

Customer Service in Local Government: An Australian Experience

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ABSTRACT

In the public sector there are frequently no competitors for the services offered which means that consumers are not free to choose alternate service provider. This paper presents an exploratory case study of a Melbourne local government that sought to improve its customer contact. The absence of thorough service performance measurement data was a major impediment in this case. The lack of data meant that identifying areas to focus improvement efforts on was difficult. To address the issue of customer contact expediently, semi-structured interviews were undertaken internally with 46 key customer service staff. This paper describes the research project, its findings and recommendations to senior management.

Keywords: Customer Service, Public Sector, Local Government

INTRODUCTION

In Australia there are three levels of government; Federal, State and Local. The Federal or Commonwealth Government of Australia is responsible for international trade, defence, immigration, postal services, shipping, a variety of taxes and emerging issues like air travel and telecommunications. State Governments are responsible for hospitals, police, public housing, land transport and schools. Local Governments (Councils) in Victoria draw their power from the Local Government Act 1989. There are now 78 Councils in Victoria, following amalgamations in the mid-1990s, which reduced the number from well over 200 (Thuy and Dalrymple, 1999). Vu, Allison and Srikanthan (1997) describe this period of amalgamations and the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) as being one of considerable change. Local Governments in Victoria are responsible for a range of services including;

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Health programs for mothers and children ❑ Immunisation ❑ Food safety regulations ❑ Youth services ❑ Support services to the aged ❑ Services to people with disabilities ❑ Childcare ❑ Support to cultural, community and sporting groups | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Economic development ❑ Building regulation enforcement ❑ Strategic planning – new suburbs ❑ Planning regulation enforcement ❑ Fire prevention ❑ Garbage and recycling services ❑ Emergency management ❑ Services to migrants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❑ Victorian councils also provide; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sport facilities, Low cost family activities ○ Parks and gardens ○ Libraries ○ Local halls and venues ○ Festivals and events ○ Local roads |
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Quality Management in Local Government

Vu, et al. (1997) suggests that Victorian local governments are striving to improve their activities for efficiency and effectiveness with many quality initiatives including improving customer service. Vu et al. (1997) found that quality management activities in Victorian local government are still in the early stages of development and that lack of training is the greatest barrier to initiating quality improvement in local government and that budgeting is the greatest impediment when implementing quality in local government. Vu et al. (1997) found that benchmarking is the most popular quality related activity in local government. In both the UK and Victoria, governments have moved from encouraging quality through the threat of externalization and privatization (CCT) to what they call 'best value' (Donnelly, 1999).

Background

The council being studied is a growth interface council (containing both suburban and rural areas) in Victoria, Australia with over 100,000 residents. The council's population has grown significantly over the past 40 years and the region has become one of a number of major growth areas, where the population expected to double by 2030. The council has considerable planning responsibilities to ensure the infrastructure and services are in place to accommodate this growth. The Department for Victorian Communities coordinates the Annual Community Satisfaction Survey which is conducted by an independent market research group, on behalf of participating Victorian councils. The Annual

Community Satisfaction Survey defines customer contact as: 'in person, by telephone, in writing, email or by fax'. The 2003 telephone-based survey identified that the council being studied was slightly above the median point, although not performing as well as the senior management team would like, in the customer contact area when benchmarked against its reference Local Government Association (LGA) group. At a senior management meeting the results were discussed with specific attention directed to the area of customer contact and how performance might be improved. The survey results, whilst providing some performance data, do not provide a great deal of information about performance, nor do they indicate areas where improvement efforts should be directed. A review of customer contact was proposed:

RESEARCH SCOPE

The council's management sought to improve frontline customer service and were keen to explore the areas of phone handling, induction, training, service strategy, difficult customers and complaints, and the barriers that staff perceived to improving the services provided by the council. Telephone contact is growing in importance as organisations are increasingly encouraging customers to contact them via telephone through the advertisement of toll free numbers (Staples and Dalrymple, 2004). Gronroos (1990, p.42) describes service encounters as providing the opportunity to demonstrate to the customer the quality of its service. Lovelock (1995, p.204) and Gilmore (2003, p.33) acknowledge the crucial role of people management in the delivery of services including issues of recruiting, selecting, training, managing and motivating employees. Judd (1987) describes the way in which people-power can create competitive advantage for an organisation through their customer orientation. Gilmore (2003, p.33) suggests researchers have focussed on organisational barriers to successful service management. Difficult customers feedback for organisations on the performance of their goods and services and hence provide opportunity for improvement (Dalrymple and Donnelly, 1997). The experience of customer contact staff with customers means they often have a good understanding of the internal barriers to customer service. McGuire (1999, p.109) believes that analysing capabilities reveals strengths and weaknesses of strategy and service organisations can use this information to manage and improve performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Service and Government

