

Customer service is make-or-break for many organisations. This includes consumer and retail organisations, business-to-business providers and government agencies.

In most cases, the staff providing customer service are located at the periphery of organisations. These staff include:

- customer service operators in call centres
- retail staff in stores and branches
- sales staff travelling from customer to customer
- service staff working at front counters and other service points
- cabin crew in planes
- technical support and other support staff

Organisations are judged according to the quality of customer service provided. Were customer service staff knowledgeable? Was the right information provided? Was the problem solved? Was the service prompt and helpful?

Answers must be provided quickly, accurately and consistently. This is not easy to achieve, however, and organisations across many industries have struggled to deliver great customer service, and to ensure consistent customer satisfaction.

Intranets can – and should – play a key role in improving customer service across all the roles listed above. The business benefits of such improvements are self-evident.

(This is an excerpt from *Essential intranets: inspiring sites that deliver value*, by James Robertson. This can be obtained online from Step Two: store.steptwo.com.au)



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Support customer-facing staff with a great intranet

The business value of customer service

Customer service staff are often scattered across many different locations, are typically more junior and are likely to have higher turnover rates.

The complexities of organisations behind the scenes also make it harder to provide clear and comprehensive customer service. These include siloed structures, complex products and difficult to use systems.

Against this backdrop, the importance of customer service cannot be overestimated, and many studies have shown the impact it has on the overall success of organisations.

According to Creative Strategies, 93% of customers indicated that quality customer service was vital to maintaining brand loyalty. Another study showed that 68% of customers stop doing business with a company because of poor service.

Bain & Co have found that a 5% increase in customer retention can increase profits by 25–95%. They also identified that it's 6–7 times more expensive to gain a new customer than to retain an existing customer.

While these studies focus on sales-oriented private organisations, customer service is equally important in the public sector. This has been emphasised by the shift to ‘government 2.0’, where simplified service delivery is a key plank in an overall strategy of improving the way agencies work with the public.

The starting point for delivering great customer service is to have the right people, trained appropriately, with the right personalities and mindsets. Products and services must also match the needs and desires of customers. These are product development, management and HR issues beyond the scope of the intranet.



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Sources: Creative Strategies, Bain & Co

Using the intranet to improve customer service

Intranets can improve customer service by better supporting customer-facing staff. In this way, intranets provide the knowledge that underpins great customer service.

This includes delivering timely and useful information to customer-facing staff, giving greater visibility throughout the organisation of customer needs, and providing effective tools for customer-facing staff.

Intranets can also help to connect the organisation as a whole with the needs and issues of customers, forming a key input into customer-centric practices.

There are five practical approaches that can be taken:

1. better understand customers and clients
2. provide knowledge for customer service staff
3. support and connect frontline staff
4. improve service delivery systems
5. provide extranet access for customers

Each of these is explored in the coming sections.

1. Better understand customers and clients

Organisations clearly benefit from having a better understanding of their clients or customers. This knowledge supports every step in the process, from originally planning products and services, through to delivering and supporting them.

Customers typically interact with staff at the edges of the organisation, such as those in stores, or in call centres. This makes it hard for information about customers and their needs to propagate to other areas of the organisation.

A lot of other information is captured about customers within areas such as marketing and research, but the siloed nature of organisations means this may not be widely known about or used.

Intranets can help build a greater understanding of customers in many ways, including:

- *Putting a face to the customer*, by sharing customer stories and insights.
- *Making key customer metrics visible*, such as 'net promoter score' (NPS) or similar figures.
- *Bringing external social media activity into the organisation*, giving staff visibility of trending topics, customer reactions and ongoing discussions.
- *Simplifying access to reporting tools*, such as business intelligence or datawarehousing tools, making it easier for managers to gain insights into customer and marketplace activity.
- *Consolidating information about clients*, by bringing multiple sources together into a single view.

These steps can also help to improve staff engagement, which has been shown to improve productivity. As explored in a previous article *Bring passion to your intranet!*, it can also bring life to intranets that are otherwise dispassionate and dry.

Customer-facing staff rely on having the right information

2. Provide knowledge for customer service staff

Staff in call centres have a tough job. They are expected to provide answers for customers within 30 seconds (or less), ideally without transferring the caller to other business areas. The answers must be clear, correct and consistent. Each time the customer calls up, they should be given the same responses, regardless of who they're talking to.

The same challenges exist for staff in branches or other customer service locations. Behind the scenes, products and services are updated frequently, and typically have complex policies and supporting details.

