Dealing with customer enquiries/complaints

A reference and resource document

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Deal with complex enquiries/complaints

Overview

You will be required to establish an effective relationship with the client; determine the client needs; effectively record details of the enquiry/complaint; obtain supporting documentation where appropriate; determine and implement suitable course of action to effectively resolve the issue/s; and ensure the client is kept informed of progress at all times.

Establish relationship with client

Organisations continually interact with people and other organisations as part of their day-to-day operations. This interaction requires effective communication, both internally and externally. For this communication to be effective you should consider the intended recipients and ensure that the format and content are within their understanding.

The communication process

Communication may take a verbal, non-verbal or graphic form.

Verbal communication is in the form of words, either spoken (e.g. telephone conversation) or written (e.g. letter, memo, email).

Non-verbal communication is any form other than words or graphics, such as oral (e.g. facial expression), written and graphic (e.g. format and layout), or, independently of words, face-to-face contact.

Graphic communication takes the form of ideas, relationships or connections communicated visually with graphic images (shapes, diagrams and lines). It can have both verbal and non-verbal components (e.g. "No Unauthorised Entry" sign in public places).

The ability to communicate is an ongoing skill gained from experience and ongoing association with others. As experience widens, new learning takes place. This is reflected in the workplace environment by the continual monitoring of the effectiveness of the means of communication being used. Such monitoring can be in the form of direct feedback from clients, customers and staff, as well as keeping abreast of current trends and practices.

All workplace procedures and documents need to comply with the requirements of effective communication, including suitable language and graphics, absence of discriminatory content, effective layout and presentation. The systems should also be easy to use by all required staff and provide detailed instructions on the methods of use. Evaluating the response to communication (feedback) is also essential.

If it is found that some or all of the communication styles of the organisation are causing problems, immediate steps should be taken to remedy this. You first need to determine the problem area (which is probably due to the presence of communication barriers) and analyse the reasons for the ineffectiveness. These barriers can be caused by many factors:
∗   inappropriate choice of words
∗   inappropriate channel

∗   inappropriate message
∗   poor layout and presentation
∗   inadequate feedback
∗   lack of courtesy

People can interpret the same event in different ways due to differences in perception. Variations in values and attitudes mean that it is important you take this factor into account when formulating your plan for a standard communication system. You need to ensure that you eliminate the problem areas, as well as obtain feedback as to the effectiveness of the new methods. Remember it is only through effective communication that a business organisation can succeed and achieve its goals and objectives.

Identify client needs

The first contact clients have with an organisation makes a lasting impression. The way you greet them, including the language used (both verbal and non-verbal) and the empathy shown, convey the level of interest you have in their needs.

All clients who approach an organisation expect prompt and courteous service and to be treated with respect. You should employ the following communication skills to establish contact with clients:

❖ Provide a welcoming client environment. A cheerful and warm atmosphere may soothe an irate client.

❖ Establish a positive communication climate by greeting the client warmly according to organisational procedures, and showing empathy. Use client's names whenever possible and use a friendly tone.

❖ Create an effective service environment through the use of appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour. A smile improves anyone's day.

❖ Use questioning and active listening to determine client needs. If it can be seen that you are genuinely interested, the client will be more forthcoming.

❖ Demonstrate tact and maintain confidentiality.

Appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviour

Using positive and polite language is not sufficient. You should also display appropriate non-verbal behaviour to reinforce what you are saying. Be friendly and relaxed in your approach. Ensure that you demonstrate confidence in your professional skills and abilities by being assertive and professional, while maintaining an interest in the client's needs.

Questioning and listening

Be attentive to clients and display interest while actively listening to what they have to say. Use appropriate body language and maintain eye contact. By using careful questioning techniques you can work out the main message the client is trying to impart and extract additional information that will assist you in determining their needs. It will also reinforce their confidence in you and your ability to help them.

Active listening and how to use it in client service is shown below (Dwyer, 2006, p.229).

Attentive to the client

Concentrate on the issue, not the person

Target key points

Investigate with questions

Verify client's needs

Energise your response

Recording client complaint/enquiry

Records are a key component and are part of the accountability process of an organisation. Keeping accurate and timely client records should be part of the overall objectives.

Maintain client records

Having a formal record of the interaction between the client and the organisation provides background information that can be used by many areas of the organisation. It can also assist in improving the services provided to clients and it is therefore important that this information is recorded accurately and in a timely manner.

These records should include a history of contacts, provide evidence of what has happened and any action taken, the people involved, and any follow-up required. An effective system will comply with all legislative and organisational requirements, have effective management and monitoring processes in place, ensure secure and confidential storage of records, and be well organised and readily available to appropriate staff.

