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Exceeding Expectations

John F. Cannon Jr.

College of the Holy Cross, jcannon@holycross.edu

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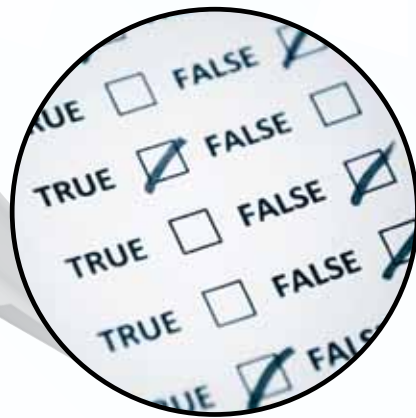
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EXCEED EXPEC

by John Cannon



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Imagine that you attended an event such as a professional baseball game with your favorite team. Your college friends contacted you because they had free tickets with great seats for the game. It was going to be a fantastic night and the first time in a long time when you were able to spend time with these special friends. The game was great, your team won, and you went home happy.

Now, let's say that you were invited to the same game, same tickets, same friends, and you were told that you would get to meet some of the players after the game. You were elated and told many friends and family about the upcoming game. The game was great, your team won, but the players had to leave right away and you did not get to meet them. Do you think you would leave as happy as you did in the previous example where you did not expect to meet the players? I highly doubt it. You might have even left angry or felt as though you were cheated. How could this happen when everything you received was free and you enjoyed a great game with great friends? The explanation is that you had a picture in your mind of how everything was going to happen and anything less would be a disappointment.

Expectations play a major role in the lives of

everyone. In the second example, you simply had an expectation that was not met and human nature took over from there. Eventually you will hopefully realize how fortunate you were to be included in such a fantastic event and it can be a great memory for many years. To come to this realization, you must realize that if you never anticipated meeting the players, you would not have experienced the disappointment.

Awareness of expectations is so important in the facilities business. My experiences have taught me that it is essential to understand how expectations impact our lives as well as those for whom we provide services for every day. The following examples and ideas will provide insight and ideas to help you understand and manage expectations in your lives and in the environment where you work.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT EXPECTATIONS?

Take a minute to think about a day when you felt especially good about something that happened at work. There is a good chance that you felt this way because something exceeded an expectation in your mind. It could be that you just finished a project and it turned out better than expected. Maybe you received a compliment for work completed by you or your staff, or perhaps you just sat down for your annual review and it was very positive.

Now try the opposite and think of a day when you left work and wondered why you ever got into this business. (Yes, most of us love our occupations, but there are days when our patience and love for the facilities business is tested.) There is a good chance the day was bad because some expectation was not met. It might have been an unhappy customer or staff member, or it may have even been that a critical system failed. The day essentially went poorly when things happened that you or someone else didn't expect. This is especially difficult because we all strive to make things run smoothly. When they don't, most of us feel personally responsible, even if it was not entirely in our control.

THE IMPACT OF EXPECTATIONS

This discussion is not meant to change the way you look at the world, although it may happen. The important concept to understand in a service industry, such as facilities, is how this phenomenon impacts the happiness of your customers and staff. People arrive on your campus with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and therefore, different expectations as well. Many new employees will arrive on your campus and bring their expectations from a previous campus. Maybe the facilities organization from their previous employer was funded at a significantly higher level than your department, and therefore they were able to provide additional services. This individual may be frustrated because they cannot understand why they are not receiving the same level of service. Of course, the opposite is true as well if your organization provides more services than their previous employer.

As a way to measure client satisfaction, many facilities departments today use surveys as a way to monitor and improve performance of their department. While surveys can be great tools, they must also take expectations into consideration. For example, have you ever answered this question: "Did the service meet your expectations?" Let's say that you answered "yes" to the question. All that means is that the individual completing

the survey is satisfied with the work. It doesn't tell you anything about how well the work was completed.

Let's say that a technician responded to remove a stain from a carpet. They arrived at the location armed with cleaning supplies and equipment and worked to remove the stain

while the occupant watched.

They scrubbed for a while with the smell of cleaning chemicals in the air. Most of the stain was removed but you could still detect that it was there. The occupant witnessed how hard the

individual worked and was satisfied

with the work because they concluded

that the person did the best they could. If this

client was surveyed, most likely their response would be "satisfied," because their expectation of having someone clean the carpet stain was addressed right before their eyes.

Now, what if the client was not present to see the work being accomplished? There is a good chance that their expectations may not be met because the stain can still be detected in the carpet and they never witnessed the staff member working diligently to remove as much of the stain as possible.

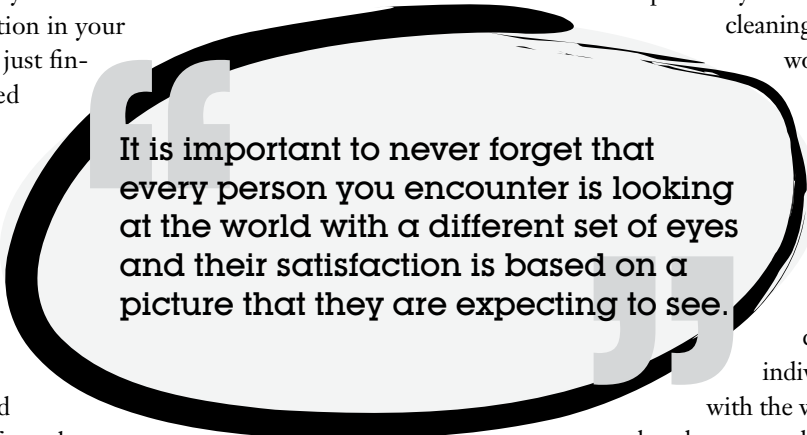
Looking at these two examples, you can easily see how the same issue and same work response may have two different outcomes depending on the client's observations and expectations.

