

Influencer improves customer service by 38 percent in Michigan human services office



ABOUT THE MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

The Department of Human Services is Michigan's public assistance, child and family welfare agency. The department directs the operations of public assistance and service programs through a network of more than 100 county offices throughout the state of Michigan.

THE CHALLENGE

The staff at the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS) Fort Wayne Office felt overwhelmed as each day started. Their voicemail was full, the lobby was crammed with people, and the line went out the door. Customers who arrived at 8 a.m. felt fortunate to be seen by noon.

The department's overall assistance population had recently expanded by 54,000—on top of an additional expansion of 245,000 people over the past year. In addition, assistance caseloads had increased by more than 100 percent since 2002. Despite the extraordinary growth, staffing had remained relatively stagnant.

In September 2008, a customer service survey at Fort Wayne revealed that three quarters of respondents were unhappy that they could not reach their caseworker by telephone and 60 percent were dissatisfied with the way they were treated in person. Two-thirds of respondents called the amount of wait time in the lobby “poor.”

As the backbone of the local economy—the automakers—floundered and unemployment climbed to 15 percent, the office flooded with new applicants. Meanwhile, each of the 100-plus caseworkers was responsible for 700-800 clients. They were required to enter claims accurately and comply with government policies and regulations.

The district office manager, Rochelle Allen, turned to the DHS Office of Professional Development (OPD) for assistance. The OPD director, Bill Patrick, and his team quickly learned the customer service problem was persistent and required intervention.

“The staff has very high standards,” Patrick said. “Their managers emphasize job accuracy to avoid federal sanctions for errors. However, when you have so many cases that need to be processed, it's easy to lose focus on the individual customer's needs.”

THE SOLUTION

To improve customer service at the Fort Wayne Office, Patrick and his team applied principles from the Influencer training model. They began by identifying the vital behaviors to improve customer service—behaviors that if routinely enacted would lead to the desired results.

They identified 14 behaviors related to customer interaction that occurred in four crucial moments: calling the caseworker, interacting with the receptionist in the lobby, waiting in the reception area, and interacting with the caseworker.



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Their research ultimately pointed to the crucial importance of phone calls and how caseworkers handled customers over the phone. The research revealed that dealing with calls saved clients a trip to the office, shortened lobby wait times, and eased the burden on caseworkers. Patrick and his team studied the vital behaviors of phone customer service by observing a unit of high performers and borrowing their techniques:

- Always answer the call if at your desk.
- Clear voicemail at least twice a day.
- Return calls in the first hour of the day.

Identifying vital behaviors was one thing—getting stressed out and over-burdened employees to actually do them was another. That’s when Patrick turned to the six sources of influence—a model to motivate and enable behavior change. Research from VitalSmarts reveals that changing behavior typically requires influence from at least four different sources—Patrick’s team tapped all six. Here are three examples:

Personal motivation. Patrick connected the vital behaviors that would improve service to employees’ personal values. He asked caseworkers why customer service was important to them and not necessarily to the organization or to the customer. Their responses included, “Because clients are people and they deserve to be treated with respect” and, “That is how I would want to be treated.”

Patrick shared customer stories from recorded interviews in which clients relayed the impact negative customer service had on their already difficult lives. The workers were surprised to learn clients wanted to be treated with compassion more than they wanted to be helped quickly.

Social motivation. Some employees were hesitant to spend the first hour of the day returning voicemail messages. At an all-staff meeting, caseworkers from the unit that had already adopted this practice spoke about how doing so made their job easier. One person even admitted that she had been skeptical about this but had since found success.

Structural ability. Before Patrick’s team became involved, the office used a screener to assist clients who came without an appointment. The screener set appointments and handled some issues for the customer. The district office manager observed that the screener created a disincentive for caseworkers to return calls and set appointments. They knew they could avoid calls and the screener would handle the issue later. This meant people with issues that could easily be handled over the phone subsequently filled the lobby. So the management team removed the screener, leaving the caseworkers responsible to handle walk-in clients and motivating them to return calls.

RESULTS

During the worst economy since 1982, and in the midst of an ever-increasing customer load, the employees at the Fort Wayne Office adopted the vital behaviors and significantly improved customer service.

Percent of Satisfied Customers	Sept. '08	May '09
The wait time was reasonable	35%	40%
My caseworker was respectful	41%	57%
Phone calls responded to in timely manner	26%	43%

Overall, the Fort Wayne Office boosted their customer service rating by 38 percent.

The improvement was even more starkly illustrated through in-depth customer interviews conducted before and after the Influencer approach. The overall average of positive comments from customers more than tripled from 23 to 76 percent. It increased to 82 percent for customers with appointments.

In addition to these improvements, average wait times dropped from three hours (all customers with or without appointments) to an average of 2.3 hours for customers without appointments and 19 minutes for customers with appointments.

The success of the Influencer approach has turned heads. Patrick and the DHS director, Ismael Ahmed, presented the case study to Governor Jennifer Granholm and her cabinet where it was well received. DHS wants to roll the approach out to other offices across the state. When Patrick presented the case study at a meeting of DHS directors, many of them said they wanted to replicate the Influencer approach and see the same results in their offices. Patrick’s team is now planning Influencer Training for these directors.

“Traditional training programs can’t match Influencer,” Patrick said. “The typical human performance improvement model is good, but Influencer is the only comprehensive model.” Nothing else empowers follow-through, he says.

“Influencer teaches that just coming up with a great plan doesn’t mean behavior will really change. To change behavior, you’ve got to use the six sources of influence to motivate and to give people the ability to change their behavior. This model is starting to transform our organization.”

RESULTS AT A GLANCE:

- Customer service rating improved by 38%
- Average wait times dropped by 23% for customers without appointments and 89% for customers with appointments
- Positive comments from customers more than tripled from 23 to 76%

About Influencer Training®—Create rapid and sustainable behavior change in your organization with Influencer Training. Equip participants with a step-by-step approach for becoming exponentially more successful at changing their own and others’ behavior.

This training infuses classroom time with original video clips of modern-day change agents who have solved some of the world’s most complex business and societal problems. The Influencer course delivers an award-winning, proven model for changing behavior by applying six sources of influence to solve your most persistent problems.

About VitalSmarts®—An innovator in corporate training and organizational performance, VitalSmarts is home to multiple training offerings, including the award-winning Crucial Conversations®, Crucial Confrontations®, and Influencer Training™. Each course improves key organizational outcomes by focusing on high-leverage skills and strategies. The Company also has three *New York Times* bestselling books. VitalSmarts’ training content has been taught to more than 2 million people worldwide. www.vital-smarts.com