

Where is your line of visibility?

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A service consists basically of two elements: what the provider does and what the customer does. Of those two, the key focus is really what the customer does. This is what makes a service different from manufacturing: the customer is involved in some way. The customer must be present temporally and geographically (if only through a remote line) when the service is delivered and the customer must do something. You cannot deliver a service without customer involvement.

Service delivery involves an interaction between the provider and the customer. This might be face-to-face, by telephone or by e-mail. This point of interaction is referred to as the moment of truth. Often what occurs in that moment of truth determines customer perception of the service. It's the key point at which the nature of the service - the style, empathy, adaptability, responsiveness and proactivity is transmitted. There may be many moments of truth in a service interaction which together constitute the line of interaction in the service. Training and process improvements which concentrate on the line of interaction should reap significant quality rewards.

Another key influence on the service quality, and a focus in service design, is the line of visibility. This is the line that divides the elements of the service which the customer can see from those that cannot be seen. In a restaurant, the line of visibility may stop with the waiter. The waiter carries out the service interaction. We see how he interacts with us, presents the food and deals with our requests. What goes on in the kitchen is hidden behind swing doors. We may be unaware of the chef coughing into the soup, ranting and raving and stepping over scurrying rats. Once we put the kitchen behind transparent screens, or move the kitchen into the restaurant area these behaviour and processes become a key element of service quality perception. All of the line of interaction is part of the line of visibility, but you can have visible elements of the service where the customer can see what's being done, but is not actively involved.

Shifting the line of visibility and making more of the back office activities visible to the customer may have significant benefits, so it's important to ask investigate your line of visibility. What should your IT service customers see and what are the benefits of creating some transparency between the front and back office?

Extending the line of visibility so that more of what IT services do is visible to the customer has its advantages. There is more of a connection between the customer and IT services. Since a prime goal of IT services is to bridge the gap between the business and the IT technologies, more visibility may be seen as a good thing. The customer can see the activities that take place in order to fulfil her information service needs. She can connect more with the complexities of the problems, the culture and the environment within which IT is done. Observing the professionalism of IT services may increase her

assurance and confidence in the service. She knows her request is being attended to and can follow the progress of her service request. Quality may be improved, understanding achieved and the end result is a more connected IT service department.

However, there is a cost. Economies of scale may be easier to achieve in a hidden back office than the exposed front office. Communication with the customer costs time and energy. Each customer requires a separate point of interaction. But increased visibility does not necessarily require increase interaction with IT service staff. Mechanisms for increasing visibility may involve increasing the transparency of the processes. For example, visibility can be increased by providing web-based facility for the customer to engage in self-management of a service call and to see the progression of that call electronically. In the transparent restaurant, the customer can follow the preparation of her meal, without having to go round the transparent screen between the restaurant and the kitchen and actually participate in the cooking. Communication within the service is key to increasing visibility and hence quality. Someone waiting at an airport or in a hospital will wait much more patiently if they can see what's going on, or at least are provided with information about the progression of their service, what's going wrong, and why they can't currently get on a plane. More visibility may involve more interaction with the customer.

Encouraging less visibility is tempting. It means less interference from the customer, perhaps apparent reduced costs and more time to concentrate on the problem. But it has its costs. Lack of visibility may lead to reduced confidence in IT services. Suspicions about customers' treatment, rumours about what is or isn't getting done, wrong assumptions about the professionalism of IT services and the activities they get up to. In all probability, lack of visibility will lead to lack of understanding of IT services.

Visibility can occur at the level of face-to-face communications, telephone and electronically. These three communication modes can be used to increase visibility. Face-to-face communications can be encouraged by drop-in centres, marketing visits to departments, seminars on available services and special events. Telephone advice lines may increase visibility. We should not underestimate the power of a sympathetic human voice at the end of a phone providing encouragement and empathy. It may be dangerous to rely on automatic telephony as the core of our service. It's helpful as a back up to make sure we don't lose customers, but a real service interaction is vital to reassure the customer and increase visibility and connection. The use of the Intranet to support a service catalogue, and the self-management of electronic call tracking may help the customer to feel in control and not lost. The customer may feel reassured to see a real-time electronic record of their call and to see it progressing, if only slowly.

So where is your line of visibility? What does your customer see of what you do? How can you push forward your line of visibility and make more of your service transparent to your customer? It may be tempting to hide as much as possible in the back office and get on with the technical problems without the presence of customers. A transparent IT service, where the customer can see what's going on breeds customer confidence as well as increasing the attention to quality of IT staff who have got nothing to hide.