Providing service excellence on a daily basis is vital to many organizations, especially institutions of higher education. In times of crisis, service excellence strategies are even more important to the people we serve. Challenging times are “make or break” moments for either solidifying customer loyalty, or crushing the service relationship. The following tips can be useful in continuing to provide excellent service during times of crisis.

**EIGHT TIPS FOR SERVICE EXCELLENCE**

- Be transparent.
- Communicate often, but not too much.
- Examine your messaging.
- Consider your customers’ fears.
- Show your support and vulnerability.
- Consider your customers’ experience.
- Be part of the solution.
- Listen.
Be transparent.
Something bad has happened and people want to know how your institution is managing it. Be honest and share your concern, shared fears, and how you are mobilizing your team to benefit your customers. Regarding COVID-19, for example, our customers want more answers than we can provide, especially regarding when things will return to normal. If you don’t have all the answers, share your considerations and promise answers soon. Let your customers know with whom you are consulting to make decisions, but don’t be hasty in giving a specific date for your response (this could lead to more disappointment later). You might simply say, “Although we want to return to a vibrant campus life, our university’s administration is working closely with local, county, and state officials to resume on-campus operations as soon as it is safe to do so.” This is the time to under-promise and over-deliver.

Communicate often, but not too much.
Your customers will clamor for information and you should provide it... but in doses. Too much, too soon, will only lead to a barrage of questions and confusion. Instead of sharing lengthy messages, try highlighting a few salient issues at a time. For example, a message focused on on-campus living or financial aid. FAQs are great solutions, as long as they are updated regularly throughout the crisis- likely many times per day. Each time your FAQs are updated it is important to note that update date and time loudly at the top of the page.

Examine your messaging.
During a crisis your office hours may be drastically modified and your ability to respond to emails and phone calls may be limited. Be sure to update your voicemail, email responses, and office signage. Especially during times of crisis, emotions are high, and lack of response can lead to heightened anxiety and higher potential for dissatisfaction. If this is a short term crisis, an “out of office” update on email or voicemail can help your customers know when they will receive a response. If this is a longer term crisis (such as COVID-19) this is an excellent time to change your email signature file altogether. You might note that you are actively working remotely. If you have set up a new phone number (cell or via Google Voice) be sure to update that. If phone isn’t the best way to reach you, note that, too. Also, pay attention to the news and social media. Are there news reports or social media posts spouting information that cause your customers increased anxiety? Understanding your customer’s experience will give you insight into how you need to respond.
Consider your customers’ fears.
The nature of the crisis will elicit the nature of your customers’ fears. The important question is, “what are they scared of?” Is it safety? Share what strategies you already have in place or are creating to enhance safety. Understanding your customers’ fears will help you develop strategies for managing them. For example, if there are reports on social media that there has been a student death on-campus, it is vital to communicate that the death was an isolated incident and the campus community is not at risk. If people are worried about a campus-shooter, this messaging will allay fears about community safety. If news reports suggest that due to COVID-19 your school won’t open for fall 2020, and your customers are sharing with you concern and even anger, ask them about the root of their concern. They may not be angry at your institution, but scared about their future options. Help diagnose their fears and let them know how you can work in partnership with them.

Show your support and vulnerability.
You need to show your support to your customers during the crisis. Express how your organization is supporting the situation and share your worries, too. It’s not a weakness or liability to show your concern. You can share in students’ and families’ worry and sadness. For example, are you unsettled by all of the COVID-19 uncertainty? Say that. Just be sure to remind people that when things return to a semblance of a “new normal,” you will be ready and eager to continue your relationship!

Consider your customers’ experience.
You and your staff are reeling, but imagine what your students and families are thinking. As you approach difficult times, consider what your customers need from you and how you will deliver. When they call or email, are they getting a timely response since your team is distracted by the crisis?
Be part of the solution.
Your customers are worried. What can you do to help alleviate the worry? Other than empathizing and sharing information, how can you be available to your students and families to help them? Let them know how you will be available to help them through the crisis whether this is through email, online meetings, or even town halls. Being available is essential in times of crisis- especially isolation.

Listen.
As in most service excellence situations, our customers want to be heard. Especially during times of crisis, listening to the concerns of those we serve is paramount. Work to listen to your customers’ concerns and respond. In order respond in the best way, you will likely also need to address the needs of your team. While focusing on your customers is key, your teams are likely worried and struggling, too. They are the folks on the frontline listening to all of the concerns- be sure to listen to them, too!

Times of crisis can be times of great stress, but also opportunity. While managing the stress, do your best to look for the bright spots including staff who step-up like never before, colleagues who collaborate in new ways, and finding strength you never knew you had. Also remember that in order to provide service excellence, you must be in top form. Take care of yourself and when the crisis is over, reflect on all that you did and learned. These challenging times might prove to be your best in ways that you never thought possible!