

## **NZLG Magazine article**

### **Subject: Council's customers - are they being served?**

#### **About Hindin Communications**

Hindin Communications have provided information systems and expert consultancy in the Contact and Service Centre space for over 8 years. Their clients range from the Work and Income multi-centre/virtual floor contact centre, through the District Council level to the award winning Manawatu After- Hours Shared Service in collaboration with Horizons Regional Council and Palmerston North City Council. Hindin's winning approach – look at the people involved, how your staff need to work and how your customers want to interact with your organisation.

#### **Are they being served?**

The concept of Good Customer Service is a hard one for councils to grapple with. In principle and policy it is straight forward, but at the brass tacks level there rest several major questions:

- Who are our customers?
- What constitutes Good Service?
- What is Customer Focus?

#### **Who are my customers?**

Firstly let's look at who the customers could be:

- Ratepayers
- Dog Owners
- Tourists
- Flatters....

The list can go on as you look at many different ways in which people interact with the council – and therein lies the key. A customer is any person or organisation that has an interaction with the council. This may be in the form of an information request, or consuming a council service (such as a Consent Process). The challenge with Customers is that they are buried in many diverse information systems across council which have been built to manage specific Council business (such as dog licenses).

#### **What is Good Service?**

What are the attributes of a 'Good Service' from a customer perspective?

- Communication – you know what is going on and what will happen next and when
- Competence – you are given the feeling that the people you are dealing with know what they are doing
- Completion – the interaction is finished in a reasonable, or at least agreed time

These attributes are the basic constituents of a ‘Good Service’ – but it does depend on the customer of course. The Councillors and anonymous ratepayers are silent customers on every interaction, and for them a Good Service is the rapid, cost effective execution of Council business.

### **So what is Customer Service?**

Customer Service is not a department (though you may have one), but a whole of council approach. The communication with the customer about a service could come from anyone within the council. Council operatives and contractors have the competence to execute council business, and many council employees may be involved in completing the council business. *The customer has to be the focus from first contact to closure of the council business.*

To ensure customer focus involves *the acknowledgement of the customer at the initiation, involvement during the execution and notification at the completion of the required service.* So this places the customer at the heart of the service, and this attitude has to be carried through the council from the Contact Centre through to the people executing the service, and back again to the acknowledgement when the service is completed.

### **Are you ready for Customer Service?**

The challenge for Councils is to add the customer into their day to day business from front to back. If you know who the customers are, what service means to your council, and this is true from the front to the back then you will be achieving Customer Service. The next step is Good Customer Service, using the three ‘C’s from above. Another way of leaving a good impression with customers is to smile when talking with them; even on the phone you can hear a smile – this too can make the difference between Customer Service and Good Customer Service.