



CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM FOR VIRGINIA WOOLF DOG DAYCARE CENTER

Sanna Kalliokoski

**Bachelor's Thesis
December 2006**



JYVÄSKYLÄ UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES
The School of Tourism and Services Management

Author(s) KALLIOKOSKI Sanna	Type of Publication Bachelor's Thesis	
	Pages 49	Language English
	Confidential <input type="checkbox"/> Until _____	
Title CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM FOR VIRGINIA WOOF DOG DAYCARE CENTER		
Degree Programme Degree Programme in Facility Management and Consumer Communication		
Tutor(s) PAUKKU Päivi		
Assigned by David Stone, Manager of Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center		
<p>Abstract</p> <p>Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center is a dog daycare but it is also used as an internship place for street-dependent youth. The purpose of this thesis was to create a customer service training program for the interns at Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center. The goal was to increase the interns' theoretical knowledge of otherwise rather practical internship. The end result is based on the author's own experiences, knowledge gathered at the School of Tourism and Services management, literature, and articles found on the Internet.</p> <p>The final thesis consists of two parts, theory and a CD. The theory contains nine chapters that are divided into three subheadings which are the Basic Elements of Competitive Service, Employees Influence on Customer Service, and Tangible Aspects of Customer Service. The first part explores service and customer satisfaction as phenomena, the second concentrates on the employee, and the last one on tangible features.</p> <p>Street-dependent youth is a challenging population to work with and this was the major problem. The CD is the final product of my thesis. It contains the previously presented theory chapters and exercises that are actualized as Microsoft's PowerPoint presentations.</p>		
Keywords Customer Service, Street-dependent Youth, Dog Daycare, Training Program		
Miscellaneous CD		

Tekijä(t) KALLIOKOSKI Sanna	Julkaisun laji Opinnäytetyö	
	Sivumäärä 49	Julkaisun kieli Englanti
	Luottamuksellisuus <input type="checkbox"/> Salainen _____ saakka	
Työn nimi ASIAKASPALVELUKOULUTUSOHJELMA VIRGINIA WOOF DOG DAYCARE CENTER-KOIRAHOITOLALLE		
Koulutusohjelma Degree Programme in Facility Management and Consumer Communication		
Työn ohjaaja PAUKKU Päivi		
Toimeksiantaja(t) David Stone, Manager of Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center		
Tiivistelmä Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center on koirahoitola, jota käytetään kodittomien nuorten työharjoittelupaikkana. Tämän työn tavoitteena oli suunnitella koirahoitolan työharjoittelijoille asiakaspalvelun koulutusohjelma. Tavoitteena oli lisätä työharjoittelijoiden teoreettista osaamista muuten kovin käytännönläheisessä työharjoittelussa. Lopputulos rakentui omista kokemuksistani, ammattikorkeakoulussa oppimastani tiedosta, kirjallisuudesta, sekä Internetistä löytyvistä artikkeleista. Lopullinen opinnäytetyö sisältää kaksi osaa: raportin sekä Cd-romin. Tietoperusta koostuu yhdeksästä eri osasta, jotka on jaettu kolmeksi eri pääluvuksi. Ensimmäinen pääluke käsittelee palvelua ja asiakastyytyväisyyttä ilmiönä, toinen työntekijöiden vaikutusmahdollisuuksia ja kolmas palvelun aineellisia asioita. Kodittomat nuoret ovat hyvin haastava kohderyhmä, josta syntyikin suurin haaste. Cd-rom on opinnäytetyöni liitteenä, ja se sisältää aikaisemmin mainitut teoriaosat sekä tehtäviä. Tehtävät on suunniteltu Microsoftin PowerPoint ohjelmalla.		
Avainsanat (asiasanat) Asiakaspalvelu, kodittomat nuoret, koirahoitola, koulutusohjelma		
Muut tiedot Cd-rom liitteenä		

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. ANALYSIS OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM FROM A FACILITY MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE.....	3
3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	6
3.1 OUTSIDE IN.....	7
3.2 THESIS ASSIGNER: VIRGINIA WOOF DOG DAYCARE CENTER.....	8
4. FACTS ABOUT STREET-DEPENDENT YOUTH.....	11
5. CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM.....	14
5.1 THE BASIC ELEMENTS OF COMPETITIVE SERVICE.....	15
5.1.1 <i>Customer Service & Service Theme</i>	16
5.1.2 <i>Customer Satisfaction</i>	17
5.1.3 <i>Competitors</i>	20
5.2 EMPLOYEE'S INFLUENCE ON CUSTOMER SERVICE.....	22
5.2.1 <i>Professionalism and Body Language</i>	22
5.2.2 <i>Empowering and Complaints</i>	25
5.2.3 <i>Relationship Selling</i>	28
5.3 TANGIBLE ASPECTS OF CUSTOMER SERVICE.....	32
5.3.1 <i>First Impression and Five Senses</i>	32
5.3.2 <i>Internet and Phone</i>	36
5.3.3 <i>Building</i>	38
6. DISCUSSION.....	40
REFERENCES.....	42
APPENDICES.....	44
APPENDIX 1. DOG DAY-CARE CENTER CREATES PORTAL FOR HOMELESS KIDS.....	44
APPENDIX 2. FROM OUTSIDE IN TO THE DOG DAYCARE BUSINESS.....	47

CHARTS:

CHART 1: OUTSIDE IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHART.....	7
CHART 2: CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM'S PLACE.....	8
CHART 3: STREET-DEPENDENT YOUTH'S ROUTE TO VIRGINIA WOOF.....	10

TABLES:

TABLE 1: FORBIDDEN PHRASES IN CUSTOMER SERVICE.....	24
---	----

1. INTRODUCTION

My thesis is a customer service training program for the homeless interns at Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center. This thesis also provides facts about homelessness as well as discusses the basic operational principles of Outside In and Virginia Woof.

The training program consists of two parts: theory and a CD. The theory contains nine chapters that are divided into three subheadings, which are the Basic Elements of Competitive Service, Employees influence on Customer Service, and Tangible Aspects of Customer Service. The first part explores service and customer satisfaction as phenomena explaining what they actually are. A closer look at competitors is also included into this subheading since it is an essential part of business. The second subheading concentrates on the employee and on what concrete measures can be taken to improve customer service, and the last part on the tangible features of customer service.

The CD is the final product of my thesis and it contains the previously presented theory chapters and exercises that are actualized as Microsoft's PowerPoint presentations. I designed the exercises utilizing MS PowerPoint and I believe that this would first of all make the exercises more interesting, and secondly, give the interns an opportunity to use a program that they might not be familiar with. For clarity, a few chapters have Word documents that contain examples that might look fairly unclear in the PowerPoint slides.

This thesis aims at opening the full spectrum of true customer satisfaction. Since the need of this thesis was presented to me I can only assume that it will

be useful to its end users. Because of the audience of my thesis I presented clear suggestions how to satisfy customers instead of generic behavior guidelines such as remember to smile.

As a reference I have used my own knowledge and experience, but mainly rely on American literature, internet articles as well as material that I gathered while I was doing my internship. I believe that leaning on American literature is the best option for this particular thesis since I wrote this to American youth. The subject may be fairly complex already and I wish not to confuse anyone with cultural matters, especially since my thesis is a tool that will be used to help youth in transition to independent living.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE TRAINING PROGRAM FROM A FACILITY MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center does not train future Facility Managers and therefore my training program does not concentrate on Facility Management as such. However, it is based on the knowledge that I gained while studying, as well as books discussing customer service from different perspectives and therefore, I believe that by altering the perspective it is possible to find connections to Facility Management.

Firstly, by a broad distinction Facility Management consists of actions supporting the core function. At Virginia Woof the core function is dog daycare. New concepts, especially utilized in the accommodation business, have proven that customer service does not have to be part of the core business in order to be profitable. In those cases, customer service is merely a support function.

