

PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS AS THE CUSTOMER: BEST PRACTICE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE DELIVERY

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Introduction

In the age of e-business the e-customer has emerged. They are experienced online consumers and their online experiences have shaped their customer service expectations. They are connected, well informed and impatient. They are pulling products and services on demand when, where and how they want. The implications and associated challenges for us in terms of how we meet the expectations of customers in our everyday business approaches are considerable given the significant changes technology has driven in consumer behaviours and expectations. This paper examines how adopting a customer centred orientation to marketing and recruiting international students enabled and driven by technology in an environment that has traditionally been dominated by process and paper can transform business models and approaches and improve business performance. A case study using Swinburne International, Swinburne University of Technology, provides an account of how a customer centred approach was adopted and implemented and the impact this had on day to day business operations and business performance.

Customer service in context

In the context of marketing and recruiting international students customer service involves a relationship between a specialised business unit of an institution, usually the International Office, and prospective students and their stakeholders. Most international offices are responsible for the functions of marketing and recruitment, aiding and administering admissions and acceptance procedures, providing specialist student support services which includes facilitating student visa compliance and orienting students to life and study in Australia, and facilitating the student mobility program.

In this context then customer service involves a relationship between the customer, prospective and existing students and their stakeholders, and the international office. Specifically the customer is defined as:

- All prospective international students
- Existing international students referred for specific support services or domestic and international students interested in study abroad or exchange opportunities
- Parents, friends and family of existing and prospective international students

Clients include:

- Business partners, institutional partners and education agents
- Academic departments and other institutional administrative divisions
- International office staff

Ongoing references in this paper to customers and customer service should be interpreted as encompassing both customers and clients as listed above unless otherwise specified.

Customer service is a commitment to a psychology that requires institution wide commitment and integrated, customer centred structural and functional relationships across all institutional business units. It must permeate everyday attitudes, perceptions and behaviours. This requires an institution wide shared a vision of

customer service, incorporating the softer aspects of business management in terms of behaviour, attitudes, relationships, motivations and communications:

“[To] radiate a positive energy that transmits its way through the structure to the front line and interface with customers. The ultimate outcome is a wide range of everyday behaviours that absorb this positive energy and pass it on to customers.”¹

Freemantle (2004)

It involves a commitment to core values and a clearly articulated purpose. Customer service goes beyond an initial purchase phase and continues through to after sales service and support and typically incorporates three elements:

- People- including customers, clients and institutional staff
- Technology- any form of technology that enables, drives and supports customer service interactions
- Process- incorporating organisational workflows and business processes and protocols

Good customer service delivery requires integrated relationships between people and technology with finely tuned business processes often referred to as best practice. Best practice is generally considered to be the most efficient and effective way of achieving a desired outcome. It is a dynamic concept encompassing continually evolving and improving strategies, approaches and processes that we use to deliver customer service in everyday business operations.

From the perspective of an international office customer service could conceivably end once prospective students enrol. However our international students are typically enrolled in higher education programs, for example, for two or more years and their experiences throughout their studies will heavily influence their future purchasing choices and their disposition to providing positive word of mouth referral and affirmation. This necessitates an institution wide commitment to good customer service from pre-purchase, post enrolment and post graduation.

Changing expectations

Customer service involves a relationship between an organisation and its customers. In this sense a form of customer service has existed ever since goods and services have been sold to consumers. However customer service as we know it today and the expectations of the modern customer are very different from what they were just ten years ago. Siegel (1999)² refers to a customer-led revolution in which he argues that prior to 2000 companies largely pushed products and services through sales and distribution channels to waiting customers. After 2000 customers have led a revolution by pulling products and services on demand and by 2010 the customer-led revolution will be complete with most buyers connected to the Internet.

