Proceedings of the 1993 Countryside Recreation Conference

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Countryside Recreation Network

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Customer Care in the Countryside

A practical review of techniques to meet customer needs and expectations in countryside recreation

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Welcome

Richard Broadhurst

Senior Recreation Officer, Forestry Commission
CRN Vice-Chairman

Welcome to this Countryside Recreation Network Conference, the first of many. This one is on Customer Care in the Countryside.

I want briefly to say something about Countryside Recreation Network for those of you for whom this might be the first event you have attended. The Countryside Recreation Network spends its time exchanging and spreading information to develop best policy and practice in countryside recreation. It has three aims in support of that. The first is to identify and meet the needs of members, providing advice, information and research. The second is to encourage co-operation in formulating and executing research amongst its members. The third is to encourage and assist the dissemination of results and best practice. It is as part of that third aim that this conference is run.

As well as the conference there are various other events throughout the year, notably the workshops which will be advertised through the means of the *Countryside Recreation News.* If you do not already receive that newsletter please give your name to Robert Wood. At the moment the publication is free.

There are three thoughts that I would like to leave with you in relation to this conference. The first is that those engaged in countryside recreation should spend a little more time focusing on people. The second is that 'customer' extends far beyond visitors. It is also neighbours, partners with whom we are working, and crucially, those people who do not visit the countryside but who may well have a part share in it. The third thought is that each part of the countryside with which participants in this conference are concerned is very much an individual part, and will therefore demand individual solutions. The concept of customer care, if it is to be implemented properly, has to be natural and sincere.

I would like now to introduce to you the conference team, the people who are behind the planning and running of this event: Leeza Sharpe, Forestry Commission, and Heather Mitchell, British Waterways, helpers; Bruce Stephen, British Waterways, in charge of a/v; Glen Millar, British Waterways, who has led the planning of the conference; and Rob Wood, Manager of CRN.

Apart from the plenary sessions there are three main participatory elements to the conference. First, the workshop sessions, in which you will have every opportunity to participate. Second, a panel discussion session where you will be able to address questions to a number of people from organisations with whom we deal, or representatives of user organisations. That is your opportunity to put to them questions about just how well you are satisfying their needs. The third element of participation is the fringe events which happen tomorrow evening. Anyone is welcome to put on a fringe event and I know some

people have come ready prepared. Many of you have a great deal of expertise which we would ask you to share.

I hope that you will all find the conference valuable and enjoyable.

Foreword

Countryside Recreation Network

The Countryside Recreation Network (CRN) is a UK wide network of the agencies concerned with countryside and related recreation matters. The membership is drawn from the national statutory organisations, the local authority associations and the research councils, but the network served extends to include the clients and customers of the member agencies.

The aim of CRN is to assist the work of the agencies concerned with countryside and related recreation by exchanging and spreading information to develop best policy and practice in countryside recreation. This is achieved by:

- identifying and helping to meet the needs of Network for advice, information and research;
- promoting co-operation among member agencies in formulating and executing research into countryside and related recreation matters; and
- encouraging and assisting the dissemination of the results of countryside research and best practice amongst the agencies and the clients of the agencies.

CRN organises a number of workshops throughout the year in addition to the Countryside Recreation Conference, a Research Directory detailing research completed by member agencies in the previous year and a Newsletter produced three times a year in February, June and October.

Further information can be obtained from:

Robert Wood
Countryside Recreation Network
Dept. of City & Regional Planning
University of Wales, College of Cardiff
PO Box 906
Cardiff
CF1 3YN

Tel./Fax. 0222 874970

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Visitors, Who Cares?

Frans Schouten

Synthesis International
The Netherlands

Once I visited with some friends from abroad The Hague Municipal Museum, and some ten minutes before closing time we went into the bookshop. My friends wandered around trying to decide which catalogue to buy. By the time they had made up their minds and brought the book to be purchased to the counter the first bell of the closing hour rang. At the same time the light was switched off in the bookshop and they were unable to buy the catalogue, worth £35, because the cash register was also switched off. By the time we recovered from the shock of being treated in such an uncivilised manner, which took us less than 30 seconds, all the museum personnel had already left the premises.

The British Consumers' Association evaluates a visit to the Tower of London, which has over two million visitors a year, paying almost £7 each, as follows: "Steep entrance fee, suffocating Crown Jewels display, partly redeemed by Beefeaters".

Visitors, who cares about them, they come anyway, so why bother?

Gradually this attitude is changing. Leisure and recreation are increasingly big business, as the role of government is decreasing, due to lack of public funding as well as privatisation and decentralisation of policy responsibilities. Privatisation and decentralisation seems to be today the new expression for cutting budgets. All institutions, ranging from a large art museum to a modest visitor centre, are more and more aware of the needs and demands of their public. They have to be, because this public provides part of the necessary funds, and today policy-makers no longer discriminate between quality and quantity. In fact, quantity has largely replaced quality as the prime evaluation tool in the decision-making process.

This policy, and the increasing number of visitors, puts considerable pressure on the resources. In some famous places like Venice, tourism has become such an annoyance that local people are deserting their own town, leaving it to the invaders. In other cases attractions have had to be closed down because of over-use of the resources, as in the case of the tomb of Tutankhamun which cannot cope with the 25 litres of perspiration per day. Or take the Acropolis, worn out by hundreds of thousands of visitors per year.

In some places the National Trust has adopted a policy of discouraging visitors to safeguard the resources. The Trust has to protect its properties, as well as to provide access to the visitors. These dual objectives can be rather conflicting.

It appears as if visitors are a nuisance, partly imposed upon us by demented policy-makers. We all know better, for we realise well enough that our very existence depends upon them.

They are our customers, but do we know our clients in the way that your hairdresser or your neighbourhood grocery knows you?

Let us have a closer look at the visitor, what is the visitor's profile and expectations?

First the visitor is a human being and not a number on an entrance ticket; nor an anonymous figure popping up from surveys: 48% male and 52% female with an average age of 26.8 years – the only age group you do not see in reality on the premises.

Secondly, the visitor does not come to museums, visitor centres, and the natural environment to learn something, although they still insist on saying so in all our visitor surveys. Their answer to the question why they are here is in most cases: to educate the kids. That is because these institutions are in most cases presented to them as educational. Being grown-ups they do not need such, so it has to be for the kids. They are also polite enough to confirm in their answers what they think the institution wants to hear on that question.

However, a number of recent studies about the public demonstrate that they do not learn a great deal. Although visitors stubbornly continue to see exhibitions as places where they can learn something, they rarely do so. Their behaviour in the galleries is more akin to window shopping on a Saturday afternoon than to the intelligent acquisition of new knowledge. The public is kind enough not to complain, partly because it is very difficult for them to formulate any alternative, as they are no experts in the field of the objects displayed, and partly because – and this is a more serious problem – they believe scientific knowledge needs to be presented in a remote and abstract way.

Thirdly, the well known distinction between work and leisure tends to obscure a rather important psychological distinction; namely the distinction between activities that are performed under conditions of stress, and activities that are performed under conditions of no stress. Our customers are visiting us in their free time and the very essential of a leisure time activity is a non-stress environment, in contrast to work.

Playing soccer for the professional and the amateur may require almost the same amount of energy, but psychologically speaking there is a world of difference. Roughly speaking, a stressful situation is any situation which people consider – not necessarily correctly – as threatening. The explicit learning environment is such a threatening environment. It puts you in the situation of being the one who does not know, it often makes you feel stupid.

Learning is done by people who are curious, who wonder about the world around them, and not by people who might be intimidated by our so-called educational displays. A lot of the communication in interpretation centres and museums is not inviting but just pedantic.

Lastly, to end my introduction about our visitors, I would like to say that one of the most important reasons to visit us is the opportunity for social interaction. Research done by Paulette MacManus in the Natural History Museum and the Science Museum in London shows very clearly that a visit to an exhibition is a social occasion. Visitors hardly ever come alone; they present themselves in small groups as a family, a group of friends, and so on. Visiting the displays is a means to interact with each other. Strangely enough the only visitors who do not do so are married couples without children; they tend to ignore each other more or less.