Donnelly, Wisniewski, Dalrymple and Curry (1995) acknowledge that quality and customer service have been identified as critical strategic issues for both public and private sector organisations. They note that in the private sector, customer satisfaction and loyalty are secured through high quality products and services that provide value for money for the consumer and are seen as being essential for the long-term survival. Gilmore (2003, p.82) notes the different service characteristics in the not for profit sector, often involve trying to please many different clients or groups of people simultaneously. It is recognised that public sector organisations face more difficulties than those in the private sector in their efforts to improve customer service (Donnelly et al., 1995). However, in the case of the private sector service, improvements in service frequently improve revenue and profit and the unit of resource devoted to service provision will, at worst, remain constant, and may increase (Donnelly, 1999). However, in the case of public sector services, improved quality of service that attracts new participants frequently has to be accommodated within a fixed total budget. Consequently, unlike the business enterprise, more service recipients force the public service provider to deliver the service using a diminishing unit of resource (Donnelly et al., 2001). This demonstrates the inverse relationship between the throughput of fixed budget public sector services and quality. As you increase the number of users of a fixed budget service the quality of that service is bound to go down. Donnelly (1999) comments on the complexity of public sector services by noting that there is often a collective or community payment for services which are not always enjoyed personally by every paying citizen. There are also services for which the individual receiving the service does not pay directly, or at all for service. Donnelly (1999) notes the detachment of direct payment leads to the recognition that there are a variety of 'stakeholders' in public sector services including: service users and consumers; future or potential users; excluded and non users; citizens; local communities. Donnelly (1999) highlights four complexities rarely experienced in the private sector environment:

1. the ignorance of actual service receipt by the 'customer' and their associated knowledge of the service;
2. the ambiguity of the customer;

3. customers with directly conflicting interests; and
4. the existence of unwilling customers for the service.

The pressure to improve and demonstrate performance

Donnelly et al. (1995) comment that Local governments are not immune to pressure to improve customer service and that some of these pressures arise internally from a genuine desire to improve the quality of services provided to communities. They also note that some of this pressure to improve is imposed through policy initiatives like 'best value' implemented in local government in both the UK and Victoria, Australia to replace Compulsory Competitive Tendering (see Wisniewski and Stewart, 2004; Sheffield and Coleshill, 2001). Donnelly et al. (2001) note that 'best value' imposes new transparency and continuous improvement demands on all of the services provided by local authorities in the UK. Wisniewski and Stewart (2004), and Donnelly et al. (2001) recognise the need for robust performance measurement data about the performance of services so that decision can be made. Wisniewski and Stewart (2004) comment that this enables stakeholders to make informed decisions about councils' strategic and service delivery performance. The authors note that the lack of accurate and timely performance measurement information has often hindered managers and elected representatives from making informed decisions about changes to council policy or service delivery. The Annual Survey would appear to be a positive attempt to address this lack of performance information for Victorian Local Governments albeit with some limitations.

Service Quality

Quality in the service environment has been primarily explored from the customer's perspective through the SERVQUAL model (Zeithaml et al., 1990, p.23) or variations on Gronroos two dimensional approach (Gronroos, 1990, p.41). Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry's SERVQUAL model (Zeithaml et al., 1990, pp.45-46) acknowledges that 'service quality' evaluations are made both on the outcome of service and evaluations of the process of service delivery. They believe that 'service quality' is defined by consumers as the discrepancy or gap between their perceptions and

expectations. That is 'service quality' perceptions result from a comparison of consumer expectations with the actual service performance (Zeithaml et al., p.37).

