



The New Zealand Post Management Excellence Awards 2006

Project Title: Managing Customer Enquiries Process Review

Award Category: Process Management

Project Overview

New Plymouth District Council delivers a wide range of services to a district community of around 70,000 people.

In May 2003 the Council adopted three policies:

- The Customer Service Strategy.
- The Customer Charter.
- The Service Standards.

The Customer Service Strategy has three key objectives:

- Processes
 - “We will focus our processes on producing the best possible outcomes for our customers”
- Customers
 - “We will deliver quality services to meet our customer needs and in a sensitive, efficient and timely manner”
- Organisation and Staff
 - “We will think, learn, communicate and work as one organisation”

The aim of the project was to:

- Review the way we deal with customers’ enquiries.
- Provide a single point of contact.
- Resolve 80% of enquiries at first point.

This was achieved by:

- Reviewing the way our customers interacted with our staff.
- Providing a single phone number for all council areas.
- Providing a single point of reception within the Civic Centre.
- Installing Infra Enterprise as a service request system to track, report and manage enquiries.
- Establishing shared team methods of communication e.g. FAQ’s, intranet, bulletin boards.
- Setting up internal SLAs for customer response.

The project was completed in 2006 when the Infra Enterprise v 7.0.3 service request system update was installed.

Demonstrate the need and proposed benefit of the project and its relationship to furthering the Council's vision and strategic direction

The Needs

Until August 2002, the Council operated a relatively complex customer enquiry management system which did not meet the needs of the customer or the organisation:

- Customers had a choice of 33 phone numbers to call, depending on the nature of their enquiry.
- Calls were answered by different teams within the Council which included a civic centre switchboard reception which managed calls including rates, building, water and waste, rubbish disposal etc.
- Most calls were referred on and answered by a variety of people with varying degrees of knowledge and expertise.
- The civic centre was staffed from 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, while the Aquatic Centre and district libraries staffed phones at various hours during the week.
- Customer-specific information relating to service requests (for repair and maintenance work) were held in a manual database information management systems, with no direct links between them.
- The Council had no tools for measuring and reporting on its call response and management performance.
- There were some basic Service Level Agreements (SLAs) in place, however these focussed on tasks not outcomes.
- The technology available was limited to two telephone consoles, a standalone service request system and no Intranet.

The Benefits

Increasingly, councils have become the place to contact when “things go wrong”. Whether it is a reporting an overhanging tree, a roaming dog or a major flood. The process review of how NPDC manages customer enquiries is an integral part of the New Plymouth District Council’s vision that the District “...will be a caring, dynamic, diverse and safe place to be”. In 2002 the Council adopted a Strategic Development Plan to help make this vision a reality. Over the next 10 years, the Council will focus on five strategic issues: quality of life; district growth; iwi relationships; environment; and youth – rangatahi.

By providing a robust, efficient system for managing customer enquiries, the council:

- Enhances quality of life – by delivering quality services to meet our customer needs and in a sensitive, efficient and timely manner.
- Encourages district growth – by ensuring that businesses are supported and nurtured by their dealings with council.
- Maintains and develops iwi relationships – by providing culturally appropriate training and channels of communications.
- Protects the environment – by providing appropriate channels, management and prompt responses to incidents.
- Encourage youth/rangatahi involvement – by providing a responsive means of communication.

The challenge of handling customer enquiries more effectively arose when in 2003 the Council adopted its “Customer First” strategy. This aimed to deliver “sensational customer service” by significantly improving customer service, introducing efficiency gains through process improvements and ensuring integrated customer service delivery.

As part of this strategy, and after close consultation with affected staff and team leaders throughout the organisation, the Council decided to change to a dedicated call centre system accessed with a single telephone number. This signalled an entirely new approach to call management and was supported by a comprehensive suite of customer service standards, systems and protocols.

In June 2003 the Council’s new purpose-built call centre opened for business. In October 2003 the one number system was implemented.

A single point of contact

All customer phone calls now go directly to the call centre, which is staffed by a team of 10 people and operates seven days a week, including public holidays. The call centre is the key interface between customers, the Council, our service suppliers and our repair and maintenance teams. Answering on average 25,600 calls a month, it has a vital role in ensuring enquiries and requests are recorded, responded to and managed promptly and efficiently. Ninety percent of calls are dealt with effectively at first point of contact. When issues cannot be resolved they are entered into the Infra Enterprise service request system. This automated system then ensures each request is date stamped, allocated a timeframe and passed onto a particular team, officer or contractor. This also allows for real-time reporting. Customer satisfaction is higher than the industry average at 86% NRB, May 2006).

