

# Service Philosophy

## Part 1

BY ALAN CARSON — CARSON, DUNLOP & ASSOCIATES LTD.



**A CUSTOMER SERVICE PHILOSOPHY REFERS** to the ways in which you think about, and develop, your business. Your service philosophy is the total of all the strategies you employ in order to deliver a high-quality service that “blows your customers away.” We’ve talked about how to market your services in a past article. But you have to have an excellent service to market because no amount of marketing will sell a service that’s not good. You may fool people for a while with your dazzling marketing strategies, but word will get out if the service is not up to snuff.

If you offer a professional service, you must deliver good service. You can market your service as “the best in town,” but if you perform below standard, you will not sustain your customer base. This section will help you develop ways to approach customer service to create a winning business.

### Strategizing Excellent Service

#### Create Customer Service Blueprint

**The first step in developing a top-notch professional service is to identify every point at which you contact the public, a process called *blueprinting your business process*. Blueprinting is a kind of map that shows you the points of contact where you can enhance customer service.**

Draw a horizontal dotted line in the middle of a piece of paper. Label it “line of visibility” or “line of interaction.” Above this line, write the section or sections of the public with whom you interact. Below the dotted line, draw a flowchart showing the flow of your business. Draw an arrow to connect the points between the public and your business to show each time they interact. Each point of contact is an opportunity to offer exceptional customer service. Most home inspection companies have very simple blueprints for this process. *Figure 1* shows a typical home inspection company’s customer-service blueprint.

#### Brainstorm Strategies

In *Figure 1*, the blueprint chart, report delivery is one of the significant points of contact. Let’s say that you mail your reports to your client. The client receives the report without any personal contact with you. What can you do to spice up this aspect of your business? Let the brainstorming begin. You can send the report by courier, deliver the report in person and spend time discussing it with the client, email the report, or upload the report to a secure website and email a link and a password to the client. The report has built-in links to documents that contain more information on the condition described. A floating document box allows the client to type in questions as he or she reads the report. After reading the report, the questions document gets emailed to you for a response.

The key to effective brainstorming is writing down your ideas without criticizing them as you go. For example, the last idea above is fairly elaborate and might cost a lot to set up. Don’t worry about it. Just write down the ideas, no matter how difficult or even ridiculous they seem. You will have time to reject them in the next step. Brainstorming is a creative process, whereas evaluating each idea is an exercise in logic. Don’t mix logic with your brainstorming or it will stifle your creativity.

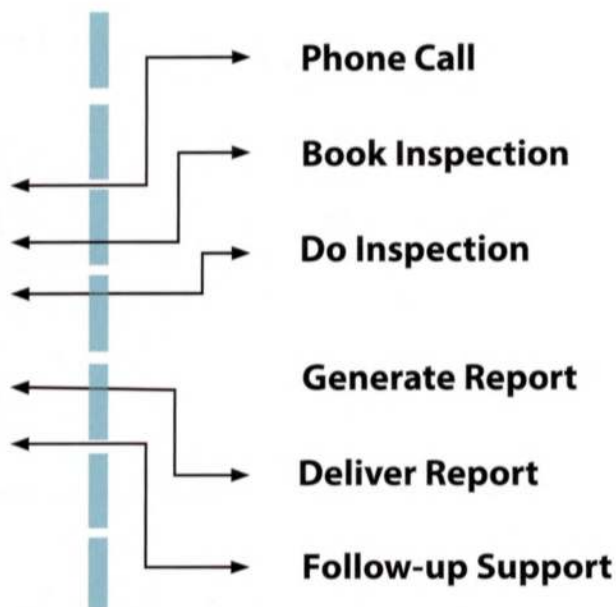
#### Evaluate

**The next step is to consider each idea, evaluating it based on:**

- **the impact the strategy will have on your clients,**
- **the cost of implementing the idea, and**
- **the time commitment it requires.**

Let’s evaluate the idea of sending the report by courier. If you give your client a summary on site, they may not have a sense of urgency about receiving the report. Sending it by courier has little advantage and little impact, but it will consume a significant amount of profit from each inspection.

## Line of Visibility



**Figure 1**

**Point of Contact = Service Opportunity**

*You might have a completely different chart for your relationship with real estate professionals. It would include items like office presentations, calling agents, lunch with agents and so on.*

*What's the point of blueprinting your business operations? It forces you to think about a strategy for every point at which you interact with the public. Each of these points is an opportunity for you to create exceptional, and memorable, service.*

Now let's look at the website idea...

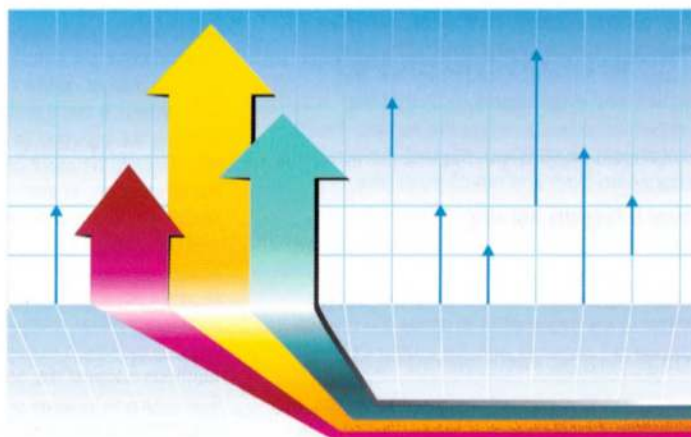
**Implementing the dynamic website reporting system may be expensive, but if it creates an extraordinary point of distinction for your company, it could launch your business to levels you never thought possible.**

### **Spend Money to Make Money**

Each idea has advantages and disadvantages. You need to weigh the long-term benefits, factoring your client's needs into the equation. Yes, you will save money if you decide not to implement a dynamic website system, but a dynamic site imparts distinction to your company and might make customers happy. Customer satisfaction leads to referrals that lead to increased business volume. More business means you can pay for your website. Once the initial costs are covered, websites are relatively easy and inexpensive to maintain. You can't always calculate the benefits based on cost alone. There are returns from customer satisfaction that don't always show up immediately as revenues.