Service Encounters

Service quality may be measured on an incident specific or cumulative basis (Baron and Harris, 1995). Carlzon (1987) popularised the term 'moments of truth' to describe the interactions that take place between customer and the company. Gronroos (1990, p.42) suggests that the 'moments of truth' concept is the time and place when and where the service provider has the opportunity to demonstrate to the customer the quality of its service. Carlzon (1987) believed these were opportunities to delight the customer whilst Gronroos (1990, p.42) viewed them as true moments of opportunity.

Role of the employee

In a service context an employee's performance is very often crucial (Berry, 1981). Gilmore (2003, p.104) notes that given the importance of people in the planning and delivery of the whole service process, the main factors influencing good service are related to 'people issues' within the context of organisational and management structures. Lovelock (1995, p.214) notes that service personnel provide the emotional labour elements of personal demeanour, courtesy and empathy. Wallace et al. (2000) suggests that customer service staff contribute a significant amount of emotional labour when being helpful, friendly and empathetic to customers. Lovelock (1995, p.214) comments that emotional labour has important implications for human resource managers who need to be aware that performing such labour, day after day, can be stressful for employees as they strive to display towards customers emotions that they do not feel. Lovelock (1995, p.214) describes the challenge as determining what customers expect, and then recruiting the most appropriate employees and training them well. Gilmore (2003, p.33) comments on the people management issues involved in carrying out service work by stating that:

Services are usually carried out by people and those people need to be motivated and capable of doing the job. Service managers continually seek ways to motivate and encourage service deliverers.

Judd (1987) advances the argument that service firms can differentiate themselves from competitors in the market place through the power of customer oriented employees. Judd (1987) notes the role that front line employees play in delivering services and that organisations have employees who support these people operationally but do not have customer contact themselves.

Complaints and Difficult Customers

Complaints provide an opportunity to discover weaknesses in service provision, identify areas for improvement and demonstrate high levels of customer care in resolving issues (Dalrymple and Donnelly, 1997). Effective customer complaints procedures can help organisations to improve both product and service quality by offering unhappy customers a method of feeding back information to the provider of those goods and services. A complaint provides an opportunity to put matters right and can be used as either a management tool to improve performance or as part of a wider attempt to gain feedback and comments about a product or service. Complaints generally arise from dissatisfaction with products or services. They occur when organisations fail to meet customers' expectations. Every organisation that offers goods or services to the public is likely to receive complaints at some time. In the public sector in particular, research reveals that satisfaction with complaints is low (Dalrymple and Donnelly, 1997). When a private sector organisation is not performing, customers seek out an alternate provider. Where consumer choice is limited, as is the case with most local government services, consumers should be encouraged to provide feedback. For this reason public sector organisations need to pro-actively seek feedback on the performance of their goods and services on an ongoing basis. The existence of an accessible complaints procedure, along with active encouragement to use it, will foster a sense of participating in improving services, and so ownership of the decisions that result (Dalrymple and Donnelly, 1997).

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Data Collection

Semi structured interviews with 46 customer service staff were undertaken to assess how the council was managing customer service internally. To identify key customer service staff a mapping exercise was undertaken by examining; the council listings in the Whitepages online phonebook, historical data detailing the numbers of inbound calls, and by speaking to managers and identifying the key contact points for their business units. The interviews were conducted to explore both how the different business units are actually handling customer service and the barriers to the delivery of quality services. Service staff were interviewed because they are a crucial interfaces between council and its customers. Open ended questions were asked addressing a wide range of issues including: telephone skills, induction, service training and strategy, difficult customers, complaints, and barriers to service improvement.

DATA ANALYSIS

Induction

Informal induction practices by business units were found to be largely variable and somewhat ad hoc. New staff members felt the council had assumed they know what they should be doing with respect to customer service because of their previous experience. They are often shown 'what to do' and 'how to do it' by trainees and temporary staff who have themselves not been long in the organisation.

