

Fifteen Ideas for Building a Better Department

by Becky Baker, C.B.O., and Vernell Woods



Would you like to tell your City Manager that your department has improved its customer service? If morale in your organization was higher, how much would quality and efficiency rise? The following suggestions are certainly not new, but they have lead to success in many jurisdictions and can help yours as well . . . and for very little cost.

Assemble a Focus Group

Marketing strategists have known for years that an organization's customers often have good ideas for improvements in products and services—hence the use of focus groups.

Gather together a half-dozen of the best design professionals and builders in your jurisdiction and ask them for ideas on improving your operations.

Good Staff Morale Fosters Positive Customer Relations

A strong team is the foundation of a good building department, and an upbeat and cohesive group is infinitely better equipped to serve the public.

The men and women who chose to work in this field are typically service-driven individuals who derive satisfaction from helping others, so look for opportunities to show your appreciation for the little things they do everyday to contribute to the success of the department and health and safety of the community. Acknowledge their importance and don't forget to have some fun!

Have Front-Line Staff Review Documents and Forms

Staff who deal directly with customers every day will know the most about the usefulness and usability of common department documents and forms. If, for example, your permit technician is asked the same questions by applicants

nearly every day, it should be a cue that some changes are in order.

Have front-line staff help review existing materials and suggest improvements. Develop posters or hand-outs to help explain the "why" for common procedures and requirements, and include drawings or other graphics whenever appropriate.

Your department's website can also be an extremely valuable resource—or, in some cases, a significant opportunity for improvement.

Learn from Other Communities

Visit other communities to learn how they do things and see if some of their forms and procedures may be better than yours. While you are there, consider whether you can offer suggestions that might benefit them.

Cross-Training and Beyond

Back at home, have front-line staff do ride-alongs with field personnel or spend some time with plans examiners, and have inspectors and plans examiners occasionally help out at the public counter. Learning more about fellow employees' jobs will promote teamwork and flexibility.

Take steps to make sure that those in other departments know what you do, and learn about their business practices as well. You might be surprised at how much this can help you enhance the efficiency of your organization (and often that of your jurisdiction's other services).

Consider the possibility of carrying this concept to the next level. Would your region benefit from a job-trading program across jurisdictional lines? The net effects could include higher staff morale, lower overtime costs, more regional uniformity, greater code compliance and—most importantly—improved public safety.

Develop and Post a Service Commitment Statement

Work with your staff to develop a statement of commitment that speaks to the duties and responsibilities of your department. Start with something like the following.

- *Our duty is to ensure that your proposal meets a minimum level of safety. We recognize our partnership with you toward that end.*
- *We pledge to provide you with excellent service, including prompt and accurate information in response to your questions.*
- *We further pledge to be courteous and respectful, with due consideration for your special needs.*

Have each employee sign the statement, frame it and post it where both staff and customers can see it.

Improve Communications

Start with the telephone. No automated system, however sophisticated, can answer every question your customers may have. Always have an “operator” option for callers to reach a real person during business hours.

Whether on the phone or face-to-face, let your customers say what they want to say before giving them a response that only addresses part of their problem. There are times that patience can be more than a virtue: they may just want to “vent” and really do not need anything besides a sympathetic ear.

In addition, regular outreach to customers—internal as well as external—will help build a better understanding of your department’s services and operations. Communications tools you may already have in place such as monthly reports, license renewal mailings, a newsletter or website offer ready means for sharing news, tips and other information.

When a Service is Provided Matters

Customer service is often measured in time. So if, for example, the normal turnaround time for a plan review is a week or more, reevaluate your current practices to try to reduce it. The actual work necessary may not decrease significantly, but even relatively small improvements in turnaround time will have the added benefit of reducing the number of status inquiries. In this sense, efficiency is its own reward.

Make Permitting Easier

Draw up plans for a sample project, fill out the application for a permit, and track it through the plan review process. It can be an eye-opening experience!

From this exercise, review your internal processes to ensure they work for customers who are trying to do the job right. Keep in mind that virtually no one comes into a building department with the intention of doing a project wrong or making your job a nightmare, and some policies were established because of past problems and may no longer be necessary.

Look to Prevent Problems

Take advantage of the fact that building department personnel are professional problem solvers by looking for ways that problems can be avoided in the first place. Making code books, commentaries and supplemental handouts readily accessible to customers and making plan review comments and correction notices easier to understand can greatly facilitate compliance.

Try to spend more time reinforcing elements of your organization that work properly. Give highly effective staff more support in the form of compensation, training, or resources to do their jobs even better. At the same time, discourage underperformance by holding all staff accountable to baseline standards using modern human resources practices.

Similarly, aim to spend 5 percent or less of your time with “problem” builders and the rest of your time helping quality builders better understand your jurisdiction’s codes and standards and your department’s procedures. Use tools like “Stop Work” orders, reinspection fees and—if necessary—legal action to keep problem builders in line so you can devote more attention to those committed to “doing it right.” It is also a good idea to attend local builder’s associations meetings to get to know the members and show them that you care about their needs and are available to answer their questions.

Anticipate Homeowner Questions

After a permit is issued to a contractor, mail the homeowner information about your department including answers to commonly asked questions. Again, do not miss the opportunity to let him or her know that your department is there to help. Provide contact information for customer service and, if available, a webpage to track the project’s status.

Help Customers Succeed

Encourage questions and talk to customers about the next step in their project to help them anticipate—and thus avoid—typical problems. Also be sure to provide ample notice and information about pending changes to codes, policies or procedures. This can prevent many needless errors and violations and foster an environment of partnership.

(continued)

Be Professional

As soon as you realize that you are going to be unable to meet a commitment such as getting a plan review completed or an inspection done by the time promised, let the customer know. Most people will appreciate the heads-up, and nobody likes to be the last to hear bad news.

Also, use your knowledge and experience to “sell,” rather than simply enforce, code requirements by explaining the rationale in terms the customer can understand. Presented with sound, logical reasoning, a customer will more often than not recognize the broader value of compliance. This will result in less push-back over the need for corrections and tend to reduce future problems.

Use Good Judgment

If all that was necessary was to quote code provisions, school children could perform our jobs. Help customers work through problems and, better yet, avoid them in the first place. By performing such value-added services, building departments are perceived as allies rather than obstacles.

Thank Every Customer, Every Time

How important is it to you that the homes, schools, offices, shops, and other buildings you and your loved ones use are safe and accessible?

The fact is that while your customers may depend on your department’s services at the moment, you depend on them for your community’s future. Always make sure you acknowledge how valuable they truly are! ♦

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