Good customer service is a key organizational concern for career services professionals. Learn how to apply customer service strategies to career services’ goals to improve the effectiveness of programs and services.
Nearly every career professional faces the same set of challenges: Students are not required to use career services offices, and those that do often do not take full advantage of the resources; there are high institutional expectations for outcome-focused goals by career offices; and career services practitioners have to juggle multiple and competing priorities for increasingly scarce resources when other departments can point to tangible outcomes as evidence of their effectiveness (i.e., the admissions office, which hits its applicant targets).\(^{12}\)

These are not new challenges, but they demand a more active and pointed response from career offices than ever before. To enhance efforts and become a more integral part of the school’s landscape, career professionals can learn lessons from the private sector. Companies in the private sector have more human and financial resources to devote toward essentially the same set of competitiveness issues, but also are under an extraordinary amount of pressure to perform without the luxury of time. One of these lessons is the critical role of customer service. Excellent customer service performed by career services practitioners can help provide designed interactions that serve the educational and career-related needs of students in ways they value most.

### Setting the Context

#### Why Customer Service Matters

Think of yourself as a typical consumer. When you have a choice, what places and services do you repeatedly choose? Why are you loyal? How are those stores or service providers able to consistently provide you with such a valuable experience? Conversely, when have you had a poor experience, what went wrong? Did you return? You probably didn’t, and perhaps even went to the trouble to tell a number of people to avoid that place. It doesn’t matter what variety of factors might have contributed to your poor experience (legitimate or not): One shot is all that that organization had at your business.

As management guru Tom Peters states, “Customers perceive service in their own unique idiosyncratic, emotional, erratic, irrational, end-of-the-day, and totally human terms. Perception is all there is!”\(^{3}\) Customer service matters because organizations lose customers mostly due to shortcomings in customer service. Career centers are no different. A customer service orientation can help career professionals develop critical, “profitable” relationships with students and design more educationally purposeful experiences.

To be clear, customer service is not servitude, but serving the educational needs of students in ways that they value most. It is not coddling. Career services should not abdicate its core educational role, but should be mindful of the variety of ways to coax students down the desired developmental paths.

### The Student Is the Product

The authors of *The Experience Economy* argue that the organizations that will thrive in today’s economy must be able to deliver compelling experiences for customers.\(^{4}\) An overview of the progression of economic value reveals that individuals will pay more as value goes up the scale: Commodities -> Goods -> Services -> Experiences. Commodities are taken from the natural world. Goods are products of commodities, which are then sold to the masses. Services are “intangible activities customized to the individual request of known clients.” Experiences occur “whenever a company intentionally uses services as the stage and goods as props to engage an individual.”\(^{5}\) This progression can be seen in looking at some prices of coffee: As a commodity, coffee is $1.18, but as an experience, e.g., Starbucks, the prices is $2.25 for a cup.

*The Experience Economy* adds a crowning step to the progression of economic value that is most germane to career professionals: individual transformation.\(^{6}\) By including this new step, the progression of economic value looks like this:

- Commodities -> Goods -> Services -> Experiences -> Transformation.

Experiences are personal, but transformations change you. Experiences have no life beyond their consumption; buyers of transformations seek to be guided to some specific aim and sustained through time. Creators of transformative experiences care enough to have a series of experiences that not only indicate, but also develop caring over time, not to deliver services, but to serve. Sound familiar? Higher education is a funny place—students are both consumers and products of the educational enterprise. And with the student as product, all career professionals are in the transformation business. There is no greater testament to career services’ work than students’ enhanced capacity to determine what they want to do based on their values and interests.

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**Note:** In this article, “customer” and “student” will be used interchangeably.

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and the ability to articulate and apply college and other life lessons to new settings.

To realize the central goals of student transformation, career professionals need to diagnose student aspirations and guide students toward those aspirations. Diagnosing aspirations means understanding what the student really needs to become and determining how far away he or she is from fulfilling those needs within. Career professionals are transformation educators and must determine the right set of life-transforming experiences required to guide and sustain aspirants in achieving their goals. With this in mind, how does this change career services professionals’ work?

