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CUSTOMER RELATIONS IN UTILITY RIGHT-OF-WAY MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS¹

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Abstract. Duke Power Company serves nearly one and one half million customers in the Piedmont area of the Carolinas. Duke's service area covers approximately 20,000 square miles and is served through more than 60,000 miles of distribution line. The Distribution Right-of-Way Maintenance operation requires the full-time services of approximately 200 contract tree crews from six different contractors. This represents a tremendous number of dollars, but on the positive side, it represents an unbelievable opportunity in the area of customer contacts. Duke Power recognizes this opportunity and intends to take advantage of the situation in order to maximize good customer relations and service.

Résumé. La compagnie Duke Power dessert près de un million et demi de clients dans la région Piedmont des Carolines. La région de service de cette compagnie couvre approximativement 20,000 milles carrés et est servie par plus de 60,000 milles de lignes de distribution. Le Service d'entretien des lignes de distribution nécessite les services à temps plein de près 200 équipes contractuelles rattachées à six différents contracteurs. Ceci représente une quantité importante de dollars, mais d'un autre côté, cela représente une opportunité incroyable pour établir des contacts avec les clients. La compagnie Duke Power reconnaît cette opportunité et cherche à tirer avantage de cette situation de manière à maximiser les bonnes relations publiques et le bon travail professionnel.

The electric utility industry was unlike almost every other type of business for many years, in that, instead of charging more for their product as the years went by, they charged less. These rate decreases continued until the early 1970s. When fuel and inflation rates skyrocketed, utilities began experiencing the need for rate increases rather than decreases. Needless to say, this change was not welcomed by customers, and unfortunately the utilities found themselves helpless in reversing the trend of increasing costs.

Duke Power over the years has prided itself in accomplishing tasks both efficiently and with the highest level of integrity. Duke is the only investor-owned utility which designs and builds its own generating plants. The results of this policy have been very favorable. Duke Power has the reputation of building plants of the highest quality for the most economical prices. The quality and efficiency can best be exhibited by noting some of the

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awards Duke Power has taken. Among these are:

- 1) In 1984, Duke's five nuclear units captured five of eight top efficiency spots in the nation.
- 2) For eleven consecutive years a Duke Power coal-fired generating plant was number one in efficiency in the nation.
- 3) In 1985 Duke's McGuire and Oconee nuclear stations took first and third place in efficiency in the nation.
- 4) All of Duke's nuclear units have come on line at costs substantially lower than other nuclear units of the same vintage.

There are many more efficiency awards that Duke Power has received and continues to receive every year, but the point of this discussion is to show that Duke is effectively doing the job that it set out to do and that job is cost-effectively supplying the customers in our service area with safe and reliable electric service. But now that this service is costing more and since we are already doing an excellent job of efficiently supplying our customers, how can we ensure that the customer feels that he is getting better service for more money? Service could always be made more reliable, but the incremental cost of making it even more reliable must be justified. This adds to increasing rates, but is being selectively done. Duke Power's answer is, "Let's treat that



Figure 1. A contractor R/W foreman is shown practicing his people skills with a Duke Power Company customer.

customer with respect, courtesy and quality so that he *feels* like he is getting a good value for his dollar. Improved customer relations do not have to cost, they can pay!"

Mr. Bill Lee, Chairman of the Board, made 1986 at Duke Power the year to improve our image with customers. This is not to say that we had a problem in this area, but rather to say that improvements in the customer relations area can always be made and often with no additional cost. We felt rather fortunate in the Right-of-Way Maintenance Department for we had already begun work on a customer relations training program for our contract tree crews.

Together with tremendous support from our Distribution Employee Development Group, we put together a training program which included a video tape as well as a lesson plan. The video began with an introduction by Mr. Lee in which he expressed the appreciation that Duke Power has for its tree crew contractor forces, and also stated the intent of the training program. The program was designed to be given by local Company supervision in each of 30 independent operating locations. The supervisors from these locations were assembled and trained in the techniques for properly presenting the program to the contract tree crews. In an effort to encourage total involvement, we utilized a number of our supervisors as actors in the training video.

