

Customer service in the arts - a manual

Produced by Arts Audiences,
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5 reasons to read this manual

1

*Everyone gets compliments and complaints from customers, but this manual helps you to find out how you are **really** doing.*

2

This manual shows you a way to improve (if you need to) based on your own resources.

3

It is based on what was done by people in organisations just like yours. It sets out what we did, what we achieved and what we might do differently if we were to do it again.

4

It is practical and doesn't assume that you have lots of money to try to fix things.

5

Our approach is to involve and empower frontline staff and management at every stage; everyone is involved in finding solutions to problems.

Background

Background

At the beginning of 2009, Arts Audiences (www.artsaudiences.ie) was set up. As well as looking at some research, practical projects were started in a number of areas. Our plan for these projects was to work with a small number of organisations; bring in external help where needed; and share the results of the exercise with everyone else. This manual is the result of our Customer Service Project which began in 2009 and is completed with its publication.

Audiences and customers have a set of expectations from your venue or organisation and it's not always easy to know if you are doing a good job meeting them; sometimes the messages you send out can be confused. We all get both complaints and great feedback, but it can be hard to know what it all means taken together.

We wanted to put a structure on this: helping organisations to think about customer service in a practical way and to objectively assess their performance in a number of areas. If this process identified areas for improvement we wanted to see what might work in setting realistic goals for change and carrying them through – and then passing this learning on to others.

In order to create an objective standard for service in all customer facing areas (e.g. ticket sales, bar sales and telephone booking etc) we brought in external help to carry out a mystery shopping exercise. This was a vital element in our project and we can recommend it. You may have other thoughts but it was invaluable in terms of staff buy-in that the reporting was fair and unbiased and that it gave credit for excellence as well as identifying areas where improvement was necessary.

Temple Bar Cultural Trust had a cultural information centre, which doubled on occasion as a booking office for events. Project Arts Centre across the road is a venue with two auditoria and a visual arts space. Both organisations committed to the project and began on the process (which is ongoing) of setting high standards for themselves and then trying to reach them. I hope you find the manual interesting and informative and that it helps you to think about all this too.

Una Carmody
Director, Arts Audiences, September 2010

Background

Roisin McCarthy at Temple Bar Cultural Trust (TBCT) and her team had been wondering for some time about whether the Information Centre was doing the right thing for their customer. Once they began to look at it from the perspective of the customer, they understood that things needed to change.

“I don’t know if we would have set aside time to do something if the project hadn’t come along. We are always so busy with our events that actually exploring the whole notion of customer service management wasn’t a priority.”

- Roisin McCarthy, TBCT

And over at Project Arts Centre, Niamh O’Donnell said customer service was always something they had been trying to tackle, but putting a plan in place was difficult to do.

“We had been monitoring complaints, and were aware that for every complaint we received, ten people had left who hadn’t bothered to complain, and who probably wouldn’t be back.”

**- Niamh O’Donnell,
Project Arts Centre**

Diagnose

Diagnose

Is there a problem?

You may be quite happy with how your arts organisation is performing, but are you being cushioned from the real truth?

Or, you may think the venue's performance is way below par and drastic action needs to be taken, but are things really so fundamentally bad?

It's difficult to know what to think, without an external or objective opinion. There are some indicators that you can check though, and these will help you decide if a more in-depth mystery shopping exercise is necessary.

"We had been wondering for some time about whether our Information Centre was doing the right thing for our customer. Staff were unsure about boundaries when it came to finding information for the customer.

Once we looked at it from the perspective of the customer, we understood that things needed to change."

- TBCT, Roisin McCarthy

Run through this checklist:

1. Complaints

Look at the level of complaints you've received: compare the last 3 months to one year ago, two and so on. Are these on the rise or static (or falling)? Do they appear to be in line with what you would expect? Can you compare volumes of complaints with similar organisations or venues – how do they compare? Is your management team fully aware of levels of customer service and of customer complaints – do they contribute to resolving issues?

2. Ticket sales

Are ticket sales levels high enough, and what has been the trend? Are these sales levels simply reflective of the economic recession or could other factors be impacting sales?

3. Bar sales

Do your customers appear to be enjoying your bar area? Do they flock there at intervals and before performances? Are bar sales up and complaints down? Do you think your bar area is inviting, attractive and appropriately stocked? Are customers being served quickly enough and with a smile?