In the previous example, we made a key assumption: we know what the customer wants. This is a typical but dangerous assumption. It's amazing how wrong we can be when we assume what customers want. For example, what if most of your customers do not have Internet access? Or, what if most of your customers think posting their report on a website violates their privacy?

**We will touch on these questions in a future article. Here we have just briefly introduced our concept of service philosophy, and examined this using the lens of strategizing excellent service. Later we will look at developing your ability to have the customer's perspective in mind, where we will discuss home inspections as a customer-centric business and how to develop different levels of service. ■**



# Service Philosophy

## Part 2

BY ALAN CARSON — CARSON, DUNLOP & ASSOCIATES LTD.



*In a previous article, we briefly introduced our concept of service philosophy. In this discussion, we will look at developing your ability to have the customer's perspective in mind. We will talk about home inspections as a customer-centric business and how to develop different levels of service.*

### Think from Customer's Perspective

You should focus on describing benefits, rather than features, in your marketing pieces. Benefits look at your service from the customer's perspective. This perspective should pervade all that you do, ensuring that the big picture encompasses a customer-centric philosophy.

Remember that the customer may include real estate professionals of all descriptions and anyone else who can send business your way. Everything you do should be evaluated with the following thought process:

- What's the benefit, or perceived benefit, to the customer?
- What can I do to make the benefit, or perceived benefit, more visible?
- Does this benefit result in a significant marketing advantage to me?

### Perceived Benefits Have Greater Impact

Before we continue, let's define the term "perceived benefit" because it goes to the root of a customer-centric business. A perceived benefit is something that may or may not be a real benefit to your client, but the client thinks it is important. For example, let's take the idea of uploading the client's report to a secure website with lots of bells and whistles. Is this a benefit to the client? Isn't it simpler for the client just to get an emailed report? An email does the job and saves the client the added step of going to a website, but the client often perceives the web-based system as superior.



### **An Example**

Here is a firsthand example. Our report-writing system is a 400-page binder. When we do a pre-listing inspection for a seller, the report and the book are supposed to be left in the home for the person who ultimately buys the home. But we find that many sellers want to take the book with them to their next house, even though the report contents are for the home they are leaving! While our clients' perceptions are not what we expected, they have to be respected.

*Let's now have a look at the different levels of service:*

### **1. Create Superior Service**

#### **Make Sure Customers Return**

The idea here is to impress your customers in such a way that they will come back to you over and over, and/or refer you to others. A good home inspector does his or her job well and consistently. A good home inspector arrives on time and delivers a professional report. Believe it or not, many home inspection companies can't even deliver on these basic services. If you deliver consistently good performance, you will be a contender. But a contender is not what you want to be. You want to be in the top-selling group of building inspectors.

### **2. Give Customers What They Want**

How do you know what your customers want? Ask them. What's the best way to ask them? There are lots of ways, but we have found surveys the most effective. If you survey your client on site during the inspection, you get a 100 percent response rate. Provide a clipboard with a pencil attached along with a simple questionnaire.

*Following are tips to help create a good questionnaire:*

- Keep the questionnaire short (two to four questions only).
- Keep it simple.
- Don't ask questions to which you know the answer.
- Don't ask personal questions.
- Ask only questions that can be translated directly into a business decision. (In other words, ask yourself, "What am I going to do with the information?")
- Don't ask a yes/no question. (You want people to give you a better idea of how they feel about your question.)

**Consider these types of questions:** "What could we do to make the home inspection experience better for you?" Or, if you are really bold, "What else could we do to help you?"

### **3. Give Your Clients More Than They Expected**

You can achieve customer satisfaction simply by delivering what the client was expecting. If you deliver more than they were expecting, you not only have a satisfied customer, but you also have someone who will comment to others about your great service. Many home inspectors take this information to mean they should show off their technical expertise during the inspection. But what you do technically during your inspection is lost on most customers. They don't understand it, and they have no way of knowing whether another inspector would have done the same or more.

#### **Good Service Needs Creative Thinking**

What does it take to offer a service beyond expectations? It takes imagination. If you think it also takes a lot of money, you're wrong. Yes, it is true that a big company can invest in systems that deliver a service beyond expectations. But here are a few examples of things that don't cost much at all:

- Customers get a follow-up email asking if they were happy with the inspection.
- Real estate agents get a thank-you card from the home inspector for referring their service.
- Clients are told that they can call you any time with questions they may have about the house.

#### **Courtesy Is Invaluable**

Acts of courtesy such as follow-up calls cost nothing at all. The difference between you and the next inspector could hinge on something as simple as returning customer calls within three hours of receiving them. That kind of service has a tremendous impact on the customer and costs you nothing.

**Although what we've discussed all seems like common sense, it isn't always so common. Focus on the little things day to day and be consistent with your good customer service. You will be amazed at how much more successful you will be compared with the average inspector simply by showing up on time, doing what you say you're going to do and delivering excellent customer service. ■**