

Notions of customer service

Peter Floyd explores ways to integrate emergency service interactions to deliver superior 'customer service'

Abstract

Do emergency services need to communicate better with each other and improve their communication strategies to keep the customer satisfied? Can better use be made of the local resources of the emergency services by agencies breaking out of their organisational silos?

This article explores the notion that knowing our partners in emergency management and understanding their respective roles and capabilities will increase the ability to provide better customer service. Some agencies must stop 'guarding their roles' and shift their focus more to the needs of the community and integration with other services during down time as well as in times of crisis.

Introduction

Customer service is often misunderstood as a term and does not only apply to organisations which exchange money for goods but also to those that just provide a service, such as emergency services.

In simple terms one pays for goods and/or services and hopefully the good and/or the service provided was to a satisfactory standard. As the bean counters have moved in we have seen privatisation happen *on mass* over the last few years and the need for all government agencies to be more accountable with the public dollar and the service they provide. This has sometimes meant a restructuring

process which usually meant, but not always, a loss of jobs. The motive behind this process was cost effectiveness, capability enhancement, competitiveness in the market place and better business continuity.

All emergency services, including the predominately volunteer ones such as the various Australian, State and Territory emergency services, have also had to embrace the notion of customer service. There is nothing wrong with trying to bring a focus on what and how well we go about doing our legislated roles and in turn how we allocate and spend the hard fought dollar from State Government. The various volunteer State and Territory emergency services are mainly funded from State budgets and are at times quite often assisted by local government in one way or another. In general, the emergency services do not receive payment for services rendered in terms of responding to emergencies. Many volunteer agencies also fundraise at a local level to supplement government funding.

Therefore, the services that the various emergency agencies provide are seen as *free* by the community regardless whether the response is to a roof blown off a house, a motor vehicle accident or a flood rescue. These services provided are also available to 'customers' 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Thus, the term *customer service* can be applied to any organisation, which basically offers *service* as well as or instead of goods as part of their function.

What emergency services actually 'sell' is public safety and this is ably assisted by the various public safety programs that the respective

services implement nationally. To achieve this, all emergency service staff require training to acquire the skills needed to do the job. All emergency services, both paid and volunteer, have vigorously embraced competency-based training for several years and can receive nationally recognised and transferable qualifications.

The NSW State Emergency Service (SES) employs full-time business managers (Division Controllers for example), public relations experts, human resource professionals and others at State level. Professionalism is still an essential part of any volunteer service with such a high profile and some skills are only available on a paid basis. However these emergency services do not need to be paid to be professional in attitude or how they apply their skills. The NSW SES is proud of its versatility to perform an enormous range of tasks around public safety.

The NSW SES is limited by its statutory core roles of flood rescue and storm damage response. In some areas it also has a legislated role to provide road crash rescue service. Every year at various locations throughout NSW, the SES provides logistical support in terms of welfare to the Rural Fire Service during bush fire emergencies and assists the police with land or urban searches for missing persons.

Exposure to the multitude of varied incidents requires staff to be multi-skilled and expand their knowledge base which helps make the organisation information rich. What is new and different today becomes

common knowledge tomorrow. If versatility alone was benchmarked staff would score highly every time.

However, public opinion and the praise of other emergency services counts considerably, when praise is received, self esteem as volunteers and as an emergency service, increases exponentially.

It has been suggested a performance-based criterion can impersonalise emergency service staff. In recent years many organisations such as hospitals, local government and emergency services—both paid and volunteer—have adopted the notion of customer service and have attempted ways to measure it. Thus *key performance indicators* appear to be part of most customer service charters. However, when the hierarchies write their mission statements and customer service charters, who are they actually being written for? In a practical context those on the ground see the greater public as part of their community and *not* customers. The validity of these documents is based on the function these documents serve, rather than submitting them as a formality to senior management.

Mission statements have worth because they formalise the organisation's purpose and what the community can expect in terms of service delivery. Emergency services need to know how well they are progressing based on how the public measure their performance. For example, does the public measure performance based on the emergency services mission statements having relevance to fire fighters at a major structural fire; a rescue helicopter at the scene of an overturned boat; or an SES rescue team extracting an injured person from a motor vehicle accident? It is suggested this evaluation does not take place at the time, but only when the emergency service has achieved an outcome. Furthermore, good outcomes—achievable ones

(and therefore measurable) are what the emergency services are there for.

There needs to be a degree of simplification. Mission statements contain a series of outcomes which emergency services would like (or need and want) to achieve, and questions that require an answer. Thus emergency services must determine how they can do the job they are trained for within the constraints of the resources available. Alternatively, do emergency services need more resources, such as communication strategies, to assist them? In addition, better communication between services could mean better use of local resources. Often local resources are under estimated, mainly because of a lack of communication between services. If there is a need to measure performance then emergency services need do something with the information we gather. The information gathering process should, in theory, add value to the respective organisations if its usefulness can be justified.

What is really happening is the correlation of the dollar value to community benefit. Can we possibly increase performance or customer satisfaction and is it in fact necessary? The answer is yes on both counts.

One use of key performance indicators is the means of measuring actual response times against ideal response times. This is commonly done for the fire and ambulance services. Response times are critical when lives are at risk and it is the first thing to be criticised by the public—our customers. In reality, what is happening is a benchmarking against criteria which is suggesting (or insisting) on a need to do a particular task in a designated timeframe: for example, to be considered as providing good customer service.

To improve customer service the SES, like other business organisations, needs to understand

its customers' wants and needs. It must also be prepared to make the definition between these wants and needs in a time of crisis as it risks over servicing some clients with the affect of delaying response times to others also in need.

