

Serving Customers: Professional Development for Economic Developers

Carol A. Jones
Administrative Specialist
University of Tennessee
Institute for Public Service/
Center for Industrial Services
September 12, 2022

Tennessee Certified Economic Developer
Certification Capstone Report

TCED Staff Advisor: Dr. David Kolzow
Capstone Project Mentor: Dr. Bridget Jones
Capstone Project Coordinator: Kathy Barber

Introduction

Serving Customers: Professional Development for Economic Developers

What role can improved customer service play in economic development programs? How do economic development programs in other states compare in their customer service programs vs what does the University of Tennessee Center for Industrial Services (UT CIS) offer in terms of professional development? How can the UT CIS customer service expertise prepare Economic Developers to become more successful? While researching for this Capstone Project, it was discovered there was a lack of information documenting the topic. The research involved in this report will lead to seeking the common elements, or the parallels, in customer service within the Economic Development field. Recommendations for professional development training will be offered in the Conclusion section at the end of this Capstone, which can be customized for use in the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) programming going forward.

Background

The Center for Industrial Services (CIS), created in 1963, is one of six agencies of the Institute for Public Service (IPS), a division of the University of Tennessee system. The IPS mission statement is: “*We serve Business and Government to Improve the Lives of Tennesseans.*” The CIS mission statement is: “*We Help Customers Achieve Their Goals.*” UT CIS values people, diversity, relationships, integrity, and excellence. UT CIS has offices throughout the state of Tennessee that offer world-class customer service to their internal and external customers. The UT CIS provides economic development opportunities to Tennessee’s businesses, entrepreneurs, organizations, community leaders and elected officials through the TCED Program.

The Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Program offers a series of professional development courses across the state, with the Tennessee Basic Economic Development Course (TBEDC), an International Economic Development Council (IEDC) certified 24-hour course, serving as the anchor course for the certification program. Additional course requirements include six specific subject matter 10-hour core courses (60-total hours) and 8 hours of elective coursework for a total of 92 hours to complete the certification. The UT CIS TCED Program is unique, in that it offers an elective professional development course focused on customer service. *“Delivering Exceptional Customer Service”* highlights the theme, “Good service yields good business.” This course, facilitated by the UT CIS Performance Improvement Consultants Martha Kelley and Audra Pinson, instructs everyone about the **LAST** Model for Customer Interaction: L = Listen; A = Apologize; S = Solve and T = Thank. It also details the Do’s and Do Not’s for e-mail etiquette and ways to respond to others. Another elective with a service component, *“Proposing to Win,”* is offered in partnership with TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority) and facilitated by marketing expert, Heidi Smith. This course is about crafting Request for Information/Proposal (RFI/RFP) responses that can sell the Economic Development professional’s community. Providing stakeholders with accurate and clear information is paramount to good customer service.

Throughout the research for customer service-driven training, there was a focus on several Economic Development courses in other states, such as The University of Oklahoma’s Economic Development Institute (OU-EDI) and Georgia Tech Center for Economic Development Research, to find any specific data supporting customer service professional development. In addition, upon reviewing the website for IEDC training courses, there were no classes offered specific to customer service.