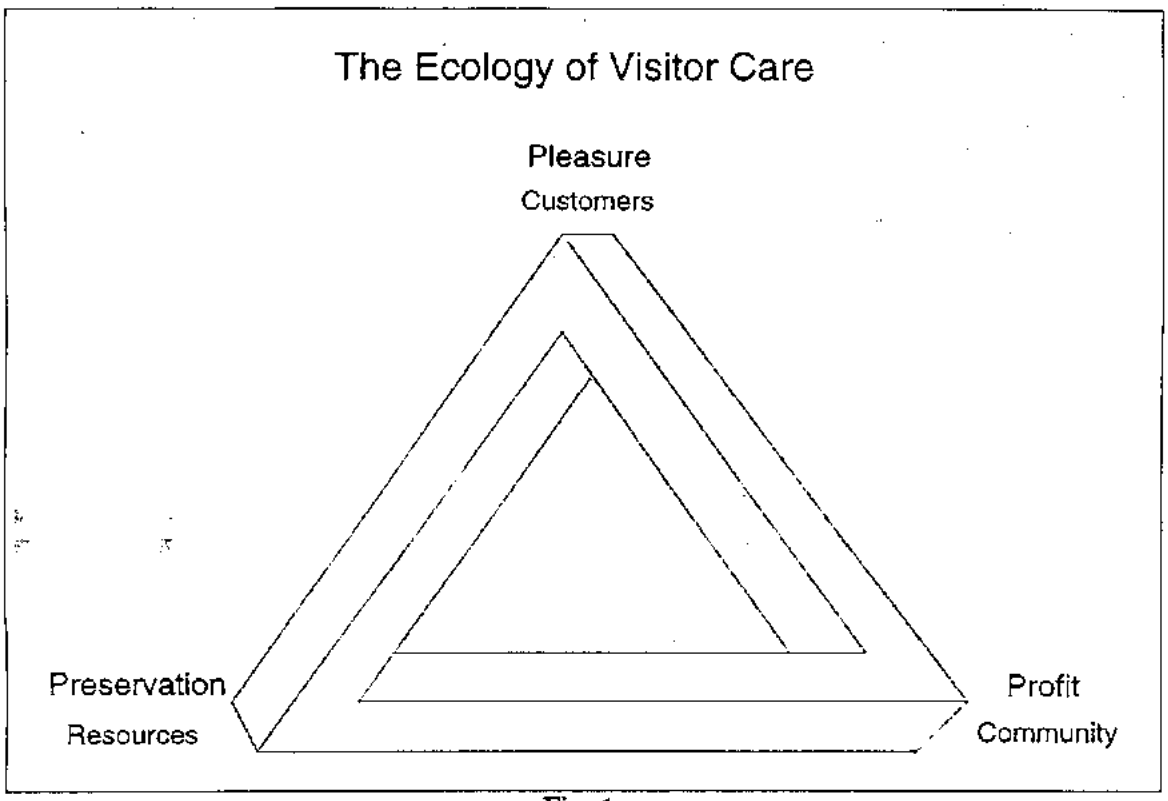
The Ecology of Visitor Care
Pleasure
Customers
Preservation
Resources
Profit
Community

Fig. 1.

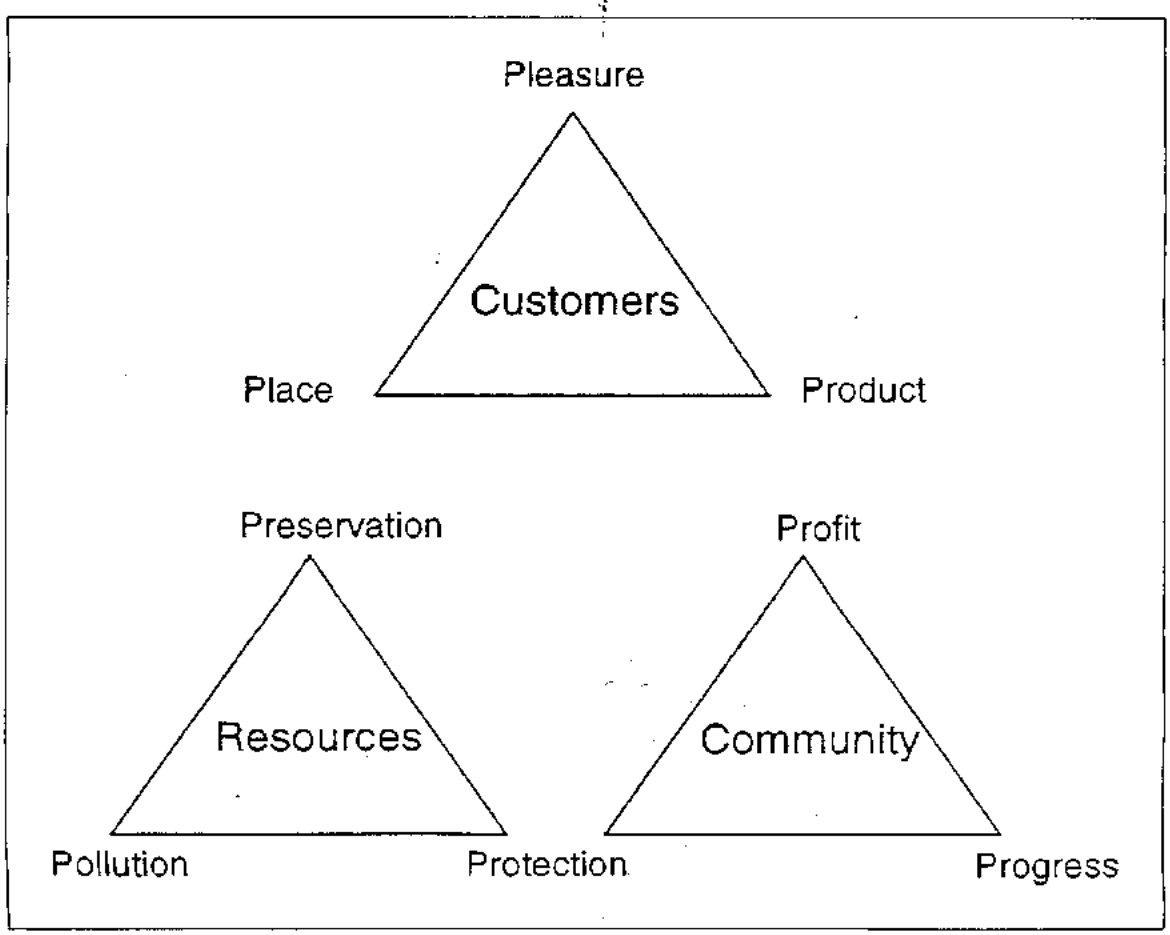
Pleasure
Customers
Place
Product
Preservation
Resources
Profit
Community
Pollution
Protection
Progress

Fig. 2.

The development of visitor centres in the countryside and rural areas on mainland Europe is much the same as the trends in the UK. In the 1970s and early 1980s the emphasis was very much on recreation as a merit good. There was an offer, and as with all merit goods, the offer was often imposed upon the public without taking account of the demand of the audience. It was often heavily patronising - we know what is good for you.

This first period is characterised by the environmental study and documentation centre. A great deal of information was released at the visitors, explaining in great depth all the surrounding natural phenomena and their background. It was not for fun and it was all very heavy stuff. They had to learn, they had to understand. The central theme was the protection of the natural environment. In most cases in these centres the only facility was a toilet.

The second stage is the information centre in which the emphasis is on the relationship between man and the environment. The central theme is the management and development of the area involved. There is a growing awareness that nature needs some help in doing a proper job. At this stage there is more attention paid to the needs of the visitors, coffee and tea machines are installed to provide refreshment for the public.

The third stage is now the environmental recreation centre. Information is reduced to a smaller area of the building and there is also a diversification of information available:

a. attractive expositions for the general public;

b. a reading corner for the more interested visitors;

c. documentation for those who really want to know in depth.

The emphasis is more on providing visitors with a good time and bad weather accommodation. There will be a playground around for youngsters; video and film equipment with special programmes; shops, cafeteria, even sometimes a bistro, and so on.

As there is an ecology in nature so there is also the ecology of the visitors. I call it the relationship of the three Ps: Pleasure (Customers), Preservation (Resources), and Profit (Community) (Figure 1).

Each of these can be subdivided into three other Ps (Figure 2):

- The three Ps for the Customers: Pleasure, Place, and Product.
- The three Ps for the Resources: Preservation, Protection, and Pollution.
- The three Ps for the Community: Profit, Protection, and Progress.

I will concentrate on the aspects for the customers: Pleasure, Place, and Product. These are the cornerstones of any policy on visitor care.

First of all, Pleasure, which contains what I like to call the UNIQUE experience, which stands for:

Uncommon
Novelty
Informative
Quality
Understanding
Emotions

Second is the sense of the Place: the visitor needs an orientation in space and time. This orientation is threefold:

- Where the visitor actually is, geographically, and the orientation towards important features such as: the exit, the parking space, the toilets, the visitor centre, the restaurant, etc.
- The orientation of what there is to do, to see, to experience, from that particular point.
- The orientation into the concept that is presented to the visitor at this particular site, the conceptual orientation. The visitor needs to know what the idea is which is communicated. This sounds odd, but my experience is that often such communication is missing. The visitor has in most cases to find out for him/herself the central idea behind a display and too often they do not go to the trouble of trying to find out. The effect is an exit oriented behaviour of our visitors.

Thirdly, the sense of product is again threefold, and consists of the rules of any good communication which has three aspects:

- Introduction
- Information
- Integration.

And the product needs to be (borrowed from Terry Stevens):

- Innovative
- Imaginative
- Inspiring.

The psychologist Lewin points out that an information flow requires three stages: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Unfreezing means opening up the cognitive structure of the visitors, and making use of advance organisers. Generally speaking: raising questions, making people curious, attracting their attention, and making them receptive to new information.

Unfreezing is the introductory part of the communication, but moving is the actual transmitting phase of the process. It focuses on new information, and the audience is stimulated to think about the theme. Refreezing is the part of the process that gives the audience an opportunity to digest the new information, to integrate it into their cognitive structure, and to consolidate the new information into their image of the world.

Communication is like a good dinner, it consists of an appetizer, an hors d'oeuvre as introduction, a main course as the actual information, and a dessert, a digestive for the final integration.