Secondly, in small organizations, just like Virginia Woof, it is not possible to employ a real facility manager. Therefore, every employee must take over responsibilities that would not originally be part of their duties.

Thirdly, The Dutch Universities of Professional FM Education has defined nine clusters of competences which were assumed and said to be executed by the facility manager. It was also said, that the possession of adequate competences may be the best prerequisite for facility managers to respond to the dynamics of the changing world, the increasing effects of globalization, the speed of technological developments and innovation, as well as to keep

up with competition and, last but not least, continuously find the right answers to the increasingly demanding clients. These competencies are:

- Strategic Management and policy-making
- Service Management
- Change Management
- Communication and information
- Public Relations
- Organizational Management
- Human Resources Management
- Financial Management
- Professional Development

According to this information basically everything that companies do has something to do with Facility Management. (van den Ende 2004, 103)

In my training program I tried to cover matters affecting customer satisfaction as broadly as possible. Many times duties of a facility manager affect customer satisfaction. The first part of my training program is purely facility management discussing the meaning of tangible aspects in customer satisfaction. The second part of it is a combination of public relations and marketing. For example, creation of the service theme is essential for customer service, but affects the facility manager as well because the service standards give answers to how to deliver the service theme. Most of the time, the facility manager is responsible for the procedures that enable the actualization of the theme. The third part of my training is mainly Human Resources Management, but also little bit of communication. Both of these competencies are in the previously presented list. Of course, the focus is different, but through the knowledge of these fields the facility manager can

offer support in these areas as well and directly affect to customer satisfaction.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While I was doing my internship at Outside In during the summer 2006 in the Volunteer Program David Stone, the Virginia Woof Manager, requested for a volunteer to provide customer service training for their interns. I was interested in the idea because I have years of experience in customer service and it would have been an interesting project as well as would have made my internship more diverse.

After meeting with David Stone and Lorraine Myers, the other employees of Virginia Woof as well as the current interns I decided that it is neither wise nor sustainable for anyone if I began learning all the procedures when I only had a month left. Therefore, I raised the idea of making the training my thesis. David Stone agreed to it and after finalizing the plan with my school representative I started planning.

I read books that discuss customer service from different perspectives and outlined a plan based on the ideas that the books raised. After approving the plan with David Stone I started working on the theory part and gathering ideas and questions for the training program.

The only requirement from David Stone was that group work was not desired since it engages the interns from doing other duties for too long. The interns can use a computer while working on the exercises and therefore space as such was not an issue because printing would not be needed. The text is locked and password will be given to David Stone, so it is possible to change the program later on.

3.1 Outside In

Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center is a division of Outside In, which is a non-profit social service agency the mission of which is:

“Outside In addresses the changing needs of homeless youth and other low-income and marginalized people as they work toward self-sufficiency and improved health by providing them innovative social, medical and mental health services and material resources.”

(Presenting... Outside In, 2006)

Basically, Outside In provides several different services to homeless youth, but clinic services are available for low-income and uninsured people as well. The agency has been offering services to this population since 1968 and constantly developed their services. At the moment, Outside In has four departments: Support Services, Clinic & Health Services Department, Youth Department, and Development Department. (Op. cit.)

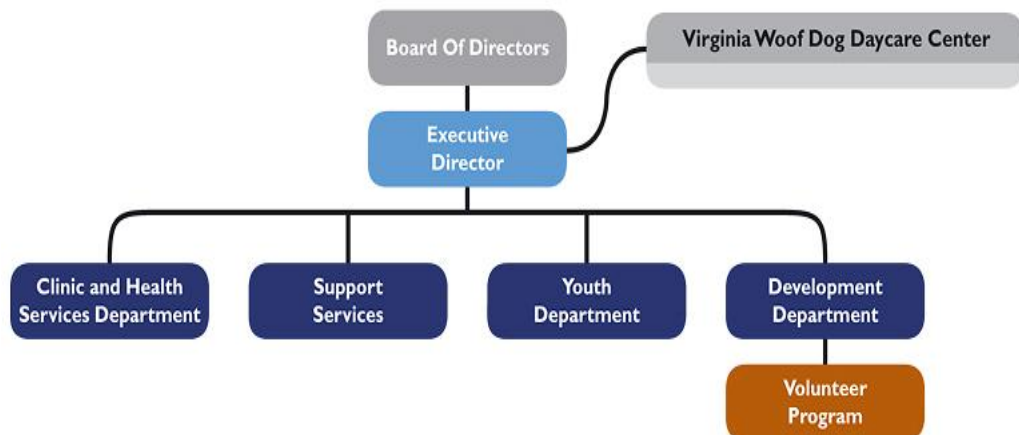


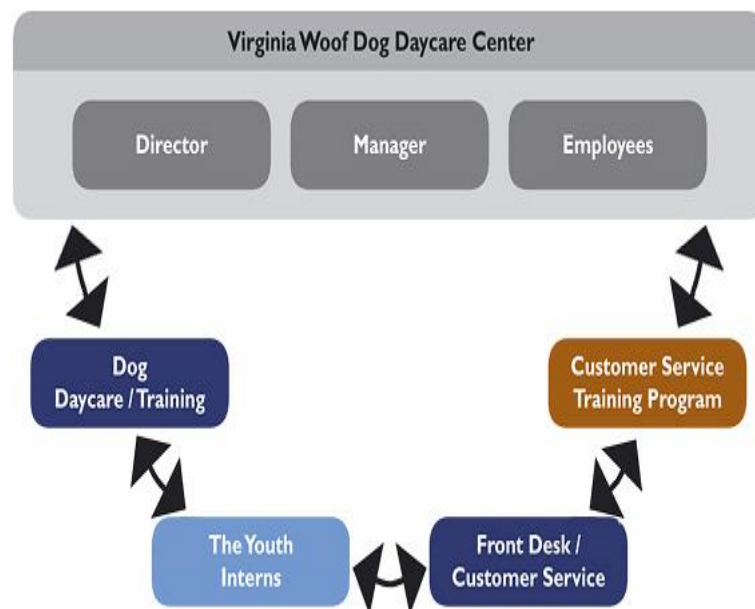
Chart 1: Outside In Organizational Chart

Support Services does not offer any services to the youth but consists of internal services such as human resource management, janitorial services, IT support, and billing. Development Department has two functions, to run the volunteer program and take care of community relations, such as private donations. Clinic & Health Services Department offers their services to everyone; they have a sliding scale for payments and no one is turned away

for inability to pay. Basically, the clinic has allopathic and naturopathic clinics, but needle exchange, Medical Outreach, and tattoo removal programs are part of the clinic services. The Youth Department is most connected to the youth by providing three warm meals a day, day and evening activities, case managers, employment resources, risk education, and housing. (Op. cit.)

3.2 Thesis Assigner: Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center

Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center started in September 2005. It is run by David Stone, the Manager, and Lorraine Myers, the Director. They both have several years of professional experience in dog training. In addition, there are two half-time employees and a boarding coordinator, along with the youth interns. The Interns learn dog handling, but also customer service while they work at the front desk. The following chart explains the position of my training program. (Op. cit.)



