

# Being Sam Malone: Customer Service on a Campus Where “Everybody Knows Your Name”

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## ABSTRACT

Working on a small campus has many advantages: Familiarity with the majority of faculty and staff, in-depth knowledge of how systems interact, adding the personal touch to each interaction with the users. However, this can also be a challenge, as knowing the personal history of some users leads us to make assumptions and generalizations with their problems.

This talk will cover how we at Grinnell College deal with a very heterogeneous user base, and what we have learned through training and experience about what to do, and what not to do, with those “difficult” situations.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.7.0 [The Computing Profession]: General.

**General Terms:** Management, Human Factors.

**Keywords:** Customer Service, Support Teams, End User Support.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Grinnell is known locally, regionally, and even nationally as a place where free spirits and thinkers come to learn and grow. From our self-government tenets to the presence of a large and very politically active “Save the Planet” chapter, both students and faculty are free to explore and learn in an environment that is very accepting and open. Administrative employees mostly come from conservative Midwestern stock, with high priority placed on complete, conscientious work and attention to detail. The juxtaposition of these two worlds can cause for some interesting support issues, as we deal on a daily basis with any number of personality types, sometimes within the same physical office.

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Three years ago, ITS was reorganized (that would be the topic of several other presentations...can't go into it here), and part of that reorganization was the creation of “Support Teams”, two teams of four people, charged with the support of all end users, labs, and various other desktop units on campus. They were divided so that the “Blue” Team (of which I am leader) supported all administrative offices, and two of the four academic divisions, while the “Green” Team supported the Residential Networking, and the other two academic divisions.

On the Grinnell campus this year, our Human Resources department has initiated a campus-wide customer service program, offering training on both the managerial and support staff levels. They have also tried to increase awareness using recognition (Traveling “Above and Beyond” trophy), fun and games (Customer Service Family Feud), and classroom instruction through their “Above and Beyond” series. This has proved invaluable as a source of information as well as motivation for our staff.

The challenge, therefore, that we face, is supporting a wide skill base within our user community, from the highly savvy administrators using Database Reporting and querying our Datatel system, to the not as savvy, using their computers to read emails and look up weather forecasts. Both sets of users, however, have the same expectation – Reliability. When reliability is compromised, users have very different reactions and methods for dealing with their frustration.

Our job is twofold...to restore the computer to a working state, and to deal with the frustrations of the user. What follows are some of the things we have learned about types of users, strategies we have implemented to handle these idiosyncrasies, and an overview of our Human Resources department's customer service push in the last year.

## 2. OVERVIEW

This presentation will take the form of a discussion of several types of users, based on the ever-popular “Cheers” television series. A look at the challenges of dealing with each user type will follow, with overviews of the HR Customer Service training and other campus initiatives as well. Ample time for discussion will also be available.

### **3. GRINNELL'S CUSTOMER SERVICE PUSH**

#### **3.1 Advanced Connections Training**

Grinnell's Human Resources Department has offered training opportunities for both supervisory and non-supervisory staff over the past year on the topic of customer service. Using the "Advanced Connection" series, non-supervisory employees were trained over the course of three weeks on a variety of topics, including phone etiquette, customer interactions, service ideals, and the customer service climate on campus.

Additionally, HR sponsors an ongoing "Lunch and Learn" program for supervisors on customer service topics, usually consisting of a presentation (either live or video tape) on a single idea, then discussion among the group on what they have experienced in similar situations.

Both programs are very well received on campus, and attendance is high.

#### **3.2 Traveling Trophy**

The traveling trophy recognized staff for commitment to customer service. It was given to honor service "Above and Beyond" the normal call of duty. It was awarded to the ITS group as its first recipient, then was passed on every two weeks by the honorees to another group on campus that they felt had provided them outstanding service. It circulated through a large portion of campus over the months it was in service. Additionally, as the trophy moved, creativity added gifts to the presentation, including candy, flowers, and an "antacid basket" of Tums, Mylanta and assorted stomach soothers to our network group after a particularly trying week of server troubles.

#### **3.3 Fun and Games**

To further publicize the HR programs, they have sponsored several fun activities on campus. The latest (and largest) of these was a takeoff on "Family Feud" in which the questions were all related to training and customer service programs that had been offered. Four teams of five members were recruited to play for fabulous prizes demonstrating their knowledge of customer service. Open to the public, this brought a large crowd of employees and interested parties, and a good time was had by all. More information, including the PowerPoint presentation, is available, please contact me.

### **4. BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF BEING WELL KNOWN**

#### **4.1 When "NORM!" isn't the greatest thing to hear.**

We've all had it happen. A simple trip to the Admissions office to deal with a jammed printer ends up as an all-day ordeal, keeping you or your staff occupied for an entire day, while other, more urgent needs go unfulfilled. How do you gracefully decline to spend the afternoon with these folks, while not causing problems with their perception of treatment?