Project Description

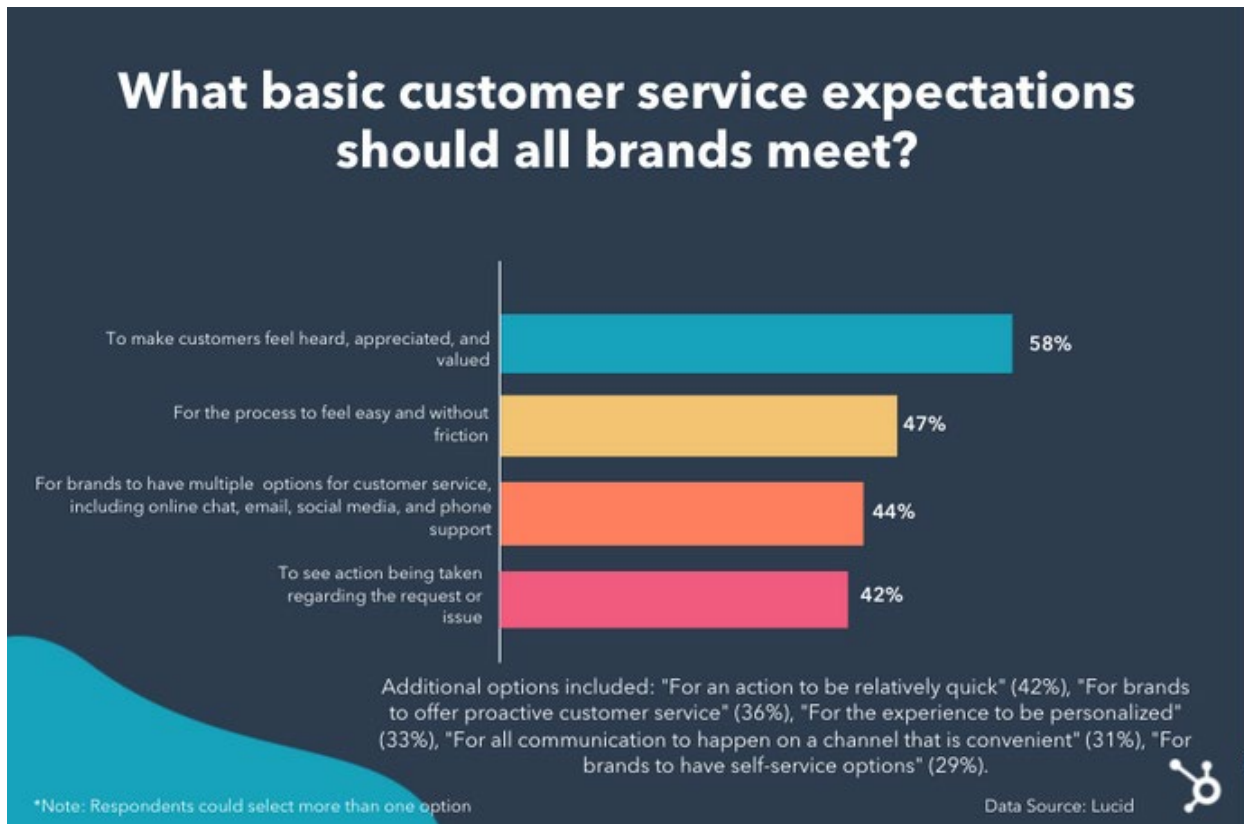
"Good customer service costs less than bad customer service."

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Customer Service as “assistance and advice provided by a company to those people who buy or use its products or services.” Wikipedia defines Economic Development as the “process and policies to improve economic well-being.” During further research of the meaning of Professional Development, Marketing91.com, a website dedicated to marketing resources, describes it as the “process of learning, where one focuses on building personal credentials for oneself – such as degrees, certificates, and attending vocational courses.”

This Capstone Report will dive even deeper by seeking the definition of an Economic Developer and what they do. The IEDC defines an Economic Developer as a “professional practitioner of economic development that have a code of ethics, profession-specific education and training, and a professional certification.” The focus of work for Economic Developers is to create the conditions for investment and job creation to occur, while improving the quality of life for residents and communities. In Dr. David Kolzow’s book, *“Managing for Excellence,”* he states that, “What distinguishes the economic development organization is its focus on stimulating a healthier and more sustainable economy for the community or region it serves, as well as fostering a better business climate and quality of life.” The IEDC website shows that professional economic developers routinely engage in Business Retention & Expansion, Marketing & Attraction, Economic Development Finance, Workforce Development, Strategic Planning among other areas in support of their community’s economic development.

Throughout this research, there was a need to discover why Customer Service expectations are an Economic Development issue. Customer expectations are what customers

predict will happen if they use a product or service. Technology has made the customers more empowered than ever, and technology also means the customers' expectations are higher than ever. To find out what the top customer service expectations were, the visual collaboration product company, Lucid, asked over 300 consumers what customer service expectations should be met as noted by their responses here:



As noted in the above graph, 58% of the respondents indicate that the basic customer service expectations should be met by making their customers feel heard, appreciated, and valued.

Capstone Survey Results

A survey was sent to 30 Tennessee Certified Economic Developers (TCEcD) that currently are working in Tennessee's Economic Development industry, asking them specific questions about customer service needs and opportunities in the economic development process.

Seven responses were received (23.3%) that describe the customer service roles that they play, what customer service entails for them in their positions, and how the Center for Industrial Services, can better serve them.

The common themes and parallels to their responses are outlined below:

What does customer service entail for you?

