

The Path to Customer Service: A Web-based Service Log

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One of the unique challenges that any housing operation faces is providing customer service in a streamlined and efficient way. Recent trends towards customer service have swayed toward the utilization of front-end interactive forms and applications that customers can use to submit and retrieve data from the office. However, a key challenge remains in the providing of customer service even with such forms and portals being available. Information tends to not be readily available and there is an inconsistent stream of information from and to the customer. Statements such as “but someone named John told me something different yesterday,” “no one told me I needed to do that,” and “I talked to some lady yesterday but I can’t remember her name” underscore some of the difficulties in providing streamless, transparent, and consistent service to customers.

To deal with this problem, we at the University of Florida Department of Housing and Residence Education developed an online, web-based customer service log to track relations with our customers in the Undergraduate Assignments office of our department. We considered key requirements (making customer information readily available, tracking customer contacts, efficient transfer of unresolved individuals to others, search for customers by name, and so on) and came up with a solution based on certain development tools (J2EE, Jetspeed Portal, Apache Tomcat, Struts, AS400 databases).

The customer service log works via the staff person logging on to a centralized in-house portal. The staff member then clicks on the tab for the customer service log application and has immediate access to several critical features. Resident information, contact history, log detail, application details, contract information, and waitlist details immediately appear on-screen in an organized and logical format. From this reference information, the staff person can communicate with the customer and address the customer’s specific needs. After communicating with the customer, the staff person can add an entry to the log indicating exactly what was said and whether any follow-up is necessary.

In addition, we built administrative features into the customer service log to address the needs of management staff to evaluate the effectiveness of staff and to quickly access records and information. The search feature, for example, allows for complex queries. If we needed to see all entries in October of a given year related to contracts information, we could quickly and readily perform this search and retrieve the relevant information from the database. Building on this, we created a statistics function which allows for the viewing of a breakdown of customer contacts. If, for instance, we needed to see what percentage of customer contacts relate to rent, we could use this feature to generate a report.

The impact on our operation from this new system has been impressive and has led to the streamlining of resources and better identification of our students' needs from an operational perspective. Our undergraduate assignments coordinator remarked that the customer service log functionality "allows our staff to provide more consistent information over time and also see if the customer is trying to manipulate things." By having this log in place, each staff member and customer is held accountable for what he or she does in the office. From a staff perspective, the reinforcement of consistency has led to better working relationships between staff members as arguments over who said what and the propagation of misinformation by staff and students has tremendously decreased.

Even while the online customer service log is a great improvement over previous practices within our department, there are still areas for improvement. It is often difficult to classify the myriad of problems that an undergraduate assignments office faces, and so staff have an inclination to use the "miscellaneous" classification too often. Staff members have also identified the page layout as being an important component of the log that could be improved, as some information is more important to providing service to the customer. In addition, our system does not allow for changes to be made to an entry, and so a well-researched process for making changes should be considered to prevent staff from trying to "cover up" mistakes.

Given the usefulness of the customer service log application, we would highly recommend that other housing departments and organizations within student affairs consider adding an internal online customer service log to their workflow and processes. There are several different ways to go about doing this, and a thorough evaluation of current office practices is a must in order to produce a better implementation. The inclusion of staff and solicitation of feedback by staff was also essential in our plan to produce an effective project that benefited all stakeholders. With the customer service log, we are assured that we can continue to evaluate and improve the service that we provide to our student population.