Experience shows that the public can become agitated when it appears the organisation has not satisfied customers' wants. It is important that we define roles clearly enough and that we are there to satisfy community needs. The SES is an emergency service made up of, predominately, volunteers who have left work or home at a moment's notice to help their community. They often go the extra mile to help people and frequently have a problem saying no to tasks outside normal roles. This can lead to community perception that we are jacks of all trades and can fix anything. Sometimes we have to say no because we are not there as trades people but as emergency service workers with a particular skill set to carry out particular tasks under State legislation. In a time of a major disaster, and in preparation for it, we must ensure that partnerships with other relevant services are strong. Emergency services must understand everyone's respective roles and abilities as this directly affects the scope of our performance and the standards of our customer service. Emergency management has been recognised as a business for some time but it can only operate successfully in partnerships with all community groups.

Who are our partners?

To understand the notion of emergency management in NSW it is important to acknowledge the vast array of organisations that have a role to play in any given event. This can be divided into two main areas, *response* (or the combat agencies) and *recovery* (the welfare agencies). The first group includes the various fire and rescue services, police, ambulance, and SES while the second group includes the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Department

of Family and Community Services and their equivalents in the various States and Territories. It must be understood that at various times the combat agencies also have a role in the recovery process but usually after their initial responsibilities for the event have finished or are at least near completion. The recovery process and the role of the various agencies in this most important facet of emergency management are often underestimated by the combat agencies. Too much focus placed on the response aspect often undermines the need to involve the recovery agencies at an early stage, preferably in the disaster planning process at the local level. The process needs to focus on communication and not guarding local knowledge but rather sharing it.

Acknowledgement is due for the parts played by other government agencies, local councils, utility companies and many other community groups who have something to offer at the time of major disasters. Emergency managers are well aware that there is no defined time when response stops and recovery begins. Managers must look at disasters on a circular rather than linear timeline. The recovery process is going to start almost immediately, therefore managers need to appreciate the concerns of the local recovery manager and ensure there are open lines of communication with all concerned. At this stage customer service is still of high importance, documents such as mission statements become less important. Emergency managers act on instinct at this stage.

Because of this response, agencies will be working alongside welfare and recovery groups in the very early stages of large disasters possibly while backup is still arriving. Of course the biggest partner is the local community itself therefore emergency managers must not underestimate the notion of 'self help', or the work done by resilient and self-sustaining communities to give assistance to themselves prior to the arrival of the emergency



Emergency services must understand everyone's respective roles and abilities as this directly affects performance and levels of customer service. (Photo courtesy Nikki Joyce, Western Advocate)

services. The need to return to some sort of normality as soon as possible is very strong in a community and the more a community can do to help itself the more they will feel they have ownership and control of their destiny.

Contrary to popular belief there is generally not much panic at major incidents so those in need will be quickly calmed and quite often by complete strangers. A multi-agency response will occur when a major disaster impacts on a community. This raises issues such as who should be doing what, when do they do it and how should it be done.

What is your job?

The emergency services in general know their specific roles but this often leads them to operate within their "organisational silos". However, agencies must come out of their silos during "down time" as quite often interagency interaction happens only at the scene of an incident or disaster.

In reality, the format of emergency plans of course allows for, but cannot always specify, the multitude of variations that will occur during an emergency. In other words, emergency planning gives us guidelines but, they are fluid by necessity in case emergency managers are subjected to the what-if scenario. They determine, in general terms, who does what and when.

Planning is also about communication between emergency services. This communication can override the fact that only a basic plan may currently exist, and that emergency services may have to, at times, improvise. This acknowledges the reality and the ability of a particular emergency service to have the potential to perform other tasks outside its normal role.

However, there are many variables when emergency services attempt to define and deliver customer service from a generic view point, Emergency services can state in general terms, we do what we do to serve the community and respond to their call for assistance 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Meeting a mission statement is one thing, but quite often, they include a paragraph regarding relationships with other services. Most volunteers do not need to know what the mission statement is. Their primary concern is completing the tasks they are trained to do. This is not a criticism, but rather a fact. Emergency managers need to ensure everyone in the chain of command understands what they are there for; hence everyone can focus on the broader goals.

If we don't have the resources to do a job internally then we need to know who else can assist, such as other

emergency services. Many emergency service volunteers are keen to cross train for example, to add variety to their regular training activities. The cost of not doing the above is wasted resources and in the event of a major incident requiring responses to multiple locations such as a major storm event then, maybe the better solution is a different solution.

Perhaps, NSW should follow the direction of fellow State and Territories, by combining all the emergency services under one umbrella, rationalising resources and implementing cross training across those services. If necessary smaller rescue services could be absorbed into larger ones to present a more corporate face of rescue to the wider community. This would also maximise the budget, increase the flow of information and eliminate the information blocks between services thus sharing knowledge. This rationalisation could potentially make it easier for community education

professionals to get their message across. Currently the community obtains information about a range of disasters that can befall them and perhaps a uniform approach would help. Hence, instead of the 'fridge magnet approach', a combined communication strategy may be more prudent. Taking a more holistic approach will allow emergency services to educate more comprehensively, across several areas at the same time, over a period of time.

Conclusion

There is much work to be done to get communication flowing between services and maintain and grow strong links. Individual emergency services can not be everything to everybody. Volunteers, in particular, are keen to help their communities but should be free, as individuals and a service, to admit limitations and plan to fill any gaps with other available resources.

References

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