- Customer service is the backbone of what they do as Economic Community Developer's. It is vital to existing business partners and the companies they recruit. Customer service is the key to success of an economic developer.
- Customer service is a significant role. They must supply excellent customer service to achieve positive results. They should be aware of the needs of their customers and meet those needs. They should always respond in a timely manner with accuracy. They strive to provide customer service that is responsive, helpful, quick, and informative, by also assisting in locating information or directing to another source, as well as connecting people and businesses with resources and data. They must be responsive in returning information back to their customers and try to meet deadlines and return all calls and emails within 24 hours.
- Their jobs are based on relationships. People do business with people they know AND trust. They could have the best community and industrial park with all the necessary infrastructure, but if consultants and project managers do not trust them, they will be hesitant to bring projects to the community.
- They do not want to create a bad customer service experience with their clients, as their customers want to feel appreciated. This can be a very powerful impact in the Economic Development field. Examples of bad customer service could include the following: customers not able to speak to a person who can provide them the answers they are looking for; customers experiencing rude and unhelpful employees; customers being passed around to multiple people; they are put on hold for an unreasonable length of time. Bad customer service does not lead to successful economic and community development outcomes.

How can the UT CIS better serve you with customer service expertise?

- UT CIS can help by offering data, resources, best practices, and training education opportunities for them as well as their local businesses. This will help retain and recruit new businesses to their communities. Consider having more courses on workforce development and customer service.

- As a state department, it would be great to better understand the customer needs regarding, for example, how a state department is not serving their city and county customers, what other services are needed, what additional funding opportunities and technical assistance that are also needed.
- Develop a course tracker that could be easier and quicker to enable them to monitor their TCED progress.
- See more pro-active outreach from the UT CIS to their office about the services available to their local business partners.

In their work, Economic Developers interact with a variety of key stakeholders including:

- Prospects and Potential Customers
- Site Selection Consultants
- Financial Providers
- Regional, State, and Federal Economic Development Partners
- Local Economic Development Boards and Elected Officials
- Peers and Colleagues

Each of these partners and stakeholders bring unique needs and perspectives into the Economic Development process. Customer service strategies designed for each group can improve the effectiveness of the Economic Development process. It can also increase the ability of Economic Developers to implement successful Economic Development programming in their communities.

Project Outcomes

The focus of this Capstone is to identify up-to-date training needs and opportunities, specifically in Customer Service, for Tennessee. Once this is completed, this Capstone research

will position the author to identify new strategies for targeted Customer Service training to prepare Tennessee Economic Developers to better serve all key stakeholder groups identified in the section above. This will be accomplished by defining specific Customer Service actions and aligning “Best Practices” in the Customer Service profession to address these appropriately.

“Best Practices” from TCED courses such as “*Delivering Exceptional Customer Service*” and benchmark data from other states as well as IEDC sources will be used to create recommendations. Surveys completed with select TCED graduates currently working in the Economic Development field in Tennessee was also used to address gaps in the literature.

Results and Lessons Learned

The Tennessee Certified Economic Developer (TCED) Program is unique, as stated in the Background section of this report, in that, compared to other states’ programs, the UT CIS offers an elective professional development course specific to customer service and another elective with a customer service component. A focus was made on several Economic Development courses in other states in search of any specific data supporting customer service professional development. In addition, upon reviewing the IEDC website for training courses, there was no data found offering customer service classes or trends.

A customer service training offered at the UT CIS is the “*Delivering Exceptional Customer Service*” course. This course is a 5-hour elective class in the TCED Program. There is a general overview of this class in the Background section of this report. To be more specific, for example, the **LAST** Model for Customer Interaction is defined as:

- L – Listen: let the customer vent; for agreement; for feelings
- A – Apologize: put yourself in their shoes, listen without judging
- S – Solve: think of every possible solution, think of ideal outcomes, solve the problem
- T – Thank: for letting it be known there had been a problem, for caring enough to check

“*Delivering Exceptional Customer Service*” also details the Do’s and Do Not’s for e-mail etiquette and ways to respond to others. For example, including, but not limited to:

DO – take time to prepare concise, correct, and careful messages that do not frustrate receivers, get the address right, use friendly and clear salutations, send copies only to concerned individuals, be professional

DO NOT – send messages with misspelling, incorrect punctuation, respond when angry, send anything that someone would not want published

In Chapter 4, “*The Customer-Driven Organization*” from Dr. David Kolzow’s publication “*Managing for Excellence*”, he acknowledged that customers have at least four basic needs including the need to be understood; the need to feel welcomed; the need to feel important and the need for comfort, either physical or psychological.