The Student Is the Customer

Both the private sector and career professionals have the same challenge: how to attract and retain customers. Here’s a heretical question: Why should students use the career center? It’s not the only game in town. Don’t they have the Internet, or advice from an uncle in HR, or couldn’t they pay a premium for private counselors to do what career services practitioners do?

Managing the Customer Experience: Turning Customers Into Advocates provides a helpful approach called the Branded Customer Experience, a service experience that is intentional, consistent, differentiated, and valuable. This means that organizations (career centers) must develop and maintain a differentiated point of view that is credible and relevant to all stakeholders. It requires aligning organizational processes, systems and training, development and management structures, and style with the brand “promise” to deliver the brand promise through every interaction. To do so, career professionals must measure what contributes to overall brand value, not only to short-term gains.

How can a career services office fulfill its mission with very modest resources? One way is “mass customization.” Mass customization requires an environmental architecture that matches buyer need with organizational capabilities, and an interaction within which the organization stages a design experience that helps the student decide exactly what he or she wants. This means efficiently serving customers uniquely, combining the co-equal imperatives for both low-cost and individual customization. A sophisticated example is Amazon.com, which can make useful recommendations for customers based on their previous purchases. Career offices can develop tools to help students personalize products, services, and interactions. Mass customization drives down “customer sacrifice,” where individuals get what they want without settling for something or digging through extraneous material. For example, good online news feeds will see what kinds of things users want and send them individualized content, helping to deliver what feels like a more personalized experience.

The following case studies illustrate how two career offices use aspects of the branded customer service model and mass customization in different ways to provide customers with a more heightened level of customer service, resulting in positive career development outcomes that students/individuals truly value.

Putting It Together

Customer Service Example #1: Mount Holyoke College’s Career Development Center

A campus career office must ask several questions, such as: What are the aspirations of the career center user? What adds value to the “career center brand”? What do students get from associating with the career center? What would the most memorable career center in the world look like? What would it take to have a student say “I love my career office”?

Like most career professionals, the Mount Holyoke College’s (MHC) Career Development Center’s (CDC) work is most embodied in its mission: “The CDC helps students and alumnae assess, articulate and apply their MHC and life experiences to a lifetime of meaningful opportunities.”

A helpful way to think about career development is approaching it by shaping students’ orientation to learning, furnishing experiences, incorporating students’ interactions with others, and shaping our physical and virtual environments toward our goals. Customer service will be discussed in
relation to each of the following viewpoints:

**Orientation to learning.** Who are our students? It is critical that we meet students where they are, appreciate the myriad ways that they identify themselves, and tap into hopes, fears, and aspirations. We know that the top three things students want from our office is to figure out what they want to do, translate what they have learned into something valued by employers, and learn how to get connected to great resources, people, and opportunities.

MHC’s “CDC Brand Positioning Statement” distilled the CDC’s target audience and what the CDC’s “unique selling proposition” is, including:

- **Target group:** MHC students in pursuit of meaningful post-MHC opportunities.
- **Demo/psychographics:** Various types of students who use the career services office, such as:
  - High-users—take full advantage of the programs and services;
  - Transactional users—come in occasionally for mostly superficial reasons;
  - Reluctant users—often nervous and often have unrealistic expectations once they engage with the office; and
  - Self-sufficient users—have the ability and resources to manage the process on their own.
- **Student needs:** Top-flight, concrete, relevant resources and guidance to help translate MHC/life experiences into exciting, meaningful opportunities.
- **Consumer insight:** “I’m the only one that doesn’t know what to do.” “I know I should do something but I don’t know what to do.”
- **Benefits to students:**
  - Rational: One-stop shopping of top-flight, concrete, relevant resources and guidance to help translate MHC/life experiences into exciting, meaningful opportunities.
  - Emotional: Desire to be empowered to attain dreams, and reduce anxiety, be happier, save time and energy, and be a better candidate.
- **How benefits will be delivered:** Range of exciting opportunities no matter what the student wants to do, knowledgeable counselors with clear guidance for students in varying stages of the educational and job-search process, timely workshops, and state-of-the-art print and web resources.