The Internet is driving the revolution by providing everyday people with access to fast, free, 24/7 products and services. Today's customers are smart and better informed. They have unrestricted access to information. They can compare products, customer service and customer experiences with the click of a mouse. Purchases

¹ Freemantle, D., (2004) *The Buzz: 50 Little Things That Make a Big Difference to World-Class Customer Service*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

² Siegel, D., (1999) *Futurise Your Enterprise- Business strategy in the Age of the e-customer*, Wiley and Sons

and purchasing decisions are not restricted to business hours. Customers will often go online at their convenience. Business conducted online is also immediate. Consumer behaviour and expectations have been shaped by their online consumer experiences. Organisations are responding by providing 24/7 web enabled services, customised in accordance with the individual interests and needs of the customer. The customer is now in control

In the context of marketing and recruiting international students we need to provide fast, convenient, 24/7 services, tailored according to the individual needs and interests of each prospective, existing and past student, all on their terms- when, where and how they choose. We need to deliver good customer service throughout the customer lifecycle and via every touch-point. Service delivery across the institution needs to be syndicated to ensure the right service is delivered to the right person, at the right time. We need to commit to continuous improvement and monitor and measure customer satisfaction.

Challenges

An international office is faced with a number of inherent challenges in delivering syndicated customer services and meeting customer service expectations. These include:

- Delivery of product- customer service goes beyond an initial purchase experience. However international offices are mostly concerned with managing customer experiences through to enrolment. After this point academic, administrative and other institutional staff mostly influence the experience students have. Unless there is institution wide commitment to customer service the experience students have beyond their initial purchase can be very hit and miss
- Large complex institutions- students will encounter many touch-points throughout their study experience. Ensuring streamlined workflows and processes and wholesale commitment to a shared customer service vision across various institutional business units is difficult to achieve in large institutions
- Cross-institutional integration- structural and functional relationships across the institution may not serve to put the needs and interests of customers first. Work processes are often bureaucratic and commitment to customer service is variable
- Long term relationship lifecycle- many of our international students are enrolled in higher education programs for two years or more. Their word of mouth recommendation is especially powerful for recruiting new international students. Ensuring a positive experience throughout the whole of their study experience and beyond requires a sustained commitment to service and after sales support
- Technology- institutions often have multiple systems and databases yet few of these interface for end-to-end customer experience management and all-inclusive customer intelligence building
- International office staff- making the shift from a paper and process based orientation to a customer service orientation is difficult and is a change process that needs to be managed. Staff need to be selected, trained, empowered, supported and rewarded appropriately
- Management- customer service is a psyche that must be embraced by all. Institutional management needs to embrace a long-term vision for introducing

and supporting customer service commitment. Good customer service needs to be modelled and rewarded, poor customer service eliminated

The role of technology

The use of technology in international education marketing and recruitment is enabling institutions to considerably improve their capacity to meet e-customer expectations and deliver syndicated customer services. Online marketing strategies can reach prospective students in the virtual spaces they congregate and funnel interest through to the institutional website. The institutional website plays a pivotal role enabling, driving and supporting customer interactions and e-business functionalities. Utilisation enables institutions to meet customer expectations for immediate, fast, 24/7 and customised services.

“All users want convenient easy to use personalised information and services made available to them over the web”³ Lightfoot and Ihrig (2002)

The website acts as a conduit to connectivity for two-way interactions between the customers, clients and the institution. It also provides:

- A Landing point for initial queries as a call to action from online marketing strategies
- Access for anyone, anytime, from anywhere
- Information and self help for customers and clients
- A platform from which e-business can operate 24/7
- An interactive e-communications channel

Online e-brochures built in real time and customised according to the interests of the user can provide immediate gratification whilst encouraging self-help. Online enquiry forms can capture prospect data and populate a CRM system where customer intelligence can be built and in and outbound interactions tracked. A customer centred, web enabled application management system provides an essential tool for efficient administration and proactive data mining.