The visitor must be challenged by your communication, his or her fantasy must be activated, and there must be a sense of discovery around the place, which actuates the willingness to undergo new experiences and information.

In the course of his presentation Mr Schouten showed a series of slides of various visitor attractions, mainly in France and Holland. He used the slides to illustrate good and bad practice in caring for the customer. He warned against flights of fancy by architects and interior designers which resulted in buildings which, while aesthetically pleasing, had no meaning for the customer. He showed examples of imaginative and innovative visitor centres in the countryside.

Caring for Guests at a Major Leisure Venue in the UK

Nick Allen

Human Resource Development Manager
Center Parcs Ltd

Good evening ladies and gentlemen. May I begin by asking you some questions?

How many of you have stayed with us as a guest?

How many of you have heard of Center Parcs before today?

For those of you who have not replied yes to either question, let me give you our reservations telephone number: 0623 411411!

I will be using slides throughout the presentation where I will focus on the following aspects:

1. How do we organise ourselves by way of structure and culture to meet the needs of the guest?
2. Why do organisations need to focus on guest care and quality management? And what strategy does Center Parcs have to fulfil those aims?
3. I will briefly outline our formal guest care and quality programmes and how we implement them.
4. I will share with you some key examples of what we believe to be best practice in guest care and quality management, and finally
5. Outline the approach we take to ensure we are constantly striving to give our guests the best, and how we measure our success.

I shall however indulge in some history. Center Parcs is something of a sports complex – something of a health farm – something of the villa holiday.

The company began in 1967 under the name Sporthuis Centrum Recreatie, when our founder, Piet Derksen, bought the first site, De Lommerbergen, in the Netherlands. It was a small scale operation with 30 villas and an outdoor swimming pool. In 1968 De Lommerbergen reopened with an indoor swimming pool, restaurant and shop. Three villages followed in quick succession in 1970/1971/1972, all in Holland. In 1980 De Eemhof opened with the first sub-tropical (a constant 84°F) swimming paradise. In 1981 we made our first step abroad with the opening of Erperhede in Belgium.

In 1985 the company was floated on the Amsterdam stock exchange and was 40 times over subscribed. The growth continued in 1986 and with it a change of name to Center Parcs.

In 1987 Sherwood Forest Holiday Village opened with 609 villas, and in 1988 the first French village opened in Normandy. In 1989 the second UK village opened in Elveden Forest with 650 villas. The growth continued. In 1990 Scottish & Newcastle purchased Center Parcs to help us sustain our growth. We were also awarded the English Tourist Board Inaugural Award for 'Green Tourism'. In 1992 after a public inquiry we announced the opening in 1994 of our third UK village in Longleat, Wiltshire. Our second village in France opened in the beautiful setting of the Loire Valley in 1993.

I will now outline how we organise ourselves and describe our culture to meet the needs of our 250,000 guests who visit us in the UK each year. Our structure is shown in Figures 1 and 2. You will see that the structure is quite flat. This enables communication to be quick and effective. Briefing from a general manager and the line management team can be direct within three hours to our most important group of employees, our front line personnel. They are the ones who have direct contact with the guests day in/day out.

Decision making is also encouraged at all levels; the word 'empowerment' is a key one. I will give you real examples of how effective our decision making is later.

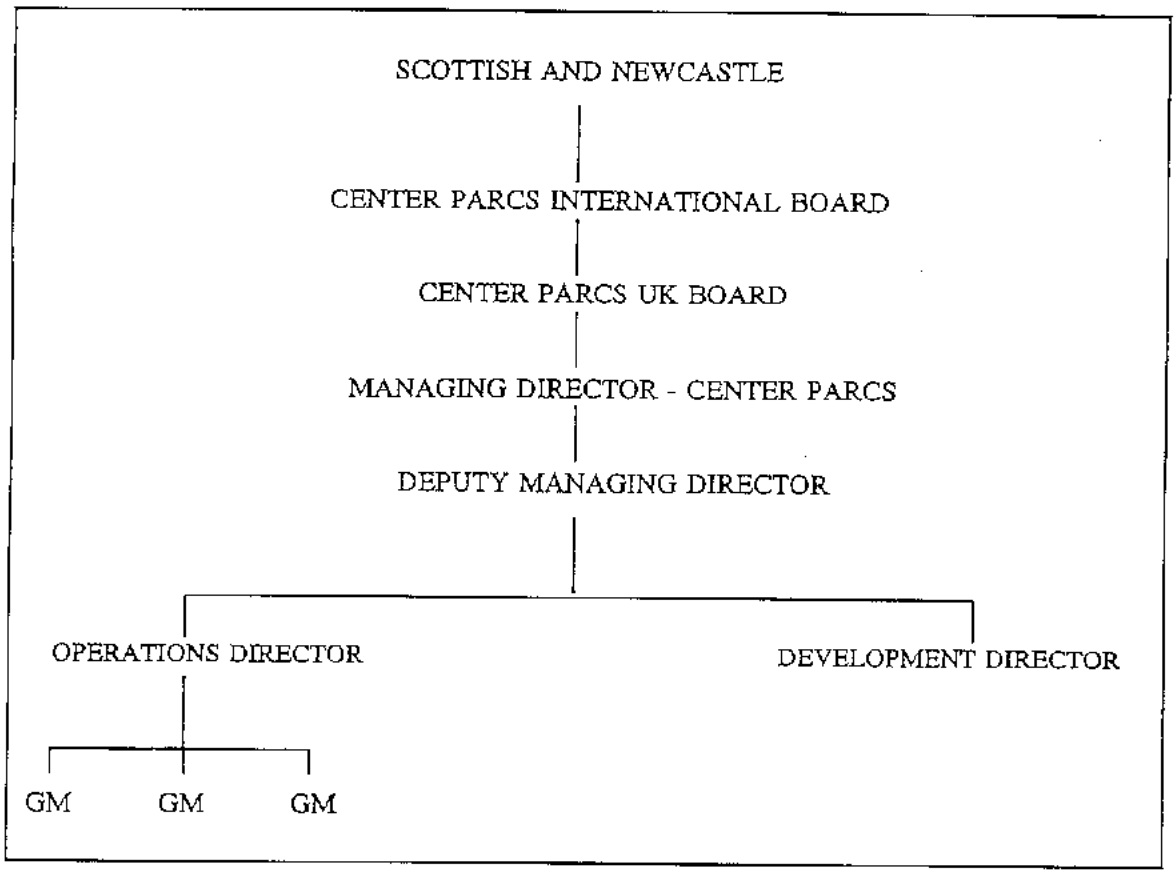

Fig. 1. Corporate structure

Let me continue to describe the culture within Center Parcs. Like most companies we have a mission statement which is:

> 'To give our guests a truly unique short break holiday experience which far exceeds their expectations'!

