



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Counters and Customer Service

Ernestine the phone operator. Do you remember her? She was one of Lily Tomlin's most unforgettable and downright irritating personalities. The caricature of this person however, may have been so close to the reality of how many people had been treated during an encounter with a "counter" person. By that I mean person that is the portal to an organization. In some cases they are on the phone such as Ernestine. Others are right out there on the stool in back of the counter. And boy, do first impressions count.

This is something that every fire prevention bureau should be concerned about, for customer relations start right there, with the point of first contact. And, many fire departments don't give much thought to the training or evaluation of who they give that power to. In order to preserve our best reputations perhaps it is time to do so.

Often, the plan checking process requires that an individual bring a set of documents to the fire service. This means that the fire service must have a location to receive these documents. Customarily this area is referred to as "the counter". How things go at the counter can be either an asset or liability to the effectiveness of fire prevention programs.

If there are complaints as it relates to customer service that are leveled against the fire service it starts with the handling of complaints by the public and probably ends with the plan checking process. In between, are the day to day complaints of people trying to get in or out of difficulty with code violations.

Let's take a look at the rationale of a person that comes into or contacts a fire prevention bureau about one or more of these potential contacts. First let's look at the complaint. While these sometimes become more of a pain than prevention problem they cannot be taken for granted. The fire prevention bureau needs to have a very specific process for the input and processing of a complaint for several reasons. The first is that having a standardized approach encourages uniformity in the handling of the problem. There is less room for variation. So, here is a series of questions for you as an AHJ. Do you have a:

- ✓ Written policy on how to handle complaints?
- ✓ specific form that you document the complaint
- ✓ Means of identifying the complaining party?
- ✓ File where you keep the outcome of a complaint?



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There, now that wasn't that hard was it. You should have all of those in place right now. No matter whom calls in a complaint it is handled the same, it gets documented, the results go back to the complainant and the outcome is recorded.

Don't regard complaints as being trivial because there have been numerous occasions where a complaint has resulted in a serious event that, handled improperly could come back to haunt an organization.

Next let's look at customer service on plan checks. The primary reason for the fire service being involved in plan checks is to assure that our concerns are accurately documented in the building process. This should be serious business for all prevention bureaus that have the right to be part of this process. It can go good or it can go bad. The first thing we should accept is that most individuals seeking plan approval wanted it done yesterday and are outright impatient if they perceive that their particular project does not receive rapid and personal attention. On the other hand, fire departments are inundated with documents associated with plans often look at another set of these as being like the straw that broke the camel's back.

The net result is that the counter is a point of contact in which customer relations are either established or destroyed. The choice as to whether the scenario is going to go well or its going to go badly is primarily that of the fire department rather than the customer. The reason for this is that the person bringing the plan to the fire department it may be their one and only experience with the process. On the other hand, the fire department that is receiving these documents may process thousands if not tens of thousands of them over a lengthy period of time and have preferences whether they are formal or informal.

Here are the second sets of questions: Does your department have:

- ✓ A written policy of handling plan checks?
- ✓ A log for signing the plans in and out?
- ✓ A form that documents required corrections?
- ✓ A predictable time frame for getting the documents back to the customer?

If your department lacks any one of the 4 items above there can be sparks at the counter.

Lastly, how about customer serve to people we have had problems with in the past. I know it's hard to call a person with a rap sheet of code violations a "customer" but they are. Regardless of the scope of their infractions they need to be treated as if they have the possibility of becoming just law abiding business and industrial leaders in the community. So, here are the last questions. When someone calls into to talk about a code violation does the AHJ have:

- ✓ Specific guidelines on how to bring any violation into compliance?



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- ✓ Specific officer hours for conducting phone and counter activities?
 - ✓ Specific policies on how to address alternative materials and methods for use when the code does not provide a simple answer”
 - ✓ Specific ways to resolve conflict before code violations have to go to an official appeals process?

There you have it. Three ways to make sure that your customers can learn to love fire prevention. And all three are up to you, the fire professional to set the ground rules. Trust me, many individuals would much rather run over to their friend the councilman or commissioner and tell them just how unfairly your staff has been. In this case customer service is not reactive – it is proactive.

Customer relations, however, is not an unconscious act. It is something that a manager of a fire prevention bureau should make specific observations on and have policies and procedures in place to assure that customer relations are at the absolute worst – cordial.

These processes involve identifying the process you want used. This process involves the development of documentation and record keeping. The department should have a bulletin prepared that provides written requirements to those who are submitting any request to the department to remove any ambiguity. Having a standardized form on which the applicant can file plans or complaints with the bureau takes some of the personalization out of the process.

However, documentation is not customer service. Customer service is being responsive to the verbal interchange that goes on when an individual is confronted with the staff doing its job. This involves having a clear understanding of the differences between acceptable and unacceptable behavior that establish customer relations.

For example, areas that are set aside for counter exchanges should be well designed and reasonably accommodating for those who are coming on site. This could include having an adequate location where multiple individuals can be seated and/or have access to an area where they can relax if there is a line pending at the counter.

Customer relations begin with the interchange when a person approaches the counter. Depending upon the credibility and the past experience of the person approaching the counter, the first two to three minutes may make a big difference in terms of how the process goes. It is a reality that many builders, developers and business owners and managers often find this process frustrating and they allow that to create a tone in their voice or a body language scenario that transmits hostility. It is also true that many fire departments that have people receiving documents over the counter have experienced conflict and confrontation that results in tension at that point in time.



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The opposite is also true. Policy and procedure for handling counter interaction should lay out the process so clearly that there should be no doubt of what is going to transpire once the problem has been submitted. This would include such things as giving the customer some reasonable expectation on whether the problem would be resolved. The planning process should also identify what the consequences are if there is a need for follow-up questions and/or plan re-submittal due to non-compliance.

The primary consideration of the fire marshal is to keep the customer relations as cordial and as professional as possible. Continued complaints against the manner in which fire departments process counter problems has often resulted in a challenge to the authority of the fire department to be in a priority position in some aspects of code enforcement, especially plan checking.

Moreover, hassles in plan checking has often lead external groups to push for a reduced level of involvement by fire departments and/or to consolidate fire and building plan checking processes at a third location. It is neither right nor wrong to consolidate the two functions. However, if the consolidation is an attempt to merely reduce the fire services involvement in customer contact that is counterproductive.

There is a concept that relates to this idea. It is called the One Stop Shop. The tendency over the last couple of years is to develop a concept of the one stop shop to integrate customer service in a very positive manner. This essentially is a decision to move all of the plan checking entities into one location so that the plans can be processed with a minimum amount of downtime between one location and another. The one stop shop concept usually results in building and fire plan checkers operating out of a single counter. On the one hand this significantly improves the processing time of most plans. This advantage to it is that it removes the plan checking individuals from the day to day operations of the fire inspectors themselves and often results in some internal disconnects.

The critical part of having an effective one stop shop program is to make sure that written policies and procedures have been established to assure standardization of how the review process is accomplished.

While I have not heard this cliché in a long time, it was once stated that “the customer is always right.” That doesn’t fly in our world. Right is defined by the idea that we have to build it right, maintain it right and make sure that the right things happen when an emergency occurs. Instead I would like to submit a substitute phrase – “the customer may not always be right when they come through the door, but they will be when they leave.”

Keep up the counter image!