

The Four Customers

I was third in line at the check out booth at the local grocery store. I had one box of dish soap and was anxious to return home to finish, washing the dishes. Mrs. Simonian, the Armenian grandmother at the front of the line eyed her bill.

“Fifty six dollars and twenty two cents for this bag of food. What kind of store is this?” she questioned.

Felix, the clerk said, “ That does seem a bit high. Let me look at that again.” The woman wanted him to recalculate her whole bag, but Felix kept insisting that there must be an obvious mistake as he scrolled through the items. Mrs. Simonian became more agitated and the line behind me grew. After listening a bit, the store manager came over. He smiled at the rest of us in line to reassure us that he had confidence in his clerk and that they would handle the matter quickly.

The woman kept talking. “It’s only little bag. Why it cost so much?”

A flustered Felix said, “ We are trying to find the mistake, Ma’am. Just be patient.”

The manager narrowed the problem down to the package of breakfast ham. He said so that all of us could hear, “We have had some problems with this manufacturing company’s labels. The price is not always clear.”

I thought, “Good move, pass the buck to someone not in the room.”

Felix said, “I see, the price should be \$2.95 not \$29.50. We can fix that.”

Meanwhile, Mrs. Simonian was arguing for a bigger discount. Just then the bread vendor showed up. He gave the manager a receipt for the delivery that he had made. The manager signed off and thanked him. Eventually, the woman completed her transaction and made her way out the store, mumbling as she went.

The nameless store manager returned to his post next to the bags of dog food. On my way out I looked at him in admiration and said, “Some days are like this.” We both smiled. I thought to myself, “This man would make a good regional director. He understands what it means to interface with four types of people at once and keep his cool.”

The Four Customers

As a regional director leading a non profit agency, you, like the store manager, always have four groups of people that require your attention. Each group wants something different from you. Each group offers something different to you. Each group is a customer because a transaction must be negotiated. The diagram summarizes the relationships.

Mrs. Simonian and The Campus Community

The mission of the local grocery store is to provide groceries at a reasonable price to people like Mrs. Simonian. The mission of InterVarsity is to develop witnessing communities

Donors	Staff
Campus Community (Students)	National Office & Board

on college campuses. The college community is our primary customer. If we fail to reach college students we might as well get out of the business. Our mission statement, structures, and resources are focused upon them.

What we offer in the transaction is training. Our staff are expert community builders. They impart sophisticated leadership skills to a generation of people who hold the keys to the future. They understand the interface between the spiritual, emotional, social and physical development of young adults and they seek to help men and women navigate the chaotic waters to maturity. In exchange, members of the campus community offer their time, talents, and sacred trust. They give us the right to influence them for the cause of Christ. Our staff, most of whom are just a bit older than the students, feel most comfortable with this particular customer.

Felix and IVCF Staff

Felix had the primary relationship with Mrs. Simonian. If that exchange was handled poorly, chances are that Mrs. Simonian would shop elsewhere. Our staff have the primary relationship with students. Without them there would not be an InterVarsity beyond one generation. They bring to the transaction their energy, faith, and vision. They raise their own support and then willingly offer their services at a rate far below what they deserve. We are forever indebted to them. They are the customer that we have the most influence over as we seek to accomplish our mission.

In exchange, they expect to be treated fairly, with honor and respect. They want to be trained. For most, this is their first post college job. They are still trying to discover their calling and gifts. Many see their term with us as a hands-on-Christian-graduate-school experience. Patterns that they establish, whether they be spiritual disciplines, work habits, or personal financial management, will last a lifetime. Many want to work in a close-knit-family environment. Who they work with and how they work together is as important as what they do.

Bread-Delivery Men and Donors

The bread-delivery man provided a valuable resource that made it possible for the store to complete its mission. In InterVarsity a variety of people provide us with things essential for our mission. The most obvious ones are those who give us their money. Both individuals and institutions- churches and foundations- are part of this group. Prayer warriors intercede on our behalf. Parents send us their children. Some may pay over one-hundred-thousand dollars for their child's college education. That gift enables us to do our work. The university is a donor. They give us permission to work on their campus and use their buildings. Agencies that receive our students for a summer mission experience are also donors. In Southern California we work with 15 different inner city agencies during the summer. We recruit a student work force and they provide training in a unique learning environment.