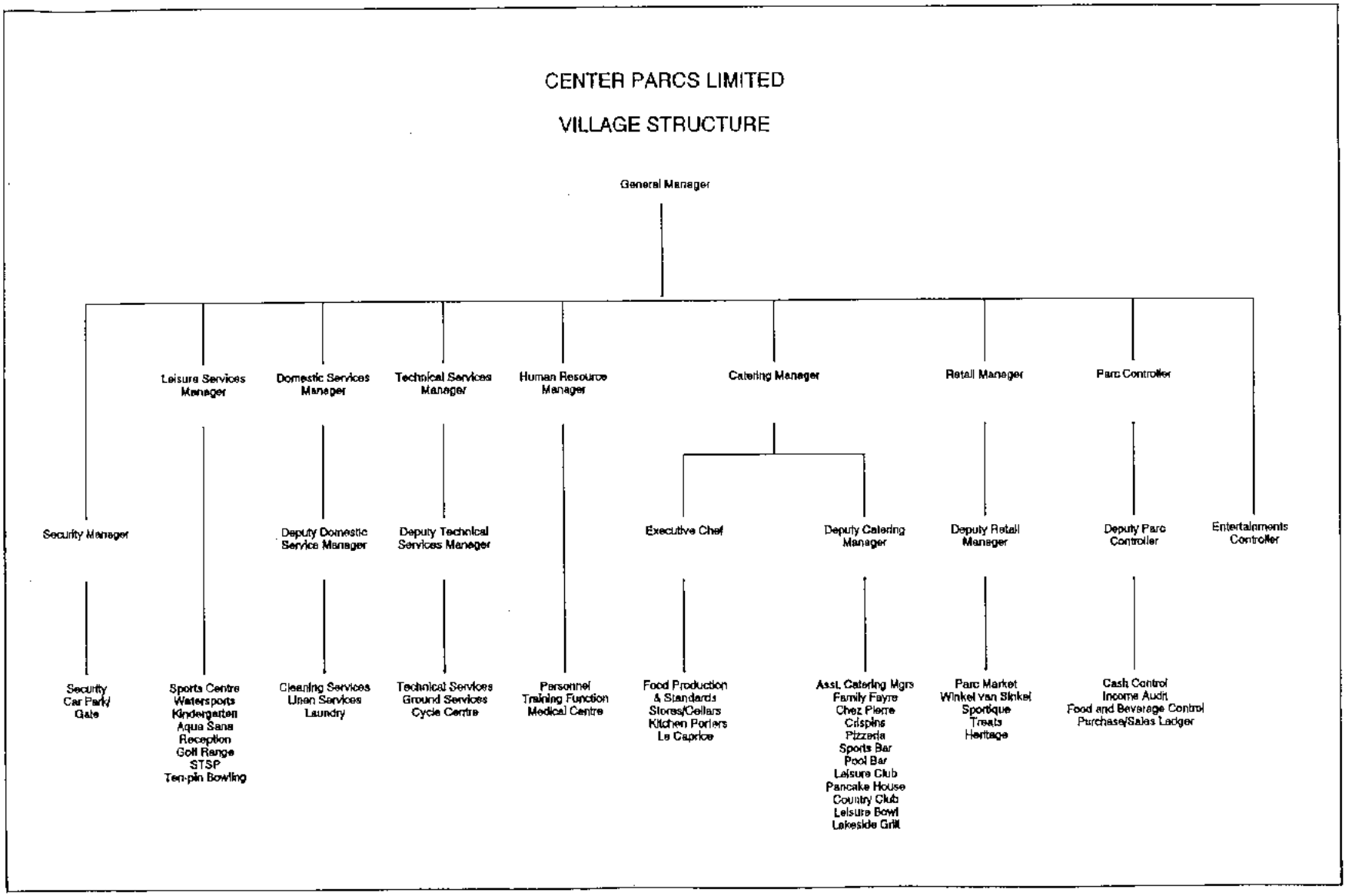

Fig. 2. Village structure

Each individual employee knows what part they play in delivering that very promise to our guests.

To help everyone focus on the mission we formulated (with a cross section of employees) our goals:

1. We will achieve success in our mission statement through our visionary approach to creative management.
2. By continually striving for the highest standards of product possible.
3. By having an approach to guest service that is second to none.
4. By a positive approach to the genuine recognition of our own employees.
5. Through a commitment to invest in the business and in the personal development of each and every individual in the organisation.
6. This will result in our guests returning, in satisfying our employees' needs and ultimately in optimising the profitability of our company – thus maintaining our position as market leaders and securing our own future.

These six goals are at the heart of our guest care philosophy.

Let me move on to explain our formal guest care and quality management programmes. It begins with the selection process, our managers are trained to interview to a very high Center Parcs standard. We have developed a Center Parcs employee profile, Center Parcs' employees must like people, that has to be the main criterion. They must enjoy working with others.

- Do they have a genuine smile?
- Are they confident?
- Do they project a quality image?
- Are they of the highest professional calibre?

The interview process follows on, not seeing one manager, but with a minimum of three interviews to ensure we get it right first time. Our business is all about people, our guests, having a truly unique experience whilst they are staying with us. They are our guests, an extension of our family, we aim to look after them like we look after our own guests in our own home.

The second phase in the quality process is the induction programme, a total of eight days. Not even such organisations as Disney, Marks & Spencer and McDonald's give such a thorough introduction to the company. Three days is spent on getting to feel the culture, they try the product, experience it as a guest. They begin to understand the culture, they immerse themselves in the history of Center Parcs, our family values, the entrepreneurial beliefs and our drive for quality in all we do.

Every employee spends two days minimum getting to know their operation. We train them to a very high definitive standard of performance. In practical terms this means they are trained by a qualified specialist trainer in order to carry out their tasks to our standard. Of course, we spend time on fire, health and safety and hygiene training. Finally we spend two whole days devoted to guest care – covering behavioural skills, how to relate to colleagues at all levels, how to get the best out of people, how to care for people and what quality is all about in Center Parcs.

By the end of this process the message is clear 'Center Parcs is a Quality Organisation', second best will not do, we never take no for an answer. We never kill an idea until it has been tried and yet we recognise if we are not making mistakes we are not trying to improve. The day we stand still will be the day we die. Everyone knows our guests come first - genuinely.

We are committed to development so it does not stop with induction training. Annually all of our employees go through a guest care refresher workshop to keep the spirit alive.

We invest annually over £3/4 million in training and development. That represents 3% of our annual turnover. Training and development is seen as a major investment not a benign cost. We encourage all of our employees to adopt a continual lifetime development process. We aim to embrace a learning culture within the organisation with development opportunities for all employees.

I mentioned earlier that I would share with you some key examples of what we believe to be best practice in guest care and quality management. Let me illustrate those now.

Our commitment to best practice in guest care includes the following:

- 'No Problem Well Done' programme
- Job rotation
- Clearly defined standards of performance
- National Vocational Qualifications
- Investors in People (IIP)
- Star Performer
- Six monthly reviews
- High performing teams.

The 'No Problem Well Done' programme is an idea that came from a number of employees who wanted to be involved in a formal recognition programme of their commitment to guest care. We ask our guests to judge our performance and the performance of individual employees. We give the guests a voting card when they arrive and ask them, before they leave, to write on it the name of the member of staff who has looked after them with no problems, whose attitude has been right and who has gone beyond the normal terms of reference for guest care. The guests hand the completed card to the member of staff concerned and it is an unbelievable source of satisfaction and self-esteem to the individual on the receiving end. It is a tremendous motivation factor.

At the end of each month the employee who has received the most votes gets a gold badge which says they are 'Employee of the Month' to wear during the following month. They also receive points towards an allocation of prizes which they can exchange for a variety of benefits.

The idea for our formal job rotation programme, again came from a group of employees. It has probably been the biggest success within the organisation this year. During the year some 90% of our employees have actually sampled another person's job for a day. That involved everybody, including the managing director. The fact that he became a chef serving hamburgers in one of the fast food outlets was a novelty in itself for him but it was also a major inspirational experience for the rest of the staff.

We do have clearly defined standards of performance. Every staff member has a summary of our complete working standards that they carry with them at all times.

Center Parcs is heavily committed to NVQs. Again, we encourage continual training and development and we aim to be one of the first organisations in the UK to have NVQs at levels one to four from a cross section of 14 different awarding bodies. It is a very complex programme but we are finding that it has major benefits. We are also committed to the Government's initiative 'Investors in People'.

We have an additional programme called 'Star Performer' whereby the best performing members of staff are rewarded with, for example, a weekend at any Center Parcs location for themselves and their family, with all expenses paid.

We have six monthly reviews; we do not call them performance appraisals because we do not appraise performance, we review it. There is a significant difference. We do it informally on a daily, weekly, monthly basis, but more formally on a six monthly and annual basis. So everyone is quite clear about what is expected of them and what their targets are.

We reward high performing teams because we are very much a team culture organisation. One unit cannot function without the others. The teams organise a variety of competitions between themselves whether it is sales generated, based on standards of cleanliness and hygiene, or guest care orientated. Competition between the units is encouraged.

The quality aspect expands into other areas. Our woodland areas are one of our major features for our guests. We have a total quality approach to the environment that includes air quality, quality of water supply, cleanliness and noise levels. For example, we would not have jet skis on our lakes because of the noise and pollution of the atmosphere.

As you are no doubt aware we ban vehicles on site except for arrival and departure. Guests have to use a bike. The only exception is for disabled guests for whom we make special provision.

We are continually looking to improve our sites in terms of reducing pedestrian congestion, the aesthetics of the buildings, the environment, landscaping, roads and walkways.

This investment and total commitment through our human resource has to be measured. This helps demonstrate that we are moving forward, constantly improving and becoming more efficient. We need to remain the best international leisure company in the world.

We measure our success against a range of criteria, including the following:

- Increased guest satisfaction
- Increased productivity
- Increased profit year on year
- Reduction in annual labour turnover
- Greater efficiency
- More efficient controls

  And more.

We are constantly searching for innovation in action, cycle routes in the forest, guest information available on Teletext in reception and in villas. An example is how we deal

with litter. When we first opened we had a major problem with the amount of litter left in the woodland areas by 600 families. We put the problem to our employees who came up with the idea of a job rotation approach to litter picking so that teams of eight people take it in turns to go round the whole complex picking up litter. It is no one's full time job. This certainly encourages members of staff not to contribute to the problem by dropping litter. We also have a cycle centre that was experiencing problems on changeover day, with delays in service to guests, so they turned around service flow; we have waitress service to the guests in Leisure Bowl areas – all employee driven ideas.

Finally, I said at the beginning of the presentation that I would share with you the reasons why at Center Parcs we believe we need to focus on guest care and quality management. It is simple.

To stay the best you have got to be the best. Our guests are more discerning, more demanding, than ever before They are becoming used to a quality service culture in the UK – the Citizen's Charter for example, the changes in the NHS, the quality drives in the retail world – there is more choice now than ever before, people will not put up with second best. We at Center Parcs will not give our guests second best.

So, in summary, to what do we owe our success and continued growth? We refer to the four pillars within Center Parcs:

- Selecting the best people
- Training and development
- A passion for excellence in guest care, and
- A drive for quality in all we do.

Are we getting it right?

- 95% average annual occupancy
- 60% of our guests make a return visit within 12 months
- A low labour turnover of 12%
- £82 million investment in Longleat
- £1.7 million profit in 1993

Well we believe so.

