

By Michael K. Jeanes, Clerk of the Superior Court

Do Monopolies Bother With Customer Service?

If you want to file a document in superior court you have to go through the clerk's office. You can electronically file, use filing boxes located inside and outside of the clerk's offices, or you can file in person; but one way or another, your document must go through the clerk's office. We are the only game in town that can provide this service and have been doing it for over 100 years -- not because people recommend our service to others, but because there is no other choice.

National Customer Service Week is celebrated in October. Although the clerk's office functions as a monopoly, customer service is a choice. When people have to use the clerk's office, it is to everyone's advantage that they look forward to the experience. The one-time customers who find themselves in a probate or juvenile case, or any other case type should have an experience where they are treated with respect and their needs are met by a knowledgeable professional. Regulars, including process servers, runners, paralegals, and sole practitioners, can look forward to their daily or near-daily trips to the file counters where they will see a friendly, familiar face.

One way the clerk's office is different from private industry is the mandates related to our services. No one from front-line staff to supervisors to the Clerk himself is empowered to haggle over the cost of making copies, reducing filing fees, or offering bulk discounts and sales promotions. Some fees can be deferred or waived, but they are non-negotiable, although that hasn't stopped people from trying from time to time.

You can't easily walk away from the clerk's office's function as a service provider. If you have a complaint, please complain effectively. The office would much rather know early about something that can be improved. Some issues, like filing fees, are beyond the office's control; however, others, such as the Electronic Court Record, were created to make records access easier and more affordable for customers, taxpayers, and the clerk's office.

Harvey Mackay, a businessman with ties to the Valley and a worldwide reputation for customer service and leadership, recommends several steps for voicing customer complaints. Those steps are adapted to the Clerk's context in this article:

- Determine the solution you want. Be specific with the problem you're having and suggest a better alternative, including any authorities that support your request. Including dates, locations, case numbers, and other specifics helps, and may be required for the office to review and respond.
- Start in the right place. The clerk's office is fortunate to be staffed by professionals with decades of knowledge in the work they do. Answers can often

be provided in detail at the first point of contact. The Clerk's main telephone number is 602-372-5375 (37-CLERK). The Clerk's contact email is COCCustomerRelations@mail.maricopa.gov. This inbox is monitored by staff who direct questions and comments to the right person in the right department with the authority to address your issues.

- Control your emotions. You can assume that the person making a complaint and the person receiving it are good people doing the best they can and that they really want a quick and reasonable resolution. Mutual respect is effective for quickly solving problems.
- Keep records. This one seems obvious for the custodian of records but should be a regular practice for everyone. Keep track of who you talked to, what department they were in (the court and clerk are separate agencies), what number you called, the dates of your contacts, and any other relevant information. Also keep in mind that your interactions with the clerk's office could be public records. Obscenities are not common, but a surprisingly high number of emails the office receives that contain obscenities are sent from individuals' workplaces. The signature lines of those emails often include the business's mission statement or motto that completely contradicts the tone and content of their email.

Let us know what we are doing well. There are always internal and external influences on the Clerk's operations and we want to keep doing what works while improving where we can. Customer compliments are acknowledged internally to keep staff encouraged to provide the highest quality customer service, to identify those in the office who do this well, and to highlight the customers who are actively engaged in helping the clerk's office improve. Customer feedback can sometimes translate to major change. Armed with documentable demand for a service, the office can get support for improvements from the court, the County Board of Supervisors, the legislature, and other stakeholders.

Customer service transcends bureaucracy and monopolies. Good customer service translates directly into more efficient work and greater satisfaction from people on both sides of the counter. We can't fix what we don't know is broken and with your input we can make great what is currently good. Yes, you have to use the clerk's office, and our goal is that you will look forward to it.

Adapted with permission from nationally syndicated columnist Harvey Mackay.