Prior to the showing of the video, the objectives of the program are explained to the participants. The video itself is shown to the crews at the beginning of the training. In order to orient their thoughts toward customer relations, the video explores the actions of two fictional tree crews. Each crew finds itself in a different set of circumstances and shows the crew handling the situation badly in one scenario and properly in a follow-up scenario.

The tape is stopped between the good and bad scenarios in order to give the participants a chance to comment on what they have seen. This part of the program is especially enjoyable in that the crew personnel are able to observe some of their supervisors in situations that they find themselves in everyday. It is pointed out that the improperly handled scenarios, as well as the properly handled scenarios, are extremely exag-

gerated in order to get the points across.

Following the viewing of the video the supervisor instructs the "textbook" training. An outline of the major points of emphasis of the program is as follows:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Importance of customer relations
 1. Duke Power Company perspective
 2. Personal perspective
 - B. Characteristics of good customer relations—(these characteristics are mainly derived from viewing the video)
 - C. Adequate job knowledge
 1. Accurate terminology
 - a. definition of terms
 2. Technical knowledge of trees and procedures
 - D. Positive Impressions
 1. Appearance
 - a. Personal (clothes, neatness)
 - b. Truck and equipment
 - c. Job site
 2. Behavior
 - a. Voice—project confidence
 - b. Manners—friendly, honest, polite, respectful, sincere
 - c. Promises—doing the things you have told the customer you would do
 - E. Effective listening skills
 1. Factors that influence listening
 - a. Listener factors—lack of training, self defense, selective listening, thought/speed ratio, barriers
 - b. Speaker factors—distractions, appearance, delivery, organization, language
 - c. Subject matter factors—terms used are too complex, too specialized, trivial information
 2. Active listening
 - a. Mental preparedness
 - b. Content paraphrase
 - c. Clarification
 - d. Emotion reflection
 3. Role play—two participants are asked to role play a situation involving a concerned customer and a crew foreman
 - F. Effective verbal and nonverbal behaviors
 1. Verbal communication—how the words are said are as important as the words themselves
 2. Nonverbal communications
 - a. Body language—posture, eye contact, handshake
 - b. Personal space invasion
 - G. Ways to approach a customer
 1. Assertive style
 2. Nonassertive
 3. Aggressive

The preceding synopsis of the classroom training is rather brief, but should provide you with an idea of the course contents. The program is designed to be presented in approximately two hours, but it may last longer, depending on the participation of the trainees. The program so far

has been presented to about 60% of our 500 tree-trimming personnel and all of the feedback received has indicated an air of appreciation for involving them in building "good customer relations."

It should be clarified that the definition of "good customer relations" does not mean satisfying every desire presented by the customer. It does mean however that we would attempt to courteously explain why we operated as we do and perhaps why we cannot honor some of their requests. One technique which has assisted us in explaining right-of-way maintenance procedures to customers involves the giving of our "Trouble-Free Trees" booklet to concerned individuals. Crews are encouraged to maintain a supply of these booklets on their trucks. The booklet can be helpful in communicating with the customers. We are currently in the process of revising the booklet to better address two separate issues. These issues are:

1. Choosing the proper location for planting particular species of trees, and
2. Explaining the necessity of a tree trimming program for safety and service reliability as well as reasons for certain techniques and procedures.

The value of a customer understanding these pertinent issues can be extremely beneficial to the utility.

In summary, let us examine a few numbers which can indicate the immensity of the possible results of good customer relations. Assume that each of our 200 contract tree crews create a positive impression with just one customer, each working day of the year. This represents 50,000 positive experiences per year. Experts profess that human nature drives each of us to relate desirable or undesirable experiences to others. One may easily see how the positive or negative results of our line-clearing activities can be self-perpetuating over time. Let's make it positive!

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