Discussion Summary

SIMON CURRY *(Rochester-upon-Medway City Council)* asked how successful the visitor centres were in general in getting across the principal message that the customer should enjoy the experience. FRANS SCHOUTEN replied that the key point was in defining what the message should be. Professional providers tended to measure their success in terms of how much information the visitor acquired in, say, a half hour visit. He did not believe in that kind of objective because it did not address the question of whether there had been an emotional impact on the visitor. It was better to set one's sights lower and try to achieve a situation where the visitor left feeling that the world was a much more interesting place than he had previously thought. An exhibition should be seen as an introduction to a particular field rather than as an end product. If people left an exhibition feeling that they would like to find out more about the subject then success had been achieved. Increased sales in the bookshop was a measure of the success in making people curious to find out more.

GEOFF BARRY *(Forest Enterprise)* asked whether Center Parcs charged per person or per villa. NICK ALLEN said that the charge was per villa and therefore the more people occupying the villa, the lower the cost per head. TONY PHILPIN *(Pennine Way Co-ordinator)* referred to rumours of expansion of Center Parcs into the Lake District or the Eden Valley. NICK ALLEN could not comment specifically but confirmed that the company was looking for an additional site. ROGER ORGILL *(Sports Council)* had been surprised to hear that litter was such a problem at Center Parcs and suggested the visitors should be educated to take their litter away with them. NICK ALLEN replied that efforts were made to do this but with such a large number of holiday-makers it could never be entirely successful.

MIKE BONNER *(Sports Council)* asked what was the best way of rewarding employees who served the customers well, apart from giving them a good salary. NICK ALLEN advocated consulting the employees. Not surprisingly, financial reward was the first option for most employees but at Center Parcs there was a range of other incentives, all employee generated. ROBERT WILKINS *(Hereford and Worcester County Council)* asked whether Center Parcs was an equal opportunities employer and, if so, whether this caused problems with their rigorous selection programme. NICK ALLEN replied that the company did have an equal opportunities policy but nonetheless there was a concern that the ratio of ethnic minorities was not as high as they would like. The main reason for this was the rural location of the sites; employees were predominantly from local populations which tended to have a low percentage of ethnic minorities. FIONA SIMPSON *(Forest Enterprise)* asked whether, apart from employment, Center Parcs offered any other benefits to local communities. NICK ALLEN thought so because guests, particularly second time visitors, tended to use Center Parcs as a base to visit other attractions in the area, particularly at Sherwood. Therefore, they were putting money into the local economy. An example of a direct spin-off was a go-karting operation which had been set up just outside and which drew its customers from the Center Parcs guests.

MIKE TURNER *(The Big Sheep)* was interested in a display of tree roots, soil, etc, which Frans Schouten had shown on a slide. He assumed that the interpretation centre concerned was in a national park in Holland and asked about its cost and whether any cost/benefit

analysis had been done. FRANS SCHOUTEN replied that the interpretation centre had been sponsored by major companies in Holland in terms of capital cost. He did not know the running costs. The entire national park, which housed the Kröller-Müller art museum, was state owned and operated by the Ministry of the Environment. The primary reason for most visitors coming to the park was to see the art museum. The interpretation centre had been designed to arouse their interest in the natural environment in which the art museum was situated.

RICHARD BROADHURST *(Chairman)* suggested that perhaps there was too much reliance on buildings in the process of welcoming people to the countryside. FRANS SCHOUTEN agreed but he thought that Center Parcs was a good example of a facility which combined the use of buildings and atmosphere. The attitude of the people working in a facility was an important factor; they should aim to imbue the visitors with their expertise rather than impose it on them. NICK ALLEN confirmed that the feeling of being at one with nature was one of the major attractions of Center Parcs. Great care was taken to blend the buildings into the surrounding areas and there was an on-going commitment to improvement.

JIM SAUNDERS *(Offa's Dyke Centre)* referred to the go-karting operation mentioned earlier. Nick Allen had said in his presentation that Center Parcs would not allow jet skis because of the noise and pollution. The same problems applied to go-karting. NICK ALLEN had no objection provided the go-karts were far enough away from the village that there was no disturbance to the guests who came for the peace and tranquillity. JIM SAUNDERS saw a parallel here with the national park which attracted a variety of commercial operations which were then detrimental to the national park. NICK ALLEN acknowledged that this was a real concern. FRANS SCHOUTEN quoted an example from Indonesia where he had advised the government to set up a leisure centre near the Borobudur to divert local people and tourists away from that overcrowded facility.

SIMON CURRY *(Rochester-upon-Medway City Council)* asked whether putting a great deal of capital investment into buildings such as visitor centres in prime wildlife areas was desirable. He suggested the money might be better spent in derelict and inner city areas to provide facilities for the local population rather than creating more disturbance in prime wildlife sites. NICK ALLEN said that one of the Center Parcs sites in Belgium had been developed in an area adjacent to a disused coal mine. A 'green' area had been created from scratch. The establishment of the facilities at both Sherwood and Elveden had resulted in the surrounding areas being considerably improved in terms of the natural environment.

JOS JOSLIN *(Ridgeway Officer, Oxfordshire County Council)* asked whether the objective of the Center Parcs company to conserve and enhance the environment took precedence over using the environment to make profits by having large numbers of people coming into it. NICK ALLEN said that was the case.

In response to a question raised from the floor, FRANS SCHOUTEN said that education and enjoyment should not be regarded as separate entities. Good education started with enjoyment. Pleasure was the gateway to understanding. Understanding was the gateway to education.

In drawing the session to a close, RICHARD BROADHURST identified a similarity between the triangle shown by Frans Schouten and the work being done by Michael Dower and his group in the *Working Towards and Maintaining Balance* publication which had come out of the English Tourist Board's work with the Countryside Commission and

others under the Tourism Task Force – the triangle between the visitor, the natural environment and the host community. It was important to get the balance right, to ensure that the benefits to the local community were in place, as well as the care of the local environment and the customer care. It was much wider than just looking after visitors.

He thanked both speakers for their contributions, for giving so generously of their experience and wisdom in starting off the conference.

Meeting Customer Expectations

Sue Walker Ph.D

Senior Researcher, Centre for Leisure Research
Moray House Institute, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

INTRODUCTION

Countryside recreation is one of the most popular out-of-home recreation activities. Depending on just how a *visit* to the countryside is defined, it is estimated that somewhere between 60 to 75% of the adult population in the UK make at least one visit in a year and between 30 to 50% visit once a month (the higher estimates include a wider range of visits – see note on sources).

Visiting the countryside is not as popular as visits to urban locations – over 80% of adults make at least one *day trip* to a town or city in a year and twice as many visits are made to urban locations; although this varies slightly depending on where in the UK visits are made (Figure 1). Neither is it as popular as many in-home leisure activities (Figure 2 – note the figures for the countryside relate to the population of England/Wales and not Great Britain). Nevertheless, it is a key part of the UK leisure market and the participation figures indicate that there are somewhere between 28 to 35 million 'occasional' customers for countryside recreation in the UK and of these between 14 and 20 million are 'regular' visitors. Over a year this adds up to over 1000 million visits (this figure includes countryside visits of all types).

The aim of this paper is to look at these customers in terms of:

- who they are and, conversely, who they are not, i.e. why people do not visit the countryside;
- when they go;
- where they go and what they do;
- why they go;
- what they like and dislike about the countryside when they get there; and
- what they want to see changed.

The final section then considers whether and how the market for countryside recreation is changing and what this might mean for those responsible for planning and providing countryside facilities and services.

WHO VISITS THE COUNTRYSIDE?

Countryside recreation is popular with people from all walks of life but the extent to which it appeals to different groups within the population varies.

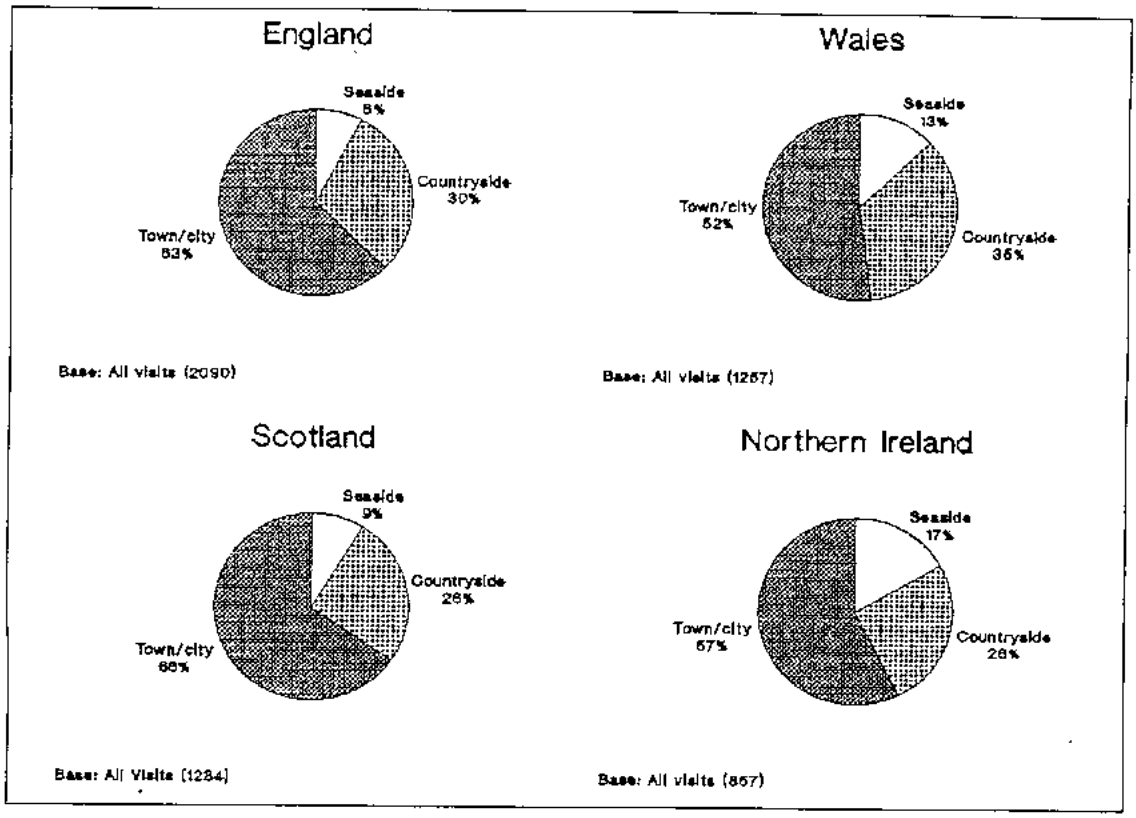

Fig. 1. Location of leisure day trips (All visits April-September 1992)