Donors expect something in return for their gift. Many who give us money want to be involved in the cause of Christ. Our efforts on campus are a means to that end. They want to be appreciated and kept informed.

Universities want to keep their students in school because dropouts don't pay tuition. Student groups like IVCF create a wholesome community environment and help the college meet their objective. Parents also want their children to stay in school and graduate. Graduation can lead to a good paying job and financial independence. For many ethnic minority families, financial independence of the child means a pension plan for the parents. Parents in turn expect IVCF to be supportive of their family goals.

Store Owners and the IVCF Board of Directors/ Service Center

There was one customer in the grocery store that was invisible. The only evidence of his presence was the personnel-policy memo next to the manager's desk. That customer was the owner of the store. The owner of InterVarsity is Jesus. The human owners of the corporation are the board of directors. They must answer to the state of Wisconsin and to the federal government for the laws that apply to non-profit agencies.

As a customer, they provide us with four things. First, they create the legal entity called InterVarsity Christian Fellowship that allows us to carry out our mission to college students. Secondly, they define the boundaries of the organization. Are high school students part of the mission? Should we engage in urban projects? Should IVP remain part of IVCF or become a separate business? Those are questions that only a board can answer as they try to evaluate our mission and keep us focused. Thirdly, the board defines and measures progress. They answer the question, "Is the effort that we as an organization invest in college ministry worth the results?" For those of us locked in day to day struggles, that question is so hard to answer on our own. Fourthly, the board blesses the work. They look with the eyes of Jesus and say in His name, "Well done good and faithful servants." When we are knee deep in problems, it is hard to bless ourselves.

In return, the board expects us to obey and enforce their policies that are meant to protect the entire organization. They need us to report changes, both progress and digressions, as we carry out the mission. Our organization is a living organism, not a static structure. Our reports keep them current so their decisions might be wise and timely.

Between the board and the regional director is the national service center. Departments such as accounting, legal, and human resources, focus upon the administrative controls that allow us to stay in business. Other departments such as development, training, missions, camping, and Twentyonehundred are designed to provide resources for the movement. The executive office seeks to guide us towards overall organizational health and harmony. As regional directors, we have been given tremendous freedom to lead our regions. In return, we are asked to support the national movement and work cooperatively rather than divisively. The loyalty tug-of-war between regional health and national health is strong and requires constant negotiation for both sides.

It's a Lonely Role

Here is the rub. As a regional director, you are expected to understand and relate to each of the four groups, but you are never allowed to be a permanent member of any one of them. Our role is to help the four interact in a harmonious way and that can only be done if we stand apart from the four. Like policemen in the middle of an intersection directing traffic, we must stand alone. That role is lonely. It's the price of our calling.

Rarely are the four groups harmonized. Each have changing and conflicting demands. The juicy problems usually involve more than one customer. The parent of one of our students was upset that his daughter had changed her educational goals. Rather than pursue a career in biology, she wanted a career in ministry. The parent felt that the staff workers had exerted undue influence in the girl's life. They called the university to complain. They called the national office. One of our area directors met with the parent. The parent felt the AD was too quick to answer. The AD felt the parent was obstinate. Finally the problem got to my desk. By then all four customers were involved—student, staff, two types of donors, and the national office. Each side had a perspective. Each wanted an advocate for their position.

Like the nameless grocery store manager we offer three things to situations like this. First, we offer a listening ear. Ninety percent of conflict resolution involves giving people a sense that they have been heard. So we must listen carefully to all sides. Secondly we offer our patience. That fruit of the Spirit is a critical gift for all regional leaders. Finally, we offer hope that a solution is possible. We have hope that God is at work, that He wants to teach us something, that He is bigger than our differences.

What do we get in return? We get to partner with Jesus. We get to see Him bless and grow the network of four groups that we call a region. We may even have the satisfaction of having a few problems solved so that we can quietly return to our desk next to the bags of dog food.

Steve Stuckey
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