Interfaces between the website, the application management system and other institutional databases enables customer intelligence to built throughout the customer lifecycle for end to end customer services. Building customer intelligence and prospect databases for mining and segmentation capacitates more meaningful and relevant interactions and targeted application of resources to maximise the return for effort. Statistical techniques can be used to search, sort and analyse prospect data to look for patterns and relationships that accurately reflect behaviour in existing and prospective customers. Outcomes of data mining lead to the development of improved business decision making.

“The longer term goal is to build a system that operates on the intelligence of the system more than the talent of the user”⁴ Salesflow.

³ Lightfoot, E and Ihrig, W. (2002), *The Next Generation Infrastructure*, Educause Centre for Applied Research Bulletin Vol 2002 issue 1

⁴ Salesflow sponsored paper, *Turning Sales Prospects- Through Process- Into Profits: Technology Making Sales More Profitable By Automating Best Practice*

Proactive prospect management with assigned case managers and informed by customer intelligence can build meaningful interactions and establish a relationship of trust. Campaign management technology with auto responses and template responses, e-zines and RSVP functionality can effectively and efficiently convert prospects into applicants and applicants into acceptances. A multi media approach including use of m-marketing (mobile marketing) can reach students anywhere at anytime and capture their attention, while face-to-face interactions and/or phone conversations as appropriate provide an essential element of human touch.

E-commerce functionality including online applications and admissions and online payments can cater for the e-commerce expectations of prospects. E-communications and face-to-face customer interactions maintain the dialogue and build the relationship throughout the student study experience and provide essential foundations for after sales engagement.

But technology alone is not enough. A culture and strategy of continuous improvement and processes that make the customer experience easy and convenient must underpin an institution's use of technology. Workflows and processes need to be streamlined across structural and functional relationships and capable of adapting to change.

The role of staff

Good customer relationship management requires an environment and culture that encourages, supports and values good customer service in which staff are regarded as the office's most valuable asset. Institutions need to foster staff ownership and pride in their brand so that the core brand values can be reflected in everyday business activities. In this sense they can become the embodiment of the institution- "The Living Brand". N and V Bendapudi assert that companies who embrace the concept of the living brand:

"Consider their employees their living brand and devote a great deal of time and energy to hiring and developing them so that they reflect the brand's core values"⁵
Bendapudi (2005)

Staff are viewed as an asset and staff training is viewed as an investment in future business success. Barlow and Stewart consider that knowing what your brand promise is and creating an internal structure and systems that are coherent with that branded understanding is:

"Service that is on-brand and therefore on-customer"⁶ Stewart (2004)

They assert that the first hand experiences of customers strongly influence their re-purchase decisions and that it is staff who will most influence the quality of the customer experience.

"In the world of products you want everything to be the same. Consistency is king. It's a symbol of true achievement. By contrast in the world of service, being the same is

⁵ Bendapudi, N and V. (2005) *Creating the Living Brand*, Harvard Business Review May 2005

⁶ Stewart, P. (2004). *The Brand or the Bland, Why Generic Customer Service is No Longer Enough*, excerpt from Branded customer Service- The New Competitive Edge, by J Barlow and P Stewart, Berrett-Koehler, 2004

a death knell. If your service is not distinguishable, then it's wallpaper. And that's why generic customer service- service that is the same as everyone else- is bland not brand"⁷ Ibid

If staff are the institution's living brand then they are your point of service differentiation. Institutions must have staffing strategies that aim to improve staff pride, ownership and commitment to delivering on the brand promise. Staff selection and training should be seen as an investment. The Nordstrom approach to customer service says

"Hire the smile, train the skill"⁸ McCarthy and Spector (2005)

Nordstrom believe it is easier to take a nice person and teach them how to sell than to take a sales person and teach them to be nice! Management must embrace a commitment to customer service and demonstrate their commitment through institutional values. Staff must be enabled and empowered, supported and resourced. A sustained commitment is required- and there is no silver bullet.

