

SCHOOL CUSTOMER SERVICE

*The Power You Need to Cause Parents
and Students to Choose Your Schools*



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Contents

About the Authors	v
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	11
Chapter 3	15
Chapter 4	25
Chapter 5	29
Chapter 6	33
Chapter 7	43
Chapter 8	49
Epilogue	53



Chapter 1

John Katter slid onto his usual stool at Meyer’s Coffee Shop with a noticeable lack of his usual energy and enthusiasm.

It was Thursday, and it had been a trying week. John had just said goodnight to the custodian at Madison Elementary School, where he was principal, and he was determined to forget about school, the district, and all the negative issues that were swirling around it—for at least an hour, before the budget meeting he had to attend later in the evening. A really good cup of coffee and a piece of Mable Meyer’s pie were just the things he needed to give him a new outlook.

Moments later, he heard a familiar voice and laugh, and a large, gray-haired man filled the seat next to him at the counter. “Mable, I’ve been thinking about a piece of your Dutch apple pie all day. I’ll have an extra-large piece and a cup of your sensational coffee,” Bill Terry bellowed while loosening his tie and undoing the top button of his shirt.

“Hey, John, I didn’t see you there. How’ve you been? I don’t usually come in here before going home, but Mable called me this morning to say that there would be fresh Dutch apple pie by six tonight and I just couldn’t pass it up. In fact, if you look down the counter you’ll see that most of the people in



here are eating her Dutch apple. Bet she called them all to let them know. That's Mable for you. This place has outlasted some serious competition over the years with a great product and a little homespun marketing. I haven't seen you in ages. Looks like you might have had a tough day."

"They're all tough days," John muttered into his coffee.

"Hey, that's not like you. You're the original 'I have the best job on the planet' guy. What's the matter?"

"Haven't you been reading the paper? More budget cuts. It seems that all I do is defend costs and explain cuts—to teachers, to parents, to the community, to the school board, and to the state house at the capitol.

"What's so disheartening is that our enrollments are declining. But we are not alone. It sounds like the same thing is happening to schools all over the country. As a result, we're having to cut budgets year after year.

"There are only so many cuts that we can make and keep ourselves going strong. The schools are in need of repairs, teachers and staff need to be paid competitive wages, the cost of healthcare is escalating. Federal and state mandates are costing us big time because the government talks a big game but doesn't always fund what it mandates. And the radio, TV, newspapers, and other media continue to say that we're not doing the job. But we *are* doing a great job. Our kids are getting into top colleges and universities and the best vocational programs. Our graduation rate is growing. SAT



and ACT scores outperform the national average. And yet we feel that we're losing... that we're not appreciated... that we're always being criticized by someone."

"I'm sorry to hear that you're so discouraged. Discouraged people usually don't run encouraging organizations," Bill replied, knowing that he was wading into deep water.

"I think I need a change," John continued, "perhaps into business where things are more controllable and I can feel successful again—and do more to manage the factors that affect my success."

"That's interesting. I've been in business for years. And we have all the same challenges you do. We have to sell more every year just to keep up with our employees who want more money, buildings that need repairs, insurance rates that keep going up, and escalating taxes. We have federal and state mandates too—OSHA and EPA are always down our throats. And then we have the regulators that inspect our industry. The list goes on and on.

"We have competitors too, and they are growing by the day. When I first started out, there were only two of us in an entire sixty-mile radius, now there are at least twenty. I've had to accept the fact that when you're successful, others will want to get in the game," Bill finished as he took his first big bite of pie, savoring it.

"So how do you compete? How do you stay on top?" John's interest was beginning to peak, and he looked at his old friend in a new light.



“Well (knock on wood), we’ve always managed to find a way to meet more needs. And then we spend a lot of time and resources training employees—and telling people why they should do business with us. Believe me, if we didn’t do that, no matter how good our products and services are, people wouldn’t buy from us.”

“Marketing just isn’t something schools have had to think much about.” John muttered, taking a slow sip of his coffee.

“Like it or not, if we didn’t market, we wouldn’t have a business,” Bill retorted matter-of-factly. “We’ve done it for so long now that it’s simply a part of us. When we don’t pay attention to marketing, we see the consequences immediately in our sales.”

There was a long silence between the two men as John thought about what Bill had said. His thoughts were only interrupted occasionally by the ring of the cash register in the background and the sounds of more people arriving to have a piece of Mable’s pie.

“What are you telling me? That I have to become a marketer?” John queried.

