

Our Quest for Service Excellence

Providing service excellence isn't about using the latest technology and equipment

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*The key values of your department should always be constant in the thoughts and actions of your personnel.
(author photo/Captain Mike Rice, Dayton Fire Department)*

com·pas·sion | \ kəm-'pa-shən \ – noun – sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it. This definition should also include firefighters, EMS and all first responders. Compassion is the word that seemed to surface during my firehouse discussions as the underlying premise to the question, “What is customer service all about in fire service?”

I have been a business training consultant on leadership, sales, and customer service for more than 41 years and a self-proclaimed expert on service excellence. I started training dealers in 2010 who sold fire apparatus and EMS trucks, turnout gear, and loose equipment to the fire service. Many of the sales reps, service reps, service techs, and ops/admin people in these dealerships are or were first responders—selling and serving back to their own members in their chosen profession. I have trained hundreds of these first responders and have established life-long relationships with so many from this elite group of the chosen few. Their encouragement and persistence led me to this journey that I’m about to take you through as I met with a few stations and crews to do my research about what it means to provide customer service to the citizens in our communities.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE IS THE NEW NORMAL

For years, I used the term “quality service” when referring to good or exceptional customer service in the business world. Several years ago, we customized the service program for an EMS manufacturer and together we came up with the term “service excellence,” which seemed current and trendy. Think about it: In today’s global economy, quality is now a given. You either have it or you can’t compete in these interesting, challenging, and competitive times. With comparable products and services today, the only way businesses can differentiate themselves from the competition is through customer service—what they do before, during, and after the sale. Service excellence is like continuous improvement, where you are never satisfied and are always looking for ways to do it better. As you achieve certain milestones and achievements, raise the bar on service excellence as it’s never-ending and continuous—sort of like how quick the trucks leave the station when the call comes in. One firehouse shared that crews are beating the 60 seconds down to 30 seconds now on the clock, which is a 100% improvement to respond quicker to save more lives.

“Customer service in the fire service is being great at what we do. Service excellence in the fire service is the top level of servicing our citizens in a safe, quick, and effective manner,” as stated by a captain from the training center. Service excellence is all about getting better at what you already do well in a culture that is conducive to teamwork and camaraderie. These traits are critical in any service environment and are driven by the people and not by technology and machines. It’s the people and not the equipment that separate the ordinary from the extraordinary.



(author photo/Captain Mike Rice, Dayton Fire Department)

IF IN DOUBT, CALL THE FIRE DEPARTMENT

“Call the fire department; they know everything!” Today, you must be the expert. You name it and the crews have seen it all from flooding to plumbing and sewage, electrical, accidents, injuries, disputes, and all types of emergency calls.

Unfortunately, 911 calls today involving nonemergency needs are growing rapidly as well as adding to the burden of increased emergency calls. When the public calls 911, it may not be an emergency to dispatch, but it is an emergency to them, especially when in a panic or crisis mode. It becomes the citizen’s nightmare and the worst day in their life to call in a fire or medical emergency. The citizens of our communities only have one source to call—quite the contrary in the business world. If a dissatisfied consumer has a failed expectation, he calls another supplier to receive the similar product or service. This is not the same situation at all in fire service. There’s only one service provider, as there are no competitors or anyone else to call. This call

starts the interaction of people serving people and sets the expectations for a customer experience that can be perceived as a positive or negative interaction. A communications and fire service specialist at one of the stations told me the key in responding properly to nonemergency calls is to make the right connection by directing the residents to the right resources as quickly as possible and in a proactive manner. I was told the best way to help our citizens with customer service is through prevention, education, and inspection.

It was refreshing to hear about all the resources that are available to the community. Service excellence is being proactive, even when reacting to a situation. Just showing a willingness and a desire to serve can exceed a customer's expectation, as so many people are betting against us today. When you inform and educate citizens, it breaks down barriers and opens communication to help minimize 911 calls for nonthreatening incidents.