- "The incumbent showed me how to do things for a day"
- "I had training for a week with the person who was temping in the position, the team was very helpful"
- "I didn't have a proper induction, I had 5 hour changeover with a temp that had been acting in the role for 1-2 months. The next day I was on my own. My previous work experience had taught customer service skills, to listen and be helpful which gave me a basic understanding"
- "I had previously worked in local government. I sat with another officer when I got here everyday for 2-3 weeks"
- "I had no formal induction as I started as a temp, I guess they didn't know how long I would be here so not sure if worthwhile investing time and effort"
- "I was lucky in that I had a good handover period and phone contact with the previous staff member who had filled this position"

The council has recently addressed the issue of induction and redeveloped its council wide induction program for staff. Perhaps because of the previously highly variable informal induction practices, new

staff can feel overwhelmed and unsupported. Some are left to figure it out for themselves and experience feelings of regret at taking up employment within the council.

- “A lot of it I worked out for myself, but during the first week I wanted to quit”
- “If I had known what I would cop then I wouldn’t have taken the job. During the first week I thought I never should have taken the job”
- “I was a new trainee, I was thrown in the deep end, first day I was almost in tears, there were no precedents”
- “When I started I felt like had just been thrown in. I had worked in this council, but I moved departments and didn’t require some of the training but I was really thrown in the deep end with no information. Even the other temp felt sorry for me as I had just been left.”

33 out of the 46 staff interviewed had attended a council run induction session.

Telephone Skills:

Many staff responded that it was assumed they knew what they were doing, particularly if they had previous customer service experience and hence were often not shown how to use the telephone systems. Many staff learnt how to provide customer service through listening and observing others or worked it out on their own.

- “I was not shown the phones, I listened to others and learnt there was no protocol or uniform way of doing things, which has been strange to me as I came from a strong customer service background”
- “I was not really shown phones, probably because I had previous council experience, I worked it out myself”
- “I think I was shown a lot of stuff. It was either 1st or 2nd days before I was on the phones; I’ve worked on switchboards before. I received minimal guidance, perhaps because of previous experience”
- “I was not really shown phones, probably because previous council experience, I worked it out myself”
- “I was not really shown things, kind of assumed I knew how to do everything.”

Customer service staff commented on the lack of standards or protocols with respect to providing standardised services via the telephone, including what can or cannot be said.

- “I was not told what to say. There were no standards. Some documentation would be helpful and help with consistency, for example how to transfer etc”
- “People answer the phone here how they did in their last job. It should be a set thing”
- “What is expected in terms of phone service? Nothing is standard here”

- “When you are learning processes it would be easier if you knew exactly what to say and what information is confidential, so you would know the info you can provide customers with.”
- “I asked my sister, who had experience in the council, before I started how to answer the phone. It took a while to direct inquiries, I would listen to customer, place them on hold, ask then transfer”

31 out of 46 staff interviewed were not shown how to use the phone systems at the council.

Customer Service Training

A generic service training program that provides an overview of service in the context of the council and its service strategy was introduced 2 years prior to data collection. The training does not provide ‘hands on *council specific*’ service training for those in customer service roles. It appears to be assumed that staff either already know how to serve customers, or learn the service specific skills within the business unit. Many staff found little value added in the service training sessions.

- “Very basic, I didn’t learn anything I didn’t know, too basic I think, I didn’t do it until after 2 years from starting and not in role where I was a trainee, did it when moved to another business unit”
- “Not particularly useful, no impact on me”
- “I did it and was not very impressed; it was very basic things and didn’t teach me anything. I thought it was a waste of time”

Staff also commented that the training was not council specific enough:

- “I was in first group to do it, council is different to everywhere else you go, we try to be current but it is important the course is reflective of council issues. Training – give it a more realist perspective, most of it should be in house”
- “Very broad, didn’t really involve anything practical, talking but not application. Someone like me who hasn’t done face-to-face customer service, role play would have helped.”
- “I thought that it would be more council specific”

15 of the 46 of the customer service staff interviewed indicated that they had not completed service training. Some commented that they had avoided doing the training because they had heard bad things about it.

- “I didn’t do it and felt lucky as heard it was a waste of time”
- “I escaped that one, because comments coming back from people were negative”

The timing of training was also revealed to be an issue with 17 of the 31 staff interviewed, who had undertaken the training, did so after 3 months of being with the council. 9 of this 17 commented they had done the training after having been with the council for more than 1 year.

Service Strategy

Overwhelmingly customer service staff were either unaware of the council service strategy, or they had heard of it but were unsure as to what it contains and whether it would be of use to them.