The information to be included in these records is gathered and recorded using organisational policies and procedures. This includes the use of a variety of documents.

Types of documents

The types of documents necessary to effectively record a complaint/enquiry will include:

* Enquiry/complaint form
* Complaints Register
* Business letters
* Memorandum
* Facsimile transmission
* Surveys & Questionnaires
* Email
* Web pages

The final document in all cases should be an effective communication tool that promotes the business and achieves the outcome required. For example, does the complaint form provide the opportunity for a client to express their grievance effectively?

In order to streamline the processing of information gathered, you need to make full use of the business technology available within the organisation. Such technology may include:

- ∗ Computer, printer
- ∗ Telephone
- ∗ Voicemail
- ∗ Fax machine
- ∗ Photocopier
- ∗ Document binder
- ∗ Shredder.

Your business activities and the nature of interaction with clients will determine the need for technology and how often the organisation may need to update such items. You should ensure that all available facilities are used to collect, analyse, structure and present information on client needs. Improvements should be implemented where necessary to ensure that complaints, comments and suggestions receive the attention necessary and collected information is used to full advantage.

For example, having an email site where clients can leave contact details is a great innovation, but will be totally ineffective if it is not monitored regularly to respond to complaints and enquiries. If it is used effectively, clients will appreciate the prompt attention to their needs and prefer such contact to using an automated telephone system with long queues or voice recognition that sometimes is unreliable.

Supporting documentation

The most obvious method of receiving feedback from clients/clients is their verbal or written response to your communication. Be assured that most of them will let you know without delay if they are dissatisfied, but the return may be less for satisfaction or acceptance.

Other means available to the organisation for obtaining feedback include the following:

- ∗ Hard copy forms (distributed by mail or in person)
- ∗ Online forms (using organisation's website)
- ∗ User forms (distributed via email)

The design of these forms can be in the format of a survey or questionnaire.

In all cases the following considerations are necessary:

1. Keep the form as short a possible – do not enter any unnecessary information. People are more inclined to respond to a short format than a lengthy one.

2. Allow sufficient space for completion of information required.

3. Use font and layout that is easy to follow.

4. If using colour, limit choice to one or two colours to avoid conflict. Use black text as much as possible.

5. If using Internet, email or fax to distribute forms, always include a brief message giving instructions on how to complete and return the form.

Assessing feedback

All feedback received, both positive and negative, should be noted and acted upon. If the reason for dissatisfaction is not clear, do not hesitate to contact the complainant to discuss the matter and determine the actual cause of their dissatisfaction. You will then be better able to fix the problem.

Feedback should be acted upon as quickly as possible to avoid a repetition of dissatisfaction. Once the problem area has been identified and effectively dealt with, you should ensure the amended system is put into place without delay. It is always good practice to then contact the original complainant and advise them that in response to their feedback the organisation has taken steps to remedy the problem.

Ongoing quality control

You should not rely solely on feedback to ensure the quality of your processes. Not every dissatisfied client/client or staff member will contact you to advise of problems. It is imperative that you implement and maintain a cyclical quality control programme to regularly review service standards and amend if necessary. You should ensure ongoing compliance with organisational and legislative requirements, as well as advances in any applicable software and hardware facilities, trends in the marketplace and generally accepted standards. Regular review by fellow group members should also be part of the quality assurance process.