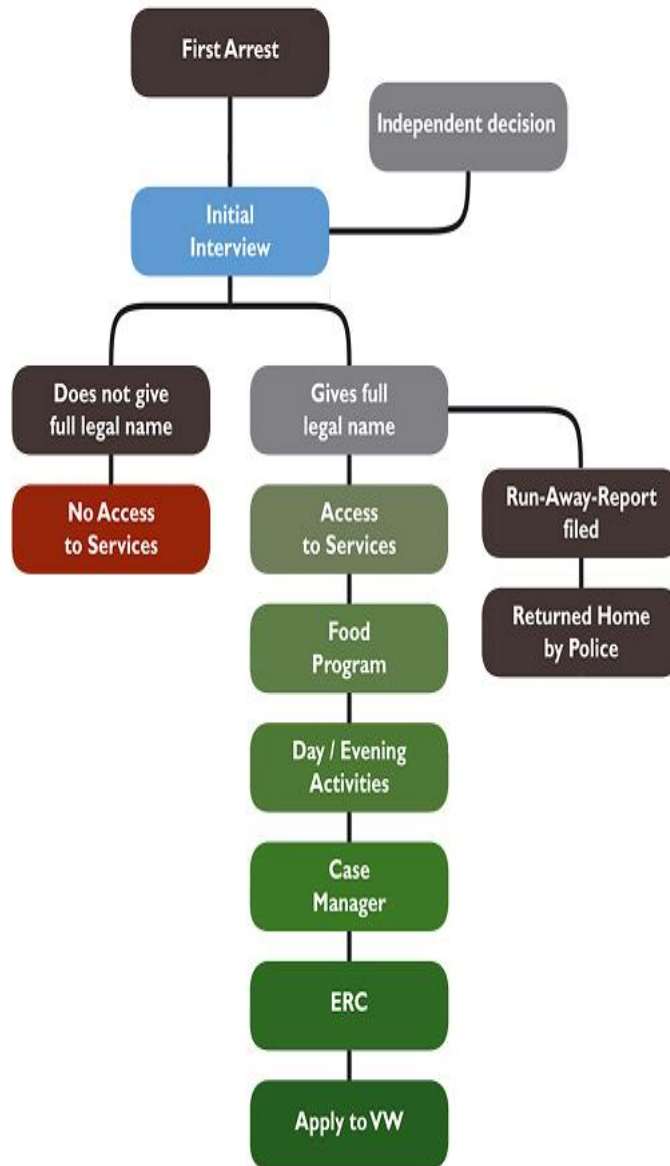
Chart

2: Customer Service Training Program's place

The executive Director of Outside In originally got the idea of a dog daycare because it is a good business in Portland since nearly 40% of households have dogs, just about three dozen Portland parks have off-leash areas, and several stores and restaurants allow owners to bring their pets while they shop or eat. (Austin 2005) However, more because street-dependent youth love dogs and most of them need a place where to learn soft skills before entering “the real business world.” Outside In discovered that it is not a problem for their clients to get employed, but to stay employed. Being on time everytime they are supposed to, being patient, and friendly are only a few of the skills that the youth need to develop. (Rowland 2005)

Virginia Woof has received national recognition from the Federal Department of Labor as a best practices program. It is common to connect homeless youth and job training, but it is evolutionary to connect their natural interest and job training into a beneficial program. (Presenting... Outside In, 2006)

To be able to work at Virginia Woof the person must be a client of Outside In and have an assigned case manager who works as his personal tutor. Together with the case manager it can be decided that internship at Virginia Woof would be beneficial. Most of the clients at Outside In have not finished school, which is their first target. The following image explains shortly the routes that clients use firstly, to get into services and secondly, to get an internship at Virginia Woof.



Chart

3: Street-dependent youth's route to Virginia Woolf

4. FACTS ABOUT STREET-DEPENDENT YOUTH

Most of us think that if homeless people would find a job they could pay their rent and they would not have to be homeless anymore. In reality, lack of housing is not the problem and, therefore, not the solution either. Homeless is a totally incorrect word to describe these people and continues to mislead people in the mainstream culture. Therefore, in this thesis I prefer to use the word street-dependent.

Before leaving their homes these youth live daily with excessive family stresses such as drug and alcohol abuse, loss of income by the parents, physical and mental health concerns, legal problems where the parent or youth is removed, divorce, and sexual identity conflicts. Most of these young people experience physical, sexual and mental abuse by family members, broken living arrangements such as foster homes, depression and thoughts of suicide, substance abuse addictions, rejection from the family unit, expulsion from school due to poor performance and fighting, and very low self-esteem. Consequently, it is common to find these young people self-medicating with various drugs, being rebellious, dropping out of the mainstream of society including school and safe social activities, treating themselves and others with contempt, having difficulty establishing close friendships, and being unable to make positive decisions. (Presenting... Outside In 2006)

These accumulating negative factors in their families create pressures that cause youth to leave their home life as a matter of survival. The act of leaving behind their families can be viewed as tragic. That act can also be very heroic as they go into the unknown in hopes of finding a better life. However, the longer they are involved in the street culture, the more difficult it becomes to leave the streets. (Op. cit.)

Oregon Research Institute and Arizona State University carried out a research in 2000 and 587 of Portland's 2000 street-dependent youth were interviewed. The research uncovers that 55% males and 66% females decided to leave independently, 29% males and 18% females were forced to leave their homes by their parent or guardian and two-thirds of these youth lived in foster care. 90% of the youth report some form of violence in their homes. 36% of girls report a history of childhood sexual abuse, with the first incident occurring at the age of seven. 30% of the homeless youth are sexual minorities: gay, lesbian, bi, trans, or questioning. 28% of males and 30% of females were introduced to non-injected drugs by a family member or by a relative. 19% of males and 23% of females have clinical diagnosable depression, and 35% of males and 47% of females have committed suicide attempts. These numbers explain why housing is not the solution for these youth. The real problems can be identified as identity, addiction or trust issues. (Op. cit.)

In the transition from street-dependent into independent individuals the youth have to struggle through several obstacles. JT Fest has researched the lifestyle of street-dependent youth and came into the conclusion that street culture is a subculture to the dominant culture. There are a few distinctive qualities that will be presented below.

- Transition begins from changing the way how the youth see themselves and the world around them.
- Each youth is an individual with different strengths and needs.
- The youth form families amongst each other and the value of the street family concept should not be underestimated.
- Street-dependent youth will seek help for their street siblings or parents easier than for themselves. This makes them feel needed which

is important for them. This also explains the success of peer counseling.

- In the streets it is all about survival. The norms of the dominant culture do not apply, only whether or not that act helps to survive. If it does, it is acceptable.
- Being identified as a “snitch” is the worst status anyone can get. The youth can be, and have been, killed for that reputation.
- Due to past and continuing trauma, street-dependent youth have gaps in their memories and the past is not being seen as a continuum but as a mix of memories. The present consists of sensations that can be smelled, heard or seen right now. The future is not a medium that exists or can be worked with.
- In order to cover their traumas, street-dependent youth create street names that give them a new identity.
- Abused or neglected youth do not have property or ownership concepts. The ownership of their own body should be one of the first lessons that street-dependent youth learn.
- From the street the dominant culture is seen hypocritical and phony and therefore non-exploitative relationships with adults in the dominant culture should be established. (Fest 1998, 159)

These points need to be taken into consideration when working with street-dependent youth. Only by understanding the differences in the cultures it is possible to achieve sustainable results.

5. CUSTOMER SERVICE TRAINING PROGRAM

The frame for the theory came from the literature that I read. I cannot say that I have a real scientific justification for the final topic selections, other than basing it on my own experiences from serving customers for several years. I had a sketch on my mind about subjects that I wanted the interns to learn and after reading the books I picked out the most interesting ones as well as the ones that I thought that would be the most important ones. Some of the subjects appeared in most of the books that I read. Subjects such as professionalism, complaints and first impressions are especially targeted to the needs of the interns. I based this assumption to the knowledge that I gained during my internship.

In my planning I tried to concentrate on exercises that would present another perspective, require thinking and generate ideas. Independent working during midday's downtime will give content to the interns' day and hopefully generate interesting discussions with the staff who are professionals in several fields.

The theory part is presented in different order in the CD than it is in this thesis due to the nature of the exercises. I believe that the exercises are easier and more undemanding in the subheading that is placed last in this thesis. Therefore, I want the interns to begin from them.