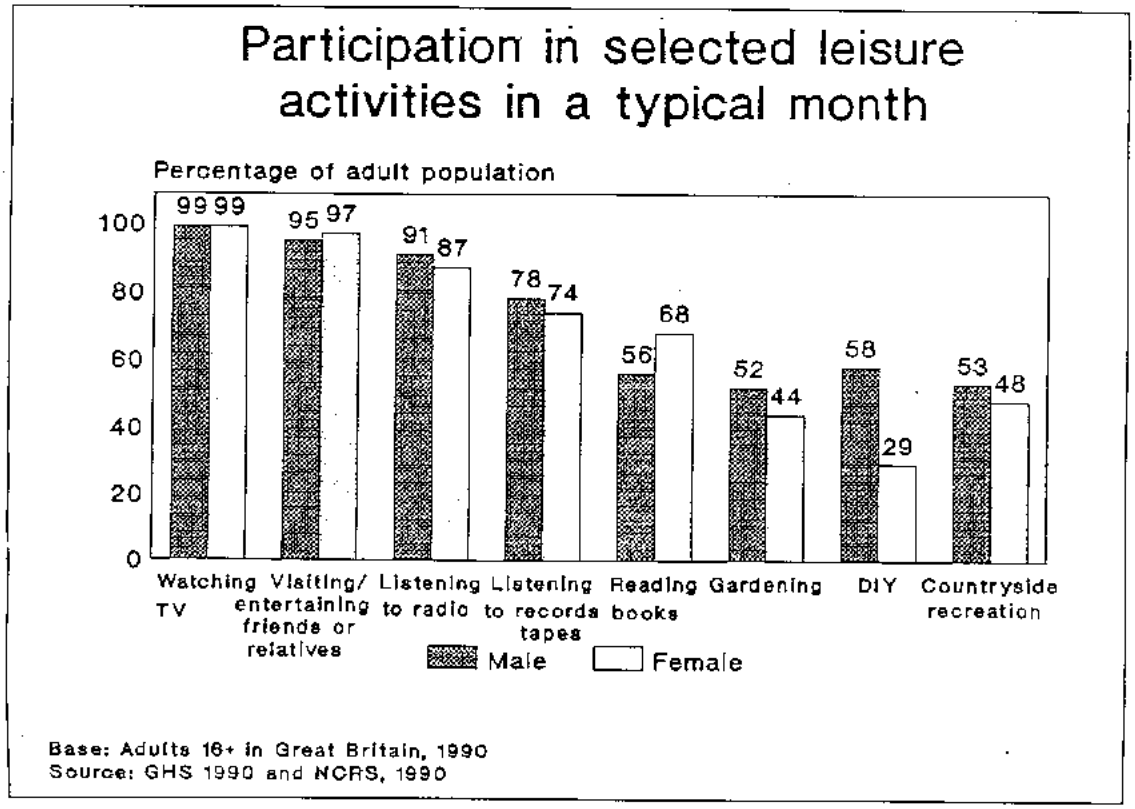

Fig. 2. Participation in selected leisure activities in a typical month

The type of people who do and do not make *leisure day trips* in the UK is shown in Table 1. This information comes from the UK Day Visits Survey (UKDVS) and is not currently available for countryside trips, but previous surveys of countryside visitors reveal a very similar picture [1, 2, 3, 4].

Table 1. **Leisure day visits from home by age, sex, working status, social class, household type, and car ownership**

	People making visits	People making no visits	All respondents
	Percentage of people (15+)		
Age (years)			
15-24	22	12	18
25-64	63	62	62
65+	15	26	20
Sex			
Male	48	48	48
Female	52	52	52
Working status			
In employment	55	47	52
Unemployed	6	9	7
Retired	16	25	20
Housewife – non-working	13	14	14
Student/at school	9	5	7
Social class			
AB	19	14	17
C1	28	21	25
C2	25	28	26
DE	29	37	32
Household type			
Children in household	34	31	33
No children in household	66	69	67
Car ownership			
Car in household	80	66	74
No car	20	32	25
Base figure: N =	2134	1708	3842

Note: Figures for people making a visit are based on a two-week recall period
Where percentages do not sum to 100, this is due to a proportion of people not answering the question

Base: All UK respondents: weighted and grossed

Comparing the profiles of people who make visits with those who do not shows that 'visitors' are more likely to be:

- below retirement age;
- in employment;

- in professional and managerial occupations – the ABC1s;
- in households with children; and
- car owners.

From the opposite perspective, it is apparent that the people who are least likely to be customers are:

- retired people;
- people in the C2/DE social groups, and particularly those in low-grade jobs or on low incomes (the DEs); and
- people who do not own cars.

Earlier surveys show that where people live is a further factor, with people who live in or near the country (within 1-3 miles) being more likely to make visits than people living further afield [1, 2].

The national surveys indicate, therefore, that whether or not people go to the countryside is a product of how easy they find it to get there, whether this is dictated by personal factors such as the limitations of age, or practical considerations such as living some distance away, not having a car and/or not being able to afford to go. People's backgrounds and interests are a further factor and these are reflected in the link between visiting the countryside and social class.

What is also revealed when people are asked 'why' they don't visit the countryside is that time, knowledge and interest play a part. Research by the Countryside Commission [5] has shown that other demands on people's time are a limiting factor, although this is more likely to influence how often people go to the countryside, than whether or not they go at all. For most people visiting the countryside is a whole or half-day event (UKDVS, for example, found that, on average, visits to the countryside lasted just over five hours and a fifth were over seven hours long) and so finding time, or more time, to make visits has to be weighed against the competing demands of work, family commitments and other leisure activities.

Limited knowledge about where to go and what to do is a constraint for a significant number of people and only a minority say that they 'know' their surrounding countryside 'very well' (Figure 3). As a consequence, many people feel ill at ease in the countryside (either because they might get lost or told off), uncertain of their rights, and are not sure how or where to get information about recreation opportunities in the countryside.

Questioning people about why they had a limited knowledge of their local countryside also revealed that some people are just not interested and young people, particularly teenagers, were most likely to be in this category. This lack of interest stems in part from a feeling that there is not enough to do in the countryside [5].

Bad weather also is a deterrent. Most people prefer to visit the countryside in fine weather, but people in the A/B social classes are more prepared to put up with poor weather. Other natural hazards (insects, cattle in fields) were seen as less of a problem, but this can vary round the country and in parts of Scotland countryside visitors complain about biting midges.