This makes providing good information to customer service staff a strategic priority. It must consist of more than just the brochures or documents given to customers, and intranets are a natural home for this information.

Customer service information must be of the highest quality, and it must be:

- *Accurate and up-to-date*, reflecting changes to policies, procedures, products and services.
- *Succinct*, providing to-the-point information that can be read and used in 30 seconds or less.
- *Multi-layered*, offering links from short summaries through to in-depth information, to address both common and complex queries.
- *Comprehensive*, bringing together all of the information needed by customer service staff.
- *Aligned with training*, to embed online resources into standard ways of working from the first day of induction onwards.

Creating a robust knowledgebase for customer-service staff is a vital first step. The screenshot (Figure 1) from Moreton Bay Regional Council (an Australian local government agency) provides a good example, covering a common topic: cats and dogs.

In many cases, the knowledgebase needed by customer service staff would be valuable for other staff throughout the organisation,

particularly when it captures key product details.

Peer-to-peer support is powerful for front-line staff

3. Support and connect frontline staff

In addition to providing top-down corporate information, organisations should also support peer-to-peer interactions among customer service staff. This provides many potential benefits:

- good ideas and approaches spread more quickly
- customer service staff can support and help each other
- issues that would otherwise be hidden can be surfaced and resolved
- customer-service culture can be strengthened and supported
- inconsistency between different locations and teams can be reduced

At a small scale, instant messaging and social tools can be used within a call centre, to allow staff to quickly get answers for customer questions. This allows operators to stay on the phone and avoid transfers, while drawing on the expertise of the whole call centre (and perhaps beyond).

Social tools and discussion spaces can also be used on a much larger scale, and social tools are often most heavily used by customer service staff. Organisations should therefore seek out opportunities to engage customer-facing staff as earlier adopters, as well as providing ongoing support with the goal of improving customer service outcomes.

4. Improve service delivery systems

Having the right customer service staff and providing them with effective knowledge and support is important. It is not, however, the complete picture when it comes to delivering excellent customer service.

The systems and tools used by customer service staff also play an important role. In too many cases, staff are provided with multiple, complex legacy systems to use. This makes it hard to look up information for customers, and leads to greater confusion and more mistakes.

The screenshot shows the Embarc intranet interface. At the top is a green header with the 'embarc' logo and a photo of two people cycling. Below the header is a navigation bar with links: Council + Structure, Human Resources, Council Services, Council Systems, Procedures + Guidelines, Forms + Templates, Reports + Plans, and Staff Hub. A left sidebar lists various council services, with 'Customer Service Resource' highlighted. The main content area is titled 'New dog and/or cat registrations' and includes a breadcrumb trail (Home / Customer Service / CSRS), a categories list (Animals > Dogs and cats), and sections for 'New registrations', 'Properties where dogs are not permitted', 'CSO Direction', 'Things to advise the customer regarding animal registrations', 'Related links and documents', and 'Fact Sheets'. The footer contains contact information for the webmaster and authors, and a copyright notice for Moreton Bay Regional Council © 2013.

embarc

- Council + Structure
- Human Resources
- Council Services
- Council Systems
- Procedures + Guidelines
- Forms + Templates
- Reports + Plans
- Staff Hub

Customer Service Resource

- Animals
- Building and Plumbing
- Community Services
- Council
- Council Buildings
- Coastal Areas, Creeks and Waterways
- Customer Service
- Disaster Management
- Environmental Management
- Financial Management
- Information Management
- Land use and planning
- Laws and Enforcement
- Parks & Reserves
- Plant, Fleet & Equipment
- Public Health
- Rates & Property
- Roads, Traffic & Transport
- Sport, Recreation & Culture
- Stormwater and Drainage
- Waste Management & Recycling
- Work Instructions

CS Resource Search

 go>

Staff Search

 go>

Embarc Search

 go>

New dog and/or cat registrations

Home / Customer Service / CSRS

Categories

[Animals](#) > [Dogs and cats](#)

New registrations

The Animal Management (Cats and Dogs) Act 2008 requires all dogs and cats to be registered by 12 weeks of age, or within 14 days of being brought into the region.

The number of animals that can be registered on a property is determined by the local law and is dependent on the size of the property.

Properties where dogs are not permitted

Properties within Steven Ct, Samuel Way and the majority of Desmond St, Narangba have a planning restriction imposed on the development prohibiting dogs from being kept of the premises. Refer to [properties where dogs are not permitted](#) if customer resides in one of these streets.

