

Customer Service

Excellence in customer service is at the heart of success for any museum or other culture and heritage organisation. This guide describes strategies and skills to assist you in making every visitor's experience of your organisation an enjoyable one.

From the moment visitors hear about your organisation to the time they take one last look as they walk out the door, you want them to have a pleasurable, informative, and memorable experience.

Customer service plays a vital role in the successful operation of any museum or other culture and heritage organisation. It is at the heart of every relationship with the tourist industry and the local community, and contributes enormously to the public perception of any organisation.

Customer service is first of all a state of mind. It means that every person who works in your museum, paid or unpaid, cares about doing the best for every visitor. Although customer service is most apparent in the roles of the people who are at the front desk, or those who host your exhibitions, it applies equally to behind-the-scenes staff. Organisations offer excellent customer service when everyone is working together towards this goal.

INSIDE

- 2 First impressions
- 4 Meeting customers' expectations
- 6 Developing great customer service
- 9 Tour groups
- 10 Participating in the tourism sector
- 11 Managing your facilities
- 11 Last Word



First *impressions*

First impressions count – and customers can make up their minds about a place very quickly.

Customer service on the street

Customer service begins long before your visitor arrives at the front desk.

Ask yourself:

- How easy is it for visitors to find you?
 - Are you listed in local directories?
 - Does the local information centre have clear up-to-date information about you?
 - Is your location clearly signposted?
 - Do you keep brochures at other tourist spots in your area?
- Do you keep regular hours that are well publicised?
- When your visitor arrives at the museum, is the entrance clearly signposted and accessible?
- Do you have a website that makes the kind of statement that you want to live up to
 - professional, friendly, inviting, and up-to-date?

A warm welcome

Visitor research shows that meeting and greeting your visitors makes a significant contribution to your organisation's atmosphere and the visitors' experience.

Establish a clear practice for welcoming visitors. Whether you're a host standing waiting to greet visitors or the person sitting behind a desk ready to answer questions, step forward when your customers come in the front door and make them welcome.

Keep in mind these principles when encountering visitors:

- Good communication is more than choosing the right words.
- Keep your body language open and positive and use comfortable eye contact.
- Avoid physical barriers – if possible, don't stay behind a desk.
- Smile – make your welcome genuine and sincere.

Meeting and greeting

Two key tasks when you greet a visitor are to make them feel at home and identify their potential needs.

Have they visited before?

Ask your visitors if they have visited the museum before. If they have:

- welcome them back
- offer guides and event calendars
- tell them about new displays and touring exhibitions.

If they are first-time visitors:

- welcome them
- give some background on your museum
- offer guides and event calendars
- point out the key facilities to them – toilets, coat and bag storage, cafe, lift.



Questions you should always ask:

- Where are you from?
- How much time do you have?
- Are you with a group or alone?
- How many are in your party?
- What are you most interested in seeing?

Asking questions not only ensures you can provide the service your customers need, but is also an easy method for gathering visitor statistics.

Greetings in other languages

If you want to greet your visitors in Māori, you could say: 'Kia ora' (hello) or 'Kia ora, nau mai, haere mai' (hello, welcome, come in).

If a staff member can speak the language of an international visitor, use them as a host or interpreter.

Tikanga Māori

If you observe tikanga Māori (Māori rules or customs), are you able to set up special seating arrangements for pōwhiri (official welcomes)? Do you have facilities for entertaining your guests with morning or afternoon tea?

Check for yourself

Check for yourself the first impression your visitor receives.

- Is this an environment you would feel comfortable entering for the first time?
- Are your staff welcoming and helpful?
- Are your facilities kept well maintained and clean?

It is important for staff to be on their 'best behaviour' at all times. When you work in the public domain, you're always under the spotlight, and your behaviour influences the public perception of your workplace.

It takes more time to change a bad impression than it does to make a good one in the first place.

Meeting **customers'** *expectations*

What do your customers expect?

Customers need to feel a personal connection with the museum or culture and heritage organisation they are visiting. They want to find something there for them.

When you know what your customers want, then you can meet their expectations. Asking about their interests when they first arrive will help you. You may be able to suggest particular displays to them or special activities for children. But be careful of making assumptions about visitors' interests.

There will always be visitors who want to do their own thing - accept this and leave them to it, but stay friendly and acknowledge their presence.

What do your customers care about?

Research shows that there are five main areas that customers care about in the service you offer them.

