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Book Review

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Client Centered Service:

How to Keep Them Coming Back for More

Written by David William Cottle, CPA, John Wiley and Sons, New York

Reviewed by Mary S. Hoover, CPA, Topeka, KS

Services are not as easily marketed as a product. This book indicates that professional firms will learn:

1. Methods for uncovering what clients and referral sources really think and say about a firm and its level of service,
2. Techniques that can be used by a firm to make them stand out from a crowd of competitors, and,
3. Approaches to presenting and developing quality service and the right public image.

Client-Centered Service not only provides all it promises in the three areas outlined above, but much more. Mr. Cottle has also written a practical guide for professional firms and their managers on ways to motivate staff, manage people, and develop a high-quality culture in the firm.

Client Centered Service is easy to follow and divided into three major sections:

- Client-Centered Service - The Key to Client Satisfaction
- What Do You Want to be Famous For?
- How to get Better Grades on your "Invisible Report Card"

The book concludes with a summary of key concepts highlighting the most important techniques and tips from each chapter. Individual chapters of the book contain *key points, definitions, examples, and questions* to think about.

In the first section, *Client-Centered Service - The Key to Client Satisfaction*, Cottle explains that clients change professional firms because of poor service, not high fees. Clients don't buy professional services; they buy solutions to problems and good feelings. The author emphasizes that if a firm wants its clients to grade its services as high quality, it must make sure the client has realistic expectations of what it can accomplish. To that end, a firm needs to determine why a new client left their old professional firm, if they had one, and what they expect of the new firm. Cottle states that the key to ensuring high quality service is to meet or exceed what clients expect. A firm has to determine the problem the client wants solved and what "good feelings" means to the client.

Section two, "What Do You Want to be Famous For?", stresses that a firm should develop a market position statement and define an USP (unique selling proposition). Both can create product differentiation when otherwise potential clients see all firms as identical. Cottle also

suggests that each firm develop a feedback program to determine what clients think of a firm's service to a client. This can be done through personal interviews, mail or telephone surveys, or written in-office surveys. In Chapter 6, he lists sample questions that can be used by a firm in its feedback program.

Finally, at the end of this second section in chapters 8 and 9, Cottle gives firms practical tips on how to stand above the crowd and how to project a high-quality image. A firm can set itself apart from its competition by looking for differentiation factors and unique characteristics, and most importantly, by *caring* for its client. A firm can project a high-quality image through the appearance of its reception area, its brochures and correspondence, and its souvenirs given to its clients.

The final section, "How to get Better Grades on Your 'Invisible Report Card'", includes chapters on:

- How to manage people within your firm
- How to develop a high-quality culture in your firm
- How to turn complaints into increased client loyalty
- How to motivate staff, and,
- How to manage client expectations and perceptions.

It is in this section where Mr. Cottle provides managers of a firm not only with methods of ensuring high-quality client service, but also with practical techniques for motivating and managing staff. The ideas in this section can be applied by any manager in any type of profession.

This section also stresses the importance of communicating with a client and letting them know what the firm is doing for them. Cottle suggests each firm "tangibilize its service" by making its invisible, intangible services as visible as possible. In chapter 18, the author concludes the book by recommending that each firm adopt the following action plan:

1. Treat your clients as if they were lifetime partners.
2. Ask all your personnel for service improvement ideas.
3. If you don't have a mission statement, adopt one.
4. Carefully recruit and train your frontline people in the fundamentals of high-quality client service.
5. Always be patient, but never be satisfied.

If a professional firm follows any of the suggestions in the book, it should be able to increase the number of its clients and referral sources. Or as Cottle aptly states, "an enthusiastic client is the best business strategy of all".