Potential benefits

Embracing a commitment to delivering and supporting good customer service can have a range of benefits including:

- Improved knowledge of customer needs and interests- this in turn builds customer intelligence and enables better-targeted and more relevant customer interactions and ultimately improved customer satisfaction. Customer data can also be mined for trends and forecasting improving return for effort
- Repeat business- satisfied customers may choose to remain at the institution for further studies
- Improved relationships with business partners- this can positively influence the profitability of relationships
- Positive word of mouth referral can improve the reputation of the Institution
- Improved staff focus on achieving core business objectives
- Happier staff and improved staff stability
- Reduced costs- utilisation of technology can reduce the costs of customer interactions by informing business decisions regarding when to apply your resources to maximise outcomes.

Most importantly whilst embracing a commitment to customer service across the whole institution may appear to be difficult or even too hard it is not really optional in today's truth economy. David Siegel explains that in the truth economy

"Your most disenchanted customer must be tracked as closely as you track your most loyal ones because tomorrow could be the day a single dissatisfied customer lets the entire world know"⁹ Siegel (1999)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Mc McCarthy, P and Spector, R. (2005) *The Nordstrom Way to Customer Service Excellence: A Handbook for Implementing Great Service in Your Organisation*, Wiley and Sons

⁹ Siegel, D. (1999) *Futurize Your Enterprise- Business Strategy in The Age of the E-Customer*, John Wiley Publishing

Adopting a customer centred approach to international marketing and recruitment

With Siegel's timely reminder about the importance of customer satisfaction it is worth spending some time considering how a customer centred approach can be adopted and implemented by educational institutions. Relationship Lifecycle Marketing (RLM) is an e-marketing concept often adopted in commodity and services marketing and leverages off technology, usually Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solutions. RLM adopts a targeted customer focussed approach that aims to move customers through the pertinent stages of awareness and trial to purchase and loyalty in a trackable fashion. It takes a longitudinal perspective of the customer relationship lifecycle well beyond an initial purchase experience. RLM involves:

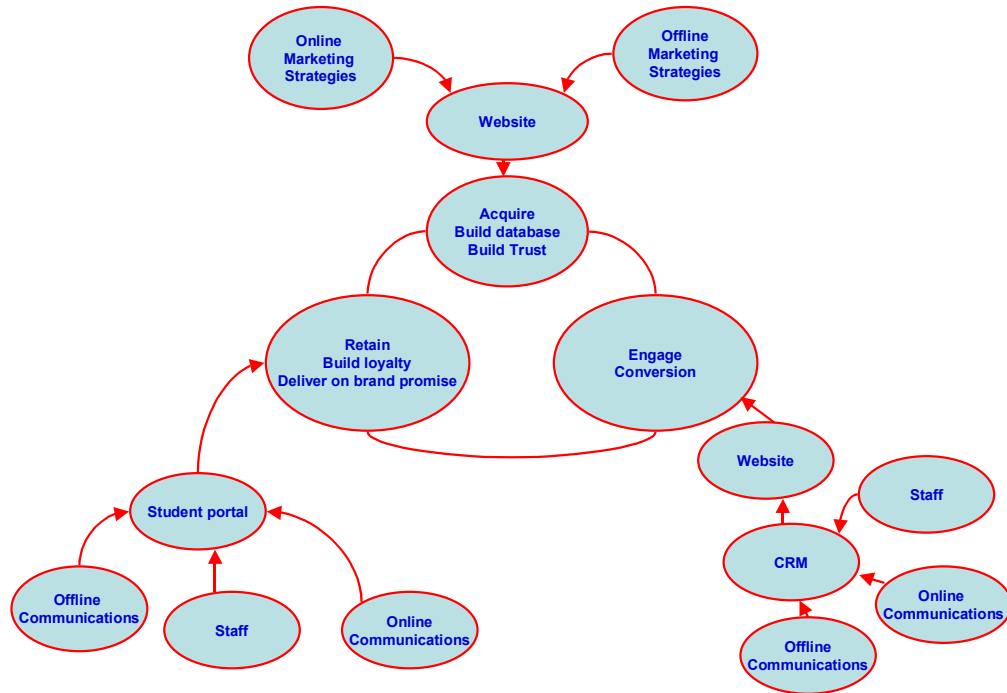
- Building customer intelligence- knowing the customer and their needs, interests and expectations
- Segmenting customer information to better target customers through relevant and meaningful interactions
- Tracking customer interactions throughout the customer relationship lifecycle
- Longitudinal customer engagement after purchase for retention
- Loyalty marketing approaches to encourage positive word of mouth referral and repeat business
- An organisation's wholesale commitment to customer service