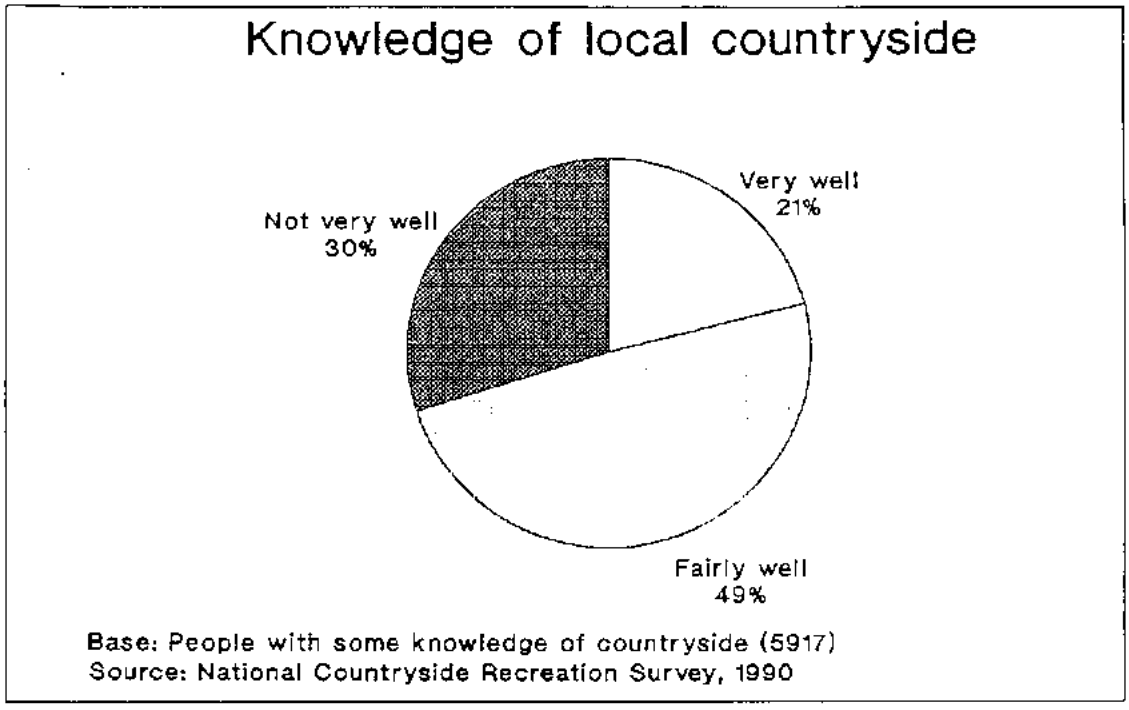

Fig. 3. Knowledge of local countryside

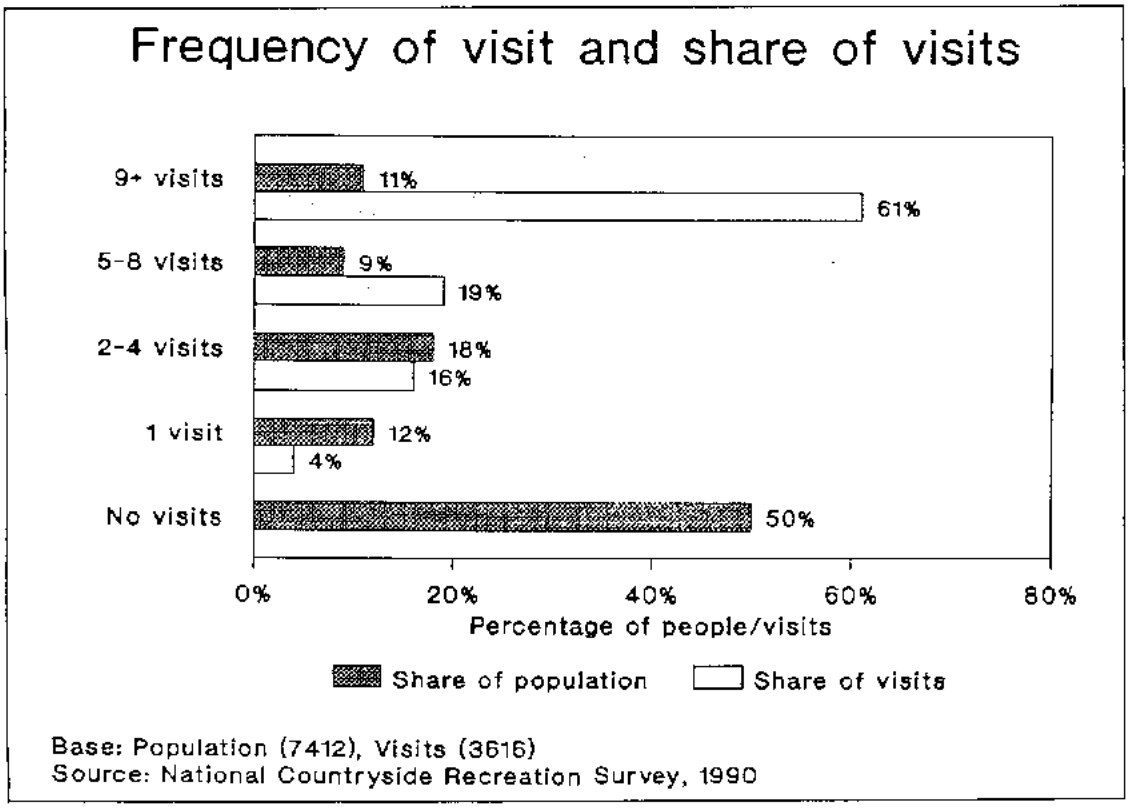

Fig. 4. Frequency of visits and share of visits

It is evident, therefore, that a mix of practical and personal factors influence whether or not people visit the countryside, but it is difficult to say which ones have most influence as they clearly interact. However, not having a car or access to transport is undoubtedly a key constraint; UKDVS, for example, shows that around eight out of ten visits to the countryside are made by car and under 2% are made by public transport.

The national surveys also show that, although a considerable section of the population visits the countryside at some time, the main customers are a relatively small group of people who visit time and time again. The Countryside Commission's national survey suggests that in England/Wales as many as six out of ten visits are made by only one in ten of the population (Figure 4). These 'frequent' users are about a fifth of the population and tend to be in the younger age groups, in professional and managerial occupations, to live in or near the countryside and be car owners.

WHEN DO PEOPLE GO TO THE COUNTRYSIDE?

The majority of visits to the countryside are made in the summer and mostly at weekends. The Countryside Commission's national survey [2] suggests that seasonal variations are not that great:

- in the main summer months (July/August) six out of ten people visit the countryside in a typical month, while in the winter (November to January) the figure falls to four out of ten.

However, day of the week is a key influence on when visits are made:

- in a typical month just over one half (51%) of visits to the countryside are made at the weekend and 33% of visits are on a Sunday.

WHERE DO PEOPLE GO AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

Most visits are made to the countryside around people's homes and the average distance travelled (round trip) is only around 30 miles (Figure 5). Only visits to the coast (whether to seaside resorts or the rural coast) take people further afield; this no doubt reflects the popularity of the coast but is also a product of geography, with a large part of the UK population living some distance from the coast.

Although some people travel over 100 miles on countryside visits, these tend to be coach trips rather than independent visits [2].

Within the countryside, most activities take place in what can be described as the 'wider countryside', rather than at facilities specifically for recreation and outdoor sport (Figure 6 – note: this figure shows the relative popularity of all *activities* undertaken in a typical month but excludes visits to friends and relatives in the countryside).

Countryside recreation encompasses a wide range of activities from picnicking to paragliding, but for the majority of *visits* (54%) the main purpose is to visit friends and relatives, have a meal and/or drink, visit an attraction, or go for a drive, a picnic or to sightsee (Table 2). Only around a third of visits are primarily to take part in active sports and recreation.

