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Michael Latta

Coastal Carolina University

David J. Burns

Kennesaw State University

Michael McCall

Michigan State University

Ismet Anitsal

Missouri State University - Springfield

Melek Meral Anitsal

Tennessee Tech University

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PANEL: Are Students Our Customers? Perils and Pitfalls of Students as Customers

Michael Latta

Coastal Carolina University

David J. Burns

Kennesaw State University

Michael McCall

Michigan State University

Ismet Anitsal

Missouri State University

M. Meral Anitsal

Tennessee Tech University

ABSTRACT

Customer service has been a part of marketing for years. A common definition is: “Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met.” This approach has been main streamed in higher education by Neal Raisman in his four books on the subject. This panel will present and discuss the perils and pitfalls of this approach in higher education along with a summary of an informal survey of marketing Professors.

Customer service has been defined and used as a part of marketing for years. A common definition is: “Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met.” It has been used successfully by such firms as Disney, and Nordstrom. It has been praised as the key to customer loyalty.

This approach has been main-streamed in higher education by Neal Raisman in his books: 1. Customer Service Factors and the Cost of Attrition: Revised and Updated 2. From Admissions to Graduation: Achieving Growth Through Academic Customer Service 3. The Power of Retention: Customer Service for Higher Education 4. Embrace the Oxymoron: Customer Service in Higher Education.

However, there has been a backlash forming and recently published on Inside Higher Ed (Nate Kreuter, February 27, 2014, <https://www.insidehighered.com>), and in higher education journals (Franz, 1998, *Journal of Management Education*, 22, 63-69).

Some of the perils and pitfalls that have been identified include:

1. Trying to attract students we recruit using new football stadiums, and geo fencing on social media.
2. Offer amazing amounts of easy credit to finance student attendance.
3. We brand what we are doing as a university and customer service organization (e.g., Feel the Teal).
4. The Board of Trustees and Administration focuses on growth for growth's sake rather than sustainability and equilibrium.
5. See a student as a customer shifts the responsibility for success from the student to the faculty.
6. The resort-ification of the campus emphasizing rock climbing walls and the beach instead of the value of our marketing degree programs.
7. Classes become popularity contests.
8. Pedagogy becomes entertainment.
9. Student desires drive programs.
10. Grade inflation runs rampant.
11. Professors become subservient to their customers.

The list above is but a few of the many serious perils and pitfalls and costs associated with acceptance of the student as customer perspective. Many other issues were shared by participants in a brief survey conducted on the student as customer approach. The top-line results of that survey are below and details will be shared in the panel discussion along with the perspectives of each panel member at his or her university.

The email survey asked the recipient the following question:

In Academia, are students our customers?
Please check only 1 and reply to this email.

Yes

No

Don't Know

Data to be used with the 2019 Association for Marketing Theory & Practice

This informal survey was answered by 79 total respondents from 24 universities.

These universities included:

- Babson College
- Ball State University
- Coastal Carolina University
- Central Michigan University
- Duquesne University
- Eastern Michigan University
- Free Lance
- Georgia College & State University
- Jacksonville University
- Midwestern State University Texas
- Morehead State University
- Penn State Altoona
- Pfeiffer University School of Applied Health Sciences
- Purdue University Northwest
- Robert Morris University
- Sam Houston State University
- San Jose State University
- University of Idaho
- University of Nebraska–Lincoln
- University of South Alabama
- University of Southern Mississippi
- Middle Tennessee State University
- Michigan State University
- Tennessee Tech University

Marketing Professors comprised 54 of the 79 respondents while 25 were of mixed specialties such as Management, Health Administration, and Program Directors and other administrative personnel.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Latta Professor of Marketing at Coastal Carolina. He is primarily an applied researcher focusing on real-world problems in business that range from positioning a golf course to promotion strategies for pharmaceuticals and medical devices, as well as sales in a retail shop in a small museum. His teaching interests include Marketing Strategy and Advertising. He has authored an Ebook titled Fundamentals of Advertising: How to Create and Display Effective Ads.

David J. Burns Chair and Professor of Marketing and Professional Sales, Kennesaw State University. He has co-authored several books, published over 100 journal articles and book chapters, and presented over 250 papers. His research interests include retail location and atmospherics, ethics, and consumer culture. His teaching interests include retailing and other consumer-based areas, including Marketing and the Consumer Culture and Neuromarketing.

Michael McCall NAMA Endowed Professor of Hospitality Business at Michigan State University. His expertise is in consumer behavior, marketing strategy and customer loyalty.

Ismet Anitsal Department Head, Professor of Marketing and Dean's Leadership Professor in Business at Missouri State University. His research interests emphasize customer productivity, customer value and service quality in services marketing and retailing as well as entrepreneurship, business ethics and online education. He also serves on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals.

M. Meral Anitsal Professor of Marketing, Tennessee Tech University. Her research interests include services marketing, consumer behavior, new product development, business ethics and online education. She serves on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals. Her teaching interests include marketing research, services marketing, design thinking and entrepreneurship.