

CITYSPEAK

“Give City Manager A+ Customer Service”

You may not think about the City Manager as your customer, but he (or she!) is. And for Department Heads, the City Manager is the MOST important customer at City Hall.

SERVICE WITH A SMILE

If you know me, you know very well that I am NOT a bootlicker; but there is a big difference between sucking up and providing service. As a former City Finance Director, I strongly believe the City Manager is our most important customer. She needs to receive excellent customer service at all times so that she can lead our organization to achieve our mission statement. With a strong team supporting her, the City Manager will be able to breathe life into the vision of the community we all serve.

Sure, at times the City Manager may be an irate customer, especially when his job is on the line; there may be the occasion when a majority of the City Council is against him. Or, on a very rare occasion, he may be irate just because he has become accustomed to crankiness. BUT, even if we do have a “not so nice” City Manager as our customer, heck, even if we don’t like his leadership at all, we must respect the Office of the City Manager.

Just as you may not love our President, you must respect the Office of the President which he (or she! Can’t wait to be able to say Madame President!) was elected to uphold by the American democratic process. Our City organization is a microcosm of the country; local governments are likewise a part of that democratic process.

So while our City Manager may be an irate customer at times, municipal managers and executives (which we Department Heads are) must respect the Office of the City Manager to preserve the legitimacy of our municipal organization and the processes that put the City Manager into power.

Bottom Line: It is our DUTY as a part of the executive management team at our City organization to **give our City Manager A+ customer service**. Fulfilling this duty is how we serve our city. The City Manager is the “key person” at City Hall we need to serve, and we as municipal managers and executive team members are “the” people at City Hall who enable our City Manager to succeed in her leadership.

In my 29 years of experience in local government, I have not known many City Managers who thought they could lead the City on their own. Over 99% of my City Managers regularly reminded me of just how important I was to their success. Though there was that one City Manager who reminded me each week during our one-on-one meetings: “John, don’t forget I have five Finance Directors in my rolodex just waiting for your job.”

Regardless of his crusty ways, I did love him dearly, and I served this City Manager and our City with loyalty and professional ethics as a Finance Director and municipal CPA. I always provided excellent customer service, no matter what. Fear not, I will write more about this “crusty” experience in a future CitySpeak newsletter.

TO THE NAYSAYERS AND NEGATIVE NANCYS

Every executive management team I worked with as Finance Director always had that one Department Head who made fun of me, calling me a “kiss ass” because I advanced the notion of A+ customer service for our City Manager. This Department Head had no idea that I was actually a “pain in the ass” to this City Manager because I also consider it my job to keep the City Manager honest fiscally. ☺

And I ran into too many Department Heads at City Hall who, although they were afraid of getting fired by the City Manager, would complain about the City Manager, or worse, gossip about him behind his back.

Although I support and advance diversity of ideas on our executive management team, I am discouraged by any negativity on the issue of customer service for our City Manager.

It is quite easy to attack a job, especially one hierarchically superior to our own, that we are not responsible for. But we often have little idea of just how much goes into that job.

During my 29 years of experience, I never sought out the City Manager position. I don’t feel I have the temperament, character, nor the courage required of the City Manager. My City Manager may not have my skills in financial analysis or accounting, but he has the leadership skills to guide an organization through any waters, be they calm or troubled.

Finance and accounting is actually easy compared to the complex organizational and/or political environment through which our City Manager must navigate. For this very reason, I am determined to support my City Manager with A+ customer service. The future of every stakeholder in our organization depends on it!

During my years as a member of the Municipal Management Assistants of Southern California (MMASC), I learned that I am committed to serving my City Manager as a “Career Assistant.” While many at MMASC during the early 1990’s had the goal of “making City Manager by age 30,” my goal was to reach City Finance Director by age 30. I realized this goal by age 31! I will discuss the role of Career Assistant and the valuable experience I gained from MMASC in a future CitySpeak newsletter. I urge anybody interested in fast tracking their municipal career to join MMASC (or MMANC) ASAP. (Sorry. I love acronyms.)

DEL TACO: A WATERSHED MOMENT ON CUSTOMER SERVICE

So where did I get all these “crazy” customer service notions? Del Taco. That’s right. The fast food restaurant chain. 1978 was a watershed moment for me. I saw the light come down from above, showing me that it was not just OK but my actual purpose in life to pursue my passion for delivering excellent customer service.

Picture it: a 15-year old high school sophomore working 25 hours per week at Del Taco in Chula Vista, California. Under the loving and patient direction of my Store Manager, Fran Dempsey (I will never forget her training), I learned the meaning and vital importance of “sincere” and “honest” customer service.

You may not think much of a job at Del Taco, but what I learned at this job changed my life. Fran Dempsey helped me feel proud to see customers leave our restaurant satisfied. I boldly wore my lapel pin with the different colored buttons on it, displaying my certifications and competency with each station at Del Taco.