The first responders are reaching out to the communities with all this knowledge about safety and prevention while bonding and building relationships in the process. They go to schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and other public centers to put plans in place when an emergency occurs. Even though these resources are available, there are only limited times for firefighters and EMS personnel to go out in the community, as their first priority is to respond to calls.

One incident was about a "frequent flyer," the term used for responding to the same citizen four times within a quarter. The fire department makes a point to visit these people to help them fix their underlying problems that keep reoccurring. The fire service specialist reiterated that so often there are times where there is nothing more they can do for people in need other than consoling, educating, and pointing them in the right direction to connect with the resources to help them. This is how compassion enables the firefighter to guide the interaction process.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE IS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE SERVING PEOPLE

Has technology created a "self-service world" and replaced the human element of people serving people with computers and phones? Providing service excellence isn't about using the latest technology and equipment. Customer service should be a human experience between the service provider and the customer. It's emotional and provides a feeling of security and trust. People still need to make a connection with each other and want the service provider to "protect this trust." In the delivery of the service or product, there are many steps or "points of interaction" with the customer. These are also referred to as a "touchpoint" or "moment of truth," which occurs whenever there is a customer contact. Each "point of interaction" can create a positive or negative experience for the customer. But, it's always an opportunity to meet and exceed the customers' expectations. Why? Because, this is the moment when the customer forms the perception about your company, its people, and its products and services. Your people become your greatest asset or biggest liability. So do your customers. At the end of the day, it's all about how you create a favorable first impression, with a positive customer experience, that keeps your customers coming back and telling others to do the same. It's no different in fire service.

I was taken by surprise when visiting with the captain of the Dayton (OH) Fire Department training center on how paramount customer service is from day one when the recruits arrive. The city manager of Dayton uses a top-down approach and makes customer service a top priority, communicating and posting the city's core values and commitment to customer service to all city departments and throughout the community. When I asked what the core values are, he recited them immediately from memory and didn't have to look them up: Accountability & Ownership, Courtesy & Professionalism, and Taking Initiative. The front entrance of the training center displays a big banner that says, "Be a Customer Service Champion," and at the rear door, the core values and customer service statement were posted on a vertical sign next to the vending machines for all to see. Throughout the center, you could see the core values posted along with other placards, signs, and banners. As I walked through the halls, I was greeted by every crew member with, "Good morning, Sir!" All of this exceeded my expectations as I felt special and it made my day. I wanted to tell everyone about my positive experience, too!



*Constantly promoting and instilling your department's core values helps transfer into positive actions through your personnel.
(author photo/Captain Mike Rice, Dayton Fire Department)*

At the scene, it's all about safety and situational awareness. I was told, "You constantly have to have your head on a swivel, looking around. Our firefighters must have complete awareness to mitigate the emergency safely and effectively," said Captain Mike Rice. "Remember, the chief's behavior is reflective on the scene, too," stated Chief Lokai from the Kettering Fire Department. How they interact and engage with the public continues down the ranks with the other crew members as well. I picked up on the three priorities when fire and EMS arrive on the scene: rescue, incident stabilization, and property conservation. It's the little things the citizens remember about their experience, good or bad.

Captain Rice stated, "We're not looking for a firefighter to occupy a seat and get a paycheck. We want people who take the initiative and go above and beyond." This is where the true art of compassion comes into play that separates the few from the many. Compassion literally means "to suffer together." It is the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering. If someone shows kindness, caring, and a willingness to help others, they're showing compassion. This is a positive emotion that has to do with being thoughtful and decent. When you feel compassion for someone, you really want to help. When you understand and feel compassion, this becomes powerful. An empathetic and compassionate person can hear the unasked questions and can anticipate the needs of others. Compassionate people are givers who never expect anything in return. A Trotwood member told me about how he finished cooking breakfast for a lady who fell. Or, just bringing a person a sandwich who was hungry and had nothing to eat in their moment of crisis. The first responder plays the role of the rescuer as well as the consoler. Sometimes, the first responder is the first person the victim sees and fills the role as a family member too.