The CD contains only the theory part of this thesis and the exercises designed specifically to support the theory. My original idea was that one of the staff members would give the interns the exercises one step at a time so the interns would not feel overwhelmed by seeing all of them at once. Also, it might help them to concentrate better. This way the staff knows where the interns are

going and is able to discuss the subject and the exercises. The exercises are designed in a way that there is no need to check the answers after they are done, but a discussion would be recommended. The design of the PowerPoint is fairly simple because I wanted the interns to concentrate on thinking rather than be disturbed by and occupied with fancy visual effects.

5.1 The Basic Elements of Competitive Service

I believe that somewhat cruel reality in today's world is that no one does anything without getting something in return, especially in the business world. Since products and services have improved dramatically within the past 20 years, customer service, or the lack of it, has become the only way to differentiate businesses from each other. I believe that this has developed customer service and created customer-oriented trends.

This first part explores service and customer service from a broader picture, as a phenomenon. The clearest way is to begin by explaining what service is and how it differs from products. By this I hope that the interns at Virginia Woolf would be able to get into the correct mindset and realize that they as employees, in any position, can affect to the service the customers get. It is not a coincidence that just happens as the result of unidentified and uncontrolled actions.

Even though we hope that there were no competitors, I hope that instead of isolation, companies would rather try to learn from each other. There are only few who can invent and create successful business ideas, but several who can improve and adjust. Lack of creativity should not become an obstacle.

5.1.1 Customer Service & Service Theme

“High quality means pleasing customers, not just protecting them from annoyance.”
- David Garvin

According to a dictionary, customer service is assistance and other resources that a company provides to the people who buy or use its products or services. The business world identifies four distinctive qualities which separate services from products: intangibility, inseparability, perishability, and variability. The qualities of services are explained below.

- Intangibility means that there is no ownership of services. All performances are good examples of intangibility. Products can be held in hand and put into a plastic bag and taken home but services cannot.
- Services are produced and consumed at the same time, which makes them inseparable in that sense. A massage is produced at the same time than it is consumed.
- It is possible to enjoy the effects of service for a long time but the actual service ends when the customer leaves. It is not possible to store or stock services, they are perishable, which creates service capacity problem for the service provider.
- Due to the fact that the customer decides the quality of the service, it is impossible to produce two identical services. It is very hard to standardize service since it varies according to the customer. In that sense variability makes each service action unique.

This information rarely helps anyone to provide better service but yet it is good to understand the special features of service. Since it is not possible to

offer identical service, a service theme can be used as a foundation when creating an appropriate mindset.

A service theme communicates the organization's mission, how to achieve that mission, and for whom it is meant. Shortly, it defines the purpose of the organization. What makes it so practical is its ability to communicate the message in a simple form, whether it is used within the organization or as a basis for the public image. (Disney Institute 2003, 53)

Alone a service theme can already be helpful but in the customers' mind it creates a promise and it is vital that this promise will not be broken. Establishing service standards support the theme by being operational criteria that ensure the consistent delivery of the service theme. In order to make the standards perform well they also need to be prioritized. (Op. cit. 58)

Disney's service theme is "we create happiness by providing the finest in entertainment for people of all ages, everywhere." This sentence includes Disney's mission, how to achieve it and who can expect services. It is a big promise to make and therefore they have set safety, courtesy, show and efficiency as their standards. For example, if there is a problem, the employees know to put safety first even if it would be rude, ruin the experience for some, and slow down other processes. (Op. cit. 63)

5.1.2 Customer Satisfaction

"I am easily satisfied with the very best."

- Winston Churchill

Basically, customer service is as simple as one plus one equals two. There is a need and a fulfillment which equals to a pleased customer and a happy

salesman. Unfortunately, it is not that easy as customer expectations ruin the simple equation.

It is a known fact that customer always decides whether service is good or not. Depending from the customer's expectations the service either exceeds or falls below them. When service exceeds the expectations it is considered good from the customer's perspective.

Today's world is full of choices and consumers are more and more demanding. Since there is no bullet proof solution how to satisfy each and every customer I have a few suggestions where to begin: think like a customer, listen, and ask questions.

Customers are not interested in anything that prevents them from getting what they want even if it would be really helpful for the billing department because it is totally irrelevant to them at that moment. Reviewing policies, procedures, rules, and regulations and redesigning them from the customer perspective can be a new beginning. It can be difficult to objectively evaluate your own service, however, it is easy to evaluate others and therefore, a fieldtrip to the competitors' business as a customer might generate ideas. (Gross 2004, 19)

Empathy is the key to thinking like customers. A dictionary describes empathy as the intellectual identification with vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. There is a difference between empathy and sympathy which should be understood. Sympathy is usually the sharing of unhappiness or suffering, but it can also refer to sharing other emotions as well. There is no need for anyone serving customers to become sympathetic and share emotions as identifying and accepting them is enough.

Most of us listen to only 25% of what we hear and tune out rest of the 75%. Therefore, when interacting with customers, it is important to listen actively. Only then it is possible to understand as exactly as possible what they want, how they want it, when they want it, what they expect to pay for it, how long they expect to wait, and what else they expect with it. There is no need to guess and risk being wrong when customers can tell all the information that is needed. Additional information can be received by listening to what is not being said. For example, lack of compliments obviously means that customers do not have anything to compliment about. (Anderson & Zemke 1998, 57)

Sometimes customers are not quite sure what they want and therefore these customers should not be left alone to solve it on their own but helped through the process. By generic background questions it is possible to start the conversation. Open ended probing questions are a good way to delve deeper into the problem and after listening, confirmation questions guarantee that both the employee and the customer understand the need. (Op. cit. 64)

There is a correlation between the customer's sensitivity level and the size of the purchase. Sometimes questions can irritate the customer and therefore attention should be paid to the timing, number, and type of the questions asked. Enquiring about something that should be known already can annoy the customer as well. (Op. cit. 66)

If mutual understanding is not reached it is good to remember that repeating the question in the exactly same form will probably not get any better answers than when asked for the first time. Rephrasing, explaining, and taking a different approach might generate a helpful answer from the customer.

5.1.3 Competitors

"Most games are lost, not won."

- Casey Stengel

The marketing world talks about competitive intelligence when they discuss information about other businesses that may have a significant impact on the way your business is being conducted. Even though organizations may never hear from each other, customers will. Often consumers conduct a small market research in order to discover their options. Would it be somewhat peculiar if organizations were not interested in the same information?

First of all, a record of all possible competitors is needed. It is crucial not to assume that merely organizations in the exactly same business are the only competitors. By broadening the business idea to a more generic level it is possible to discover the true spectrum of the competitors. Furthermore, new products or services might seem totally different and irrelevant but result in making older products or services redundant. (Understand your competitors 2006)

Secondly, all possible information should be gathered from the competitors since knowing the names of the competitors is not enough. Knowing as much as possible is helpful, but knowing for example, the competitors' prices, available services/products and their limitations, suppliers, strategies, premises, history, employees, service culture, customers, and marketing methods, gives plenty of information. In addition, knowledge of general economic, market trends and buying behaviors can be very valuable. (How to Get To Grips With Competitors 2004)

Thirdly, information is useless if no one learns anything. Finding out what the competitors do better, equally or worse, will give ideas and guidelines of actions that need to take place. Simply copying the competitors' ideas utilizes them by 50%, but to get the full advantage of them means doing them better and adding even more value. (Understand your Competitors 2006)

5.2 Employee's influence on Customer Service

The second part of the theory gives more practical tools on how to achieve the previously presented relatively theoretic goals. The main focus is internal and concentrates on what an employee can do to improve service.

Professionalism is an important subject to the final users of this thesis. It is important that they understand their role in the organization. Body language is such a huge subject that my goal is just to make the interns aware of themselves. It is a big transform from a person asking spare change in a street corner, where most people look at the walls to ignore you, into a company representative.