Diagnose

4. Sales of programmes and other merchandise?

There are commonly used benchmarks which might be helpful in gauging whether your sales of programmes and other merchandise are at expected levels. Use these and devise your own to see how well you're really doing in this area.

Tip in a box
Typically, one third of attenders buy a programme – do yours?

5. Your phone system

- Are phone calls being answered in the allocated time?
- Are there any hang-ups?
- Are calls being dealt with in the allocated time?
- Have you reviewed these call answering times recently?
- Should calls be dealt with more rapidly?
- Do you know what proportion of phone enquiries are being converted to sales / happy customers?
- Do you think this could be improved?

These are just some of the ways in which you should review this vitally important customer communications channel.

6. Other

Do you have drop-in visitors – if so how long do they stay? Do they view all of the merchandise, gallery space or other public space and materials that you've made public? Are your toilet facilities impeccably clean? Are your doorways and floor levels accessible to people with a physical impairment? Are you using the space you have in an efficient way? Where do customers go when they enter your building and do your services and facilities reflect that?

7. Anecdotal feedback

Be careful here, because ad-hoc stories that you hear from colleagues and friends are not scientific. In other words these people might choose to tell you the good news about how they find your venue and keep the negative things to themselves. You could end up hearing lots about the successful elements of your business and nothing at all about the problems.

[Note this is where external mystery shopping comes into its own – you will get the naked truth from an objective and completely unbiased outsider, with no hidden agendas or involvement].

However, talking to people in your own network at this early stage might provide high level feedback which will point you in the right direction and hint at where things aren't going as well as you'd thought. Ask a variety of staff, suppliers, regular attenders, friends or other stakeholders (such as a local business person, councillor or school etc) for their opinion.

Diagnose

What do you think?

Try scoring yourself from 1-5 on each of these areas:

- Complaints
- Ticket sales
- Bar sales
- Sales of programmes and other merchandise
- Phone system
- Other
- Anecdotal feedback

Once you've done this ask yourself the question:

“Are my customers enjoying their experience with us – from their perusal of the programme right through to attending an event? Do they receive excellent customer services while they're here? Is their visit memorable and are they already looking forward to coming back? Will they tell their friends what a great time they had at our venue?”

If the answer is *Yes*, then congratulations, you're already doing a great job. If however it's *Not Sure* or *No*, then it's time to carry out Mystery Shopping.

“We can all be a bit protective about our work but it was now time to put that aside.”

- TBCT

Evaluate

Evaluate

Evidently not all is going well in your organisation - but you may not be sure of the extent of the problem, or perhaps even what the problem is.

Your checklist has raised some alarm bells, e.g. a higher than expected number of complaints, poor bar sales, mutterings of poor customer service or simply poorer than anticipated ticket sales.

However, you now need to figure out exactly where the problems lie, and, more importantly, what to do about these issues. Don't forget you're likely to come across some good news too in areas where you're actually performing quite well. This will allow you to build on current successes and perhaps take some of that learning to other parts of your organisation.

What Mystery Shopping will do for you:

- Reveal precisely and with certainty what's going wrong with customer services
- Give you the tools to fix the problems

First things first though: how do you figure out what's wrong? We recommend two stages to this evaluation process.

1. Mapping the customer journey
2. Carrying out a mystery shopping exercise

1. Mapping the customer journey

It's interesting how challenging this process actually can be. The tendency at TBCT and Project Arts Centre when they first attempted this was to pitch the customer journey at all the stages staff and management thought about most, e.g. the ticket sale, or the facilities at the venue etc.

Once the mystery shopping team gave their input and insight however, the teams realised that the customer's journey begins far earlier: at the Google search engine for example, at the sign on the door outside, or at the cover of the season's brochure.

So the teams took a step back and thought more about every single interaction point the customer had with them, from very early stages through to long after they'd gone home. They found that it helped to group these interaction points under the following headings: Find, Ask, Surf and Go. We drew up a cloud diagram of most of these normal points: this helped prompt fresh thinking about our customers' interactions with us. [Note: the diagram itself can be viewed from the Info Hub section on Page 20]

Tip in a Box:

When planning the mystery shopping project, we knew that we'd have to pull together people from every team. We also brought in the manager of the Information Centre. As a FOH person she was not normally involved in decision making but she had real insight into what customers wanted. We couldn't sit upstairs and imagine what that was like; we had to have her there.