- “What’s that?”
- “Not aware, I understand the principles but I can’t recall it off the top of my head”
- “Which is it? Have gone through it browsed through it rather than read, A lot of it I already know – it is common sense”
- “Never heard of it”

There was only one staff member (1 out of 46) interviewed who responded that they both knew the strategy and what it contained. This staff member had worked for the council for 5 months.

- “yes, it is in the induction manual, its my own policy, yes definitely have read that, went through it in induction”

Consequently, 45 of the 46 staff members interviewed either had not heard of the service strategy, had heard of it but were unsure as to what it contained, or had read it but could not remember what it was about. Staff raised concerns regarding the usefulness of the information contained in the service strategy.

- “When I read it I could remember what it was about, but really not sure, too many procedures – what does it actually mean?. It seems like there are a lot of documents with information, would be better if there was only 1, What is it that they are after? Staff read and don’t retain or they don’t really read it”
- “What is that? Sometimes council pitches things that are too verbose”
- “Not aware, haven’t read, don’t think it will help”
- “I’ve heard of it, probably read it, but wouldn’t know what the hell it was about”

Intranet

Most customer service staff were positive about the role of intranet in assisting the delivery of service to customers:

- “Quite handy, otherwise I would have to spend a lot of time asking people who does what”
- “It is a great resource, the staff tracking device is useful if it is filled in”
- “I use the intranet to locate administrative officers in different areas, as I assume they will know how to deal with inquiries that I believe are more related to their areas. It was difficult at the start as I didn’t know who to contact, but have now been here awhile.”

Difficult Customers / Complaints

The diverse range and nature of services offered by the council means that some business units attract more difficult customers and complaints. For example, enforcement of local parking restrictions.

- “I go through the procedure that a complaint needs to be put in writing, nothing can be disclosed over phone, if I can’t resolve it too much then take the callers name and get a higher officer to ring. I never put the call straight through to them, If an officer is not there then I would take a message. More often I get the senior officers to call back; everybody will get a return call. In 15 months I have been really abused 4 times. I tell them that if they proceed to talk like that then I will disconnect the call. We are here to help resolve, if they aren’t happy they have to put it in writing to have it heard at the magistrates court.”

There is no consistent approach to dealing with difficult customers or complaints by the council. Each business unit appears to have its own approach. Most customer service staff describe; trying to stay calm, letting the customer talk, showing empathy and listening before speaking.

- “Difficult – yelling, carrying on, let them have a say, prepared to help, please don’t yell, happy to speak to you, 90% of customers are OK, use an even tone. When I first started hard not to take it personally, sometimes because sitting at front counter they want to speak to someone else behind. I transfer to another staff member, depends on what issue is, day to day, if it involves legalities I transfer to coordinator, I think I am pretty good at diffusing things, If confident it makes a big difference”
- “Empathy, stay calm, ensure them you are on their side, active listening, resolve situation, not Us Vs Them, because they don’t know what happens in council”

Staff note the emotional and often stressful nature of their interactions with customers.

- “Personally if someone uses abusive language I give them 3 warnings then terminate the call, if it’s the first call of the day it kind of sets the tone.....I have had a couple of terrible incidents and I tend to take home those upsetting experiences”
- “I back away from front counter and am hesitant until get a feel for the customer, if an appropriate officer is not in I take a message. If they have an infringement notice I don’t rush towards them.”
- “I try to stay calm and not lose my temper; customers can be rude and scream, but I try to stay calm, If you lose your temper you encourage them. If they are swearing they have to stop otherwise I won’t speak to them. I have been comparatively lucky in that I haven’t had any death threats. Formal procedure – would help a lot.”

10 of the 46 staff interviewed had undertaken difficult customer training provided by the council.

Barriers to improvement

New staff members who have not worked in a local government environment before have a challenging time learning about the range of activities that the council is involved in and knowing who does what within the council.

- “Knowing what each department does what, particularly for people who have been here a short time”
- “Lack of broad knowledge of council”
- “Learning what other departments do”
- “We get a lot of transfers as people have their rate notice handy and get the number of the council off that so we, get a lot of general calls, have to know the whole council to know who to transfer to, otherwise we would have to transfer back to switch and then back to the group.”