The interns cannot empower anyone, but that can be a way to review policies and demonstrate to the management if there are flaws in the system. I also believe that being empowered can be very good for the interns. The more they get positive experiences the more they gain trust in their own skills. A complaining customer can activate old habits in the interns and therefore I tried to explain it from the customer point of view and offer a clear what-to-do model. What I liked most about that model is that employees do not have to understand or agree on the ideology behind the model, but if they do use it, in most cases customer expectations are going to be exceeded.

Relationship selling is a concept that should be the goal of every employee who serves customers. In my mind it finalizes the whole action chain that begins from a need. It also proves that good customer service is not a coincident.

5.2.1 Professionalism and Body Language

“Speech is conveniently located midway between thought and action where it often substitutes for both.”

- John A. Holmes

If consumers have expectations of the service they also have expectations of the people serving them. Role expectations give guidelines on how an employee or a customer should behave. How employees look, talk, write, act and work determines if they are behaving professionally. General norms for employees could be that they should be nice, helpful, tidy, and polite, have answers, and remember to smile. Customers are expected not to have too many questions, stick to the point, be patient, and wait for their turn. If either the employee or the customer steps outside their own role, the other party usually feels uncomfortable and as a result employees are labeled unprofessional and customers difficult.

The conflict usually begins because of different perceptions. Employees feel that they are just doing their job but to the customer, however, the employee is the company. Customers neither know nor are interested in specifics of anyone's area of responsibility, job description or what that specific person can or cannot do for the customer. If something goes wrong and the customer does not get good service, the customer automatically labels the whole organization bad. (Anderson & Zemke 1998, 4)

The internal service concept can bring a solution to the “I just work here” attitude. Basically, internal service means taking responsibility of one's own work, appreciating it and other's work as well as showing it. Listening, encouraging and being interested in co-workers create a caring atmosphere. Also, giving and taking feedback and solving problems constructively is part of internal service.

Some words alone or in combination create negative images in customers and talking is an essential part of professionalism. Nancy Friedman, a customer service and telephone consultant, has listed forbidden phrases and alternatives for them. (Op. cit. 68)

Forbidden Phrase	Use instead
"I do not know"	"That is a good question. Let me check and find out."
"We cannot do that"	"That is a tough one. Let's see what we can do." Then find an alternative solution
"You will have to..."	"Here is what you can do.../You will need to..."
"Hang on a second; I will be right back"	"It may take me two or three minutes (or however long it will really take) to get that. Are you able to hold/wait while I check?"
"No" when used at the beginning of any sentence	"We are not able to refund your money, but we can replace the product at no charge" think how to form a negative answer to a positive response.
"No problem"	"It will be my pleasure," or "I would be happy to"

Table 1: Forbidden phrases in customer service

As mentioned before, people listen only to a minor part of everything they hear. Therefore the body language has to support the message conveyed by words. The body language is a language without spoken words and is therefore called non-verbal communication. We use the body language all the time, sometimes unconsciously, but it is impossible not to communicate something when in contact with others. However, we can learn to use our body language for a purpose as well as learn to understand and interpret the body language of others. How to interpret body language depends on the

situation, the culture, and the relationship between people as well as the gender of the other. (van Marwijk 2002)

From the customer service point of view it is important to pay attention to the body language because it can give away messages which customers should never receive. Probably the most frequent messages that many employees communicate to their customers are that they are not interested in the customer or that the customer is stupid. This is a serious mistake that should be avoided by all possible means.

Customers act upon their first impressions but so do employees. First impression can affect the service that is provided to customers. It is fairly common to make assumptions of customers' buying power based on their appearance. Generally the customers who look good are more likely to get better service than the customers who seem to have less interest in their appearance, maybe because of less personal time and money. Needless to say, organizations may lose significantly if their employees make assumptions.

5.2.2 Empowering and Complaints

"It's not what you call me, but what I answer to."

- African proverb

Empowering means giving employees the power to do their jobs. At Nordstrom's the employee handbook contains only one rule: Use good judgment in all situations. By saying this Nordstrom wants to empower their employees to do whatever it takes to make the customer happy if the employee thinks that it is within good judgment. Instead of setting rules and regulations that employees are obligated to follow Nordstrom concentrates

on “hiring the smile.” They believe technical skills can be taught to anyone but attitude cannot. By hiring certain type of people and giving them the power to make what it takes, their total sales were more than \$7 billion in 2005. (Spector & McCarthy 2005, 7)

By giving employees more authority and responsibility it is possible to make them feel more valued and respected. This can be an enormous source of motivation. To generalize, motivated employees are usually more productive. In addition, empowering means that employees can make decisions and therefore they do not take management’s time by verifying everything and asking small questions. However, employees need to be aware of guidelines, whether it is the good judgment of Nordstrom or a stricter version. By acting this way the employees will not be afraid of making these decisions and empowering will be valuable.

A book called *Complaint Is a Gift* describes complaints as gifts that dissatisfied customers bring to organizations. Sometimes the wrapping is not beautiful but what is inside is a chance to correct whatever the issue is and please the customer. Only satisfied customers come back. It is important to understand that when customers complain they are giving the organization a second chance. These customers are also the most loyal ones because they have so much faith in the organization that they believe their problem is worth complaining about. (Barlow & Møller 1996, 11)

Most customers vote with their feet and never go back to an organization that treated them bad. According to a nationwide survey 96.1% of customers tell others if they received bad service but also 97% of customers tell others if they received exceptionally good service. (Gross 2004, 13) Nowadays it could be said that if a customer complains yet leaves satisfied, exceptionally good

service has been provided. 26 out of 27 customers do not complain because they believe that it is waste of time and will not make any difference anyway. (Barlow & Møller 1996, 21)

Organizations could see complaints as tools, if not gifts, that will help them notice flaws and improve. Since more than two-thirds of customers do not complain, it means that even though there are no complaints there could be something to improve and if someone tells what is wrong the customer should be rewarded for doing so. For one voiced complaint the organization might have already lost 26 other customers who did not complain.

Organizations should encourage all their customers to complain by creating a complaint friendly environment. Customers should know who to complain or how to, and if possible, personal and impersonal means should be available. However, written complaints are always warnings. It takes more time and dedication to write than send an email or call and usually it means that it is not a minor complaint. (Op. cit. 110)

Whenever customers complain it should be handled professionally from the customer's perspective. It takes a lot of time, effort, not to mention the mental suffering, from customers to bring products back and voice dissatisfaction. If they are then treated poorly, the organization can be sure that the customer will never come back, but feel better after telling their experience to several others. Organizations should not forget the customers who are already in the premises and witness the incidents.

When a customer voices a complaint eight steps should be taken:

1. Say "thank you"
2. Explain why you appreciate the complaint

3. Apologize for the mistake
4. Promise to do something about the problem immediately
5. Ask for necessary information
6. Correct the mistake – promptly
7. Check customer satisfaction
8. Prevent future mistakes

Service recovery has two aspects, psychological and tangible. The first four steps are psychological and cost nothing to the organization. By following this formula the customer is surprised by a welcoming start which might calm them down if needed and when it comes with an explanation it does not sound empty. The response should always include an apology, but when it is not in the beginning, it is possible to build a better rapport with the customer. An apology in the beginning might give an impression that nothing can be done and that is why the person is apologizing. After the customer is feeling better and is more capable of controlling his emotions and therefore able to answer questions, required background information can be collected. After the problem has been fixed it is important to follow up with the customer and guarantee that the problem does not reoccur. (Op. cit. 86-92)

The previously presented step model together with empowered employees, who know what can be promised to the customers without causing another disappointment, are an effective way to handle complaints. Further trainings are recommended so that complaint management would not be a feared aspect of the employees' work but a way to gain back the customers' trust.

