

# Customer focus

The time has come, **Malcolm Chalmers** argues, for a new generation of contractors in the road maintenance sector.

Customer service is a phrase so commonly used these days that it has become almost meaningless, and the road maintenance industry is as guilty as any of overusing it. When sourcing a highway contractor, one thing we can be assured of is that they will offer 'great customer service'. So what exactly does it mean?

All too often, it means having to chase your contractor to try and get an inkling of when they think they might turn up and do some work. It means a service that fails to meet expectations or requirements and, most commonly, invoices that are invariably higher than the initial quote. Not so great after all.

The highways service is guilty of practices which are, at best, shoddy and, at worst, dishonest. It is time for a new generation of contractors who put their customers' requirements before their own.

So, what are the biggest sins when it comes to customer service in this sector? Lack of communication, late completion, poor quality, and short-term gain.

One of the most important things on a customer's wish list is communication. When are you going to turn up? What exactly will you do? If, for whatever reason, the work is delayed, when will I know about it? Unfortunately, communication is not a skill employed by many contractors. The focus is on winning the contract and, once that has been taken care of, there is an assumption that the customer will just accept the level of service they are given.

In my experience, one of the most common complaints about contractors is the late completion of work. There are many reasons for this. It could be as simple as the work not starting on time. However, a more common practice is to start on time but then disappear off-site halfway through the job, in order to service another customer – probably one which has a contract containing time-penalties for non-completion.

While this looks like a simple case of bad planning, all too often it is because there are not the resources available to complete it on time. It is more important to some contractors to win as much work as possible rather than concern themselves about the quality and level of service they provide.

Large term maintenance contract tenders are often price-driven, despite moves to make quality a bigger factor in the decision-making process. Even if all contractors took customer care seriously, the only way to deliver a below-market-value price is to use substandard materials.

There have even been cases where the materials specified in the tender documents and agreed with customers have been replaced with lower-quality materials when the work is actually carried out. This is a handy way to reduce costs and increase profits, but it is not great news for a local authority whose road repairs fail shortly after being installed.

It seems strange, but established practice among highway services



Fair warning: It's time contractors really put the interests of their customers first

contractors, such as road repair and maintenance companies, is to focus on the short-term goals of winning contracts and making quick profits. The thought of building long-term relationships with customers, based on trust and honesty, seems alien.

The shortsighted way in which most contracting firms are run sees too many local authorities left with half-finished, or badly carried-out repairs, and no idea of when they will be completed.

A recent study carried out by Glasgow City Council tested various products available for road repair. The results showed that, of the six repair solutions tested, three failed to meet the agreed criterion. The three remaining products had differing degrees of success and the most cost-effective solution for heavily-trafficked roads turned out to be a product which had a five-year warranty.

It is time for a new generation. In almost every other sector, a company that provides a poor level of customer care simply will not get away with it. Customers will not stand being treated as an afterthought when there is a more service-focused competitor waiting in the wings.

The time has come for the highway services sector to lose its 'this is how we've always done it' attitude and started putting customers first. And it is time that customers actively demand it. At the very least, it is not too much to expect to:

- Pay bills that match the quote;
- Be supplied with the best materials on the market, rather than cheaper substitutes;
- Expect guarantees that last longer than the shelf-life of a pot of yoghurt.

Human nature dictates that unscrupulous service providers will always survive and thrive in an environment which fails to challenge and discriminate against them.

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