Adapted from a concept developed by Connectus Direct Solutions¹⁰ the customer lifecycle in international education can be neatly modelled in the Relationship Lifecycle Marketing concept. The three key phases are acquisition, engagement and retention. The aim in each phase adjusts according to where customers, existing and prospective students and their stakeholders, are in the lifecycle. For example:

- Acquire- the aim is to build a database of prospective students and opinion leaders and build a relationship of trust
- Engagement- the aim is to continue to build customer intelligence and trust through targeted and relevant customer interactions to convert prospects into applicants and applicants into acceptances
- Retain- the aim is to deliver on the brand promise and meet customer expectations, and build loyalty for positive word of mouth referral and repeat purchase.

¹⁰ Connectus Direct Solutions. Beyond Email: Integrated Online Tools For Managing the Customer Relationship Lifecycle www.connectusdirect.com

Relationship Lifecycle Marketing in International Education



Each and every strategy and tactic involved customer interactions from initial acquisition through to after sales support can be represented in the context of the RLM model. Syndicated customer services for today's e-customer must be enabled, driven and supported by staff and technology, relating seamlessly and symbiotically with strategies, tactics and processes. Individual customer preferences and customer status in the customer relationship lifecycle should determine the timing and mode of deployment of proactive outbound customer interactions, and these decisions will be informed by customer intelligence.

Business workflows, business processes and protocols need to be reviewed with a focus on the customer experience rather than administrative outcomes. Every possible customer touch point and channel should be modeled then supported by best practice approaches, processes and tactics with commitment to continuous learning and refinement.

On and offline marketing and communications strategies and tactics should leverage off a technological platform, as detailed earlier, and the institution's wholesale commitment to customer service. With websites providing the central mode of connectivity the relationship between e-communications and online publications and other print materials needs to be reviewed. The underlying principle must establish the website as the primary and central repository for all institutional information for external and internal customers. A content management system provides the owners of the data with a quality assured mechanism for maintaining their data. Auto responses and templates ensure consistency and accuracy of responses and information, maintain brand integrity and save time. Other on and offline communications from acquisition through to retention build and maintain a relationship of trust and continue to build on customer intelligence.

Customer feedback should be proactively sought. Mechanisms and approaches for gaining feedback should be systematised with responsibilities allocated to relevant staff. The ultimate measure of customer satisfaction is the answer to the question:

“How likely is it that you will recommend us to a friend or colleague?”

Implementing a customer centred business approach

- Invest in your staff- have a clearly articulated vision for customer service. Staff need to understand their roles and responsibilities in making the vision happen. Consider your staff your most valuable asset, the embodiment of your brand promise- the Living Brand
- Know your customer and build customer intelligence- customise, personalise and humanise interactions. Segment and mine data to be data driven and operate on intelligence rather than talent
- Invest in e-business- develop and implement the technology, processes and strategies that enable you to reach and service prospective, existing and past students effectively and efficiently
- Re-engineer process- model and syndicate business processes to identify and address sticking points, barriers to purchase, bottlenecks and inefficiencies. Most importantly it must be easy and convenient for customers to interact with you on their terms
- Reconfigure structural and functional relationships- structure the organisation and cross-institutional structural and functional relationships to embrace a customer service culture
- Have a long-term vision- there is no silver bullet. Adopt a longitudinal view of customer relationship lifecycle via Relationship Lifecycle marketing
- Gain institution wide buy in- institutional staff, business processes and system interfaces must all share a customer service vision
- Manage change- train and support staff, celebrate achievements, develop timelines, allocate resources and time, phase the approach as required
- Know how to deal with customer dissatisfaction- early detection and the truth economy. Throughout the retention phase focus on the total student experience. Use online surveys and focus groups to build customer feedback
- Adopt a culture of continuous improvement- measure progress, celebrate achievements, seek feedback from customers and clients. The defining measure of customer satisfaction is the response to the question: “How likely is it that you will recommend us to a friend or colleague?”

