/09 customer relationship direction of **RESPOND** (Respond with **E**ffective **S**olutions, be **P**roactive, take **O**wnership - **N**ow **D**eliver). It outlines Ruapehu District Council's (RDC's) direction for customer services from 1 July 2008. The Customer Service Strategy has been developed at the request of Council to clarify strategies being taken to improve customer service. The Strategy puts a framework around a number of initiatives taken in 2007/08, and enables progress to be measured.

Explanation: The term 'Customer Relationships' was adopted by Council instead of 'Customer Service' in 2008, because Council has a Team of people with the same name (Customer Services Team) and it became confusing. However this Strategy will keep the name 'Customer Services' Strategy because the document will be read by external readers. It is a Strategy for all staff of Council.

Significant steps achieved in the 2007/08 customer improvement programme were:

- Raise performance from 45% resource consent processing to timeframe in 2005/06 to 80% in 2007/08.
- Launched the Customer Service Charter in March 2008.
- Launched restructuring within the Community & Regulation Group aiming to provide more streamlining between building and resource consents, and liquor licensing, to speed processing for the customer.
- Launched Trades Forums to connect better with the trades and surveying sectors (this approach is contained further in Council's Community Engagement Strategy).
- Launched the first Customer Service Award in 2007 to recognise excellence in customer services.

The Strategy outlines four strategic goals for customer service development in 2008/09 and will be refreshed annually. The goals are: - Ruapehu District Council:

1. Is a customer-focussed organisation.
2. Delivers excellent customer service.
3. Actively seeks improvement in customer service performance.
4. Faces up to its customer service failings and fixes them.

The Place of Customer Service at Council

Council understands that the internal structure of Council is not important to customers trying to access Council services, and that their expectations have increased for both speed of satisfying enquiries, and efficiency in processing enquiries and applications. Today's customers expect reliable, responsive customer relationships, with staff providing a warm attitude and accurate advice. In essence, this Strategy and the projects and initiatives arising from it aim to improve significantly the quality of customer experience in RDC.

Council accepts that customer service cannot be seen simply as an 'add-on' to the existing jobs that people do. It needs to become an integral part of the day job. In addition, there needs to be sufficient corporate resource to co-ordinate and drive forward the customer service focus.

In addition, Council recognises that its contractors are an extension of Council's customer service delivery. Outsourcing services does not disconnect the Council from the way they are delivered by a contractor.

Who is a Customer to Council Staff?

Customers (including residents, ratepayers, elected members and internal staff) are any people who, for any reason, contact staff or Council's contractors with an enquiry or request. Council exists for its customers and is a service organisation. A customer is a person afforded the greatest respect and our best efforts, regardless of whether their contact with us is an application for consent, or the enforcement of an infringement.

All Council staff are expected to value every contact with a customer and take responsibility for that customer right through the process they are dealing with. Staff are not to pass on the customer but stick to them until the enquiry has completed. They are to put themselves in the customer's shoes and give the service they would expect from another organisation that they themselves deal with.

The Customer Service Charter seeks from staff to find 'win-win solutions' that respect both the desires of the customer and the reality of the legislative environment Council works within. Not all demands can be met, but our staff can assist the customer to achieve their goals in a way that fits within a regulatory framework.

