PANEL: Are Students Our Customers? Perils and Pitfalls of Students as Customers

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PANEL: Are Students Our Customers? Perils and Pitfalls of Students as Customers

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ABSTRACT

Customer service has been a part of marketing for years. A common definition is: “Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met.” This approach has been mainstreamed in higher education by Neal Raisman in his four books on the subject. This panel will present and discuss the perils and pitfalls of this approach in higher education along with a summary of an informal survey of marketing Professors.

Customer service has been defined and used as a part of marketing for years. A common definition is: “Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met.” It has been used successfully by such firms as Disney, and Nordstrom. It has been praised as the key to customer loyalty.

However, there has been a backlash forming and recently published on Inside Higher Ed (Nate Kreuter, February 27, 2014, https://www.insidehighered.com), and in higher education journals (Franz, 1998, Journal of Management Education, 22, 63-69).

Some of the perils and pitfalls that have been identified include:

1. Trying to attract students we recruit using new football stadiums, and geo fencing on social media.

2. Offer amazing amounts of easy credit to finance student attendance.

3. We brand what we are doing as a university and customer service organization (e.g., Feel the Teal).

4. The Board of Trustees and Administration focuses on growth for growth’s sake rather than sustainability and equilibrium.

5. See a student as a customer shifts the responsibility for success from the student to the faculty.

6. The resort-ification of the campus emphasizing rock climbing walls and the beach instead of the value of our marketing degree programs.

7. Classes become popularity contests.

8. Pedagogy becomes entertainment.

9. Student desires drive programs.

10. Grade inflation runs rampant.

11. Professors become subservient to their customers.

The list above is but a few of the many serious perils and pitfalls and costs associated with acceptance of the student as customer perspective. Many other issues were shared by participants in a brief survey conducted on the student as customer approach. The top-line results of that survey are below and details will be shared in the panel discussion along with the perspectives of each panel member at his or her university.
The email survey asked the recipient the following question:

In Academia, are students our customers?
Please check only 1 and reply to this email.

___ Yes
___ No
___ Don’t Know

Data to be used with the 2019 Association for Marketing Theory & Practice

This informal survey was answered by 79 total respondents from 24 universities.

These universities included:
  Babson College
  Ball State University
  Coastal Carolina University
  Central Michigan University
  Duquesne University
  Eastern Michigan University
  Free Lance
  Georgia College & State University
  Jacksonville University
  Midwestern State University Texas
  Morehead State University
  Penn State Altoona
  Pfeiffer University School of Applied Health Sciences
  Purdue University Northwest
  Robert Morris University
  Sam Houston State University
  San Jose State University
  University of Idaho
  University of Nebraska–Lincoln
  University of South Alabama
  University of Southern Mississippi
  Middle Tennessee State University
  Michigan State University
  Tennessee Tech University
Marketing Professors comprised 54 of the 79 respondents while 25 were of mixed specialties such as Management, Health Administration, and Program Directors and other administrative personnel.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Professor of Marketing at Coastal Carolina. He is primarily an applied researcher focusing on real-world problems in business that range from positioning a golf course to promotion strategies for pharmaceuticals and medical devices, as well as sales in a retail shop in a small museum. His teaching interests include Marketing Strategy and Advertising. He has authored an Ebook titled Fundamentals of Advertising: How to Create and Display Effective Ads.

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Chair and Professor of Marketing and Professional Sales, Kennesaw State University. He has co-authored several books, published over 100 journal articles and book chapters, and presented over 250 papers. His research interests include retail location and atmospherics, ethics, and consumer culture. His teaching interests include retailing and other consumer-based areas, including Marketing and the Consumer Culture and Neuromarketing.

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