Ownership of the Infra service request system has always resided within the Call Centre and this has provided the team with a unique responsibility. The Call Centre staff have become the facilitators of service levels. The request for service system generates a report to the Executive Management Team on a weekly basis and any requests not completed within the agreed timeframes are highlighted and followed up by the manager responsible. This end-to-end process provides the Executive management with a powerful view of business performance and is viewed as an invaluable tool. The team is involved on a day-to-day basis with staff and their contractors and meetings are held monthly to address any issues. In addition to this, the team are involved and have valuable input to make when it comes time to negotiate contracts to ensure the best outcome for the customer and the organisation.

In addition to the single point of contact for phone calls, the review highlighted the need to centralise the physical reception areas. Previously, customers would have to walk around the Civic Centre and associated off site locations to contact various teams. A single main entry to the Civic Centre now provides:

- A redesigned front counter area with clearly defined service points for reception, general enquiries, payments, consents and approvals, and records
- Booths for one-on-one consultation
- Adjacent dedicated interview room and meeting space
- Bilingual signage
- New public waiting spaces and seating
- A new Cemetery and Crematorium Services office with confidential meeting and waiting space



- Civic Centre security system with public and staff-only zones
- Improved secure cash-handling facilities

Demonstrate effective project management techniques to achieve results

From the outset, communication was identified as key to the success of the project. The steps along the project path were as follows:

- Research current processes and develop a project scope – this document identified the projects aims in broad terms and the stakeholders to be consulted. It also identified assumptions made, the risks faced and the management structure for the project. This scoping document was distributed widely among stakeholders to obtain feedback.
- Identification of project tasks – once the scope of the project had been agreed, the individual tasks and resource requirements were identified.
- A project team was created – Customer First undertook the analysis of existing processes and set up the various project streams.
- Project planning and budgeting – Tools used included Microsoft Visio, Excel and Project. Reports were created in Word and PowerPoint.
- Reporting – Project status reports were prepared and circulated on a regular basis. A weekly report was circulated to senior management. Regular updates were made to the staff via the intranet. The council publication *Newsline* informed the public of progress.
- No major issues arose during the life of the project.
- The project was delivered on time, within budget and achieved results of a quality which surpassed expectations.

Demonstrate a thorough participatory approach to communicating with and getting 'buy-in' from stakeholders associated with the project

Communications

Communication about all aspects of the project was undertaken via:

- Article in the council's *Newsline* publication.
- Media briefings.
- Regular updates to councillors during construction via *Friday Flash* newsletter.
- Regular updates to staff during construction via staff newsletter.
- Information boards in foyer and café.
- Regular updates to public via media.

Buy in

In order to achieve buy in from stakeholders, the project team:

- Gained endorsement from the Executive Management Team.
- Looked at all aspects of the way we communicate/interact with customers in person or over the telephone.
- Undertook research aimed at seeking our customers' views from the outset.
- Communicated openly and frequently.



Demonstrate innovation and originality in process management

Although many local authorities have adopted either limited or single contact numbers we feel that the holistic approach to customer enquiry management is innovative. The adoption of a customer service strategy committed the council to meeting high service standards. The implementation of the Infra service request system has meant that all service requests are tracked and reported on. This enables the council to meet, or even exceed, its service standards. The creation of a Customer First team as continuous improvement “evangelists” ensured that the customer had a dedicate advocate within the organisation.

Demonstrate successful results in both financial and non-financial terms

- Positive feedback from both customers and staff.
- The number of late service requests has dropped from an average of 300 per week to 4.
- Trish Reader, Team Leader of the Call Centre, was awarded the TUANZ “Team Leader of the Year 2006” award in recognition of her innovative, best practice approach.
- Clear responsibilities within SLAs have dramatically improved the quality of service provided within the council.
- 90% of calls are now resolved at first point with a resulting high level of customer satisfaction at 86% (NRB, May 2006) which is higher than industry average.

Demonstrate that the project was a ‘good, sensible and right thing to do’

The project is key to the Council’s vision that the District “...will be a caring, dynamic, diverse and safe place to be”: It addresses all five areas of the council’s strategy: enhancing quality of life, contributing to district growth, improving Iwi relationships, promoting environment issues and involving youth/rangatahi. The project is also key to the customer service strategy and the associated service standards.