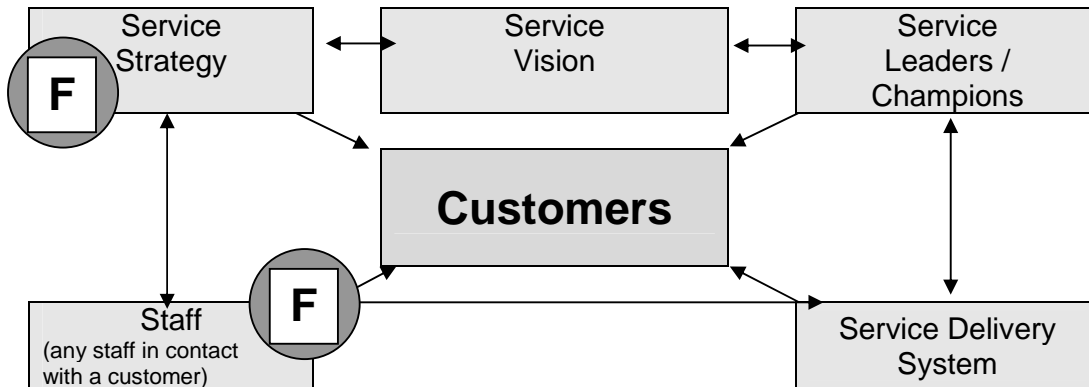
Customer Service Improvement at RDC

Council staff are committed to excellence in customer service and continual improvement. Council aims for every customer interaction to be positive and satisfying.

With 18,647 telephone calls in the three months of July to September 2008, 5,520 counter enquiries over the same period, and 1,431 building consents and 167 resource consents processed in 2007/08, it is not realistic to expect Council to be error free, or to satisfy customers 100% of the time. However, how Council deals with customer disappointment, and its own shortcomings, is important in building trust with customers and maturity in its customer service approach.

2 Customer Service in a Local Authority

The Customer Service Model



The model contributed by John Heslop [CEO Group Ltd] indicates the areas of a successful Customer Service Strategy to address, and two areas where a customer service approach is most at risk of failure (represented by the 'F' in the model). These risk areas are:

- Not having a Customer Service Strategy to guide the organisation, and,
- Failing in the relationship between the staff and the customer.

Customer Expectations of Council

Today's customers expect a basic level of service delivery that is faster, less siloed, friendly even in aggressive situations, less rules bound than in the past. Although a small Council, the customers' expectations are that we provide the service they expect from a large urban authority. This trend is accentuated by the fact that between 40% and 70% of Council's urban areas are owned by out-of-District ratepayers; many from our large urban areas. General customer service research indicates that customers expect:

- **Reliability** of customer service (32% of research respondents)
- **Responsiveness** to requests by staff (22%)
- **Assurance** that the customer is understood and that staff will act on their request (19%)
- **Empathy** with the customer's situation (16%)
- **Tangibles**, meaning the smart dress of staff and the smart appearance of the building (11%)

A Customer Service Strategy must therefore concentrate first on actions that promote reliability and responsiveness of customer services which together account for over 50% of the customer's expectation. The question to assess is how good is the Council's present systems to provide reliable and responsive customer service.

3 Customer Service Looking Forward

The targets that Council's customer relationship improvement programme will aspire to by 30 June 2009 are:

- Consistent, reliable and streamlined service, with every process involving customers being looked at by staff from the perspective of the customer first.
- Staff consistently able to identify if the customer needs extra help or advice, helping to sort out problems becomes second nature, and taking personal responsibility for them through their enquiry process.
- The ICT platform to support better customer service will be implemented and staff adequately trained in its use.
- The Internet will increasingly become a 24 hour customer service tool for customers.
- Council will make sure that services are responsive and accountable to all citizens by regular reporting and consultation.

This is what the Vision will mean for the residents of Ruapehu by 30 June 2009...

Example 1: At the counter

"Amy wants to extend her house with an ensuite. She comes to the doors of the Taumarunui Administration Centre and soon sees the signs above one of the three counters saying, 'Building and Resource Consent Enquiries'. She walks to that counter and is soon joined by a friendly staff person with the name tag, [let's call her 'Sharon'], who listens to what she wants to do. Sharon finds her a pamphlet on the information stand and talks her through the process. Sharon also gives her a business card which also has the Council's website address for more information and application forms when Amy is ready. Amy has become Sharon's customer and Sharon will now take responsibility for her needs through the process.

