



Project report: Service training on the subject of customer orientation at S-Bahn-Berlin (Tram line)

- :: The project was carried out with the consultation and accompaniment of flow consulting gmbh.
- :: Project Manager S-Bahn-Berlin GmbH: Dr. Wilfried Kramer
- :: Project Manager flow consulting gmbh: Kai Fiukowski and Joachim Simon
- :: Period of Project: March 2003 - February 2004
- :: Authors: Dr. Wilfried Kramer (S-Bahn-Berlin) and Joachim Simon (flow consulting gmbh)
- :: The Project Report was published in the magazine:
management & training Nr. 4 / 2000
- :: Permission for publication by flow consulting gmbh has been granted by the authors and S-Bahn-Berlin.
- :: This project report is subject to copyright. It may not be reproduced nor reused or used for commercial purposes. This also applies to the recording of this report on electronic devices and duplication on CD-ROM. Propagation is subject to permission granted by S-Bahn Berlin and flow consulting gmbh.
- :: Copyright: flow consulting gmbh
- :: Celle, May 2004



Servicetraining

Good customer service, affability or even a smile are not necessarily terms, which are embraced by our service providers of public transport. Far from it: bad-tempered ticket sellers, grumpy drivers and the incorrect information is given instead. These are the subjective impressions received by our customers, travelling on public trains or busses. A trainings-program to improve customer focused service and sales, which is run by the S-Bahn Berlin GmbH, shows what difference can be made.

Markers in the metropolitan jungle



Dr. Kramer, marketing director at S-Bahn Berlin sums it up: "Our customers demand a better service. We want to keep up with it. We need to know today, what the customer will ask for tomorrow."

To get there, Dr. Kramer himself interacts with all service associates and ticket agents. He explains: "Communication at the grass-roots level is extremely important to us. We need to know what is going on, what works and where the problems are. This is the only way to react promptly."

On top of this personal contact between leadership and assistant level, the S-Bahn operates customer focused surveys at regular intervals. And these also prove: The customer's expectations towards service, safety and cleanness are increasing. In terms of service orientation from the assistants side, the survey showed fluctuating results. To stabilise and improve this particular aspect, the 'S-Bahn Berlin GmbH' authorised the consultancy and trainings provider 'flow consulting gmbh'. flow joined the consultation process in spring 2003.



Protection against metropolitan stress

The 'S-Bahn Berlin' assistants constantly work in a tough sales and service environment. A train station is by far no unhurried village square. A hectic pace rules the place, combined with high volume, time pressure and anonymity. This is why S-Bahn assistants may turn into projection screens for the customers own stress and frustration.

After discussions between employees and consultants, it turned out that some ticket sellers got extremely emotional after facing individual customers that were aggressive or harsh. In particular younger female employees appeared to be afraid of even approaching some customers with a question. Others instead, developed a much bolder conversation style à la "Berliner Schnauze" (= Berlin gob) which does not always do well either.

But stress back and forth: the first impression leaves a mark. Because the actual quality of contact between customer and assistant (referred to as "interaction-quality"), is believed to be as important as the product itself. In terms of affecting the purchase decision.

Under ideal conditions of work, without stress and conflicts, almost all employees are able to provide a high level of "interaction-quality". But to face these situations of stress adequately, certain techniques need to be learned. For this reason, the consultants did not want to consider a purely service orientated seminar, but acknowledged the clients need to work on conflict and stress management first. Then, after developing these important tools, the service quality should be trained.

Reflection and projection

More than 250 employees participate in the seminars. Each time, 12 members come together for two days. The trainings program is divided into three stages: the first step is, to gain awareness of the personal attitude and behaviour pattern. Followed by developing new behaviours and alternative attitudes, to ensure the learning transfer.

The participants start out from the opposite outlook: they put themselves in the customers place. The trainer collects examples under the theme: "Where did you last experience good service?". Together with the attendants, he compiles their own expectations as clients. He then turns the tables and lets them question themselves: "How about my own behaviour towards the customer from the other side of the counter? Would I fulfil my own requirements?"

The reflection process comes alive and gathers momentum. Personal blind spots show up. The understanding that: "There is lots to do, lets get started" grows.

Further discussions and examples bring it forward: the customer projects his or her personal negative experiences onto the total company.