Case Study Swinburne University of Technology

Customer Service: Delivering customer services in the context of international student marketing and recruitment

In just under two years, Swinburne University of Technology’s international performance has undergone a remarkable transformation. From lagging behind the industry in international student recruitment performance in 2004, and suffering a drop of more than 20% in international commencements, Swinburne has had its best

year ever, with rates of growth well ahead of national trends in the Higher Education and TAFE sectors.

Swinburne changed its international office structure and business processes, its approach to relationship management, adopted a customer service orientation, and focussed on technology solutions in marketing, recruitment and admissions to achieve this dramatic turn around.

Swinburne International in 2004

Swinburne's international office was structured around process, and while dedicated staff provided great customer service to individual students, their efforts were hampered by the process-oriented structure in which they operated.

- Agents and applicants dealt with 5 separate business units as they moved from enquiry to enrolment;
- The business model focussed on process, rather than on customer engagement and service delivery;
- There was no enquiry acquisition and management strategy, and no enquiry management system;
- Teams were organised around processes, or internal client groups (ie faculties and schools), rather than by customer groups;
- Strategies were not consistently market-tested;
- There was little understanding of how international students constructed and consumed Swinburne's brand;
- There was no overarching communications strategy – web and hard copy publications did not complement one another, and did not resonate with target audiences;
- Conversion rates were low – only 29% of students with an offer were accepting (or, nearly 3 in every 4 students with an offer were going elsewhere).

Swinburne International in 2005

Following the appointment of a new PVC International in 2004, the foundations of an International Division were put in place. Swinburne International, the international office of Swinburne, was created within the International Division, and was tasked with marketing, recruitment and admissions, student support and education abroad.

An extensive review process commenced at the end of 2004 to examine the status quo, including consultations with internal and external stakeholder groups. The recommendations of the review process included development of a structure and business process that would transform Swinburne's international recruitment, marketing, and student support.

A major restructure of Swinburne International took place throughout 2005. The essential elements of the new structure and business processes included:

- A redefinition of the customer – future, current and past students and their parents, families and friends;
- A redefinition of the client – education agents and institutional partners, and faculties and schools of the university;
- Teams were created that put the customer in the foreground, and the process in the background;

- Creation of a dedicated marketing communications team with a focus on customer service (front office and enquiries, publications and advertising, web, brand management) and the use of technology to stimulate awareness and drive conversion;
- Recruitment and admissions functions were structured into regional teams, in which the focus is on the student as customer, and within which enquiry-to-orientation services are delivered;
- Outsourcing of enquiry management;
- Implementation of an applicant management system;
- A case management business model in which teams take responsibility for their clearly defined customer groups and for 'landing' students;
- A revamped 'student life' team – with a focus on the total student experience.

Starting to understand our students

Throughout the review process and subsequent re-structure and remodelling of our business process, we introduced a discipline of using market and customer research to inform our strategies and approaches. Through major commissioned market research projects, as well as less formal feedback mechanisms – online surveys, intercept interviews, formal and informal focus groups – we began to explore:

- How international students construct and consume Swinburne's brand;
- How international students consume course guides and how they interact with us online;
- What do we need to do to our academic products in order to make them appeal to international students;
- What is Swinburne's brand proposition for international student audiences;
- What do agents think of us and what are we like to work with;
- What do students and agents think of new product and service developments?