"At the counter Sharon is able to view a screen with all Amy's contacts with Council and notices that she has an outstanding dog registration, and a letter sent to Council that said that she had given the dog to her sister. Sharon pleasantly asks whether Amy has had a reply back from Council about her dog registration. Amy can't remember one, so Sharon offers to have someone sort the registration out with her. Amy is happy to spend a few more minutes to get this off her mind, and soon another Customer Services Officer sorts the enquiry out and assists as she fills out the needed forms. Amy leaves up-to-date with her Council business, and happy with her experience of Council."

Example 2: On the phone

“Mrs Jackson has just moved into Ruapehu. Her new house does not have a local A-Z phone book and she needs help. Mrs Jackson rings Council. She wants advice on how to get Council rubbish bags, which primary schools are in the District, and how to pay her rates. She has also noticed that the streetlight outside her home isn’t working. She is delighted to get a response within three rings. Mrs Jackson listens to several quick options and chooses to speak to a Customer Services Operator because she has multiple enquiries. Imogen [let’s call her], the pleasant Council’s Customer Officer, is able to deal with all these enquiries. Imogen answers the questions on the phone and directs Mrs Jackson to more information on Council’s website about local schools, and also Council services. Mrs Jackson’s enquiry about the streetlight is lodged as a service request and she is given a number for follow up, and also Imogen’s name if she needs to ring again. She is also informed that service requests can be lodged on Council’s website 24 hours per day, and an electronic response will be given to her from Council for her request.

“Imogen passes the streetlight service request to the contractor and it is repaired within five days. The electronic Council system records the closing off of the enquiry and tracks how long this took. Every six months, Councillors look at the timeliness of closing off service requests.

“Imogen also sends to Mrs Jackson a ‘New Resident Starter Pack’.”

Example 3: On Internet

“Mr Matua has submitted a resource consent application and has gone back to his home in Auckland. Planning staff note that the application is incomplete. Usually they would scan the application at the counter with the customer. However, this application was lodged in the mail. Instead of taking 20 days to notify Mr Matua of the incomplete application, Council has put in place a fast-track pre-assessment process and rings Mr Matua within two days. Having re-submitted the application with the necessary information, Mr Matua is now able to track the progress of his application from Auckland via the Council’s website. He is impressed and also chooses to browse other Council information and leaves a message on the website chatroom, “Well done RDC. What great service. You put the big boys to shame. Keep it up!” “

Example 4: A Resource Consent enquiry

“Mr Belgium is about to launch into a residential development in Owhango. He calls the Council to tell them and to get some assurances that rumours he has heard about won't happen in his case. Mr Belgium is pleasantly surprised to be invited to a pre-application meeting. Pre-application meetings were extended to all resource consents (not just for large consents) in November 2008. Mr Belgium was requested to bring his surveyor and any preliminary plans to that meeting.

At the meeting, Council's engineering and planning staff were present and worked through Council's requirements in the District Plan and their own processing procedures. The meeting discussion was recorded in the 'Meeting Record' book with a copy given at the meeting to the developer, and one placed on file. Mr Belgium was informed that Council had a fast-track pre-application assessment to check that all documentation appeared in order with a timeframe of two days.

Mr Belgium left with the Council's Regulatory Administration Manager as his point of contact for information on his process. Acting as a 'Business Broker' the staff member liaises with the client and informs of processes throughout, but advises the customer that staff are not able to project manage for them or to hurry processes at the expense of other customers waiting in line. Mr Belgium also leaves with a Consent Information Pack, and very happy at Council's service.”

4 Strategy and Implementation Plan 2008/09

The following outlines four strategic goals for customer service development.

Ruapehu District Council:

1. Is a customer-focussed organisation.
2. Delivers excellent customer service.
3. Actively seeks improvement in customer service performance.
4. Faces up to its customer service failings and fixes them.

These goals are outlined with strategies and implementation plan on the following pages.