- **Reliability.** Deliver your promised service dependably and accurately.
- **Tangibles.** Have clean facilities, warm buildings, and friendly staff.
- **Assurance.** Know where things are and what's on in the museum.
- **Empathy.** Listen to your customers and pay attention to what they say. Provide personalised care.
- **Responsiveness.** Provide prompt service and a willingness to help.

Customers don't expect staff at the front desk to be experts or specialists in any particular field, but they are expected to have a good general knowledge about the museum and to be able to give directions to the museum's displays and facilities.

How do you meet customers' expectations?

Research suggests the most important factor in meeting customer expectations is reliability. To exceed those expectations, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy are the more important factors. Be courteous, engage with your visitors, and go beyond what is expected.

Help them find their way around

Make sure the space inside your building is well signposted. Don't just tell visitors where facilities are - show them. Offer to take a visitor on a personal tour to your favourite display or through your favourite gallery. When you see that a visitor or group is specially interested in a particular object or area, identify other examples they might like to see, and assist them in finding all the information you have available.

Tell the stories of your place

Think about the possibilities arising from these questions.

- Can you tell the history of your region or iwi (tribe) in a story?
- Are there objects in your museum with a great story behind them?
- Would the story behind a painting or exhibit enhance the visitor's appreciation of the display?

Share some of the interesting facts and background about your museum or culture and heritage organisation. Sometimes visitors don't know what they want to see and this can be an opportunity to relate a personal story and show your favourite items.

If you can tell factual information as a story, that can be an enriching and memorable experience for your visitors. They will remember both the story and the facts.

Customers value not only the information you give, but the way you give it.



Providing information

The public expects that museums and culture and heritage organisations will be informative and authoritative.

Ensure that you provide visitors full and detailed information in a range of forms, such as labels of various kinds, or reading material on local history or natural heritage, or a computer set-up. If there is a table and chairs for reading, the visitor can access more information if they choose to or just make use of a place to sit down.

Keep a feedback book available so you can monitor the level of information your customers want. Exit surveys are also good opportunities to check your customers' expectations, for information as well as other services, and whether you are meeting them.

Keep yourself informed about what is in your organisation and what is happening there. However, if you don't know the answer to a question, admit it. Not all the staff need to be an expert on everything, but everyone working at your museum needs to know the processes for answering queries and, if necessary, where to go for further information. Find out from a staff member and remember the information for next time.

Providing safety and security

Your organisation must comply with statutory legislation and local by-laws. You need to have policies and procedures in place which are understood and followed by all staff and visitors, so risks are minimised at all times and your organisation is always operating within the law.

Check that your museum or culture and heritage organisation has the following processes or systems:

- statements of compliance with building, public health and fire safety regulations;
- Occupational Health and Safety compliance;
- Building Warrant of Fitness;
- emergency procedures that are understood by all your staff;
- list of fire wardens or marshals;
- first-aid certification;
- public liability insurance;
- regular hazard checks;
- schedule of health and safety checks;
- tikanga guidelines for cultural safety.

Make sure that all staff know emergency procedures and the location of fire exits.

For further information, see *He Rauemi Resource Guide 7: 'Emergency Procedures'*.

Developing great *customer service*

Surveys and feedback

A good place to start developing great customer service is through customer surveys. As well as asking your visitors questions about what they want to see and do, record their comments and respond to their feedback. Acknowledge both favourable and unfavourable comments.

Have systems in place for acting on comments, such as a complaints procedure clearly understood by all staff, easy-to-use comments or complaints forms, a system for recording comments and complaints and the decision made or action taken, and follow-up procedures.

Customer research is useful for a number of reasons:

- You can learn about your customers.
- You can easily assess the quality of your service.
- You quickly pick up any changes in your customers' expectations and preferences.
- The impact your institution has on visitors is clear to both your staff and the wider community.

Think of yourself as a customer. Have you had a bad customer experience?

- What made it a bad experience?
- What would have improved it?
- Did you complain?
- Were you listened to?
- Did the organisation make any attempt to follow up on your complaint?

Monitor and review your customer service standards regularly. Engage in staff training; this can be arranged through outside sources or with informal groups of your committee and staff or other museums in your region.

You can find useful information on approaches to and frameworks for visitor research in *He Rauemi Resource Guides*:

3: 'Know Your Visitors'

4: 'Introduction to Visitor Surveys'.

Handling customer complaints

Complaints can be a challenge for your organisation but they also provide an opportunity to improve your service, change public perception, and educate your customers and staff.

Setting up the systems for handling complaints and teaching all your staff how to manage customer complaints are part of good customer service.

Here are some key points to remember about customer complaints.