- TBCT

Evaluate

Here are just some examples of the ways in which customers interact with us:

Find

- Finding information in the phone directory, on Google, in directories etc. ...
- Locating the venue on the street itself...
- First impressions of the outside of the building...
- The signposting of rooms and facilities in the building
- Using a brochure or flier to access information about an event

Ask

- The box office information desk
- The email newsletter or text message reminders etc
- The process of purchasing a ticket
- Speaking to us on the phone
- Speaking to ushers, bar staff or other staff at an event

Surf

- Using a search engine to find our website URL
- Finding contact details or information about events on our website
- Navigating through our website
- Being our friend on Twitter or Facebook

Go

- Finding the right room in the venue for a performance
- Finding the right seat
- Knowing how to purchase refreshments (e.g. understanding signs for interval drinks)
- Experiencing customer service and efficiency at the bar
- Finding and using the toilet facilities
- Enjoying a clean and pleasant lobby area during an interval

2. Carrying out a mystery shopping exercise

Once PAC and TBCT had identified all the points on the customer's journey, we then carried out a mystery shopping exercise. These are the stages involved in doing this, and don't worry, it's neither as expensive nor as complicated as it might sound.

Stages of a mystery shopping project

Stage 1

Find a mystery shopping expert or company, meet with them and discuss what you think is needed. We used KnowledgeWorks (www.knowledgeworks.ie) or see Info Hub for a list of other companies and for sample pricing.

Evaluate

The mystery shopping team will meet with you and talk through the points on your customer journey, perhaps identifying some that you might have missed. Once you've talked them through how things work in your organisation, what you offer and what the different aspects of customer service are that you provide, they'll go away and write up a proposal.

This proposal will detail exactly what they're going to do, how long it will take, how much it will cost, and what you'll get at the end of it.

Stage 2

Once you give the go ahead, mystery shopping will begin. Mystery shoppers will take your customer journey and shop each element of it several times. Here are some examples of the kinds of things they might do:

- Make a number of pre-planned phone calls to your enquiry or box office line, making enquiries about events, discussing access by an elderly person or group of children, making a complaint, or enquiring about facilities at the venue, etc
- Reviewing the usability and look and feel etc of your website, your Golden Pages advertisement, your brochure ware etc
- Walk past your venue on the street, getting impressions of what it looks like, how easy it is to find from your published directions, etc
- Attending several events at your organisation, navigating around your venue, understanding the interval drinks process, using the toilets, purchasing a programme etc
- Asking questions of your staff, from general venue enquiries to complaints to event enquiries etc

These are just some examples of the dozens of interactions the mystery shopper will have with your organisation.

Stage 3

Once mystery shopping has been completed, the firm will collate the results and present them to you in the form of a detailed report which will clearly outline how you fared. Each type of interaction will be scored and you can see where you're doing well and where you're falling down.