1. RDC is a customer-focussed organisation		
Goal: Council fosters an environment of excellence in customer service attitude amongst its staff		
Strategies	Milestones	Who and when
New residents find Council a satisfying place for District information	New Residents Starter Pack developed and maintained.	Team Leader Customer Services by end-March 2009.
All staff receive customer service training, and all front line staff receive conflict resolution training	Group Managers and Team Leaders to be trained in their role as customer service champions of their Teams.	HR Manager with support of Group Managers by end-October 2008.
	Programme in place to have all front line and customer contact staff to be trained in customer service and conflict resolutions skills.	
Staff are recognised for good customer service.	Annual Awards for excellence in Customer Service are held and staff nominated by peers.	Nominations by April 2009.
	Performance Plans have a category for customer service and recognise exceptional performance.	HR Manager and CE by end-August 2008.
All Group Managers and Team Leaders praise good customer service and discourage and respond to poor examples	Performance Plans of Group Managers and Team Leaders have a category for customer service and recognise performance (either good or poor). Team and Group overall results feed into the result for the Team Leader and Group Manager.	HR Manager and CE by end-August 2008.
	CE to reinforce that desired leadership includes excellence in customer service, and encouraging good examples of this amongst their staff.	CE begin in Sept Annual Staff Briefing.
RDCs Customer Service Charter is reinforced and linked to performance	Customer Service Charter key points included in all organisation performance plans for 2008/09.	HR Manager and CE by end-August 2008.
	CE to reinforce the customer-focus of the organisation as a key priority in staff briefing.	CE begin in Sept Annual Staff Briefing.
	The RESPOND philosophy to be explained, reinforced and promoted by Council leadership.	Customer Relationship Taskforce develop initiatives, and advise Strategy Team.
	Group Managers to include an item each month on their meeting agendas (with their Team leaders) for 'customer service improvement.'	Group Managers.

2. RDC delivers excellent customer service		
Goal: Council delivers services to expected timeframes and standards of quality.		
Strategies	Milestones	Who and when
Continuous improvement to customers in consent delivery	RDC targets 95% processing to timeframe, and is improving toward this. 2008/09 targets: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 85% resource consents [80% achieved 2007/08]. ➤ 95% building consents [90% achieved 2007/08] 	Group Manager Community and Regulation by 30 June 2009.
	Pre-application meetings held for every resource consent, and Meeting Record of meeting issued.	Regulatory Administration Manager by end-Nov 2008.
	Information kits produced to guide the applicant through the processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resource Management ➤ Building 	Regulatory Administration Manager: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By end-November 2008. • By end-May 2008.
Customers are satisfied with their experience of Council services.	Customer service annual satisfaction surveys are completed for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Water services ➤ Customer services (contact staff), Dog registration, Liquor and health licensing, Building and resource consents. 	[All surveys by 30 June 2009] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Water • Regulatory Administration Manager
Council's ICT platform enables a customer-focussed strategy	Origen implementation allowing Customer Services staff to have full information on customers on their screens on the front counters is implemented.	Team Leader IS, and Origen Team, by end-May 2009.
	Phone system enables faster and consistent Customer Services response time to customer enquiries.	Team Leader Customer Services by end-Nov 2008.
	Exponare mapping system for property data is implemented, available to all staff (and customers at the counters), and up-to-date within one month.	Team Leader IS by end-November 2008.
	Exponare availability hosted from the Council website for customers investigated.	Investigation completed by Team Leader IS end-Nov 08.
	The RDC Internet is regularly updated with relevant information, online forms, enquiry feature, and rate payment facility.	Team Leader Administration and Team Leaders – ongoing.
	Online tracking of resource consent progress.	Team Leader IS investigate by end-March 2008.
	Service requests made available on-line for 24/7 service.	Team Leader IS end-May 09.
All correspondence, requests and enquiries are promptly addressed	Tracking of service request response times performance is implemented	Team Leader IS end-March 2009.
	General enquiries response times are included in Performance Plans and monitored by exceptions.	HR Manager and CE by end-August 2008.
Service delivery contractors have a consistent customer service approach to Council's	The Strategy is launched with contractors and they sign up as partners.	Group Manager Assets. End-March 2009.
	Customer service improvement is included as a regular agenda item on contract management meetings.	Group Manager Assets. End-January 2009.
	New service delivery contracts include a sign-off requirement of RDC Customer Service Charter, or, that the company have an alternative which is consistent.	Group Manager Assets. End-March 2009.