- The staff member behind your front desk will receive 45% of your organisation's customer complaints.
- Customers who feel their complaints were badly handled will tell an average of twelve to twenty other people.
- Customers who are pleased with the way their complaints were handled will tell an average of four to six other people.

Managing complaints effectively

Complaints can be an opportunity to show your willingness to listen and to improve your organisation. Studies show that it is not the complaint itself that is the deciding factor in whether a customer will come back, but how the organisation handles the complaint. Customer loyalty can increase if an organisation solves a problem or deals with a complaint well. You can even turn a complaining customer into an advocate for your museum or cultural organisation!

Here are four steps to take for handling complaints effectively.

Step 1

Let the customer finish their complaint before you begin to offer any explanation. Listen all the way through and don't interrupt. Actively listen – give feedback to show you heard what they said. If you are not clear on any point, ask questions.

Step 2

Accept and acknowledge the customer's feelings. Reflect back the feelings you have picked up. Don't look or sound defensive, and don't take the complaint personally – the customer is speaking to you as a representative of your organisation.

Step 3

Clarify the facts. Repeat the facts to the customer so you are sure you understand them. Ask questions:

- What happened next?
- Did anything else take place?
- What does the customer want you to do?

Step 4

Take action to fix the problem. If you can't fix the problem yourself, go to the staff member who can, but keep ownership of the problem. The customer should deal with the same staff member during the complaint process even when others are involved in finding a solution. If necessary, investigate further and present options for solutions. In any case, follow up and let the customer know the outcome.

Communicating across cultures

Another challenge in customer service can be maintaining clear cross-cultural communication. It is important that staff recognise and have an understanding of the difficulties faced by international travellers. Culture shock occurs when familiar cues in language, physical landscape, attitudes, dress, and behaviour are removed.

International visitors are not the only ones liable to suffer from culture shock. Any first-time visitors to your organisation may do so to some degree, whatever their culture.

Symptoms of culture shock may include:

- frustration
- irritation
- stress
- anxiety
- anger
- feelings of helplessness
- excessive fear of being cheated or hurt.

Be aware of these important areas of difference between cultures.

- Language is often the most noticeable difference – and this includes body language as well as verbal language.
- Expectations of levels of service vary greatly in different countries.
- Not only the food and beverages consumed may be different, but the attitudes to consuming them may also differ from your expectations – visitors may want to bring their own food in and/or eat and drink in your museum spaces.
- There are different attitudes to and varying standards for hygiene and toilet facilities throughout the world.

Cultural empathy and awareness

Certain taonga (treasures) or iwi (tribal) exhibits or other museum objects may hold special significance for some visitors. These visitors may want to acknowledge the taonga with a karakia (prayer), karanga (female call), mihi (greeting), or waiata (song).

The best way to assist travellers and visitors who are displaying symptoms of culture shock is to pay attention to the key attributes of customer service: **reliability**, **assurance**, **empathy**, and **responsiveness**.

Travellers often experience culture shock when they find differences between their expectations and the realities of the country they are visiting. Be aware of the symptoms and points of difference, and show the visitor that you understand.

Providing for special needs

A major component in good customer service is the ability of staff to identify customer needs quickly. Customers with special needs may require assistance from your staff. You will need to have systems in place to assist visitors who need particular assistance, and you will need to ensure that all your staff understand these systems.

Your goal in providing good customer service for visitors with special needs is to create a barrier-free environment.

The buildings

Make sure your museum meets all legal requirements and recommendations for access. If there are any difficulties of access, be aware of them and know how they can be overcome.

You will often need to take a proactive approach to meet special needs. If your museum or organisation is large enough, or has walking tracks, then you may be able to provide mobility scooters or ensure there is access for them. Other features to assist customers with special needs include:

- large text on signage and hand-outs;
- audio guides;
- hearing loops (devices for assisting people with hearing aids).

The staff

Make sure that your staff know how to offer assistance to any visitors who require it.

Whatever the size of your organisation, remind staff to speak loudly and clearly to customers with hearing difficulties. You can obtain signs requesting customers to let you know if they have hearing or other difficulties from the Barrier Free New Zealand Trust.

When a visitor is accompanied by a caregiver, talk to the visitor, not just the caregiver. Remember that guide dogs and helper dogs are legally permitted in public facilities.

Legal requirements

There are legal requirements to assist access to public places for people with disabilities. Information on these requirements is available from a number of organisations. Liaise with local disability information centres and national organisations such as the Barrier Free New Zealand Trust and the Human Rights Commission.



Tour groups

Tour groups present particular challenges, especially for small organisations. It is essential that you identify the needs and interests of your tour groups, preferably before they arrive.

