
Charter Mark can change your life!

Stephanie Ensinger
Information Desk Co-ordinator, Learning Support Services, University of Bolton
E-mail: s.ensinger@gmail.com

Dawn Grundy
Information Officer, Learning Support Services, University of Bolton
Tel: 01204 903563
E-mail: D.Grundy@bolton.ac.uk

Customer service is not a new concept for libraries. They have been recognising not only the value but also the need for delivering good service for many years. With student retention high on the agenda of most academic libraries, it becomes a downright necessity. After all, we know that unsatisfied customers tend to go somewhere else where their needs are better fulfilled. Providing a non-customer-focused service can often result in losing students.

The biggest question is where to start. Theories and knowledge are freely available: after all, we work in an environment where information is at our fingertips. Type 'excellent customer service' into Google and it will return a variety of results. Frameworks and guidelines are wide-ranging, but do they apply to us? How can we make something 'fit' when it has been developed mainly with commercial end-users in mind? With the limited resources available, how do we adapt theories to work for us? And how do we get recognition? For Learning Support Services (LSS) at the University of Bolton, and many other academic libraries, Charter Mark has been the answer. In fact, LSS achieved the standard twice, first in 2002 and then again in 2005.

The Charter Mark framework has been developed with public services in mind. Although it does involve much hard work and many staff hours, it is relatively straightforward to employ and, with the buy-in of staff, certainly achievable.

Once the standard has been achieved, one can celebrate this achievement, thus creating a useful bit of PR. However, this is where the danger lies. Why are we working towards achieving Charter Mark? Is it because we will be able to attend a

ceremony where someone important will hand us a certificate? Is it because we can post an item in our internal bulletin about having received the news that all our hard work has been fruitful and that our application was successful? Or is it because we will be able to print a logo on all our publications? Indeed, all these factors are bonuses. However, most of the benefits lie in implementation of the actual framework.

Charter Mark provides a virtual step-by-step guide of how to improve the delivery of excellent customer service, that is, 'to go the extra mile'. Holding the standard twice has taught us a thing or two about doing things that simply make sense. The following 'Top 5' will be helpful to anyone considering applying for the standard. The way LSS looks at it is that they are beneficial anyway – with or without the fancy logo.

Audit trail!

Be able to explain why you did what. All major actions should have documented justification and implementation. Someone asking 'why did you introduce this service' should not be met with a 'well, we thought it would be a good idea'. Doing things for the right reasons saves time, energy and resources. It also means that should something fail you can put it down to experience rather than poor judgement. Most importantly though, you will be more likely to do things that will succeed – simply because there is an appropriate methodology behind it!

Standards!

Charter Mark's first criterion 'Set standards and perform well' gave LSS the push in the right direction. The key to good planning is to know what you should be achieving, what you want to achieve and how you are performing at the moment. Put as much thought into setting these standards as you can afford. If you get them right, the rest will be much easier. Make sure they are demanding enough: if they are too easy to achieve they become meaningless. You also have to review them, not ad-hoc but ideally on an annual basis, and should not be afraid to adapt them if services or circumstances change.

Review!

Make review an integral part of project work. Every new project or implementation has to be

scrutinised, reviewed and redirected if necessary. All departmental resources are precious and even if budgets are closely monitored, staff time often gets wasted. Have you ever sat in a meeting, wondering why you were there? Would your time be of much better use somewhere else? Project leaders have to make sure that all members of the team are contributing and, more importantly, that the project is actually moving forward: they should not be afraid to review staffing if it makes sense. A regularly submitted report, which can be as simple as 'what have we achieved this month, who has done what, what did we want to do but could not' can help focus and flag up any problems. If, for example, after three months nothing has been achieved, project leaders should have the courage to disband the group.

Don't be afraid to fail!

Learn from your mistakes. Failures can be instructional. They can show you what not to do. One of the reasons why you set standards is to see how well (or not) you are doing. Should you see at the end of a year that you consistently failed a standard, look into why and see whether it is possible to improve your performance. Make this a part of your annual planning process. This will allow you to redirect resources and tackle a problem area with a more holistic approach. If you cannot improve, change the standard to a level that will still be a challenge, but this time, a more realistic one. Failure is an essential part of assessing what you can and cannot do. The key is not to get too upset about failing. Use it as an opportunity to move forward.

You think you know your customer – but you don't!

Do not do something that you are convinced your user wants without asking first. Invite user feedback and be as creative as possible about creating a dialogue. LSS invites formal feedback via leaflets, email and snail mail. In addition, the annual satisfaction survey, the occasional focus group and themed surveys can help gain an understanding about a specific issue.

The most useful feedback about day to day issues, however, is received verbally via staff and in the LSS comments and suggestions books. These invite users to write about any issue – good or bad – that concerns them. The

books are available at Information desks on both sites. In addition make sure all staff are encouraged to pass on feedback. You will even find out things you did not ask for. For example, when LSS carried out a survey about a closure due to unexpected essential building work, we found that the time of year meant that most of the forms returned came from international students who communicated their very individual needs. Some of these students volunteered to help us further and were recently invited to attend our international focus group.

It is also important to bear in mind that you need to have a systematic way of receiving, recording, replying to, dealing with, and evaluating all feedback received thus creating a meaningful audit trail.

LSS always saw the road to Charter Mark as more important than the actual achievement, so even if you are not interested in Charter Mark, be it because you have used a different framework, or you do not have the resources to apply, have a look at their criteria on the website (www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/chartermark/) and be inspired!

The LSS Charter Mark Team would like to dedicate this article to the memory of John Morrow of the University of Newcastle. John was an inspiration to us and will be sadly missed, not only by his colleagues at Newcastle, but by those of us who were fortunate to have worked with him over the years.