Procedure for responding to complaint/enquiry

Each organisation should have policies and procedures in place to provide support to members when responding to complaints/enquiries. These responses should be the result of careful planning based on factual and objective data, and should be continually reviewed and updated. The basis for these changes is the result of feedback from clients, both positive and negative. You should identify your organisation's customer service policies, procedures and goals in order to produce required outcomes, and be aware of the processes needed to locate the relevant policy documents.
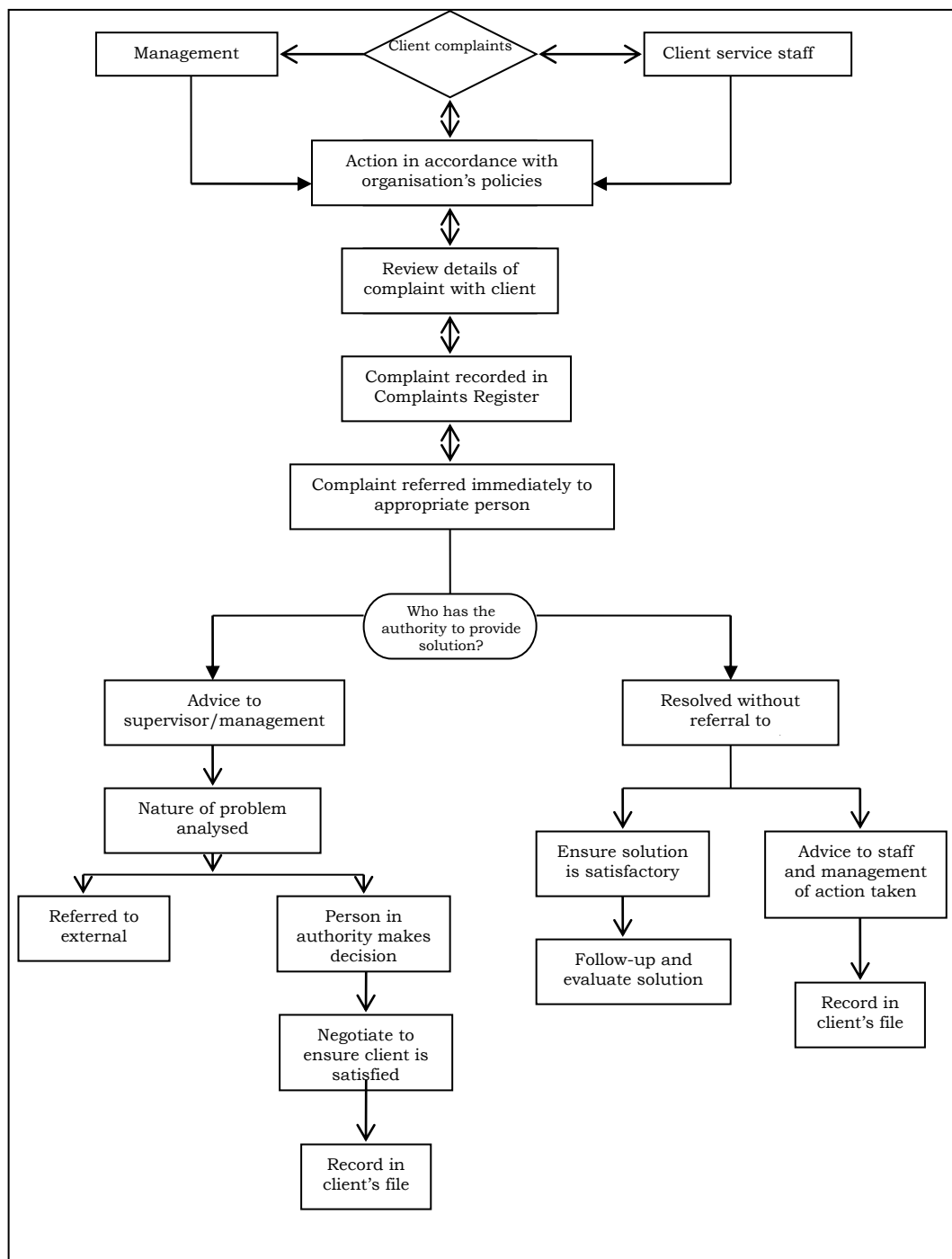
The key to effective service is to act promptly, while adhering to organisational guidelines, feeling confident that you have taken every reasonable measure to address the situation.

Procedures to resolve client difficulties may include:
* Conflict management techniques
* Refund of monies
* Item repair or replacement
* Referrals to supervisor
* Review of products or services
* External agencies, such as an ombudsman.

Ensure you follow the designated chain of command for problem resolution so that those authorised to make decisions actually do so. The organisation should have such procedures in place and ensure all staff members are aware of the processes, or know how to obtain assistance when necessary.

The following Flow Chart provides a suggested process for handling client complaints (Kerr & Yates, 2000 , p.177).

Conflict management

When dealing with dissatisfied clients you need to employ techniques that will clarify the perceived problem or enquiry and promptly identify a solution, while minimising client dissatisfaction with the organisation.

You will find the following skills useful in achieving these goals:

* Listening and showing empathy

∗ Gathering the necessary information to follow up the complaint
∗ Reminding yourself that an upset client may exaggerate or be offensive
∗ Following up their concerns quickly and effectively without making unreasonable promises or acting outside your authority
∗ Putting in place means to avoid the problem from reoccurring.

External agencies

In some cases external agencies (eg review board, tribunal or ombudsman) may be used by your organisation as an independent referee when dealing with disgruntled client. It is therefore essential that accurate records of your interaction with clients are maintained. This will show the attempts you have made to deal promptly and to the best of your ability with the client up to this point.

On some occasions when your organisation does not agree with the client, the intervention of a third party may be necessary and welcomed by all.

Client feedback

In responding to client feedback the organisation should aim to develop a climate of trust and confidence that will result in increased satisfaction and reduced complaints. It will provide the opportunity to improve the overall client service process and, in turn, improve staff motivation and job satisfaction. Ideally, staff should be empowered to take action in response to complaints/enquiries or refer the matter to the person responsible, either internal or external.