Key points for effective group management

- Know which groups are expected before they arrive.
- Find out how long they will be spending at your museum.
- Identify special areas of interest.
- Be aware of any special needs and access requirements.

Booking tours

Your museum or organisation should have a booking system in place that all staff are familiar with. One staff member should take responsibility for tour groups but, as with other areas of customer service, all staff, including those not working on the frontline, should also be familiar with the procedures.

Questions to ask about how you handle tour groups:

- Is there a good communication network between local organisations such as schools and community groups and your organisation?
- Do these groups know the bookings procedure and understand your preference for this?
- Do you have a system in place to record bookings? (This can be as simple as a diary with name of group, date, time, and numbers.)
- Is there a designated staff member who takes responsibility for coordinating tour bookings?

The needs of tour groups are the same as those of all your customers, but meeting these does require coordination and extra organisation from staff. In addition, staff will need to project their voices, give clear and concise instructions, and ensure they give these instructions to teachers and tour guides as well as to the tour party.

It is very important that tour groups are managed well. Ensure that other visitors aren't ignored, lost, or made uncomfortable.

Useful Contacts:

The Barrier Free NZ Trust

PO Box 25064
Panama Street
Wellington
www.barrierfreenz.org.nz

The Human Rights Commission

www.hrc.co.nz
0800 496 877

NZ Federation of Disability Information Centres

0800 69 3342 will connect you to disability information and resource centres.

NZ CCS Information Service

86-90 Vivian St
PO Box 6349
Marion Square
Wellington
www.ccs.org.nz

The National Foundation for the Deaf Inc

127 Vincent Street
PO Box 5593
Auckland
www.nfd.org.nz

Royal NZ Foundation for the Blind

4 Maunsell Road
Private Bag 99941
Newmarket
Auckland
www.rnzfb.org.nz

Enable New Zealand

60 Bennett Street
PO Box 4547
Palmerston North
www.enable.co.nz

DPA (NZ) Inc. Assembly of People

with Disabilities
PO Box 27 524
Wellington
www.dpa.org.nz

Participating in the **tourism sector**

For travellers, the tourist experience is the sum of all its components. If one component, such as a tour operator, fails to meet the expectations of the visitor, then in many cases the entire experience is tarnished. If one area is not providing quality service or goods, the entire industry will suffer.

As a museum or culture and heritage organisation, you are part of the tourism sector. Liaise with other tourism and relevant groups and keep up to date with sector-wide developments. Portray your organisation as a tourist attraction, alongside other attractions in your region.

Be aware of the points of difference that your organisation can offer, while maintaining a focus on the fact that you are part of something bigger – not only in your region but in the national tourism industry.

Collaborative marketing

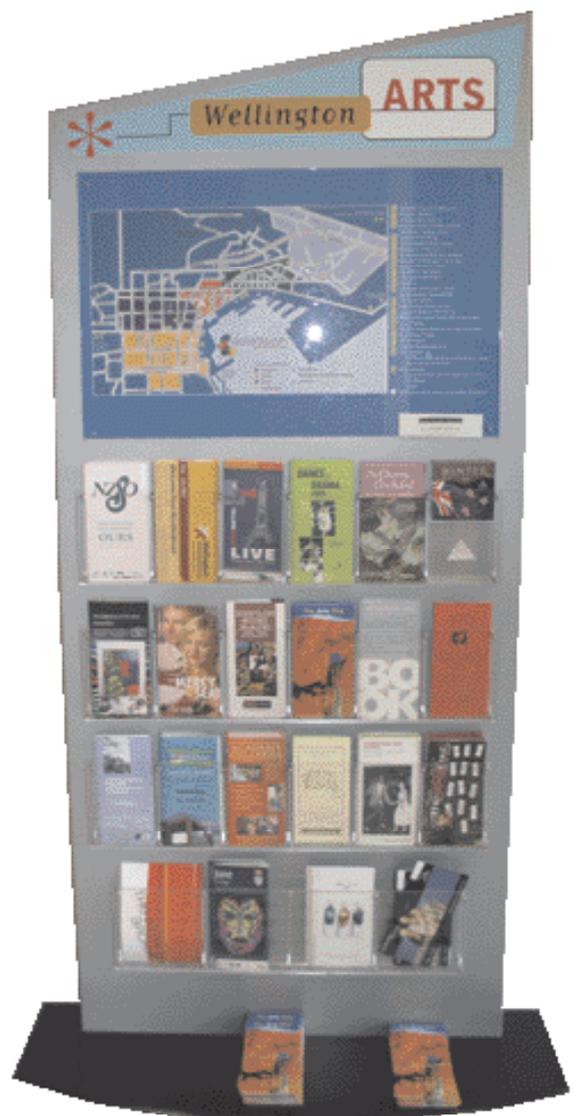
Collaborative marketing means that your museum or culture and heritage organisation can share the costs and benefits of joint ventures and advertising campaigns, and create a stronger public profile.