I learned that no matter what station I was in, no matter which role I filled, each position ultimately allowed me to provide a superior experience for our customers. I started out in Grill (red button), then went to Taco Bar (blue button), then Drinks (yellow button), then Cashier (green button). Yes sir, if I continued on this way, Fran Dempsey said I could someday make Assistant Manager of Del Taco. I’m serious. No joke. I was proud of my customer service skills 40 years ago in 1978, and I continue to be proud of them today (I still have the badge!).

COFFEE POINTS...JOKERS EVERYWHERE!

Of course, there’s always a joker out there to make fun of good old-fashioned work ethics. You don’t have to go very far. Jokers and others who make a mockery of hard work and customer service even come from within the organization. My very own Regional Manager (Larry something or other) from Del Taco himself made fun of me one early Saturday morning.

It was 7am, and I was helping to open the restaurant, so when I saw Larry meeting with the company owner, without being asked, I prepared two cups of coffee. I confidently walked over to Larry and the company owner and offered them both coffee. I remember being initially embarrassed when Larry said, “there’s Juan (my legal name) again, trying to make points by serving coffee.”

This was the watershed moment for me. How should I respond? Would I turn red in the face from shame, or would I stand up, proud of my own proactivity in customer service? Thankfully, I was compelled to stand up. I simply smiled and served the coffee, first to the company owner, then to Larry. The company owner said, “thank you Juan.” That was all I needed to tell me I did the right thing.

Needless to say, this lifelong focus on aspiring to the highest level of customer service has served me well.

What is interesting is that while I never aspired to deliver A+ customer service for money, *I have achieved all my financial goals because of it.* And I expect every member of my team to aspire to A+ customer service to remain on the MuniTemps team. In fact, a commitment to customer service is a key requirement to be considered for employment with our company.

WHAT IS A+ CUSTOMER SERVICE TO OUR CITY MANAGER?

“Well John, what is A+ customer service to you is not A+ custom service to me.” I’ve heard this argument many times over the years. I still hate it. But I get it. The definition of A+ customer service is sometimes in the eye (or heart) of the beholder.

Ultimately, however, there are some common standards across the board of what constitutes A+ customer service to a City Manager. Here are some general standards that you should quickly be able to apply to any unique situation:

- Over the top service; do more than is asked of you. Surprise your City Manager!
- Specialized service, even when you’re adhering to a system.
- Give your City Manager options, highlighting your best alternative.
- Spend time creatively, by the water cooler, etc., to provide A+ customer service.
- Stand firm on your values and principles while providing A+ customer service.
- Meet frequently with City Manager to know and “manage” their expectations!
- Make the City Manager aware of anything that’s “coming around the corner.”

This list goes on, but the above have been the most relevant to my success as a City Department Head. I would love to have you share any others that are useful to you with me at www.munitemps.com or by emailing me at John@munitemps.com.

CUSTOMER SERVICE NEVER GOES OUT OF STYLE...

A+ customer service is of vital importance to the communities that we serve in our municipal organizations. In some organizations, like my own at MuniTemps, customer service is actually an evaluation section for employees. **Customer service can even be quantified for objective evaluation of employees.** This topic was discussed at great length at a CAPPO (California Association for Public Procurement Officials) workshop in 2008, which *I will discuss further in a future CitySpeak newsletter.*

In fact, all the way back in 1990 (wow that was 28 years ago!), Joe Guzzetta, City Manager at the City of Hemet, hired Linda Silverman. Linda had published a book “I’m First: Your Customer’s Word to You,” just a couple years earlier in 1988. Joe hired Linda to train all City Hall staff on providing excellent customer service.

So you see? Customer service, specifically A+ customer service, never goes out of style! You may be called a “bootlicker” or even an “ass kisser” for your passion for delivering A+ customer service, both to your City Manager and everybody who is your “customer,” but you’ll always know you’re doing the right thing. *We’ll definitely talk more about this topic in a future article.*

I LOVE YOUR FEEDBACK...

As always, please call me if you want to share your thoughts on customer service or any other subject I write about in my newsletter; I would love to talk to you about your ideas for interesting municipal topics for my future CitySpeak newsletters.

I love your feedback!

MUNITEMPS IS HERE TO HELP...

And remember, MuniTemps is here for you should you need temporary help to fill a staff vacancy in your Department. It is much harder to get an A+ report card on customer service if you’re short-staffed. Partner with your City Manager and MuniTemps!

As president of **MuniTemps – Municipal Staffing Solutions**, I am passionate about delivering A+ customer service to our municipal clients and our associates. I have worked hard during the past 28 years, serving many Cities and Special Districts as Finance Director and other administrative positions.

My team and I understand municipal organizations, the budget, the CAFR, **customer service**, and the nuances of municipalities in serving their communities.

I wish us all success as we work through the execution of municipal best practices and the continuous professional work ethic of serving our City organizations!



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Note: MuniTemps has now partnered with **MuniGlobal®** to now provide executive search services exclusively for City Hall and other municipal organizations. Call us at (866) 406-MUNI (6864) to learn more about our budget-friendly search services. The municipal managers and executives we recruit for your municipality will stay with your organization!