Bad customer service, based on the website, REVE Chat, can be defined as when a business fails to meet customer expectations such as service quality, response time, or overall customer experience. The factors that have a negative impact on customer service are inefficient support staff, lack of real time support, or unable to understand the customer’s needs.

In summarizing key points from the survey results, there are clear indications that customer service in the Economic Development profession is vital. Professionals in the Economic Development field want to connect people and businesses. They value the investment the businesses make in their communities. They understand the needs of their customers. They are committed to the relationships they have built with businesses, with TRUST being a valuable aspect. They aim to provide customer service that is informative, helpful, responsive, and quick. One result from the survey stated: “You have only one chance to make a good first impression,” so always be ready to provide superior customer service.

Conclusion

Through the results of this Capstone research, there is better awareness and understanding of what Economic Development professionals need to be successful. Economic Development professionals in Tennessee are passionate about what they do. They have made a commitment to their communities and to the relationships they have built. They operate with the highest honesty, trust, and integrity. They understand the needs of their customers and they strive to provide the best customer service that is informative, helpful, responsive, and quick.

This Capstone research has confirmed the importance of excellent Customer Service throughout the Economic Development process in Tennessee and other states. Based upon these findings, the following recommendations for future professional development offerings for Customer Service practices in Economic and Community Development in Tennessee that leverage the UT CIS expertise in training and professional development can be offered.

In addition to the electives that the Tennessee Certified Economic Developer program offers, the UT CIS has the potential to recommend, create, and implement additional Professional Development course work in Customer Service that will continue to be greatly beneficial to Economic Development professionals. These offerings could include a full day of Customer Service-oriented classes focusing on “Best Practices” by Tennessee Economic Development professionals.

One of the most effective elements of the TCED courses are presentations by Economic Development professionals from Tennessee that highlight successful local practices and implementation success stories. These “Best Practice” presentations offer current and relevant examples of successful practices from TCED peers and colleagues that can be immediately implemented in more Tennessee communities. TCED Program leaders can continue to identify

leading TCED graduates, and Economic Development professionals working in Tennessee to create and present relevant “Best Practices” in Customer Service during segments of existing and future TCED course offerings.

Additionally, new courses that help Tennessee Economic Developers collaborate more effectively with local officials in their communities can be created as a new TCED or UT CIS professional development offering. This finding from the Capstone survey responses is too valuable to dismiss when one considers the role of local elected officials in successful local economic development programming. TVA Economic Development has previously offered training in Basic Economic Development for Local Elected Officials in past decades. This course could be updated to address current needs and opportunities for customer service professional development for Tennessee Economic Development professionals.

An additional helpful suggestion made from one of the survey responses was to develop a course tracker that could be more efficient to enable them to monitor their TCED progress. The UT CIS LMS (learning management system) software, K@TE (Knowledge and Training Excellence), can be difficult at times for those wanting access to their transcripts. Responding to this survey request would be an excellent example of the UT CIS leaders utilizing the concepts from the “*Delivering Exceptional Customer Service*” – **LAST** Model for Customer Interaction – in TCED Program offerings to better serve Tennessee.

Resources

Course material used from the UT-CIS Tennessee Certified Economic Developer Program:
Tennessee Basic Economic Development Course, Proposing to Win and Delivering Exceptional
Customer Service

Center for Industrial Services

<https://www.cis.tennessee.edu/economic-development>

Sally Gronow – Head of Customer Service at Welsh Water

<https://www.liveagent.com/>

Oxford English Dictionary

<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46319?redirectedFrom=customer+service#eid1212284660>

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_development

Marketing91

<https://www.marketing91.com/>

Dr. David Kolzow – President Team Kolzow, Inc.

“Managing for Excellence”

International Economic Development Council

<https://bit.ly/3uWzL2R>

<https://www.iedconline.org/>

HubSpot

<https://blog.hubspot.com/service/customer-service-expectations>

Indeed.com

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/customer-expectations>

Lucid

<https://lucid.co/>

University of Oklahoma Economic Development Institute

<https://pacs.ou.edu/edi/>

Georgia Tech

<https://cedr.gatech.edu/professional-development/>

REVE Chat

<https://www.revechat.com/blog/bad-customer-service/>