5.2.3 Relationship Selling

"There are no traffic jams along the extra mile"

- Roger Staubach

Nordstrom's all time Number One seller for over 15 years in a row gained over \$1.5 million in sales every year. He had a personal client list of 7000 from recent college graduates to chief executive officers to United States senators. He understood that people like to do business with people they like. When products or services are similar along with the prices the reason why customers select one over another is the service. Once the relationship is established and nurtured why would the customers go anywhere else? (Spector & McCarthy 2005, 193)

Essential points in establishing a relationship is knowledge. At Nordstrom they teach all their sellers to measure both feet. This means that a professional shoe seller knows that feet are almost never exactly the same and by measuring both feet the customer can get shoes that fit both feet. This proves to the customers that the employees know what they are doing and take the time and effort to actually serve the customer. In addition, employees need to know the services or products that are available in order to offer a solution to the customer's problem, several if possible. (Op. cit. 195)

The difference between great salesman and an average salesman is that the great one does not think about selling. The focus is on serving the customer and if it results in a sale that is an additional bonus. The easiest way to nurture the relationship is honesty and sincerity. It is more professional to tell the customer that the most expensive item that they are going to purchase is not going to work for them and sell something less expensive that will truly satisfy the customer. The organization might lose some money but gain the respect which might lead to a lifelong relationship. When the respect has been gained once, it usually leads to additional sales because the customer listens to and values the opinion of the employee and might purchase items that

were not originally in the shopping list but were recommended by the employee. (Op. cit. 201)

When spending time with a customer the point should be in getting to know the person in such a way that it would be possible to offer more personal service next time the customer needs something. Being called by name makes the customer feel as if he is not a customer anymore but the customer.

Utilizing the full spectrum of service can help to create a relationship. According to the push/pull theory consumers are drawn into stores because there is pull, which is basically a need for something, or a push which can be for example an interesting advertising. Taking care of customers can happen in a form of calling and notifying the customer when something that they like or need is on sale, especially if they have not been shopping for a while. This tells the customer that being sales customer is nothing to be ashamed of and they are valued even if they do not spend much.

Relationship selling consists of caring for customers, knowing them, their needs, and the services available. The aim should be to make the experience valuable to the customers and become memorable.

One way of engaging customers into a deeper relationship is a membership. Through memberships it is possible to collect valuable information about customers and offer promotions and discounts to the people who are most likely to purchase most frequently. A membership in its simplest form is a stamp card where the customer gets the 10th or 11th purchase for free. This encourages customers to purchase from one location. There are no guarantees, but for example, in the stamp card system the organization does

not lose anything because the customer has to make those nine or ten purchases before the organization has to give anything.

The more sophisticated versions may include more risk to the companies, but the results should be better as well. In memberships the basic principle could be that by giving a little the organization gets a lot. For example, if an organization gives 30% discount customers are more likely to make bigger purchases than without the discount. By giving discount to membership customers the company rewards them for purchasing, which creates a positive image in customers' minds, and maybe even initiates another purchase.

5.3 Tangible Aspects of Customer Service

The last part concentrates on the tangible aspects of service. Understanding that even the smallest matters can affect the purchasing decision should lift the interns into the same level with people who have been basically purchasing products and services their whole lives. The purpose of this part is to perfect the previously presented ideas into a whole picture.

The internet, phone, and building are aspects of customer service that many organizations do not excel. Many times, they are the forgotten aspects that are not included at all into the spectrum of customer service. On one hand, the importance of the internet and phone are ever increasing but on the other hand, the actual premises should never disappoint the customer either.

Taking the Internet, phone and building into consideration can be seen as fine-tuning, but I believe that it is part of the purchasing experience.

Customers can give opinions on them and therefore it is part of the judgment that determinates whether the service is good or not.

5.3.1 First Impression and Five Senses

"Few have strength of reason to overrule the perceptions of sense, and yet fewer have curiosity or benevolence to struggle long against the first impression: he who therefore fails to please in his salutation and address is at once rejected, and never obtains an opportunity of showing his latest excellences or essential qualities."

- Samuel Johnson

It has been said that first impressions are created within the first few seconds of a new encounter and opinions are based on that. No one gets a second chance to create a first impression. There is no need to say a word, however

once this evaluation is over, the content of your speech will not change it. When the best possible first impression is made, it is more likely to reach the audience better. When a poor first impression takes place, the audience has set their minds and usually it is not possible to change it. (Sterling 2006)

A dictionary defines impression as an image in the mind caused by something external to it, but also as the act of impressing; state of being impressed. Fully understanding this opens a possibility for organizations to capture their potential customers even before they consider purchasing anything. It has been said that purchasing decision begins from a need, but even before that an image can have been created in the customer's mind. Everything that the customer sees or hears unconsciously forms a basis for an opinion of the organization even before the customer lays a foot inside their premises. These are called passive experiences since the customer is not part of the experience.

If the previously created opinion is positive enough the customer will contact the organization and become part of an active experience. The first time when the customer has contact with the organization is called the moment of truth. This can, for example, happen by an email, phone or actually visiting the organization's premises. Depending on the type of contact different points will affect the impression. The organization should make sure that no matter how customers decide to contact them it can always be done easily and that the image is positive. The organization has to make sure that the image they want to give to the public is really the one that they get, already from the first seconds on.

The first impression ultimately affects the purchasing decision. If the impression is negative, for whatever reason, it is unlikely that the customer

even tries the services. Therefore, it is crucial to convey the correct message right away. The message should be carefully selected according to the target audience. For example, colors, shapes, and logos appeal differently to people at different ages, sexes, and nationalities. The message should appeal most to the customer group using the services most frequently.

The Disney Institute says that in order to take full advantage of setting it must be designed for all five senses. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch all create impressions and give means to understand the environment we are in. Each of them also offers an opportunity to enhance the experience. (Disney Institute 2003, 122)

- Sight: About 70% of the body's sense receptors are located in our eyes, making sight the greatest transmitter of setting. The premises must be appealing in order to please the customers. In addition to general layout of the premises customers have different cleanness levels and other preferences that should be met. A professional guideline is that the premises should be as neutral as possible and therefore it has potential to please several customers. Effective usage of different shapes and colors can prevent neutral from being boring. (Op. cit. 122-123)

- Sound: Sounds are caused by vibrations of infinitely varying pitch, quality, and loudness. The only vibrations that customers hear should be good ones. For many people sounds are mood setters and this should be an essential part of the planning. To describe the power of sounds in a setting, John Hench from Disney has said, "People do not walk out of attractions whistling the architecture." (Op. cit. 123-124)

- Smell: Smells are stored in long term memory and through them people can associate different memories of people, places and events that happened several years ago. Smells can also cause physical reactions, even better than taste, and therefore organizations should be very careful with them. (Op. cit. 124-125)

- Taste: Many organizations have taken taste into their experience creating palette and offer for example chocolates or other candies at the front desk or after a purchase. Water tanks or little fountains can be found in almost every organization nowadays. (Op. cit. 125-126)

- Touch: The skin is the largest organ in the human body and its sense, touch, should not be forgotten when the premises are designed. Different materials provide variety of options when the touch feature is being installed, however safety and convenience along with suitability are factors that should be paid attention to. (Op. cit. 125)

5.3.2 Internet and Phone

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."
-Arthur C. Clarke

The internet has opened a whole new way of doing business and it is not only for internationally oriented companies. When used correctly the internet can be the actual advertising, the printing, the stamp, and even the mail man. Every successful company should guarantee their visibility for every potential customer regardless of their computer skills since the internet is a heaven for a computer savvy, but a hell for someone with fewer skills.

The purpose of a website, firstly, is to give information to potential or existing customers and work as a feedback medium secondly. The order of these two purposes depends on the customer's need at that moment. Generally, the website should contain the following information:

- Contact Information (address, phone number, and email address)
- Services, and any rules, restrictions or guidelines concerning them
- Prices
- Opening Hours

The most important feature of the website is however, its velocity. If downloading of the pages is a prolonged process the customers will rarely wait and then it does not matter what information is available. The website should be easy to navigate so that the customer can locate what is required as fast as possible. The KISS-principle, Keep It Short and Simple, is a good guideline when designing websites.