Our strategy for such ambushes is relatively simple. If a problem can be solved in a few minutes, then we certainly do that. If it

seems that it might take a little larger chunk of time, we discuss that with the user(s), and let them know when we will be able to allocate the time to it. Communication is key, and they do not want to be left wondering if you have forgotten or avoided fixing their problem.

On the other hand, we are sure to spend the time with them if we have it. Often times, an hour spent hand-holding in an office is worth much more than that in building a perception about service levels. We take pride in the fact that on campus, people know we are busy, but also know that we will give them the attention they need when it is appropriate.

### **5. USERS AND THEIR NEEDS**

#### **5.1 The "Cliff Claven"**

When a user calls up with their own diagnosis and solution to the problem, you know Cliff is on the line. Possibly the most dangerous of the users, this type has often tried to fix the problem on their own, with sometimes disastrous results. After a gentle reminder that no, it couldn't be your printer that is causing the spam to show up in your inbox, we then have to approach the problem with care.

The challenge in this instance is the conflicting view of ITS...we want the users to be able to solve their problems on their own as much as possible, yet we don't want to have them so bold that they will delete any file that doesn't look familiar.

Our approach is preventative, mostly. By encouraging such users to either store data on the server or teach them how to make frequent CD backups of their data, we can minimize the problems they might cause by being able to restore their system without loss of important files. If we sense a new employee will be such a user, we also take the time at the beginning to let them know what we will, and will not do to help recover data. Knowing that they are ultimately responsible for their data can insert at least a little fear into their actions.

Now, that doesn't help the guy feeling comfortable loading his home version of Windows ME.....

#### **5.2 The "Diane Chambers"**

While the Claven is a technical nightmare, the Chambers has the possibility of being frustrating and a PR disaster. They often are very vocal about their opinions, and make no bones about sharing their experiences with different departments around campus.

Diane must have everything done according to specifications (either hers, or in some instances, a department with several of the same type conspiring together). Any deviation from the pre-designed processes will cause frustration, anger, and even tears.

Handling a user such as this takes a very different skill set than the first one. From experience, they only want to talk to the leader of the group when a problem arises, and often will copy the entire senior administration with a trouble call.

We spend a lot of time with these folks, making sure that they understand how the computer works, and how it interacts with other systems they are using. We often find ourselves in a consultant role, helping to streamline the processes they have created, eliminating any confusing or troublesome steps.

Above all, we are often empathizing, sympathizing, and a calming influence when everything seems to be crumbling around them. And as much as I'd like it to be the case, that is one set of skills that I have yet to find a training video to cover. Great care is taken with who gets sent on such calls, and follow-up is important.

### **5.3 The “Woody Boyd”**

Woody is clueless. Usually a wonderful person, very friendly, never pushy or demanding, but has a hard time with any but the most basic of tasks. While he may be perfectly willing to be able to read most of his emails, and type a paper or two, he's often asked to do more. This is where we come in.

By automating as many processes as we can, we can keep the number of steps down to a minimum. We try to train on the easiest methods of accomplishing a task, and decide which things are important to him and which aren't. Placing shortcuts to frequently used application, aliases to server shares for storage, and other accommodations on the desktop make his (and our) lives easier.

Minimalism also extends to what is available to this person. Limiting things such as the number of printers they have to choose from can alleviate frustration on their end as well.

### **5.4 The “Carla Tortelli”**

OK, she's evil. She hates her job, or her coworkers, or her supervisor, or the view out her window, or the fact that she doesn't have a window...you get the picture. She is the perfect opportunity to use your “soft skills” training to soothe her and solve her computer problem at the same time.

I have to admit (although I will deny it to my coworkers) that I kind of enjoy the challenge of working with these types. When I can provide for them a small ray of sunshine in an otherwise dreary day, it does my heart good. And therein lies the key to working with these folks...PMA. Positive Mental Attitude. Not letting anyone drag you down with them.

I have found on the whole that underneath the rough exterior you will usually find someone who is genuinely appreciative of what you do for them. They realize that their computer issue has gone beyond their control, and they desperately need some assistance. The ability to swoop in, magically make some adjustments, and leave with them being able to complete what they need to is just the ticket to getting along with them.

Keeping your wits about you while others are losing theirs. Focusing your attention on the task at hand. Blocking out distractions. All of these clichés can serve you well while working with Carla.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

What I've found is that customer service is not an easy task. It takes time, energy, and patience to deal with all kinds of people. But it can be very rewarding, and certainly worth the effort. And having a good relationship with your customer base makes your life much easier.

## **7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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