3. RDC actively seeks improvement in customer service performance		
Goal: Council monitors and evaluates its customer service performance.		
Strategies	Milestones	Who and when
Active innovation and process improvement is fostered	A Customer Relationship Taskforce be formed and be the champions of the improvement programme.	Communications Manager lead. First meeting by mid-November 2008.
	Customer Relationship Taskforce members be from each Group and be the champions in their areas of the right customer approach and attitude.	Communications Manager lead. First meeting by mid-November 2008.
	The Customer Relationship Taskforce to visit South Taranaki District Council (winners of local government customer service award in 2007) and bring back improvements, as well as researching with our customers their experiences of Council.	Communications Manager and group to report back to Strategy Team by end-March 2009.
Senior management to monitor progress	Six-monthly report to Strategy Team on progress with this Strategy, and other initiatives for customer improvement.	CE. First report early-May 2009.
Elected Council to monitor progress	Six-monthly report to Council on progress with this Strategy, and other initiatives for customer improvement.	First report by end-May 2009.

4. RDC faces up to its customer service failings and fixes them		
Goal: Council handles complaints and errors with empathy, speed, and excellent communication with those affected.		
Strategies	Milestones	Who and when
All complaints are quickly and seriously addressed	The Complaints Register is actively maintained and timeframes for addressing complaints (as per the Complaints Policy) monitored.	Regulatory Administration Manager by end-Nov 2008.
	Complaints Policy is publicly available on-line.	Team Leader Governance by end-Nov 2008.

5 Customer Service Charter

Our Commitment

The hallmark of our Customer Service Charter is our promise to provide consistently professional and high-quality service. This means that at all times our staff will:

- Treat customers with courtesy and consideration, and be helpful.
- Attend to customers' questions and needs promptly.
- Not disclose any information about customers without customer consent, except as permitted by law.
- Be honest, ethical and professional at all times.
- Use plain language.
- Listen to customers with respect.
- Provide a 24 hour enquiries service.
- Respond immediately to high priority emergencies.
- Where necessary, enforce rules which protect the community.
- Be transparent and accountable.
- Apologise if we make a mistake.

Our Service Standards

Council staff aim to:

- Respond to telephone and email enquiries within three working days.
- Where telephone enquiries are more complex, either make an appointment for the customer to meet with a staff member or arrange to call the customer when the information is available.
- Acknowledge, and where possible answer, mailed enquiries within 15 working days.
- Attend to the customer as soon as practicable if the customer does not have a pre-arranged appointment and, where possible, provide the customer with information while they wait.
- See the customer punctually at the scheduled time if the customer has a pre-booked appointment, whether it is in or out of the office. If there is to be a delay in seeing the customer, we will keep them informed.
- Arrange mutually agreeable times for site visits with the customer for a no-surprises approach.
- Respond to all high priority emergencies immediately and provide the customer with feedback on the outcome of any investigation.

Our Responsibilities

As part of our regulatory role, Council is required by Government to:

- Administer various regulations and uphold the law.
- Safeguard the public interest.

These responsibilities may not always match customers' expectations or wishes. Where there is conflict that cannot be resolved at staff or manager level, further avenues of appeal to external regulatory bodies may exist. We will be happy to advise customers of these procedures.

Feedback on our Services

We aim to keep improving our service and seek customers' evaluation and feedback on our performance. Please contact us if there are some aspects of our service you believe we have not done well, could do better or, for any reason, were not satisfied with.