The essential factors on excelling phone performance are tone of voice, knowledge, and listening. The tone of voice that is used when phone is

answered can determine the direction of the call. Customers have heard more than enough of tired, bored, and unhelpful voices and without doubt welcome an exception. A person who does not have any answers is as good as nothing on the phone since customers rarely call just to chat, even though it sometimes feels like that. From time to time it also seems like customers do not know what they want and listening becomes the key to solve those situations. (Anderson & Zemke 1998, 75)

Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service book by Anderson and Zemke offers useful phone etiquette tips:

- Never put a caller on hold without permission. Provide a timeline for the hold and accept “no” for an answer as well.
- Customers hate to be transferred from person to person. If you do not know the answer, take the number, and call back when you have an answer or a person who can help them.
- Do not create a voice mail jungle and remember that it is not a substitute for a real-time phone communication. Give short, clear, and accurate information on what to do and when you will be back. Always return calls promptly. (Anderson & Zemke 1998, 77-80)

Today’s customers are busier than ever and usually take the initial contact in any other way than physically entering organizations’ premises. Excelling website design and phone behavior can win many customers.

5.3.3 Building

“Building art is a synthesis of life in materialized form.”

- Alvar Aalto

What customers see is just as important as what they do not see, is the message that John Hench from Disney wants to tell their employees. Every setting tells a story at Disney, and practically it means getting the details right. Every detail of the setting must support the desired story. (Disney Institute 2003, 118)

Dead plants, overflowing trash baskets, signs with missing letters or misspelled words are small details that can be easily overlooked, especially in hurry, but customers notice details more than ever, if they have to wait. Specialty organizations, such as Disney, can get away with minor inaccuracies because customers cannot find the same experience anywhere else, but organizations offering more general services cannot, because nowadays it is effortless for the customer to select one of the competitors.

The premises have to be designed according to the requirements of the organization. Customer service will not be efficient if the design is only for customers or residue of the previous company. Ideally, the premises should be designed to correspond to the business plan, but in addition, be enjoyable for the customers. After all, the aim is to make them stay.

The five senses that were presented previously can be used as a guideline when design is being looked at from the customer point of view. Senses can help when lighting, music, colors, and materials are being selected. Details such as window and desk heights are directly dependent on the customers; children need lower levels than adults.

Every now and then customers have to purchase services or products they do not want but inevitably need. If organizations can make these experiences pleasant even for those customers they might get customers for a lifetime. It might be impossible to make the service or product itself more enjoyable for the customer but carefully selected details might be able to turn the experience positive after all.

One factor that increases customer satisfaction is a distinction between customer areas and backrooms. During opening hours companies should be ready to serve their customers immediately when they step into the premises. Meetings, feedback sessions, eating, personal phone calls, and any other type of break activities should take place in another place. It is highly uncomfortable for customers to interrupt employees and therefore the premises should allow different kinds of support functions to be performed as well. (Op. cit. 126-127)

6. DISCUSSION

The interns at Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center will get a tool that should increase the quality of their internship. So far, they do not have a set formula that they follow, but merely an action based training, where the interns learn matters that take place during that day, but nothing more.

Division of the three parts gives the reader a whole picture of customer service. By choosing those parts I had the opportunity to delve deeper into matters affecting customer service. The subjects are discussed on a fairly basic level in order not to scare the reader away with overly too complex ideas.

All together, I am pleased with my work. I very much enjoyed reading the literature that I selected and I believe that I made good choices based on them. The actual writing process was fairly straightforward since I had read all my books and generated numerous ideas based on the texts. I definitely proved to myself that well planned is half done like Finnish people say.

I had two major problems: creating the exercises and the visualization of the training program. I cannot say whether or not I completely succeeded in creating helpful exercises since I do not have any background or education in teaching. It was a very challenging task for me but I believe that I still succeeded. Combination of the theory and exercises should give the interns at least something, how much; it depends on the interns themselves. The visualization problem was solved by using MS PowerPoint instead of MS Word.

I believe that quality customer service is not hard. All it needs is a little sensitivity and the correct mindset and hopefully I can assist the interns at Virginia Woof in becoming more effective and productive service providers. Now that the interns have a solid training program they will be better equipped to provide a higher level of service within Virginia Woof and maybe even carry pieces of it to their independent lives.

REFERENCES

Anderson, K., Zemke, R. 1998. Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service. Revised Edition. The United States of America: AMACOM

Austin, D. 2005. Dog Day-care creates portal for homeless kids. The Oregonian.

Barlow, J., Møller, C. 1996. A Complaint Is a Gift: Using customer feedback as a strategic tool. The United States of America: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

Disney Institute. 2003. Be Our Guest: Perfecting the art of customer service. Foreword by Michael D. Eisner. The United States of America: Disney Editions

Fest, JT. 1998. Street Culture: an epistemology of street-dependent Youth. Self published.

Gross, T Scott. 2004. Why Service Stinks ...and Exactly What to Do About it! The United States of America: Dearborn Trade Publishing.

How to get to grips with competitors 2004. The Chartered Institute of Marketing [Referred to on September 20, 2006]
http://www.cim.co.uk/mediastore/10_minute_guides/10_min_Get_To_Grips_With_Competitors.pdf

Presenting... Outside In. 2006. Portland. PowerPoint Presentation for volunteers.

Rowland, R. 2005. From Outside In to the dog daycare business. Spot Magazine.

Spector, R., McCarthy, P. 2005. The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: a handbook for implementing great service in your organization. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons

Sterling, M. 2006. Do You Make Your First Impression Your Best Impression? [Referred to on September 18, 2006] About, Inc.
<http://entrepreneurs.about.com/cs/marketing/a/uc051603a.htm>

Understand your competitors 2006. [Referred to on September 20, 2006] The Chartered Institute of Marketing
<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/bdotg/action/layer?r.l2=1073858842&r.l1=1073861169&r.s=tl&topicId=1073900131>

Van den Ende, M. 2004. Effective Facility Management. 2nd Edition. Niehove: Hanzehogeschool Groningen

Van Marwijk, F. 2002. The Importance of Body Language. [Referred to on September 18, 2006] Submitted to Self Improvement Online on January 11, 2002. <http://www.selfgrowth.com/bodyl.html>

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Dog day-care Center Creates Portal for Homeless Kids

The Oregonian Copyright 2005;

Written by David Austin

Helping hand - The program aims to get youths off the streets and give them the means to live on their own

Randy Jasper moves swiftly across the floor of the Virginia Woof Dog Daycare Center, kneels down and gently separates Harlan -- a thick yellow lab -- from her wrestling match with Libby, a retriever mix.

Sensing the commotion, a Jack Russell terrier named Lucky approaches and nips at Jasper's hands. "You can lick me and bite me all you want, but it's time to settle down," he coos, using his low voice to coax the dogs to nap.

Jasper, 21, lives on Portland's streets. He hasn't had a permanent place to live for years but is training to become an intern at the dog day-care center. It's operated by Outside In, a social service agency that aids homeless youth, and is scheduled to open Tuesday.

The agency's dog day care brings together two signature elements from Portland's sidewalks.

On one hand, it's a "dog town." Nearly 40 percent of households have dogs, nearly three dozen Portland parks have off-leash areas, and many stores and restaurants allow owners to bring their pets while they shop or eat.

The city's other common element is homeless youth. Official estimates put the number of kids living on the street at 1,500 to 2,000 over the course of a year.

Jasper represents some of the most difficult cases. He isn't a native Oregonian. He's too old for the services designed to get homeless kids off the streets, and he has no family to rely on.

So Outside In's dog day care may be Jasper's final chance at stability.

"Our purpose is to prepare kids like Randy so they can make it on their own," says David Stone, the center's director. "They gain work experience but they learn something more important: How to handle themselves in the real working world."

