

Knowing your Customer

In a service discipline like facilities management it is vitally important that the FM understands the needs and wants of their customers. However good the service is, the simple truth is that no-one will value it if they don't want it or believe they don't need it and nobody can be persuaded that they want or need something unless the service provider clearly understands their objectives, issues and drivers.

Knowing and understanding customer needs is at the centre of every successful FM operation, whether it is dealing with internal customers or fee paying clients. With this knowledge, the service can be designed and delivered in such a way that it is clearly seen to be operating in the customer's best interests.

This process begins with effective communication involving lots of listening and questioning. Understanding customers' needs and desires can highlight valuable developments that can be made to the current offering, or indicate gaps in the market that can be filled with new products or services. Strong customer engagement is driven by emphasising the benefits that the service brings them. If the challenges they face are well understood, it is much easier to offer them solutions.

A careful eye should be kept on trends and worth future developments in the customer's markets and lives. Knowing the trends that are going to influence their operations helps the FM to anticipate what support they are going to need and to offer it to them as soon as they need it. Market research can be valuable here and there are many existing reports that can help to build a picture of where customer's markets may be going.

There is a huge amount of market information that can be tapped into. Much of that information is available free of charge and is readily available. For example, help desk records will identify key customer requests or complaints, what their needs were, frequencies, trends and patterns.

Company reports and press releases will highlight major issues and opportunities. Facilities managers should consider how these things will affect their customers and what support FM can offer. Google Alerts can be used to identify relevant market news and activity that may cause the customer concern and mitigation plans can be drawn up in advance.

These activities will not provide all the information required and it is good practice to ask customers directly. This can in face-to-face or telephone interviews, online surveys or in group discussions. It is important to emphasise that these sessions are for the FM team to learn more about the customer's issues and not for the FM to talk about facilities problems.

The Institute of Customer Service provides a wide range of training, publications and services aimed at improving the relationship between customers and service providers
www.instituteofcustomerservice.com