

# Universal Service Guidelines

Nearly all companies have some employees whose service performance is stellar. For example, think of the top-selling sales person, the “go to” person in design, the superintendent who delivers homes complete and clean, or the warranty rep who “gets the job done.” In each case you will find an employee with service attitudes and habits that have led to the resulting success. These stars consistently manage the mundane details effectively: they return phone calls, answer emails, make suggestions at meetings, and are generally respected because they serve *all* of their customers well.

Builders often wish aloud that they could replicate these attitudes and habits, yet have no idea how to make that happen. Imagine the results if the success habits of these genuine professionals were identified and practiced throughout all levels and functions of an organization. Imagine further the clarity and confidence with which the company could then set expectations with customers. The first step is creating “Universal Service Guidelines” for your organization.

## Universal

The term “universal” in this case means the universe that is your company: *all* employees subscribe to and practice these service behaviors for *all* customers, *all* the time. Universal Service Guidelines are defined by your company. They reflect the philosophy and operational style of your organization. You develop them based on your company values, current practices, recognized past failures, and today’s performance goals.

Remembering that the definition of “customer” can broadly be applied to home buyers, business associates, and company employees, the benefits of creating across-the-board service expectations and developing consistent performance becomes readily apparent.

Consider what would happen if everyone within your organization agreed to a set of service behaviors designed to serve customers well: home buyer customers, business associate customers, and employee/departmental customers. Not only could homeowner Jones expect a predictable level of service, so could the plumber, the engineer, construction, purchasing, and you—all the time, from all of your colleagues.

## Service

Service is one person doing something for one other person. The customer might be a home buyer, an associate, or another employee. The service provider might be the receptionist, a warranty technician, a superintendent, a selections coordinator, or the company owner. The service might be answering the phone or a question, filling out a form or building a home, providing a repair or conducting a meeting. Customer reactions to hundreds of such interactions comprise your company’s reputation for quality and service. Your goal of course is to have a good reputation and reap the benefits—

- Referrals are a powerful indication of and reward for customer loyalty.
- Besides generating sales, high referral rates help keep marketing costs under control.
- Reputation affects the ease with which you conduct business. From purchasing land to arranging financing, reputation influences the cooperation you receive from the broader

business community.

- Talented people naturally want to work for companies of which they can be proud and where their efforts are respected. Your company's reputation affects employee recruitment as well as negotiations with vendors and trades.
- A builder's good reputation can benefit buyers by increasing the value of their homes. Do your homeowners mention your company name in newspaper ads when they sell their homes?

You do not saunter accidentally into such a service reputation. You need clear service goals and a plan to achieve them. Part of that plan requires identifying and specifying the nitty-gritty day-to-day behaviors that ultimately constitute "service" within your organization.

## Guidelines

Builders work hard, with varying degrees of success, defining the service levels that home buyers can expect and then striving to fulfill those expectations. Experience shows that where there is a void in a customer's expectations, the home buyer's imagination rushes in to fill it. The resulting expectation is unknown to the company until they fail to fulfill it and hear complaints. When the service efforts of company personnel are inconsistent, customer satisfaction levels reflect that randomness, further compounding the builder's frustration.

Looking beyond paying customers, we find that few businesses make any effort to define the service that associates and employees should expect from each other. These areas are usually left to manage themselves or are planned in a haphazard manner at best. This means that the expectations of those groups are left to each individual's imagination while the performance is also left to the discretion of the responding employee or department.

The results reflect the effort invested—some good, some bad, as shown in this trade's observation: "Their accounting department really has its act together; they always call back quickly when I have a question and they stay in touch 'til the issue is resolved. Sure can't say that about their purchasing department! I've called twice in three days with no response."

When accounting informs trades that approved invoices submitted by the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> will be paid by the 30<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> respectively, accounting is setting expectations. Only accounting needs to set such an expectation because only accounting issues checks. Yet everyone in the company acknowledges emails—somehow, at some point—and typically no guidelines or expectations exist for this ubiquitous behavior.

Similarly, we find a wide range of habits for managing phone calls, emails, and meetings. These everyday-everyone behaviors impact a company's reputation. ***Why should an element of performance so significant be left to chance?*** If an organization lacks shared priorities and performance guidelines, each individual's personal values are inevitably applied—with wildly fluctuating results.

## Benefits

Without consciously developed habits each of us can fall prey to responding to service issues randomly. With Universal Service Guidelines in place, every employee at every level can look forward to more predictable company interactions. Experts have written that employees reflect

the way they are treated by management and colleagues in the way they treat paying customers.

When guidelines are consciously set for how employees work together, companies ensure that the desired tone is set and habits established for the treatment of home buyers. As trades and associates

are well-treated, their loyalty increases and their performance often improves. They are likely to strive to serve the company well because they want to continue to interact with such a culture. They may even copy the approach, thereby improving their own organizations.

Companies are transparent to their paying customers. Home buyers are sensitive to the culture of a company; they recognize the tell-tale signs of friction among functions, poor follow through, or lack of internal support. Committing to consistent and intentional guidelines for daily working relationships helps manage the image customers see and builds customer confidence in your organization's ability to perform.

## Implementation

To create and implement a set of Universal Service Guidelines, begin by involving representative personnel (including folks from the front line) in developing the guidelines. You will certainly identify other areas to address, but begin with communication and meetings. These two activities affect almost everyone and are notorious for causing frustrations. Apply a quality management mind set. The principles of quality management are as useful for managing behaviors and processes as they are for managing product quality—

- Envision the qualities you want to produce.
- Write them down, describing the “ideal” condition.
- Circulate the list to all involved.
- Monitor performance—rate yourself.
- Note variations between the guidelines and performance.
- Investigate to determine the cause and eliminate it or adjust the guideline.

Once a draft is compiled, ([click here to download a sample](#)) circulate it with a cover memo explaining the concept. Ask for feedback and set a reasonable cut-off date for responses. Incorporate the returns as appropriate and prepare your final draft. Circulate and discuss the final version at departmental staff meetings. Use a few case studies to illustrate the possibilities of application. Ask every employee to sign a copy for his/her personnel file. Make it clear that one of the benefits of adhering to the guidelines is that in return each employee can expect others to do likewise—making everyone's job easier (or at least predictable).

To perpetuate the commitment, include this information in your new employee orientation program. Add it to job descriptions and performance reviews. Check on success rates occasionally in departmental staff meetings.

Keep the guidelines relevant and appealing. Your Universal Service Guidelines are one of many “living documents” your company will want to review and update occasionally. Just as builders are surveying home buyers for their thoughts on service improvement, companies can survey trades, associates, and employees for their ideas. Updating your Universal Service Guidelines generates an opportunity to re-issue the information, thereby reminding everyone of their performance targets.

Can builders replicate their stellar professionals with a mere list of behaviors? Probably not entirely—the essence that makes a talented individual stand out in any organization is often a

quality of character that cannot be captured or transplanted. But the everyday behaviors that impact every person who comes into contact with an organization can be defined and discussed, attitudes and habits can be influenced, and trouble-makers weeded out when a company commits to Universal Service Guidelines:

*We commit to performing according to these Universal Service Guidelines  
for all of our customers—all the time, all of us.*