“Let’s change the subject a minute before I answer that one,” Bill responded. “You said a moment ago that your enrollments are declining. Do you have competitors?”

“Well... I guess if you called them competitors... yes. Every family that homeschools their children is a competitor. Then



there's that church school in town. It takes 50 kids a year. And parents can have their students go to neighboring districts, if they want to. I've also heard a rumor that a new virtual school may open in the western part of the state next year. They project enrolling a few hundred students. It might draw some of ours."

"Between the students who are enrolled in neighboring school districts or the church school, those who are homeschooled, and those who might sign up for the virtual school, how many students do you think you are losing?"

"About three dozen students are attending schools out of the district this year. And, like I said, the church school takes about 50. We think we might lose another 10 to the virtual school. I don't know how many are homeschooled. But that's not enough to worry about."

"Don't you get money for each student from the state to run your schools?" Bill asked with a purpose.

"Yes, we do actually. It's in the thousands, but it's not enough to do all that people expect. But with declining enrollment, state funds are falling and we can't make it up in local taxes."

"So every student who goes elsewhere for schooling means that thousands of dollars are walking out with them. Is that the way it works?" Bill asked again.

"Well... yes. That is true."



“And you just said that the church school is taking 50 students a year and that as many as three dozen are leaving to go to neighboring districts. You don’t know how many are homeschooled or might choose the new virtual school, but if it’s another few dozen, that’s more than a hundred students who are not using your services. Right?”

“I’m sure you can do the math too, but that’s hundreds of thousands of dollars walking out your door every year. Even if you are fortunate enough to have students coming into your schools, you are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars every year that you might be able to use to prevent cuts—maybe even improve programs and services. You may not think much about it, but we would be doing everything in our power to change that situation in our business. In my line of work, you can’t afford to lose customers year after year and expect to stay in business. If there was *anything* we could do about it, we wouldn’t let those customers leave us.”

John looked at Bill as if this insight had rocked his world.

“You sure have given me a lot to think about. Ironically, I’m headed to a budget meeting tonight. The administrators in the district have been asked to come up with strategies for cutting expenses.”

“Perhaps you ought to spend some time tonight figuring out how you can get some of your students back. Producing revenue is a lot more fun than cutting expenses any day of the week—and ten times more productive. Think about it,” Bill said with the wisdom that only comes from having had both experiences.



“I will, thanks. Can I talk to you again sometime... maybe call you at work?”

“That’d be great. But I’m eager to hear what you’re going to put back into your school to grow it, not what you’re going to take out,” Bill retorted.

“Really?”

“You bet. Don’t forget, my granddaughter is in fifth grade at your school.”

Insight 1: Many schools and school districts, both public and private, are experiencing a slow but steady erosion in student enrollment.

A growing number of parents are making the decision to homeschool their children. Also, private schools are competing with public schools for students. In many areas, parents are making a decision to send their children across district boundaries to other districts which they believe offer something better. Many places are experiencing the growth of virtual schools that can serve students regardless of where they live. Even if the number of students coming in to your school or district is equal or greater than those leaving, school personnel need to be very concerned about students who are



leaving and why this is occurring. If costs are going up, and they are, the school or the district needs to take in more students than leave each year. Further, not knowing why students are leaving and not doing something about it present the risk of even more students leaving in the future. In reality, growing the student population of a school or district means an automatic increase in state aid and tuition and a solution to many problems.

Not too long ago, we were building schools for the burgeoning number of baby boomers who were having children. Public schools didn't have to compete for students. In fact, public school personnel at times may have even been grateful when some parents chose other options, because it lessened their work and challenges. But the tide has turned in many communities. Now, all schools must compete to serve the students who live and/or might be educated in our communities.

Today about 12 percent of the school-aged population is schooled outside of the public schools. Yet the attitudes of public school personnel about what they need to do have not necessarily shifted accordingly. The estimated number of students taught at home, while still comparatively small, has grown 29 percent since 1999, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In surveys, parents offered two main reasons for choosing homeschooling: 31 percent cited concerns about the environment of regular schools



and 30 percent wanted the flexibility to teach religious or moral lessons. A distant third, 16 percent were dissatisfied with academic instruction at schools. Obviously, we may not be able to serve all of the interests of these students and families, but many of these factors lie within our control and influence.

If we hope to meet this challenge so our schools can prosper and thrive, we need to realize that parents and students are our customers. And like most customers, they are going to go where they believe their needs can be met in the best possible way.