CSO Direction:

CSOs should locate the property where the animal will be residing in Pathway and:

- Confirm property size
- Options > Animals (check for current registration)
- Options > Licences (check for current animal licence)
- Refer to relevant fact sheet to confirm the permitted number of animals on the property. Refer to [permitted number of animals on a property / Approval to keep in accordance with the local law](#) if customer requires an additional animal approval.

Things to advise the customer regarding animal registrations:

- Applicants must be 17 years of age or over.
- Copies of any relevant documentation (including desexing certificate, pension card, completed 'Obedience concession application and certification', Canine Control Council (Dogs QLD) or QLD Feline Association membership card) must be provided to council to be eligible for a discounted registration renewal. Note: concessions are only applicable for desexed animals.
- If the animal is currently registered in another council area, the current registration period is free of charge. Proof of registration from the previous council must be provided with the registration.
- Assistance dogs, rural working dogs and service dogs are exempt from paying the registration fee. Refer to [registration fee exemptions](#) for additional information.
- Microchipping is compulsory for all dogs and cats born after 1 April 2009, and/or when the registered person changes after 1 July 2009. It is the responsibility of both the new and previous owners to ensure this has occurred. Failure to microchip a new animal may result in fines being issued to both the old and new owner.
- Animal registration period is from 1 Oct – 30 Sept each year. Renewals are sent out in early September each year.
- Lifetime registration tags are issued at time of registration. Replacements may be requested when required. Dogs and cats are required to wear their registration tag at all times.

To register a new animal, customers must lodge the 'Animal registration application' and pay the relevant fee to council.

Related links and documents

Forms

- [Animal registration application](#)

Fact Sheets

- [Obedience concession and certification application](#)
- [Domestic animals - how many can I have on my property fact sheet](#)
- [Birds - how many can I have at my property fact sheet](#)
- [Stock - how many animals can I have on my property fact sheet](#)
- [Minimum standards for keeping animals](#)

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Figure 1: Pages such as this are vital for supporting call centre staff, in this case within a council (local government agency). (Screenshot courtesy of Moreton Bay Regional Council.)

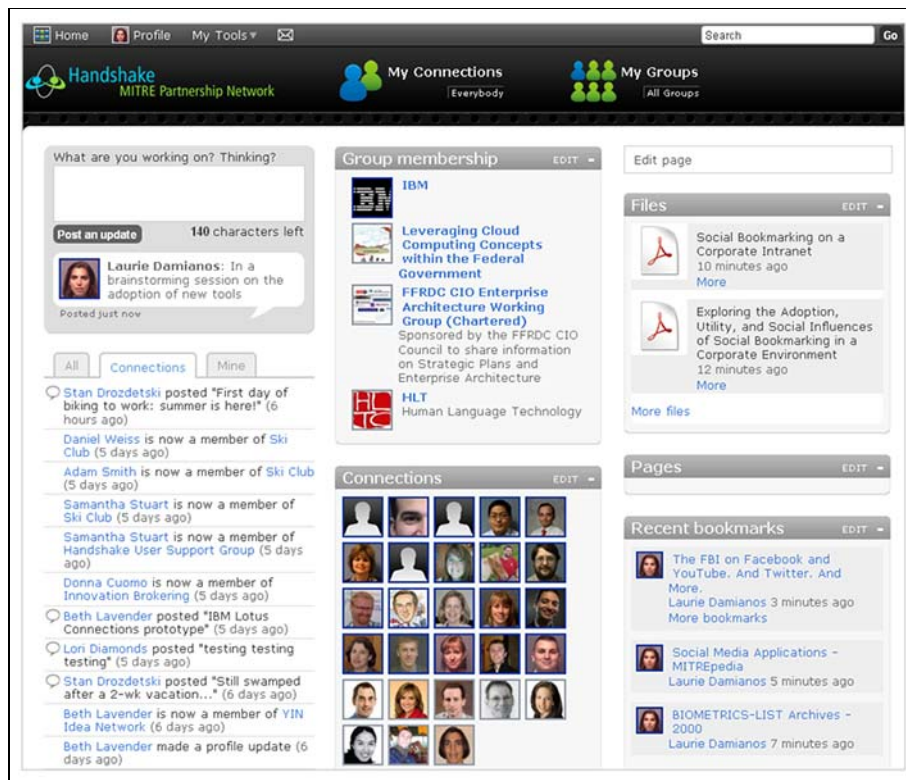


Figure 2: The MITRE Corporation provides technology research and application development services for the US Federal Government and other customers. 'Handshake' is a knowledge sharing and social platform that connects MITRE staff with customers in a secure way. (Screenshot courtesy of MITRE Corporation.)