Are there other museums or organisations in your region that you can contact? You can display promotional pamphlets and other information for each other and direct free independent travellers (FITs) to other regional places of interest.

Websites that can provide contact information and tourism updates include:

- www.nz museums.co.nz
- www.purenz.co.nz
- www.nztb.co.nz

See *He Rauemi Resource Guide 19: 'Developing a Marketing Plan'* for further information.



Managing your facilities

Your organisation will demonstrate that it has considered the whole visitor experience by providing facilities to make the visit welcoming, comfortable, and enjoyable. The prime aim of visitor facilities is to enhance the physical comfort of customers and other users and their enjoyment of the visit.

Visitor facility checklist

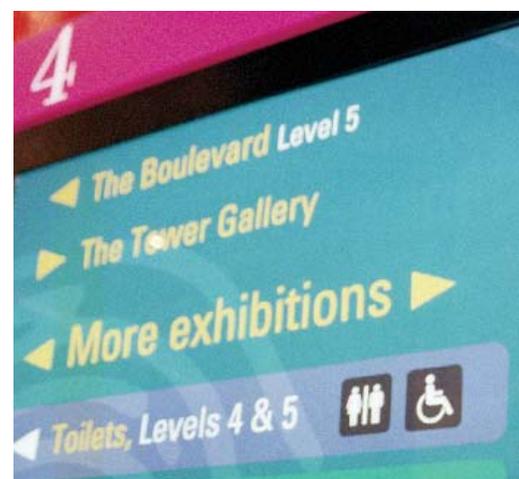
Here is a checklist of facilities that museums or culture and heritage organisations may offer. Check which facilities you offer at present, and which facilities you don't have that you need or might want to consider developing.

Toilets	Facilities for visitors with special needs
Designated customer service staff/volunteers	Road signage
Maps of galleries or site/orientation display	Access ramps
Cloakroom/coat and bag check	Seating
Drinking fountain	External and internal wayfinding signage
Picnic area	Baby changing area/parents' room
Carpark or nearby parking	Community space
Coach drop-off	Public transport nearby
Cafe/kiosk	Classroom
Museum shop	Lifts

Museums and cultural organisations of any size can provide the facilities that customers expect. It isn't necessary to provide them all but it is vital that good management of the facilities is put in place. Customers notice and appreciate the details that show an organisation is making an effort to ensure their visit is pleasant and well-planned.

A specific staff member should take responsibility for the visitor facilities. Regular maintenance and monitoring must be carried out to ensure your organisation complies with hygiene and health regulations.

If your organisation has taonga on display or in the collection, it is possible that iwi will want to visit or even borrow items. It is wise to have somebody on the team or in the community who can assist your organisation in tikanga Māori. Refer to *He Rauemi Resource Guide 8: 'A Guide To Guardians of Iwi Treasures He Tohu ki ngā Kaitiaki o ngā Taonga-ā-iwi'*.



Last word

Creating and maintaining great customer service can be as simple as changing your stance to be more welcoming, or rephrasing your language to be more positive. You can explore the tourism opportunities in your region and develop supportive networking systems. Whatever approach you take to improving customer service, give it a firm foundation of manaakitanga – the quality of caring for and looking after others.



Glossary

Exit survey A survey that takes place as the customer leaves the site

FIT Tourism industry abbreviation for 'free independent traveller'

Interpretation All the means used by museums to explain their collections to the public, such as exhibitions, displays, publications, guided tours, and audio guides

Iwi Tribe

Karakia Prayer, incantation, spiritual acknowledgement

Manaakitanga To care for and look after others, to show hospitality

Taonga Treasure, property

Tikanga Rules or customs handed down within hapū or iwi.

Hapu Sub-tribe, extended family group linked through a common tupuna (ancestor)

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Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa *He Rauemi Resource Guides*:

3: 'Know Your Visitors'

4: 'Introduction to Visitor Surveys'

7: 'Emergency Procedures'

8: 'A Guide to Guardians of Iwi Treasures He Tohu Ki ngā Kaitiaki o ngā Taonga-ā-iwi'

19: 'Developing a Marketing Plan'

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