Knowing that you have a problem is your first step to solving it. The second step is wanting to do something about it. The budget problem you may be having right now might be the opportunity you need to change how you and your schools are operating. Not by cutting back—but by actually adding service and programs that attract students and make you more competitive without necessarily costing you more money.

SCHOOL CUSTOMER SERVICE *Workbook*

*The Power You Need to Cause Parents
and Students to Choose Your Schools*



*By Tracey DeBruyn
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Contents

A Letter from the Authors	iv
How to Use This Workbook	v
Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	7
Chapter 3	11
Chapter 4	15
Chapter 5	21
Chapter 6	25
Chapter 7	33
Chapter 8	37
Epilogue	41
Customer Service Training and Action Plan	45



How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is organized into nine sections which correspond to the eight chapters and epilogue of *School Customer Service: The Power You Need to Cause Parents and Students to Choose Your Schools*.

This organization allows you to conduct or participate in one customer service workshop or discussion group during each of the nine months of the typical school year. Each discussion is designed to last from 1 to 1½ hours. You can also concentrate your training into two, 4½- to 5-hour workshops. In a retreat situation, you and your group can study chapters one through five on the first day and chapters six through nine on the second day.

Throughout this workbook, we have provided areas in which to take notes. Another important feature can be found at the end of each chapter—a place for you to brainstorm *Strategic Actions*. By putting all of your strategic actions together, you will have the body of a *Customer Service Training and Action Plan*—giving your study the ultimate in meaning and purpose for your organization.



NOTES

CHAPTER 1

Insight 1: Many schools and school districts, both public and private, are experiencing a slow but steady erosion in student enrollment.

The first chapter in the book makes the point that each student lost to a school or district means thousands of local, state, and federal dollars, or on the private side—tuition dollars, that walk out the door with him or her. Keeping that in mind, ponder the following items:

1. Do your own math. Estimate the number of students in your community who are homeschooled. Now add to that the enrollment in private or competitive schools in your area. Then, add to that the number of students who are attending schools outside the district (if you are a public school system). Lastly, add to that the number of students who you believe are going to virtual or online competitors for schooling.

_____	Number of homeschooled students	
+		
_____	Number of privately schooled students	
+		
_____	Number of students going outside of the district	
+		
_____	Number of students enrolled in virtual/online schools	

_____ **Total loss of students**

Line A

Now, multiply Line A by your per pupil local, state, and federal reimbursement or tuition, if you are a private school or district.

_____	x	_____	=	_____
Line A		Reimbursement		Total lost resources



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2. Take the time to analyze the total lost resources in terms of what it represents:

As a percentage of the total district budget.

In relationship to budget cuts or potential cuts that need to be made or are being considered.

In relationship to total salaries.

In relationship to specific programs that you would like to initiate or may have to drop.

In terms of other areas not listed above.

3. Insight 1 makes the statement that we need to realize that parents and students are our customers. Discuss the following:

Who do you think are your primary customers?



NOTES

Who influences your primary customers?

Should these people be considered your customers as well?

4. Consider the statement, “And like most customers they are going to go where they believe their needs can be met in the best possible way.”

Discuss the concept of parents and students as consumers of education.

As consumers, what are parents and students looking for?
How do you know?

Identify those competing with you for students in your district.

What advantages might your competitors have? How might you respond to gain the advantage?

COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS	Your School/District	Competitor #1	Competitor #2	Competitor #3	Competitor #4	Competitor #5	Competitor #6
Preschool							
All-Day Kindergarten							
Athletic Options							
Curriculum							
Teaching Experience							
Activities Non-Athletic							
Safety							
Character Ed							
Special Ed							
Parent Involvement							
Administration							
Size							
Proximity to Home							
Cost							
Before-School Programs							
After-School Programs							
Transportation							
At-Risk Programs							
Religious Ed							
Grants							
State Accreditation							
Teacher Use (for Their Own Children)							
Technology							
Scholarships							
College Entrance Exam Scores							
State Standard Compliance							

Instructions for using this chart:

1. On the left-hand, vertical column, list your competitors.
2. Grade your competitors in each of the areas listed across the top using the following grading system:
A Excellent
B Good
C Average
D Needs Improvement
N Not Applicable
3. Grade your school or district in each of the areas.
4. You are at a competitive disadvantage in any area in which you give your school or district a grade less than an A. You have a competitive advantage, that you can and should exploit, in any area in which you give yourself an A and your competitors a lower grade.