Using Relationship Lifecycle Marketing

Swinburne International's organisational structure and business processes are based on a Relationship Lifecycle Marketing model. In the first two years of operation, the new approach has yielded dramatically improved student recruitment outcomes – with 10% growth in commencements in 2005, and more than 40% growth in commencements in 2006 – as well as improved career development and reskilling opportunities for staff.

Some of the strategies, processes and tactics used by Swinburne International are attributed, below, to the three key customer lifecycle phases of acquisition, engagement, and retention.

Acquire

The aim is to build a database of prospective students and opinion leaders and build a relationship of trust.

- Enquiry management outsourced
- Complete website rebuild – www.international.swinburne.edu.au is a self-contained subdomain within the Swinburne website, with separate territories for first enquirers, applicants, and enrolled students;

- Prospects generated through on and offline marketing activities, and funnelled to CRM;
- Prospects filtered, and assigned a heat status according to established protocols;
- Agent relationships redefined (new approach to agent management, strategic acquisition and termination of representatives);
- Search engine optimisation and online advertising/referral site strategy is now having an impact on our weekly enquiry levels;
- Site audit and web tracking technology allow us to see how our web site is performing – where we are engaging or losing prospects. This data has led us to make changes to our site which have resulted in immediate improvements (eg dramatically improved web enquiry form completions);
- Weekly enquiry data allows regional teams to track their own enquiries, and to develop targeted campaigns to turn prospects into applicants;
- We benchmark our weekly enquiry levels with two similar competitor institutions.

YTD enquiry levels in 2006 are tracking at or above 12% over the equivalent period in 2005. And web traffic is growing by 12% each month in 2006.

Engage

The aim is to continue to build customer intelligence and trust through targeted and relevant customer interactions to convert prospects into applicants and applicants into acceptances.

- Staff within regional teams take responsibility for sub-segments within their region. Team Leaders allocate staff responsibilities based on real-time results;
- Introduction of an applicant management system that is helping us manage applicants as they move from enquiry through to enrolment (a customer-focussed system as opposed to a process-focussed system);
- Made-offer (ie regular and systematic follow-up of students with offers) has become part of the fabric of each team;
- Targeted prospect campaigning;
- Marketing and admissions staff own the outcome and take real pride in their achievements;
- Staff and team achievements are celebrated;
- A systematic communication program is now in place with agents and prospects
- In 2004 our offer-to-enrolment conversion rate was less than 29%
- In 2006 our offer-to-enrolment conversion rate has increased by 5% to 34%, and in our most recent intake is tracking at around 38%.

Retain

The aim is to deliver on the brand promise and meet customer expectations, and build loyalty through positive word of mouth referral and repeat purchase.

Swinburne is a mid-size Australian institution (with about 25,000 TAFE and Higher Education students). Our main campuses (in Hawthorn and Prahran, and on the urban fringe of Melbourne at Lilydale) are compact. With the total student population spread across these, and 3 other smaller campuses, international students comment favourably on the intimate, personal nature of their campus life. Classes are small. It is very common for students to know their lecturers well. Familiar faces are seen everywhere.

International students have told us that they feel welcome at Swinburne – they do not feel ‘anonymous’, or ‘just another student number’.

In this context, face-to-face customer service is possible. But as the number of students grows (dramatically), we need to look at new and smarter ways of delivering services. Or put differently – now that we’ve grown, how can we retain our personal, friendly brand image?

We continue to refine the menu of services we offer students, and the way we communicate with students throughout their life at Swinburne (and beyond). Some of the tactics, processes and strategies adopted so far include:

- A monthly newsletter to all enrolled international students about activities and services on campus, and Swinburne’s achievements;
- A rebuilt website for current international students;
- Improving the website by running competitions and online surveys to generate ideas from students (“what I want on the site is...”);
- An international student tab about to go live on Blackboard;
- An improved physical presence for the international office on all campuses (all offices improved, welcoming, and lively);
- Celebration of student achievements (on and offline communications, and individualised celebrations).

