BECOMING A SERVICES-ORIENTED MARKETING DEPARTMENT

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Much has been written in recent years about the importance of being service-oriented. It is time to take pause to consider how well we, as marketing departments, apply this newly found knowledge to our own programs. Are we effectively applying our own concepts? The following discussion focuses upon an evaluation scheme to examine how well we, as marketers, apply the body of existing knowledge on services marketing to our own programs.

KEY SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS

Several researchers have attempted to identify a number of different dimensions of service quality. Based upon continuing MSI research (Parasuraman, Zethaml, and Berry, Journal of Marketing, 1985), a set of scales, "Servqual," were developed to measure service quality. Key among these dimensions were responsiveness, reliability, empathy, tangibles, and access.

Questions of interest in evaluating a marketing department's performance with regard to students as customers (other constituencies such as employers of your graduates, colleagues, other departments, other university units could be substituted in the analysis) might include: Have you attempted to measure service quality in any formal or informal manner? Do you have a good intuitive (or better yet empirical) understanding of student perceptions and expectations of quality in the service delivery process? Have you attempted to identify and/or breakdown structural and behavioral barriers to effective service delivery? How does your department measure up compared to your primary competitor(s) in terms of performance on key service quality dimensions (i.e., have you attempted to develop meaningful service quality benchmarks and norms against which to evaluate, control, and modify your own services marketing program?

If the answers to these questions are largely negative, or your program has not formally addressed them, chances are that your program's service quality is suspect. A good starting point for self-examination would be to focus upon the service quality dimensions uncovered by Parasuraman, et. al., in their research, and to discuss which of these dimensions you feel are most appropriate for your marketing department's program to attend to, and why? If members of your department have never dealt with this issue, it might provide an interesting framework for exploring anything from department mission and goals, to operational issues of staffing, scheduling, systems and procedures, budgeting, and physical facilities. Until the task of defining quality is dealt with seriously, little progress can be made in improving quality in the actual service delivery process.

ADDRESSING QUALITY GAPS

In their original MSI research, Parasuraman, Zethaml, and Berry also identified a series of gaps which can be used to understand why consumer expectations are often not met. Which of these service quality gaps possess the greatest challenge for your department, and why? Have your measured the gaps, or do you understand their genesis? For example, do your students' expectations differ significantly from those of the faculty (Gap 1), and if so, why? Are their inherent limitations on quality which are built into the services delivery process specification (Gap 2)? What are quality control problems the greatest in the actual teaching and department administrative process (Gap 3). Have you promised more than you can realistically deliver, or are student expectations out of line (Gap 4)? If so, what should you do about it? Can student expectations be managed? If so, how?

Again, these questions form the basis for interesting faculty discussions regarding what can be done to improve the process of teaching students and serving their various needs, and creating satisfied customers. These gaps can be thought of as an opportunity to identify troublesome areas in the service delivery process, and prioritize service areas which need to be changed or modified if significant change in student perceptions of quality are to be realized.

In their most recent research (Zethaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, Journal of Marketing, 1988), both structural and behavioral causes of gaps in the delivery process are addressed. Based upon this research, interesting diagnostic questions in this area might include: What is the frequency and quality of interaction between your department faculty and student (a common cause of expectations gap)? How strong is department and school commitment to quality service delivery? Have significant barriers to service quality delivery been identified, and steps to remove them been put into place? Has a successful internal marketing program stressing teamwork and the importance of providing quality been initiated? Does the organizational culture (university, school, department) support or block a strong service quality orientation? Does the institutional and departmental reward structure reflect or encourage a quality service orientation?

Hopefully, out of the above analysis a number of prescriptions for change will emerge, which then need to be prioritized, and developed into an action plan. Such a plan might make an interesting agenda for change, by providing an organized framework and rationale for modifying some of the things your department is presently doing, or making a case to administrators for why, and how, school-level objectives can be better served by altering the existing organizational structure, school or department culture, or departmental resource allocation.