
Bruce McClendon and co-authors Mac Birch (Ch.8 and 9) and Ray Quay (Ch.9) wrote Customer Service.Gov as a continuation of the "revolution in public service" started by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler in Reinventing Government (1992) which highlighted government’s need to become more innovative and entrepreneurial and less bureaucratic. Gaebler’s forward to Customer Service.Gov praises the authors for building on the earlier work and for taking a more customer-driven approach. McClendon and co-authors envision the book as a self-help guide that local governments can use to deal with "pressing and unsustainable fiscal issues" while improving customer service through the use of technology and the application of ten principles of customer service which are identified and discussed in detail. The authors challenge governments to be entrepreneurial by recognizing “the fundamental business premise that if you take care of your customers, then the revenues and the net bottom line will increase” (p. xxix). They believe an informed public can help entrepreneurial governments at every level make “appropriate and targeted internal and external investments in technology, public education and infrastructure that improves real productivity, advances living standards, and increases the rate of return on private investments that will grow the economy” (p.15). Their prescriptions are not easy. A strong point of the book is that the authors take care to discuss impediments to each of the principles, while providing inspiration and advice on how to overcome these obstacles.

Written in an easy-to-read conversational style, the book is densely packed with quotes and discussion of the essential planning and management literature from the 1990s to the present.
Quotations from American political figures (e.g., Presidents Reagan, Clinton, and Obama), as well as business (Ross Perot) and military leaders (David Petraeus) appear throughout the book. With a reference list of nine plus pages, the work could easily serve as a textbook for local planning or customer service courses as well as providing a background and impetus for making improvements to planning at all levels of government and in other customer-service centered organizations.

McClendon, who twice served as president of the American Planning Association, has over 30 years’ experience working in local government plus additional years as a management consultant. He liberally shares examples of local planning done well and local planning gone awry, as well as how to turn a seemingly negative event into a positive one. For example, pertinent to today’s tough economic climate, early in his planning career, just as he was starting a new job in 1979 in Galveston, TX, voters passed a charter amendment that reduced the tax rate and "limited the maximum permissible annual rate of increase to less than half the then rate of inflation, while also capping the city’s ability to take on any new debt” (p.26). This resulted in serious and lasting cuts to all departments’ annual operating budgets. Upon conducting surveys and meeting directly with the public, departments were surprised to learn that much of what they had been doing had little or no perceived value by the populace. From this experience McClendon “learned why and how to listen to customer/citizens and how to reduce costs, prioritize and fulfill service responsibilities while maintaining and even improving quality” (p. 26), a customer-focused attitude he also shared in his 1992 book, *Customer Service in Local Government* which introduced his initial six principles, now developed into ten.

Although McClendon, Birch and Quay discuss and quote from many local, state, and national government programs, one entity not treated is the Federal Depository Library Program
(FDLP) and the leadership role it took early on regarding the use of technology and e-government to deliver quality customer service. For example, as early as 1998 FDLP libraries were considering how to best supply quality services in an electronic environment as evidenced by Daniel C. Barkley’s article, “Public Service Guidelines in an Electronic Environment.” After reviewing the literature Barkley proposed a new set of quality public service guidelines for FDLP programs that included e-government and technology initiatives and made customers “the driving mechanism” of the services offered by the FDLP.

Because McClendon has devoted his life to providing quality customer service in government and training others to do likewise, he is predisposed to see customer service, done right, as a way out of many of the persistent problems that beset all levels of government. Indeed, it is likely that applying the principles of quality customer service presented in this book would serve as both catalyst and roadmap for the changes that need to be made to provide well-planned and -delivered government services without bankrupting future generations.

Not just local planners, but anyone dealing with customers would benefit from reading Customer Service.gov. The authors wisely added Ch.12 as a condensed version of their principles to provide an overview for those who lack the time to read the full-length version.

References:

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