Going back to the survey results, does a positive response to the survey determine if this person did a good job? What if the wrong cleaning chemical was used and the stain could have been completely removed if the proper cleaner was used? The occupant may not be happy if they had this piece of information as well.

Now let's consider the concept of exceeding expectations. A faculty member has a light above their desk that is flickering on and off. The problem is addressed in about two hours. The faculty member is satisfied if they expected the work to be completed in this time frame. However, they might not be happy if it took six hours to fix the problem. Additionally, if the problem was fixed in less time than originally stated, then their expectations would have been exceeded. Exceeding expectations in this example may be completing the work professionally *and* sooner than the faculty member expected.

HOW ABOUT STUDENT EXPECTATIONS?

Prospective students apply to numerous colleges and universities. They tour many campuses and enroll at your institution with high expectations for a positive experience. There is no doubt that all of us hope to contribute to this great experience, but it's hard to determine whether their expectations match the level of service we are funded to provide. Did they live in a situation at home with a shared room and bathroom? Do they



It is important to never forget that every person you encounter is looking at the world with a different set of eyes and their satisfaction is based on a picture that they are expecting to see.

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have a housekeeper or cleaning service? Having a better sense of your student body will be helpful to you and your team in communicating and setting the expectations for those that your staff members come in contact with day to day.

Now that we understand how people have all different expectations, does this mean we eliminate customer satisfaction surveys? I highly encourage the use of surveys as long as these client expectations are considered when developing them. For example, in the carpet cleaning scenario you could ask; was the problem completely remedied, if not, is further service required? If anything, these surveys can help tell your customers that you care about their opinions but remember to keep your questions focused and the data you receive in context as you outline areas of concern or improvement.

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

So how do you survive in a world where we are always trying to exceed expectations? The first step is to try to help people adjust their expectations where necessary. The following are some suggested steps:

- *Utilize Technology*

Use the Web or your work management system to educate requestors and provide as much information as possible to

help them understand what to expect for service. For example, services provided, anticipated timing, procedures to request services, etc. Make sure you can meet the service level that is published! Remember, people are happy when the work is completed in an hour when they expected two.

- *Create Service Standards*

Create standards for your services. Train the staff to understand and follow these standards, then provide appropriate inspections to make sure the standards are being met. Make sure the standards are attainable at your current staffing and budget level. If an individual is not happy with your services you can determine if the appropriate standards were met only if you have specific criteria set. If expectations were met, you can help educate the unhappy individual on your team's standards for service. If you don't feel the work completed matched your set standards of service, then an investigation with the staff is warranted.

- *Customer Interaction*

Encourage your staff to make contact with requestors when possible and also provide immediate feedback if reasonable. This will tell the requestor that you responded and worked to remedy the situation quickly.



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EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS ABSTRACT

Have you ever experienced the frustration of dealing with a disappointed customer when you knew you provided excellent service? How did you feel when that happened? Frustrated? Confused? Incidents like this are usually the result of misunderstood expectations. Expectations play a major role in our lives and are particularly important for those in the facilities profession. This article clarifies the role of expectations in customer satisfaction, and provides the framework for developing a plan to improve customer satisfaction which will enhance the reputation of your department. The guidelines are also provided to change your corporate culture and set the stage for a stronger department.

Five Key Words:

- **Exceed**
- **Expectation**
- **Customer**
- **Satisfaction**
- **Service**

- **Resolve Problems Immediately**

If you receive a complaint or find out you have an unhappy customer, it is important to understand and remediate the situation as quickly as possible to restore the faith in your department and to ensure the customer understands how important they are to your department.

- **Promoting Your Department**

Always take the opportunity to promote the professionalism and skills of your department. This can create an environment where people feel that if something is not done exactly when or how they expected, then there were other factors in play, because this is a great department. Also consider recognizing your team by applying for awards that reward facility departments who provide a high level of service and customer care. Receiving these prestigious awards of recognition will help create this client service environment, not only for your staff but also the clients that you serve.

- **Staff Education**

Educate your staff on the importance of promoting the department. This is most important between department divisions. For example, there may be natural conflicts/competitions between operations and construction. Any issues should always be resolved immediately, and never forget to promote a mutual respect between the groups. If you find that you have individuals that are criticizing others in your department, it must be dealt with immediately and with a clear explanation of how this type of behavior impacts the image of the whole department.

- **Communications**

Share and discuss this article with your staff. Use it as a training tool to help them understand their critical role of customer interaction and how a simple follow-up when something is repaired or corrected can make a big difference.

I am sure you can think of many other ways to set expectations and I encourage you to try new methods. It is important to never forget that every person you encounter is looking at the world with a different set of eyes and their satisfaction is based on a picture that they are expecting to see.

The more success that you have setting appropriate expectations for yourself and those around you will provide more of those days when you go home feeling good. And that is what life is all about! ☺



John Cannon is associate director of physical plant at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA. He serves as treasurer of the Southern New England Chapter of APPA and can be reached at jcannon@holycross.edu. This is his first article for *Facilities Manager*.