

DEVELOPING FACILITY AND CUSTOMER SERVICE STANDARDS FOR UT EXTENSION

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Work environments can influence efficiency, enhance job satisfaction and create either positive or negative impressions of the business or organization. Some businesses and organizations have very strict guidelines for workspaces in order to convey a desired image. Having a plan to follow as facilities are built, remodeled or updated with new furnishings helps ensure that offices, meeting spaces and spaces for operations are designed for maximum efficiency, contribute to the desired image and capitalize on space utilization.

In addition to effective facilities, customer service is an important part of relating to the public. Customers receiving poor customer service are more likely to share their experience, which reflects negatively on the organization or business. In today's world, competitive organizations are those that place emphasis on consistent, high-quality customer service.

Background

In 2010, University of Tennessee Extension launched a strategic planning process to honor the past and look to the future. The strategic plan provided a roadmap to guide UT Extension to achieve excellence and advance UT Extension in Tennessee. The plan resulted in five overarching goals that included strategies and action steps to achieve each goal. One strategy identified developing office standards, including facility standards and customer service standards, as critical for the organization's future growth.

Office standards can assist UT Extension offices in being more professional, effective and consistent across the state. Standards can also help ensure that facilities are adequate for delivering effective educational programs and that the customers' needs stay at the forefront of county, regional, departmental and 4-H center operations. The term *standards* refers to both a desired level of quality (an expectation) and a standard operating procedure. These standards do not circumvent but rather complement University policy.

UT Extension offices serve a variety of needs for both staff and clients, including offices for confidential consulting, meeting spaces, conference rooms, demonstration kitchens and workspaces for equipment. UT Extension offices are open to the public and, therefore, need to be accessible, professional and welcoming.

Because UT Extension does not own county facilities, there was a disparity in the facilities across the state. Additionally, when it became necessary to relocate, remodel or build new UT Extension offices, there were no guidelines to document needs and inform these decisions. This made it difficult to justify facility requests to county government leaders in these situations. Written standards can address these issues.

Purpose & Objectives

In 2014, a diverse committee was appointed and charged with developing office standards for UT Extension, including:

- guidelines for facilities
- expectations for customer service
- standards for professionalism

Methodology

The committee divided its work into two subcommittees to separately address customer service and professionalism standards and facility standards. The customer service subcommittee was responsible for identifying existing procedures and recommending new procedures aimed at optimizing customer service to clients statewide. This group identified several key areas related to professionalism within county offices that needed to be addressed. The facilities subcommittee was responsible for identifying space requirements to meet the needs of an efficient and modern UT Extension facility.

Customer Service Subcommittee

The customer service subcommittee reviewed other organizations' customer service standards and current literature on customer service and selected four domains for standards. The domains include:

- **Professionalism:** attire, tobacco/e-cigarettes, business etiquette, fund development, cell phones
- **Interpersonal Skills:** interpersonal communication, dealing with difficult situations and individuals
- **Engaging Clientele:** Personal communication and visits, customer waiting area, presence, accessibility
- **Media Relations:** mass media, social media

After selecting these domains, the committee wrote rationale and recommendations for standards, citing best practices, examples and additional resources for each standard. These standards will maintain the integrity of the institution and the research-based programs and information UT Extension provides.

Additionally, a set of professional dress guidelines was developed to address a need expressed by county directors to provide guidance for employee attire. The committee conducted a review of other organizations' guidelines and used input from county directors and other employees to develop these guidelines.

Facilities Subcommittee

The facilities subcommittee determined that a facilities standards document would focus primarily on county offices and include dimensions, diagrams, functions and rationale for spaces needed. The committee looked at state building codes, UT policies regarding office space and ADA requirements for public buildings. After reviewing these requirements and touring exemplary facilities, the committee selected five domains for standards. The domains include:

- **Facility Criteria:** site selection, exterior architectural character, accessibility
- **Programming Space:** work and meeting areas
- **Interior Design:** furniture, lighting, flooring, color schemes
- **Signage:** exterior and interior signage, publication distribution
- **Communication technology:** IT equipment

After selecting these domains, the committee wrote standards, including diagrams, dimensions, specifications, examples and rationale.

Major Outcomes

The committee developed several documents as part of their efforts. A website was also developed to house the documents and is accessible to employees through an internal SharePoint website.

Facilities Standards Document

A document detailing space requirements and specifications was developed. The document has been requested and utilized numerous times as county government officials have explored relocating or remodeling UT Extension office spaces. The document has also been used in planning the construction of new facilities.

Consistent Office Signage

Facilities guidelines have facilitated the implementation of more consistent signage for UT Extension offices across the state by providing specifications for size, materials, font and placement.

Customer Service Guidelines Document

A document was developed detailing customer service standards in each of the four domains of professionalism, interpersonal skills, engaging clientele and media relations. The document provides guidelines for UT Extension employees, examples of best practices and additional resources.

Professional Dress Guidelines Document

A set of dress guidelines was developed and is provided to new employees at orientation. An underlying premise of the document is that maintaining a professional appearance inspires confidence in our employees and conveys a positive public image for UT Extension. Since UT Extension events and activities vary widely, from field work to 4-H camp to formal presentations, this document provides flexible guidance to help employees determine attire that is appropriate for the occasion. Because other Extension systems face similar challenges, the guidelines have been shared with peers in the southern region upon request.

Sustainability Plan

The Dean's office will initiate appointment of committees to update standards as needed. This will ensure that the guidelines will remain relevant to changing technology and current cultural and social norms.

Initiative Committee

Committee Co-Chairs

Shirley Hastings, Director, UT Extension Strategic Planning
Robert Burns, Associate Dean, Agriculture & Natural Resources and Community
Economic Development

Committee Members

Facilities Subcommittee

Kaye Avrit, Accounting Specialist, Central Region
Tim Fawver, Chief Business Officer, UT Extension
Ranson Goodman, UT Extension Agent, Henry County
Connie Heiskell, UT Extension Regional Director, Eastern Region
Mary Beth Henley, UT Extension County Director, Franklin County
Martha Keel, Professor, Department of Family & Consumer Sciences
Cam Philbeck, UT Extension IT Administrator, Eastern Region

Customer Service Subcommittee

Linda Carey, Administrative Coordinator, UT Extension Administration
Janet Cluck, UT Extension County Director, Dickson County
Joseph Donaldson, Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication
Walter Malone, UT Extension Agent, Sullivan County
Tyrone Miller, Assistant Professor, Tennessee State University
Justin Stefanski, UT Extension Agent, Wilson County



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