The Virginia Woof Center is part of a small network of agency-sponsored programs designed to help youth get off the streets.

The network -- created earlier this year -- provides experience through a job-training program that places young people in three-month internships at places such as Oregon Steel Mills, Coffee People, Big City Produce and Mt. Hood Chemical.

Kathy Oliver, Outside In's executive director, says it's too early to tell how well the program is working because only a few kids have been placed with businesses. The dog day care will have the most participants, she says.

"These are youth who don't have parents picking up the tab," says Oliver. "If you've lived on the streets for any length of time, it can be a culture shock to move from there to being a full-time employee."

Outside In wanted to locate the 3,350-square-foot center close to downtown and the dog-loving Pearl District. It cost the agency about \$200,000 to open the center; half the money came from the Meyer Memorial Trust; donations made up the rest.

The storefront location on West Burnside Street near PGE Park makes it a prime choice for pet owners. It will handle 40 dogs a day -- the fees will help pay for the center's operation -- with care provided by Stone, a center manager and as many as eight homeless interns.

For Randy Jasper, the odds of making it are stacked against him.

Born and raised in central California, Jasper says he didn't know his father growing up and remembers a history of disputes with his mother. As a kid, he wasn't really close to anyone other than a pet Rottweiler named Buddy.

"He was my best friend," Jasper recalls. "The way I see it, he took care of me, and I took care of him."

But when the dog went after one of his mother's cats, it had to be put down. It was devastating to Jasper and, in part, drove him out of the house and into foster care by age 13.

He dabbled in drugs -- marijuana and prescription pills, mostly -- and got into a few minor scrapes with the law. He also bounced around -- he was placed a few dozen times in foster homes. "I didn't mind them, but I never really connected with people," he recalls.

He met his father and lived with him for a short time but decided to leave California for Portland, where he has lived on the streets for about three years.

Sometimes, he stays with friends. More often, he'll look for a warm grate or an overhang to protect against the rains when it's bedtime. Trash-bin diving for food is a common occurrence unless "spange-ing" -- asking passers-by for spare change -- pulls in enough money for a meal.

"I've been outside the last two or three winters, and I don't want to spend another one outside," he says now. "My theory is that for every winter you spend outside you lose five years off your life."

Eight months ago, Jasper discovered Outside In, thinking it was a good place to get a meal. Then he heard about some of the programs the agency offered and decided to try to turn his life around.

Will he make it? That depends on Jasper, says Stone, the day care's director.

Stone says he's committed to giving Jasper a three-month internship because of the young man's affinity for dogs. "You can tell he's a natural because of how he talks about dogs," Stone says.

At a recent training, Jasper appears most at ease when he's around dogs. As a group of interns works with the center's manager, he stands to the side quietly. But when the dogs are loose, he easily mixes in with the canines.

Jane, a spaniel who has lost her eyesight and hearing, cuddles up next to him. Hercules, an overweight dachshund, barks until Jasper quiets him.

"He just wants a little extra attention," Jasper says. "I like it here because the dogs are just as social as people but they don't judge you."

Jasper knows that judgment is real when it comes to how he's seen by much of society. He wants the chance to prove people wrong about homeless kids.

"It's on me to show that I can jump through the hoop society is holding up for me," Jasper says. "Success for me will be getting a job, getting an apartment and having cheap rent so I can get on my feet."

"If I make it, I definitely want a career working with animals. Maybe in a kennel or something. But it definitely has to be with dogs."

Appendix 2. From Outside In to the Dog Daycare Business

Spot Magazine Copyright 2005;

Written by Ruth Rowland;

Homeless youth to develop job skills caring for dogs, owners

"Is today the 10th?" asked a young woman filling out paperwork in the lobby of Outside In. Actually, it was the 14th, as the staff member at the desk informed her softly. The exchange illustrated a challenge faced by the Portland homeless-youth advocacy agency: how to help street kids, whose lives aren't centered around the calendar or alarm clock, transition to the structure required by a job?

An answer came one day to Outside In executive director Kathy Oliver: open a dog daycare business.

The vision will become reality September 22nd, as the doors open at Virginia Woof, a daycare facility owned by Outside In and staffed by homeless youth from the agency's job-training program.

The grand opening party, September 16th even features a celebrity guest appearance by Milo van Sant, Australian shepherd companion to local filmmaker Gus. The human van Sant is a long time Outside In supporter and helped raise funds for the project.

In recent years, many agencies serving homeless youth and adults have entered the private sector to ease their clients into the everyday work environment. Portland agency New Avenues for Youth, for example, operates a Ben & Jerry's scoop shop in downtown Portland. But so far as Oliver knows, Outside In will be the first social-service agency to venture beyond food service and thrift stores into dog daycare.

A perfect fit

Once the idea came up, staffers knew it was a winner.

"Dog daycare is a great industry and makes a lot of sense in that it will build on the passion and affinity youth have for dogs," Oliver said. "So many of the homeless youth themselves have dogs. If you walk around downtown, it's pretty obvious."

Outside In even took the special bond into consideration three years ago when designing its new facility. In addition to the "people lobby," the headquarters has a courtyard with a "dog lobby" of crates where dogs can wait safely while their owners access services. Staffers also get to bring well-behaved pets to work, and Oliver's 13-year-old border collie, Zaida, supervises the comings and goings of the upstairs hallway.

The project found support from numerous community businesses and also a few strokes of luck, according to Oliver. "I had lunch with someone and told him this idea. I told him I just needed a place and some money, and he offered me a place." The benefactor, who wanted to remain anonymous, provided a seven-year no-cost lease for the building.

Money appeared thereafter in the form of a \$100,000 start-up and remodeling grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust and donations from numerous community members.

Outside In staffers are excited about the site, an early-20th-century building at NW 15th & Burnside with a history as an auto dealership and sign company. It's close to agency headquarters, visible, and offers good street parking. After renovations, the center features a lobby/reception area with coffee bar, separate playrooms for big and small dogs, and time-out/crating areas in addition to staff offices.

Once in operation, the daycare center is expected to break even or even turn a small profit for the nonprofit agency. Plans call for it to employ between four and six youths at 20 hours per week for two to three months each, or about 25 kids total per year.

Learning the ropes

While Outside In already offers job training and placement assistance, having Virginia Woof will allow more flexibility supporting clients who struggle while shifting from street life to life on a schedule.

"It's culture shock moving from life on the streets to employment in a business," Oliver said. She recalled one youth who'd shown up at his new job three days out of five. "He said, 'That's the best I've ever done-what's the problem?'"

To work at the center, youths will go through a regular job-application process and must first be clients in the agency's employment resource center. This includes a screening, assessment, and initial job-skills course. Feedback from client members on the project's advisory board suggest the lure of working with dogs will motivate clients to get through the process.

They'll work with two regular paid staff who are experienced with both dogs and youth. Workers will learn about dog handling from a consulting veterinarian and will have opportunities to get certified in pet CPR and receive additional animal-related job training. Nearly 10 local businesses have pledged to hire Virginia Woof graduates.

Project developer Ian Galloway, only slightly older than some clients, has helped Oliver flesh out the workings of Virginia Woof. He had his eyes opened to the rigors of dog-daycare work during a stint at the Noah's Arf daycare in Northwest Portland. Noah's owner Kris Price has advised Outside in on the project, telling them, as Oliver described it, "what not to do."

"It was very vigorous, very physical work," Galloway observed, asked to sum up his experience.

It left him with high hopes for the rewards clients will receive from taking on the challenging daycare environment, compared with many entry-level jobs.

"Dog daycare imparts broader skills. You have to be great with customer skills. You have to work with a team. You have to be there on time-six a.m.," he said.

For Oliver, the center's opening offered a special perk when it came time to design the new center's logo, a smiling, learned black-and-white dog on a green background. "As director, I got to use my dog as a model-a Border Collie reading a book."