Tip in a box

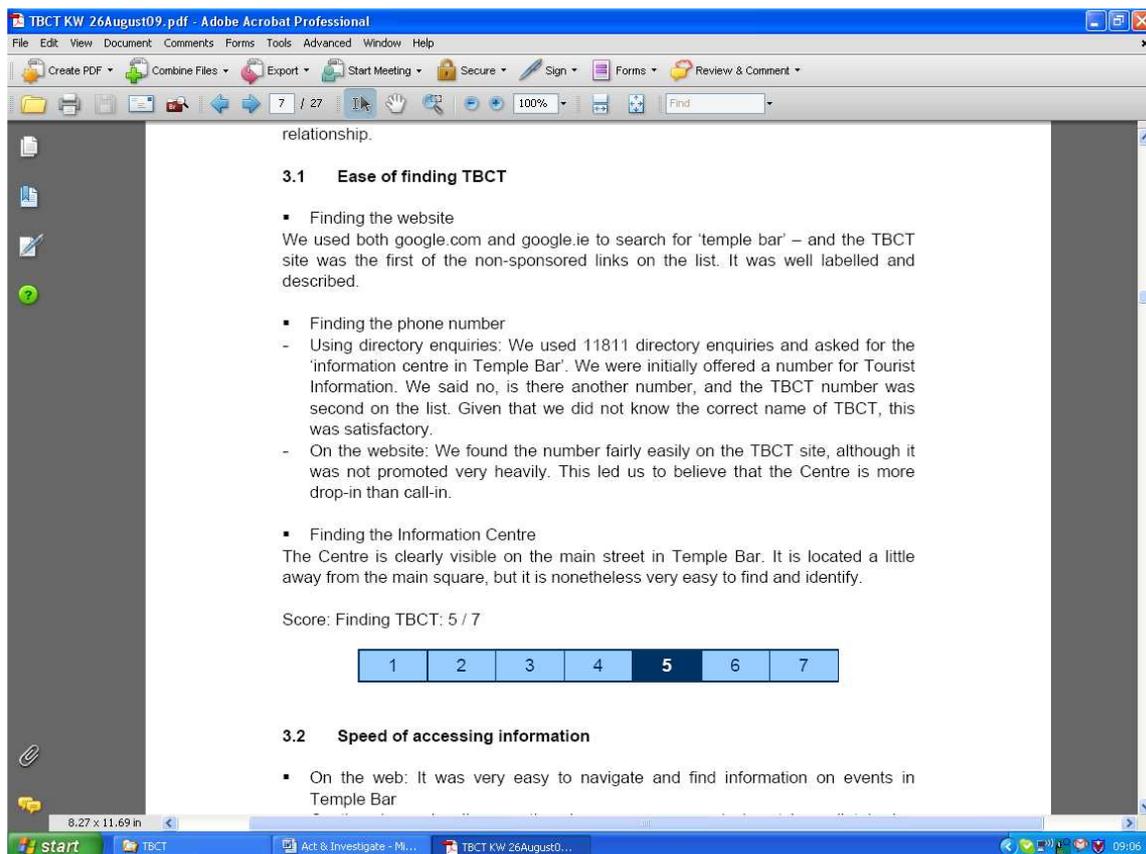
Members of staff were involved in the whole process of identifying areas of concern, and prioritising the actions that arose from these. This was difficult as it was very time consuming, but it gave them an opportunity to discuss the plans so that when it was implemented they understood that it was the best way forward. They were wholly accepting of the plan for change because they were among the decision makers in forming the plan.

- Project Arts Centre

The important point though, is that all of this is from the objective view of your customer, aka the mystery shopper. It is a viewpoint that is completely uninfluenced by any agendas or opinions, and it will reflect the true impressions of the ticket buying customer.

Here's an example of what part of a mystery shopping report looks like:

Evaluate



Stage 4

Once you've received the results of the mystery shopping exercise, your team will then take over, to act on the problems identified in the report and to implement change in your organisation.

Don't forget: mystery shopping is a team effort, not a managerial critique

One thing that's vital here is to get the input of the team at an early stage. Without their buy-in to the process the whole project runs the risk of failure: the team's co-operation will be essential in order to effectively implement the changes that are needed.

"We advised our team (in advance) that mystery shoppers would be around over the next few months. We assured them that they were there to uncover the good as well as the bad, and that our objective was to use the exercise to help us understand how we could improve our service to the customer. As a result they felt a little more in control, and were pleased that they would be involved at each stage of the process."

- Project Arts Centre

Act

Act

Making change happen

How do you decide what to do with the results of the mystery shopping exercise?

You must successfully implement change, if it's necessary. As we all know, bringing in change can be difficult, but here are some tips on how to approach this in the best way.

Prioritise

Every organisation has different internal priorities. These may be financial, staffing or operational etc. It's vital to discuss these, agree what they are and then decide on action points in the context of these priorities.

For example, mystery shopping could reveal a large proportion of complaints are about the cleanliness of the facilities, and that this is putting customers off a return or more frequent visit. An organisation with financial constraints might put this high on their priority list as this problem indicates a lack of training or of good operational procedures among existing bar and cleaning staff. Every venue already has these staff – however if they are not doing their jobs properly then they can be retrained, coached, guided etc within existing financial resources.

For an organisation that has a poor staff expertise priority, rather than financial constraints, then their actions will be managed differently. For example, their feedback from mystery shopping might have indicated poor sales activity over the phone, or poor customer service on attendance.

This should be prioritised by allocating resources to external consultants who can tackle these specific problems through new procedures, new technologies (e.g. a new phone system) and retraining in customer service etc.

Here's what an Action Plan might look like:

“When we were presented with the results of the mystery shopping there seemed like an awful lot that needed to be done, and we thought - how are we going to deal with all this?”