At the simplest level, intranet solutions can provide a simpler mechanism to look up information stored across multiple systems. Chr. Hansen in Denmark, for example, has developed a single search that encompasses product documentation for over 50,000 unique products, in a variety of languages. Behind the scenes, information is drawn from SAP and several other databases.

Even comparatively simple solutions such as this one can greatly improve customer service, by streamlining and automating processes for providing customers with required information.

The core systems used by customer service staff can also be improved and streamlined. This can provide sales staff, for example, with greater visibility of recent customer purchases, and help to increase coordination between multiple sales staff.

Exploring these types of opportunities tends to blur the line between intranets and core business systems. In many cases, the systems themselves will be managed by IT, on behalf of the business units using the systems. This may take the systems themselves

out of scope for intranets (and intranet teams).

Even when the systems themselves are managed by other teams, intranets provide opportunities to design simpler front-ends to help customer service staff. This is often a win-win outcome: staff are provided with better tools, while usage of the core system is increased behind the scenes.

As organisations move towards more pervasive 'digital workplaces', the lines become further blurred. If the goal is to provide a seamless working environment for staff, then further improvements of these types must be explored.

5. Provide extranet access for customers

In most organisations, websites target potential customers, or the e-commerce needs of consumers. Within organisations, intranets support staff needs and activities.

Between the two sit 'extranets', spaces that provide secured access for key customers or partners. These are internal spaces to some

degree, although they don't give full access to enterprise information.

There are many situations where extranets provide value, including:

- *Document sharing spaces*, for lawyers and other professional services to share information with key customers.
- *Business-to-business spaces*, communicating to, or collecting information from, partners or suppliers.
- *Joint venture spaces*, where several companies come together to conduct a single project, such as building or infrastructure projects.
- *Secure sales tools*, allowing customers to access private spaces to regularly purchase products or services.
- *Franchise spaces*, providing information, tools and support for individual franchisees.

Extranets typically provide a mix of content and task-based functionality. Information in extranets may be specific for each customer, or shared in a tailored way across multiple users. There may also be intranet content that is republished or reused on extranets.

Collaboration and knowledge sharing can also be a primary focus, as shown in Figure 2. In some cases, such as universities and research organisations, there may not even be a clear line between 'internal' and 'external', with the organisation operating as a loose association of staff, partners and customers.

In all cases, extranets should be planned and designed as part of broader intranet and information management strategies. This ensures that technology capabilities are established early, and content is managed in an effective way.

Where to start

Customer-facing staff are expected to provide the right information every time, within 30 seconds or less. Intranets provide invaluable support for these staff.

Intranet teams should therefore:

- **Spend time with customer-facing staff**
Conduct face-to-face research with customer service staff, particularly those in call centres and other major service points. It should be possible to listen in on calls (either live or pre-recorded), as well as interviewing customer service staff.

- **Identify bottlenecks and points of pain**

While many aspects of customer service will be well managed, there will always be key points of pain, typically related to receiving timely updates and key information. Seek these out, and capture them.

- **Co-design customer service solutions**

Form a working group with key customer service staff to 'co-design' appropriate improvements, establishing ongoing processes to keep information up to date.

- **Surface existing insights**

Within most organisations, significant amounts of information will already be known about customers or clients. Look for opportunities to surface this information on the intranet, giving it wider visibility and value.

- **Align intranet strategy with customer service**

For organisations with a strategic focus on customer service and service delivery, this should be reflected in the business case and plans for the intranet itself. Work with customer service areas to identify concrete opportunities and metrics that will support further intranet improvements.

Conclusion

There are many – often simple – ways of providing better support to customer-facing staff. Providing accurate and useful information is a natural starting point, but social tools and business systems also play their part.

Organisations should seek out all opportunities to use their intranets to improve customer service, and establish a clear alignment between the business objective and the intranet platform.

More information

This is an excerpt from the best-selling book *Essential intranets: inspiring sites that deliver value*.

Obtain a copy of the book to see the full set of screenshots and examples, and to explore the other ways that modern intranets can support business goals.

Copies can be obtained online from Step Two Designs:

store.steptwo.com.au