We have more to do to ensure that we deliver on our brand promise and meet or exceed student expectations. While students have told us, through a range of studies, that they enjoy their Swinburne experience, we need to find ways to continue to improve student life.

A major study is underway to explore the gap between student expectation and experience. The findings of this study, plus the involvement of students, faculties, schools and other support services on-campus, will help us improve the student experience.

Hints and recommendations

What works

Staff who were previously siloed by structural relationships develop closer relationships with their co-workers

Staff feel they have clear direction and consequently are able to focus their efforts towards activities, tasks and initiatives that are likely to have the most positive impact on achieving business objectives

Relationships with business partners and clients become more meaningful and profound. Working towards shared goals with a shared vision provides clarity and appreciation of the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders

Staff feel they are able to make a difference. By empowering staff they are better able to influence outcomes. They are happy to take ownership of cases and see them through to conclusion. This necessarily requires a multi tasking approach and although initially there was some discomfort overall staff satisfaction has significantly improved. Staff are challenged and consider they are developing personally and professionally through opportunities to learn new skills and in depth knowledge of customers and their needs and interests

Reconfiguring structural and functional relationships and empowering staff in the front line has opened up opportunities for career progression.

What doesn't work

Although commitment to shared business objectives and priorities both within the international office and across institutional departments can be a potential benefit of a customer centred approach, achieving a sustained commitment to common business and customer service objectives and targets needs to be managed. People, communication, process and technology are the keys

Competition across regional recruitment teams is a very real threat and functional silos can materialise. Competition across functional business units is typically driven by competition for resources and lack of appreciation for other teams' business objectives. Staff across all institutional business units need to remain aligned with broader institutional goals and strategies and consider how their roles and responsibilities contribute to the whole of the institution achieving these broader goals. Performance measures must be challenging yet achievable and good initiatives should be shared across teams for the benefit of all

Inconsistencies and variable commitment to customer service will emerge across business units

Lack of appreciation for the roles and business objectives of other business units can lead to a level of resentment across units particularly where one unit seemingly outperforms others as measured by key performance indicators (KPIs). KPIs need to be realistic, challenging yet achievable

Recommendations

Reconfigure structural and functional relationships both within the international office and with other institutional business units and manage change. If the customer focussed teams based structure is to achieve its maximum potential a significant shift needs to occur in the mindsets of all staff and stakeholders. This will take time to accomplish

Staff training and professional development- some staff will be required to take responsibility for tasks and roles for which they have little experience or knowledge. The training needs of each individual staff member should be determined and a plan developed

Team building- to avoid the development of functional silos team building initiatives are important.

Reconsidering how and why we do things the way we do- the customer focussed teams-based structure provides opportunities for fresh approaches. Some staff may struggle to extract themselves from the day-to-day detail to take an objective and critical aerial view of work procedures. Management must provide opportunities for staff to be involved in process review and refinement. A commitment to quality assured processes and best practice needs to be resourced and allocated as a responsibility

Role clarification- it is essential that every staff member understands the roles and responsibilities of each team in addition to their own roles and responsibilities

Assign responsibility to those in the front line- empower staff by providing them with the authority to make decisions within a framework of policy and process. Support staff decisions

Accepting responsibility- in return for accepting greater responsibility staff need to appreciate accompanying accountability. Management should seek to determine rewards and incentives and how poor practice can be eliminated

Know your core business objectives- each business unit should be able to define its core business objectives, the needs and perspectives of their customers, strategic priorities and KPIs. A formal and regularised approach to planning is required

Good internal and external communications can ensure information and intelligence is shared across amongst clients. This can assist with the development of shared objectives and priorities