**Experiences.** Another way to think about customer service is to constantly strive to provide things that people want. The CDC developed a new program, *Your Plan*, that answers the questions, “What if students listened to everything we said? What should students know and be able to do after interacting with our office?” *Your Plan* is a four-year developmental career curriculum. Each class year has a set of class-specific goals, with specific primary and secondary tasks to achieve those goals. The design of this program is developmental, comprehensive, cumulative, scalable, and understandable—all to be regarded as valuable by students.

The CDC also developed the S.E.E.D. program, a comprehensive, cohort group-based program that is aimed at encouraging the community, scholarship, and professional development of Mount Holyoke interns. Those interns register through the CDC, either for a summer or January internship, come together as they learn, and support each other through their internship experience. Lastly, the CDC is piloting Career Action Teams (C.A.T.s), ongoing, peer-run, structured, job-search work groups.

**Interactions with others.** All customer service hinges upon human interaction. Every person in the CDC can help create loyalty-worthy experiences, and must be trained to do so. *Managing the Customer Experience* urges organizations to find people who have “service in their souls,” and make
them accessible to students when and how they are most desired. Staff must be trained to listen to students and ask questions that will help “triage” their visit, to ascertain a student’s goal, solve problems, act on students’ behalf, and speak with other students as if they are the in the warmest, most professional place in the world. We have set standards for key processes (customer needs/expectations). Our conversations must center on how much the process enhances the student experience.

Environment. Imagine your office from a student’s point of view. Perform an environmental audit and walk through the experience: How do your signs, symbols, and language reinforce the brand goal? Is the physical and virtual environment welcoming, comfortable, and affirming? Are there negative cues that detract from the overall experience?

Customer Service Example #2: Teach For America

Teach For America is a national nonprofit that recruits a highly selective national corps of outstanding college graduates from all academic majors; these graduates commit two years to teach in underserved urban and rural public schools. Teach For America’s mission is to build the movement to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting the nation’s most promising future leaders in that effort.

In the short run, Teach For America corps members work to ensure that more students growing up in the nation’s lowest income communities have the educational opportunities they deserve. In the long run, Teach For America’s goal is to build a force of leaders who, with the insight and added conviction that come from having taught in a low-income community, work from inside education and other professional sectors such as law, policy, medicine, journalism, and politics to effect fundamental changes needed to ensure that all children have an equal chance in life.

Given the focus on leadership and the potential impact of alumni to effect change, the Teach For America career office has a unique advantage over traditional undergraduate career offices; that is, the mission of the office has been clearly defined to promote career choices that inspire corps members and alumni to work for social reform in a wide variety of sectors to eliminate educational inequity and ameliorate the underlying social issues that contribute to the educational achievement gap. As a result, the organization has created concrete placement goals in key sectors that drive the work of the career office. For example, Teach For America has defined “success” for the career office, in part, as having 800 of its alumni obtain principalships by 2010. Similarly, it has established specific numerical goals for its alumni to achieve leadership positions in other sectors as well, such as politics, policy, business, and journalism. To a large extent, the effectiveness of the career office will be judged on whether the organization reaches these goals. At the same time, the career office embraces a satisfaction measure to ensure that it is adequately addressing the career needs of the corps members and alumni. This means that corps members and alumni have to believe the career office is a very good or excellent partner in their career development. This measure was adopted to ensure that the career office was meeting the needs of the corps members and alumni (needs as defined by them) in addition to helping Teach For America reach its goals of accelerating the leadership development of its alumni in all sectors to ensure that social reform occurs more rapidly.

As you can imagine, the act of defining success for the career office has done a lot to drive its activities. Teach
For America’s career development programs, alumni mentoring activities, and job-development efforts are acutely focused on helping corps members and alumni understand how to advance their careers and leadership development while supporting Teach For America’s desire to advance our alumni leadership in all sectors. Corps members and alumni, in turn, now view the career office as an integral partner in helping them achieve their career goals, not just as an isolated office that performs a set of career development activities.

