
7 Actions You Can Take to Be Part of the Emerging Revolution in Client Services

by Barry Koren, AIA, PhD



An architect I know told me that he takes great pride in the service he gives to his clients. He makes himself immediately available anytime they call. Day or night, he'll bend over backwards to give them what they want. As we chatted, his tone and words convinced me of his sincerity.

I admire the dedication, the drive, and the personal service he gives his clients. I'm concerned, though, that so much of the service he provides depends on him personally. It depends on him not becoming ill, overloaded, or retiring. It's an approach like the one my parents used 50 years ago managing their small, corner grocery store. That approach was challenged when a supermarket was built a block away and my parents saw their "steady" customers walking by with full bags of groceries. Scanning through magazines and junk mail, I see more and more companies claiming to distinguish themselves from their competition on the basis of their services. Companies claim to be quicker (Domino's Pizza delivers in 30

minutes or its free), more dependable (Prudential Insurance provides security as reliable as the Rock of Gibraltar), or more available (Kinko's is open 24 hours a day). I also see much more flexibility -- I stayed in a Radisson Hotel that allowed me to select the time that I would have my room serviced. First Chicago says I can bank and pay my bills on America Online. Jewel Food Stores offers grocery shopping via computer.

These ideas are too late for my parents' store which has long since been closed, but they're not too late for you, me, or the architect I know. Here are seven actions you can take to be part of the emerging revolution in client services.

1. Turn the hierarchical organization chart

upside down, putting the customer first. Doing this means that management's job is to provide support to the people who serve clients like "Henry."

2. Reward client-oriented frontline people.

That is, reward people who tune in to your client Henry's immediate situation, his frame of mind, and his needs. Support them by giving them a high-quality work situation, including the feeling that their job is worth doing. If it fits with your service strategy (Action 6 below), encourage them to have a whatever-it-takes attitude.

3. Segment by customer expectations.

Find out what Henry expects and design your services

accordingly. For example:

- **Provide various levels of service** so as to accommodate different abilities to pay.
- **Share the burdens of service** by eliminating services that Henry would rather not pay for, by enabling him to receive service during non-peak hours or to accept slower service on non-critical items, and by allowing Henry to place orders via fax, computer, or e-mail.
- **Install client-friendly systems** that are designed to help Henry get what he wants. When you step up to the service counter at McDonald's, every aspect of the service has been diagrammed, analyzed, and "engineered" to give you the fast service and standardized food that you expect. At the touch of a single cash-register button, the order for a Big Mac is received and sent to the kitchen and its price added to your bill. It's no accident when you are asked-- "And will you have fries with that order?"

4. Check the "cycle of service."

This cycle is the series of events that Henry goes through in receiving your service. E.g., Henry calls your office for an appointment, drives to your office at the appointed time, finds a parking space, enters the building and then finds your office, arrives at the reception area, waits for you to appear, etc. Analyzing and improving Henry's

experiences in these events is a basic part of “engineering” the delivery of your services.

5. Focus on “moments of truth,” which occur anytime a client or prospect comes into contact with your organization, whether by seeing your listing in the yellow pages, driving by, telephoning, or walking into your office. The critical issue is whether the total of these experiences is positive or negative compared to the alternatives that Henry has.

6. Develop a vision, mission, or strategy for the services you provide. Here are some examples:

- **Shouldice Hospital** in Toronto only accepts men with hernia problems. It offers them a first-rate experience by stressing camaraderie among patients. It also offers very low costs and a significant role, e.g., by having patients shave their own abdomens and groins.
- **Federal Express's** vision is that of a truly reliable mail service. And they enhance your confidence by offering status information about your shipments.
- **McDonald's Hamburgers** offers speed, convenience,

and low price.

- **Holiday Inn** offers value and a moderate price, whereas Embassy Suites, which is its sister company, offers luxurious and personal services to the business traveller.
- **Southwest Airlines** offers fun and a low price.
- **Nordstrom** offers their customers “an experience” when they are in their stores.

7. Address Henry's fears that things may go wrong:

- **Provide service guarantees.** Remember how much business Domino's Pizza got when they delivered in 30 minutes or it was free.
- **Pinpoint likely areas of failure** and design your services to respond quickly to resolve problems. Auto manufacturers do this by installing diagnostic devices like the warning light that tells me when its time for service. Auto dealers reduce service complaints by offering a loaner car while they're servicing my car.

And now I have a question for you.

Is there room for improvement in your firm's services? Are there any actions you can take now? By commenting, please let all of us know your reactions, or if you have any stories, news, or marketing tips that you want to share.

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