In small work groups, the 'S-Bahn employees' now develop precise steps to make use of this effect and to indicate directions. Creative ideas emerge. "How about to bring along some freshly cut flowers from the own backyard?" To be friendly to the grumpy morning person is not easy. But it costs nothing and can sometimes put the customer in a new perspective. Friendly and considerate. And - it may seem trivial – but: well-tended working clothes also make the difference.

So, what exactly happens during a client/customer conversation? The participants develop the optimum course of action on a flip chart. They all agree that a kind greeting and good-bye is most important.

Also, to request further, what exactly the customer wants, is sometimes not that easy. Just imagine a bowling group, wanting to take transport somewhere, bringing their bikes along and planning to split up halfway. Some stay in the city centre, others want to go all the way to Potsdam. To offer the actual ticket immediately when giving information, is taken for granted. A time-table printout and map of the transport system should also be offered to the customer.

The participants compose a video clip

The next task is to shoot a video clip. The employees work in pairs. The given title is: "The perfect client counselling". The originated clips are analysed by the whole group. The ability to observe and also the self-perception improve a lot.

It turns out to be interesting for the participants to play the customers role. They can experience in person how the ticket-sellers behaviour influences purchasing patterns. To face the camera is something unfamiliar. But soon enough, stage fright gives way to fun. Some good little plots arise: the customer who loses its suit-case. The mother that leaves behind her pram. Due to a familiar atmosphere, the reflection and feed-back process turns out to be very fair and constructive. From colleague to colleague.

Some cases receive more attention. Because it becomes clear: some problems cannot be addressed with a standard solution. Creativity and self-responsibility are in great demand. Below the line, the customer needs to be approached in a friendly, committed and solution orientated way.

Confrontation gets us nowhere

After the video clips dealing with the 'normal and non-viscous' customers, the group takes on the more challenging cases: the tense client, who complains and protests.

The participants learn de-escalating inter-speaker attitudes. One thing becomes clear: confrontation leads to nothing. But to dwell on the actual problem, to go into detail with the client and his situation, sometimes works wonders. The group practises these behaviour patterns in role plays and draws conclusions with the trainer.



It is interesting that these situations are often not even theoretical. Due to metropolitan stress, some customers easily get quite aggressive. And all it takes to release their temper, may be the need to change a ticket.

But of course, it is not always possible to come to a solution that works out for both. At some points a final stroke is needed. The customer might have to be turned away politely. The personal health cannot be sacrificed at all costs. But what to do when a customer causes such grief that the employee feels angry and hurt? Together with the trainer, the work groups create an array of specific stress management techniques and tools. Conclusion: whatever works, is accepted. Apart from letting off steam on the next customer or colleague.

Lasting effect

In the end, all conclusions are gathered and discussed within the group. To ensure transfer, the participants write a letter to themselves. They frame their own and personal behaviour pattern, with which they want to improve the service quality at the `S-Bahn Berlin`. These drafts are specific and time-phased. The letters are send off to them six weeks later, so that the participants can evaluate themselves. They are, of course, private and confidential. It seems to work. A ticket seller states later:” The customers turned out to be much more kind and considerate!”

But not only the personal perception of the employees stated an improvement of the customer service. A survey, implemented at regular intervals by an independent consultant agency, proved the same: a definite increase in consumer satisfaction.



Hints for a 'service orientated seminar'

A field analysis carried out by the trainer or consultants: no standard seminar, but true participant focus throughout the field analysis. The trainer needs to know the reality of the participants everyday work situation.

Participant focus: no textbook knowledge, but consequential and flexible integration of specific examples.

Focus on activities and multiple methods: no funnel principle, but to develop personal action alternatives. Create an attractive learning environment with room for developing experiences and results. No back-breaking one-sidedness, but a good mix of moderation, head-on training, role play, video analysis and working in small groups.

Working on stress and conflict management: not to ignore the everyday life reality, but to work on difficult situations: conflicts with customers and personal stress.

Making definite transfer arrangements: no general abstract future visions, but individual transfer arrangements that every participant has to implement for him- or herself.

Focus on self-responsibility: the participants need to understand that it comes down to their own responsibility to provide a better service quality.

Include in-house promotion: the seminar is not the idea and concept of an external trainer. It is what the companies management wants to achieve. This needs to be emphasized. The marketing director for instance should be present in an open discussion round.

Authors

Joachim Simon, flow consulting gmbh, Celle, www.flow.de

Dr. Wilfried Kramer, S-Bahn Berlin GmbH, www.s-bahn-berlin.de