Granted, there are many differences between a college career office that embraces the goal of serving the career development needs of a student population with diverse interests and a mission-focused nonprofit that attracts individuals. A college career office may balk at the idea of defining success in terms of placement goals because it doesn’t want to be perceived as a placement agency. More importantly, poorly designed placement goals could inadvertently be used to drive students into professions they may not necessarily want to pursue. We can all agree that such activities would be misguided, and that any career professional has to help students understand how their unique talents, interests, and skills might fit into a wide array of professions. Still, by clearly articulating how the career office prioritizes its activities, Teach For America corps members and alumni have a much better understanding on the value that the Teach For America career office provides.

While its approach to goal-setting might be unique, the Teach For America career office faces the same staffing and resource challenges that beset most career offices in colleges and universities. These challenges are exacerbated because Teach For America is in an aggressive growth phase that will see the number of corps members grow from 4,000 to 8,000 by 2010. The alumni population will almost double—to 20,000—in the same time frame.

Since the staff of the career office is not expected to increase, Teach For America has had to think creatively about how to achieve the ambitious goals. While strategies are constantly evolving, simply knowing that there will not be a significant staff increase has forced the career office to experiment with different forms of service deliveries and career programming to maximize resources. For example, the career office used to rely on individual career counseling sessions and group seminars to deliver services; those approaches have been supplemented within the last year with the following types of services:

**Virtual career webinars and employer information sessions:** These don’t need to involve fancy technology, although that can help. Teach For America had corps members and alumni call into a dedicated phone line that allows the career office to expand its reach regarding career programming. Prior to the call, all callers received a copy of the presentation.
This allowed the career office to reach corps members and alumni throughout the country to deliver programming. Alumni speakers can be located virtually anywhere because all they had to do was call in (as opposed to physically attending a career panel on campus).

**Career e-newsletters:** Teach For America’s career office created opt-in career e-newsletters in different fields (e.g., The Public Policy E-newsletters) that allows staff to disseminate job information, career tips, alumni profiles, and other career information to a targeted audience.

**Alumni:** Teach For America uses alumni extensively to help career office staff review resumes, conduct mock interviews and career workshops, and develop relationships with employers. Although many career offices do this, Teach For America developed an extensive training program for alumni who are interested in helping deliver career programming. This “train the trainer” model has expanded capacity tremendously.

All of these interventions can easily be adopted by any career office. Although each initiative requires a certain investment of time, the return on investment could be substantial in terms of acquiring additional capacity to deliver quality programs and services to students and alumni.

**Conclusion:**

**Loyalty by Design**

So, how do career centers adopt a customer service approach? *Managing the Customer Experience* provides a possible blueprint for customer service success:

- **Define customer values**
  - Identify target customer segments.
  - Define what customers value and determine which values drive buying and loyalty behavior.
  - Create a differentiating brand promise.

- **Design the Branded Customer Experience**
  - Develop a profound understanding of the customer’s experience.
  - Design critical touch point and employee behaviors to deliver the brand promise.
  - Develop a comprehensive change strategy to implement the customer experience.

- **Equip people and deliver consistently**
  - Prepare managers to lead delivery of customer experience.
  - Equip employees with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to deliver the brand promise at every customer touch point.
  - Reinforce performance through leadership’s action and measurement.

- **Sustain and enhance performance**
  - Use customer and employee feedback to maintain a line of sight to customer and continuously enhance customer experience.
  - Continuously communicate progress and results to embed the Branded Customer Experience as the way you do business.

**Final Thoughts**

Arthur Levine said that railroads went out of business because they thought that they were in the railroad business when they were really in the transportation business. Similarly, career services professionals are in the transformation business. Career practitioners can be faithful to their unchanging missions, but it is at their peril not to accept change. Customer service is critical to organizational effectiveness: It helps to create a shared vision and shared language, align resources, streamline processes, and determine what to measure.

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**Endnotes**


9 Smith and Wheeler.


16 Brown, Adler, Ashworth, and Chevry.

17 Smith and Wheeler.


19 Smith and Wheeler.

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