It's not uncommon to go call-to-call and not return to the station for hours. On one call, you're consoling a grieving spouse and on the next call evacuating a resident with a gas leak, then handling a multicar accident where people are trapped with life-threatening injuries. The conditioning and training allow the first responders to act instinctively, automatically, and without thinking about it on a routine basis. They put their lives at risk with an array of emotions that range from one extreme to the other. Often, there is no time to think about it as there is no other alternative but to do it and save the people. Remember, this elite rescue team wants to return home safely to their families every day too. It truly takes a special breed to rescue others, which defines compassion to help others to the fullest. Unfortunately, dealing with these extremes takes its toll on the first responder's mental health and well-being.

CHALLENGES ON DELIVERING SERVICE EXCELLENCE

The challenges facing the fire service to excel at delivering service excellence continue to mount even though customer service is engrained in the first responder from the start. They are faced with major internal and external service problems and issues that need to be addressed. Enrollment is down at the some of the regions' fire academies as the younger people aren't as attracted to fire science as they once were. One local suburban department expressed that turnover is high as the stations transition between full-time, part-time, and volunteer. The "mercenaries" work

several stations and don't return enough to the same station on a regular basis, missing out on the firehouse banter and comraderies. The social styles of the younger members are different than generations of previous firefighters on how to engage and interact with people.

A chief lamented how hard it is to find the "right person," that special breed who has the compassion and commitment for serving others. "You can train a firefighter on how to fight a fire but not how to talk to a resident at 3:00 a.m. like she's a family member," said Chief Hosford. The biggest internal issue is the need to take care of their own by opening up communication on suicide awareness, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the limited downtime just to relax and "chill."

The biggest challenge externally is finding the balance with training and responding to calls. The call volume continues to increase as these stations I visited handle 7,000 to 9,000 calls a year. One suburban department reported its call rate was up 24% over last year. Add to that, the state training requirements for fire and EMS certification, adding another 130 hours of training per member, every three years. It's good to know that the training center supports and serves the entire fire department with training and continuing education and delivering a high level of service excellence. EMS is going to change drastically, driven by Medicare. Don't forget all the clean room requirements as well to protect those who serve others. The equipment and technology continue to change, requiring more training and instruction for safe work practices and to protect our communities. Just look how battery powered equipment is changing extrication rescue tools. It's no wonder it's so hard to find people who fit the description of a first responder. I now have a much better appreciation and respect for this elite team of caregivers. Their differentiator over all other traits is their ability to have compassion and still perform in life-threatening situations. It's an honor and a privilege to be recognized as a first responder in our society.



(author photo/Captain Mike Rice, Dayton Fire Department)

Charles Kettering, a famous inventor and industrialist from Dayton, Ohio, once said, "You better be interested in your future because that's where you'll spend the rest of your life." Service excellence is alive and well in the fire service. Our future is now, so what we do to serve others today can only have a positive impact in our community tomorrow.

I leave you with Our Customer Service Commitment from my hometown, Dayton, Ohio: "The City of Dayton exceeds expectations and is committed to excellence through consistent, high-quality service delivery by dedicated, knowledgeable, and courteous employees."

Author's Note: My gratitude and sincere appreciation go out to Trotwood Fire & Rescue where I met with Chief Haacke and Deputy Chief Barnett and their crew members, as well as the City of Kettering Fire Rescue, Chief Lokai, Fire Service Specialist, John Moore and their team. I also met with Captain Mike Rice, training center for the Dayton Fire Department and spoke with Chief Hosford from Dayton on the phone, who shared some valuable information. My appointment was delayed due to the tornados that devastated Dayton on Memorial Day. Captain Mike provided me, as a citizen, peace of mind on how customer service is the first priority in the fire service.

Bob Butler, TSP, began his career at Butler Learning Systems (BLS) after graduating from Bowling Green State University in 1978. He worked in the areas of graphics production, sales, and facilitating seminars. He co-authored the company's sales, leadership, and customer service programs with his father and founder of BLS, Don Butler (1925-2002). In 1975, Butler registered the term "The Sales Professional®" (TSP) and has certified thousands of sales professionals in a sales certification process for next-generation selling.