Some staff felt that the communication between departments was lacking. The council’s centralised reception felt they were not given enough information about what has happening in business units to enable the to anticipate and plan.

- “We don’t get told is what is going on – not informed enough at reception.”
- “We don’t get told about festivals or if rangers have sent out notices etc, not enough info on what is happening, there’s been some steps taken in this area.”

The business units felt that reception transferred too many calls to the wrong areas.

- “The staff at reception don’t ask enough questions of client before putting them through to us, how much listening are they doing? Are they asking the right questions? It is frustrating, especially for customers”
- “I get upset when calls transferred from reception that have absolutely nothing to do with my area... e.g I wanted to organise a circus in the area and wanted to know if any restrictions?”

Most staff felt that transferring a caller was very frustrating and not good customer service.

- “Frustration for customers is being palmed off, moved around department to department”
- “Frustration customers have is being mucked around, when they really shouldn’t have been transferred here”
- “Initially trainees are too young and not mature enough.....on counters we have all our newer and younger staff, where we need our most trained”
- “Customer service suffers from turnover of staff”

14 out of the 46 staff interviewed identified knowledge of staff as a barrier to improvement. 7 felt internal communication was an issue, whilst 7 identified workload as an issue whilst 6 identified phone skills of staff.

CONCLUSIONS

The current approach is inconsistent and often involves putting new, sometimes inexperienced staff in customer service roles when the most experienced staff are needed. This often causes new staff to experience stress and question whether they want to work in the council environment. The council would benefit from taking more responsibility for supporting staff and ensuring they are shown how to do things. There is clearly a need to develop systems for standardising service operations. The business unit induction should occur in the first week of employment and prior to new staff members providing customer service. Telephone training that includes how to answer, divert, and transfer a call needs to be undertaken on the first day a new staff member begins. The telephone will most likely be the first and most frequent way in which a new staff member interacts with customers. This would be best if undertaken within the business unit and that is the current assumed approach. Business unit managers need to identify appropriate officers within their area to provide new staff members with telephone training. The council may wish to consider adopting standardised telephone protocols. The service training currently undertaken by staff is seen as having little value and lacking relevance to

council operations. A large percentage of staff avoid taking the training, or are doing it far too long after they started. This makes the training no longer useful or relevant and staff are uninterested. The awareness of the service strategy by customer service staff was at such a profoundly low level that the strategy has no relevance to the provision of council services. If the strategy was an attempt to standardise the way service is provided by the council it has failed and needs to be revisited. The intranet is the council's most easily accessible internal information resource. It can not be assumed that new staff members know how to use the intranet just because they are familiar with the use of the internet, particularly as staff members need to be encouraged to use it and understand its range of capabilities. The intranet training should incorporate customer contact/service specific issues such as where specific documents are located and the use of the range of search functions. The intranet training should be undertaken by all new employees and be included in the corporate induction. There appears to be no consistent approach to dealing with difficult customers and complaints. Customer service staff have previously had training on 'dealing with difficult customers' and appear to have developed skills in this area, however these will remain only as long as these particular staff remain with the council. A clear complaints process for staff to follow would provide the benefit of supporting the staff in delivering services and provide a transparent mechanism for customers to provide feedback. Important barriers identified were customer service staff knowledge of council and the communication between business units. To provide a quality service customer contact staff need to have a broad understanding of the activities of each business unit within the council. Formalised business unit and corporate induction must be undertaken very soon after a staff member begins. This will would help improve a new staff member's knowledge and confidence. The intranet has made a positive contribution to both improving knowledge of council staff and the communication between staff. Unless staff are delivering good service or aware of how to do so, it is very unlikely that a customer would respond favourably when asked about the council's customer contact. The present situation with respect to services is largely inconsistent throughout the organisation and needs addressing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following four recommendations were made to the senior management team:

1. HR review the content of the council service training and the corporate induction to include dealing with difficult customers and intranet training.
2. HR provide business unit managers with a template of training issues to be addressed as part of the business unit induction/training.
3. Business unit managers identify the appropriate officers to provide new staff with necessary training required.
4. Business unit induction and training should occur prior to new staff providing customer service.

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