So we broke it down into smaller pieces, we made priorities and we asked people: do you think this is manageable by X month?”

- TBCT

Tip in a box

After the mystery shopping exercise, customer service is now always an agenda item in our team meetings. For example, we have a list of questions customers typically ask and we discuss how best to deal with them. Putting customer service onto our meeting agendas gives staff a chance to discuss issues like this that are a concern to them, and together we try to solve the problem. Staff now feel comfortable talking about what happened without feeling that it's reflecting badly on them.

- Project Arts Centre

Act

Appendix I- Immediate Actions

Immediate Actions are actions which either (a) necessitated immediate intervention or, (b) could be implemented without lengthy consideration or a change in organisational culture. All actions shown addressed by end the October 2009

	Action	Ownership	Priority
J	Improve email communications (in this case, publish complaints handling policy and improve customer complaints mechanism)	IC/Comms	Immediate
I	Improve brochure layout and availability for festivals.	Comms	Immediate
K	Fix errors on website, re-work some layouts. Re-work email format	Comms	Immediate
C1/D1*	Discuss and agree policy re: use of scripts for all staff involved in events (including MC)	Events	Immediate
F1*	Agree roles for stewards, security and volunteers in delivering good customer service at events	Events	Immediate
G	Consider ownership of role of MC at events	Events	Immediate
H	Discuss and agree policy for improving festival signage	Events	Immediate

Decide on deadlines – and stick to them

It's important to set deadlines for each action, but not for too far down the line! Think about what you can realistically change and apply a sensible timeline to that. Don't beat yourself up about it: you'll need to tackle each issue wholeheartedly and with a realistic plan for improvement. This is much better than trying unsuccessfully to implement too great or unrealistic a change too quickly.

Other actions might be postponed until the next financial year when additional financial resources become available etc.

Finally, you should also try to prioritise according to the issue's level of urgency.

And of course you should document your actions and allocate people to them, as well as to priorities and deadlines.

Act

Success story

The mystery shopping exercise revealed something we hadn't realised - while staff understood their role as ticket sellers they found it uncomfortable driving sales and also up selling as they felt that they were being pushy. In our team meetings we now discuss wording and phraseology. For example we talk about how 'Can I offer you a ticket for another show?' sounds better than 'Would you like to buy a ticket to something else?' While this may seem subtle the result is that staff are becoming more comfortable and confident in driving our sales and in looking at ways in which they can encourage customers to make a purchase.

- Project Arts Centre

Here's some feedback from TBCT and PAC on how they brought about change in their organisations following mystery shopping revelations:

"The mystery shopping project scored us from 1-5 on different aspects of our customer service. Anything that went above 5 was called an Unexpected Extra. This could have been anything from a great interaction with staff over the phone to an excellent response to a complaint.

Since then, 'Unexpected Extras' have become part of our language here at TBCT. Feedback is categorised like this and staff are now thinking of ways they can do more for customers. It's an example of how fresh thinking can re-invigorate our approach to customer service."

- TBCT

Info Hub

Info Hub

Mystery shopping cost

A typical mystery shopping exercise at a small to medium sized theatre or musical venue will take 3-5 weeks to complete. At least three to four people will act as mystery shoppers, and the results will be presented to you in a format that you can easily understand and act on. The cost should be in the region of €2,000 to €3,000.

Mystery shopping companies

- KnowledgeWorks (has experience in mystery shopping the arts and was used for this project) see www.knowledgeworks.ie
- Pan Research (well resourced for larger venues or organisations), see www.panresearch.ie

Click here for a check list of handy documents

- A sample template for mapping the customer journey (click [here](#))
- A sample template for action points (click [here](#))
- Cloud diagram showing all customer interaction points on the customer journey (click [here](#))
- TGI Attendance report (click [here](#))

Success story

Following the mystery shopping exercise, we made the decision to close our Information Centre and re-direct staff resources. As a result staff are now more confident and self assured because they are much clearer about their roles. In fact, we found that the principle findings of the exercise were transferable to any part of our organisation.

- **TBCT**

Success story

We've noticed we have a reduced number of customer issues and complaints, and that we've received more positive feedback from our customers. Customers have complimented staff directly and we've received a number of emails telling us our Box Office staff are efficient, friendly and well informed. This positive feedback confirms to staff that they have achieved a lot - which of course they have.

- **Project Arts Centre**