

Effective Complaints Management

4: Communication

INFORMATION FOR NORTHERN TERRITORY PUBLIC SECTOR AGENCIES:

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This Fact Sheet forms part of a series designed to assist public sector agencies to ensure they have appropriate procedures in place to effectively manage customer complaints.

The Fact Sheet series has been kindly made available by the Queensland Ombudsman. It has been adapted for use in the Northern Territory.

For further information or advice, please contact the Northern Territory Ombudsman's Office on 08 8999 1818.

Communication: a big issue for complainants

Good communication strategies are beneficial to the success of any organisation, but are absolutely essential for effective complaints management.

Public agencies understand the need for effective communication as part of their commitment to client service. However, many do not appreciate that their communication practices can have a big impact on the number of complaints they receive.

Our experience shows that communication is a big issue for complainants. If insufficient time is taken to explain actions and decisions in a manner that shows the public's concerns were properly considered, a minor matter can escalate into a major drama.

Communicate better with your customers

Sound communication strategies aid openness in decision-making. They help your customers to view your agency as accessible and user-friendly.

Here are some suggestions for improving communication that can lead to higher levels of client satisfaction and reduce complaints:

- involve the community in your decision-making and actions on matters that will affect them
- develop a complaints-friendly culture by encouraging a 'your problem is our problem' attitude among staff
- encourage staff and customers to contribute to the improvement of your products and services
- ensure your written materials are straightforward and prepared in plain English
- publicise complaints contact details in the telephone directory and prominently on your website
- close the communication gulf for non-English speaking people, those with impairments and people who have been educationally disadvantaged.

Make it easy for staff to fix problems

A commitment by senior management to quality customer service goes hand in hand with good communication practices.

Part of that commitment is to help staff who deal with the community become better communicators.

Here are some practical suggestions on ways you can help your staff to become better communicators:

- provide training in areas such as interviewing skills, problem-solving, conflict resolution and writing in plain English
- encourage staff to speak to concerned customers rather than responding in writing
- clearly define agency communication practices in your customer service standards
- provide cross-cultural training for staff and access to translation and interpreter services
- use technology to help people with special needs communicate with your agency.

Useful tip

You can save time and money if your written complaints documents help customers understand what they need to do.

Problems not resolved at the outset can become dissatisfied customers

Ms Kingston was convicted of a traffic offence and disqualified from driving for six months. At the expiry of this period Ms Kingston attended the Courthouse to "get her license back". She was referred to the Motor Vehicle Registry (MVR), where she was informed for the first time of a requirement, under the Motor Vehicles Act, for her to attend a driver re-education course prior to having her license re-instated. As Ms Kingston lived in a remote NT town, she discovered that she would need to wait two months for the next course. She complained that due to her lack of awareness of this requirement, in effect the penalty given by the Court was increased by two months.

Investigation revealed that the Courts Administration had failed to forward the details of her disqualification to MVR, which normally would have issued a letter to Ms Kingston explaining the requirement to attend a driver re-education course. Courts staff had also failed to give Ms Kingston a brochure that explained the requirement when she was convicted.

After bringing this issue to the attention of Courts Administration, it acted to prevent the problem recurring in future by amending the fine slip handed to defendants as they leave court to explain the requirement. Ms Kingston argued that she was entitled to a refund of her out of pocket expenses and lost financial opportunities caused by the delay in being able to reapply for her license. However the Department of Justice considered there were no legal grounds on which to pay the complainant, who remained unhappy with the outcome.

Communication and complaints management

The way your agency handles complaints can affect its reputation. If complaints are ignored, customers will look for redress in some way, either by seeking external review or by publicly exposing their experiences, a step that could damage your agency's reputation.

Agencies have a lot to lose if they ignore customer complaints and a lot to gain from having effective complaints management systems.

Your communication practices can also help provide better customer service. Consider these suggestions:

- tell them they can complain
- tell them where to complain – publicise your complaints handling point of contact through a range of sources and accept complaints by phone, in person or in writing, including email
- avoid long, complicated forms
- be responsive – answer complaints lines quickly, establish target times for stages of the complaints handling process and let your customers know what they can expect
- find out what the person wants you to do about the problem and be clear about what remedies you can offer – do not make promises you can not keep
- give personal and specific replies – a stock standard reply may make things worse
- treat people as you would like to be treated – do not pass the buck – but if you need to refer the complaint to someone else, make sure you give the customer full details
- let your customers know about improvements that have been made as a result of their complaints and thank them for their feedback.

Time is of the essence

Information technology and modern communication equipment allow your staff to respond easily and quickly to customer complaints.

When customers contact your agency to complain, they do not want to be transferred several times or told to ring another number. For this reason, it is useful to establish a designated toll-free or free call complaints hotline that connects straight through to your complaints section or designated complaints officer.

You should also make sure customers can leave a message on an answering machine when the section is unstaffed or the telephone lines are busy.

An effective complaints database will also allow you to record details of your answers and track customer complaints so you can meet the target times you establish. This will mean that you can easily keep customers informed about the progress of their complaints as well as gather useful data to help you improve your services.

Complaints about the decisions or actions of those within your agency can seem like a burden at times, but how you manage customer complaints lies at the core of your customer service.

Providing information to help your customers complain is a demonstration of your commitment to them and will make your job easier.

Useful tip

Welcoming customers' input and keeping them informed about progress in dealing with their concerns increases satisfaction.