Organisational and legislative requirements

Once the needs of the client have been identified you need to apply processes which comply with organisational requirements. There are many factors that need to be considered to effect service delivery. These may include:
∗ Legal obligations
∗ Occupational health and safety policies, programmes and procedures
∗ Confidentiality and security requirements
∗ Anti-discrimination and related policy
∗ Organisational best-practice policy
∗ Quality measures
∗ Continuous improvement processes
∗ Ethical standards
∗ Pricing and discount policies
∗ Replacement and refund procedures
∗ Payment and delivery options
∗ Designated resource parameters.

Not all of these will apply in every workplace. Let's look at some of the common areas.

Legislative requirements

There are certain laws that may relate specifically to your organisation (eg Medicare regulations in health areas), and others that apply to organisations or businesses in general (eg taxation and anti-discrimination legislation). There are also industry

authorities and agencies linked to Federal, State and local government that can provide you with information and assistance when formulating new policies. In all cases, the approach should be *proactive* rather than *reactive.* The organisation should have a monitoring process in place to ensure ongoing compliance with legislative changes that affect their operations.

All policies and procedures, including document design and layout, should take the issues of client confidentiality and security into account, and be implemented in an ethical and non-discriminatory manner. They must take into account issues arising from legislation such as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO), Anti-discrimination, the Privacy Act and Occupational Health and Safety. Some of the areas that may be affected are discussed below.

Anti-discrimination and related policy

Equal opportunity legislation can be open to legal interpretation but organisations should ensure their policies and practices meet reasonable community standards. Anti-discrimination policies are relevant to both internal and external clients and can relate to things including:

∗   Sexual or racial harassment, or other discriminatory practices
∗   Physical bullying, victimisation or standover tactics
∗   Unreasonable workloads
∗   Equal access to promotion by staff
∗   Client service delivery to special-needs people.

Policies and procedures may focus on certain areas of the organisation's client base, but it should not clearly discriminate against another group.

All discriminatory language should be removed from all documents so as to achieve equality of opportunity. Some of the changes which have occurred over recent times are:

Previously used	Other choices
Businessman, businesswoman	Proprietor, manager, executive
Chairman	Chairperson, convenor, coordinator, moderator, chair
Delivery boy	Messenger, courier
Girl Friday	Office assistant, clerical assistant
Manpower	Labourforce, personnel, staff, workforce
Man-hours	Hours, work hours, working hours, total hours
Office girl, office boy	Office worker, assistant
Policeman	Police officer
Spokesman	Spokesperson, representative
Storeman	Storeperson
Workman	Employee, staff, labourer

(Kerr & Yates, 2000, Pp. 51, 60)

Environmental considerations

You should also comply with environmental legislation. This can be achieved by implementing and monitoring the recycling of paper and other consumables such as ink and toner cartridges, minimising use of photocopiers and utilising recycled paper products wherever possible.

Occupation health and safety

Organisational policies and procedures should ensure compliance with Occupational Health & Safety Act requirements by all staff members. You should arrange for the implementation of training and information sessions by the responsible staff member.

Resource allocation

Providing effective service to clients relies on the resources available to the organisation, either internal or external. The policy adopted will need to be practical in its application so that resources are not over- or under-committed. For example, a department offering online access to answer client questions on new policies must ensure there are adequate telephone operators available to deal with the expected response.

Feedback to clients

To maintain a good relationship, the client should be kept informed of any action taken to resolve/refer the complaint/enquiry. This should include the maintenance of client records in accordance with organisational procedures.

The information provided to clients should be timely and accurate. As you respond to the client's needs, explain the process that will be implemented and the purpose and anticipated outcomes. By maintaining contact you will alleviate stress and anxiety that may otherwise develop, and in turn will receive feedback on the client's reactions and expectations.

Where necessary, ensure any instructions given to other staff are clear and precise. Acknowledge client expectations but take care not to give false hope. It is better to let them know in a clear and courteous manner that the result they are expecting is not possible. If necessary, refer the client to more senior staff members who can reinforce the possible outcomes. At all times your response should take into account the diversity of clients – no one solution will apply to all situations.

In all cases records of interactivity with clients should be maintained. This will provide a source of information that can be used to improve the services provided by the organisation, as well as update relative policies and procedures.

References:

Dwyer, J. (2006). *The communication handbook (7th Ed.).* Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, NSW.

Kerr, N. and Yates, B. (2000). *Developing office skills (4th Ed.).* Pearson Education Australia, Frenchs Forest, NSW.