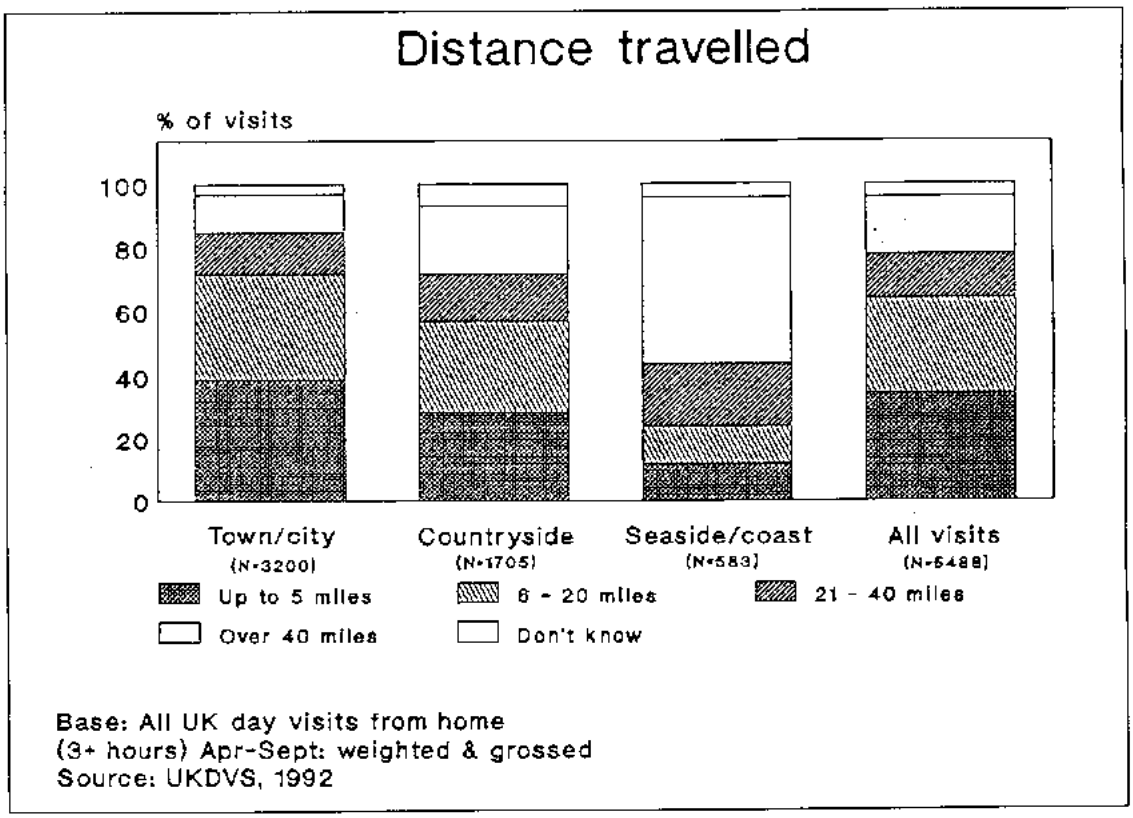

Fig. 5. Distance travelled

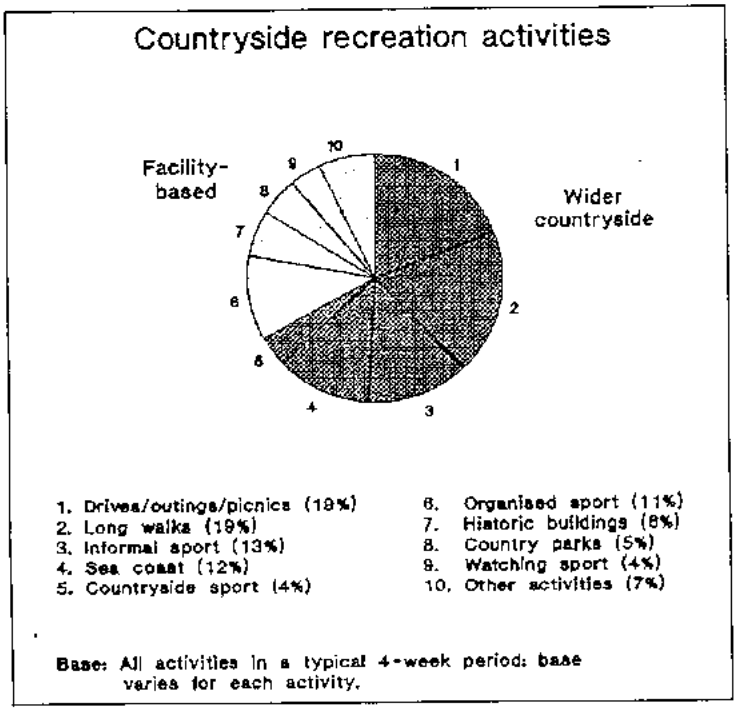

Fig. 6. Countryside recreation activities

Visiting friends and relatives and eating/drinking out are also the most popular activities in an urban setting and only visits to the coast are distinctive, with swimming and beach activities the most popular at this location (28% of the 'other' activities for this location in Table 2 were in this category).

Table 2. Main Activities Undertaken on Leisure Day Visits

	Countryside visits	Town/city visits	Seaside/coast visits	All visits
		Percentage of visits		
To visit friends/ relatives	19	20	10	19
To eat or drink out	16	20	5	17
To go for a walk/hill walk	11	2	7	5
To play organised sport	11	6	3	7
To go to a leisure attraction or place of interest	10	4	9	6
To go for a drive/sightseeing/ a picnic/pleasure boating	9	3	16	6
To take part in countryside sport	6	1	6	3
To watch sport	4	2	2	3
To go cycling/mountain biking	3	1	1	1
To play informal sport/ children's games	2	1	5	2
To pursue a hobby	2	3	*	3
To go shopping	2	12	2	8
Other activities	6	23	32	19
Base figure: N =	1705	3200	583	5488

Note: Figures are based on a two-week recall period.
Where percentages do not sum to 100, this is due to rounding the figures.
* indicates less than 0.5%

Base: All leisure day visits in the UK April-September 1992: weighted and grossed

A further facet of what people do in the countryside which has been examined in more recent surveys is how much they spend. The Countryside Commission's national survey and UKDVS indicate that somewhere between 50 and 60% of visits involve expenditure, with people spending, on average, between £6 and £8 (these figures include the 'no-spenders'). Most money is spent on food and drink, petrol and entrance fees.

People are less inclined to spend money on visits to the countryside than those visiting towns/cities and the coast in their leisure time; UKDVS indicates that around 80% of visits to these locations involved spending and the average amounts spent were just over £17 and £15, respectively (again these figures include the 'no spenders').

WHY DO PEOPLE GO TO THE COUNTRYSIDE?

The figures above suggest that particular activities are not the main reason why most people go to the countryside and this is borne out when people are questioned about their motivations. For most people it is the attractive, peaceful setting which the countryside provides which underlies much of its appeal.

Again, the survey for the Countryside Commission [5] demonstrates this, with the nice scenery, peace and quiet, places for walks, plants and animals, and attractive villages being rated as 'very important' in influencing people's decisions to go to the countryside. However, when they get there they are more concerned with practical aspects. People were asked to say which were the most important features, facilities or opportunities when they were in the countryside and those which topped the 'very important' list were: the toilets, easy car parking, being with friends/relatives, and somewhere to get a snack. Aspects of the countryside itself – history/geology/wildlife – came lower down the list (sixth equal with 'pleasant pubs').

For some people too the countryside setting is an escape from the pressures of urban life, while for others it is a social environment in which they spend time with friends and family or entertaining guests; this is also reflected in the fact that few people go to the countryside on their own.

Proximity also plays a part, particularly in deciding where to go; 'because it is convenient' is the reason which frequently underlies the choice of location.

WHAT DO PEOPLE LIKE AND DISLIKE?

For the most part, the national surveys do not explore what people like and dislike about the countryside and so it is necessary to turn to area or site-based surveys in order to find out what people think are the good and bad points about the countryside.

People's 'likes' tend to reflect the reasons why they go to the countryside and 'the scenery' and 'peace and quiet' commonly emerge as the two things people like most about the countryside whether they are on day trips or holidays or visiting sites close by the urban edge or in remoter areas (see Appendix 1, Tables A1.1 – A1.4).

Specific aspects of the countryside or individual locations tend to be mentioned by a smaller percentage of visitors, although seaside and coastal sites are somewhat the exception to this (see Appendix 1, Table A1.1).

In looking at what people 'dislike' about the countryside, the most striking thing is the proportion of people who do not have any dislikes. This suggests that most customers are satisfied with what is being provided; depending on the area/site it appears that somewhere between four and six out of ten visitors have no complaints (see Appendix 1, Tables A1.5 and A1.6).

This high level of satisfaction is not necessarily surprising, as many people are 'regular visitors' and presumably would not return if they did not like what was on offer. However, as the surveys reviewed here do not explore the responses of first-time, occasional and regular visitors, it not possible to say to what extent the satisfaction of these different groups varies.

Dislikes tend to be related to the areas/sites people have visited but three common complaints emerge:

- the toilets,
- the litter, and
- the weather.

In general, few people complain specifically about other users, although in some areas complaints about dogs do occur (see Appendix 1, Table A1.5).

Some types of provision, for example footpaths, do generate specific complaints about the condition of the path and associated facilities [6].

When people are asked to assess specific facilities most surveys indicate that visitors are satisfied with what is on offer, but again the toilets do not fare so well (see for example Table A1.7 in Appendix 1). Given that there is evidence that many people consider toilets to be an important feature when visiting the countryside, then these complaints should not be ignored (in the Countryside Commission's survey [5] 68% of people rated the toilets as 'very important' when asked to say what were the most important features, facilities or opportunities, easy car parking was second in the list – rated 'very important' by 48% of people).

Some surveys look at what different types of customers like and dislike – for example, holiday and day trip visitors – but, on the whole, more detailed assessments of the market are few and far between.

Neither do most surveys look at what people think about the 'product', i.e. different facets of the countryside itself. However, recent surveys by the RSPB have attempted to look at people's awareness of land use change and what impact this might have on their decision to visit a particular place [7, 8].

As one example of this, visitors to mid-Wales were asked about increases in conifer plantations and loss of heather moorland (Table 3). More people were aware of the former than the latter and were more likely to say that it would affect their tendency to visit.

WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT TO SEE CHANGED?

Given that a significant number of visitors are satisfied with what is on offer, it is not surprising that many of them say they do not want to see changes or improvements (Table A1.8, Appendix 1). Moreover, those who do request new or improved facilities, tend to focus on what is already there, rather than new types of facilities. Most people request:

Table 3. Awareness of Land-use Change Among Visitors to Mid-wales and Future Holiday Intentions

	Percentage of respondents
Aware that conifer plantations increased:	52
If plantations continue to increase:	
more likely to visit	4
less likely to visit	40
no difference	55
Aware that heather moorland decreased:	35
If moorland were to increase:	
more likely to visit	30
less likely to visit	5
no difference	64

Base: All respondents (365)

Source: RSPB Mid-Wales Summer Survey 1990

- more car parking,
- more/better footpaths,
- more/better toilets,
- more refreshment facilities, and
- more signing and information.

IS THE MARKET CHANGING?

This final section considers whether or not the market or 'customer base' has changed over recent years and whether it is changing at present. Most of the information in the first part of this section comes from the Countryside Commission's national survey [2], as this is one of the few sources of trend data.

The results from the national survey from 1985 to 1990 indicate that the scale of countryside recreation, i.e. the number of visits made over a year, has remained at a similar level over this period. The proportion of the populario visiting the countryside in a typical month has changed little from year to year (Figure 7) and the frequency with which visits are made has stayed the same, with the average around three to four visits per person per month.

A more general comparison of the nature of countryside recreation over this period also shows relatively little change. In brief, most visits to the countryside are undertaken by:

- a relatively small *core* of regular visitors;
- people who have the ability and resources to get there;

- people taking part in general leisurely pursuits, rather than active sports and recreation;
- people visiting areas they are familiar with which are within easy reach of their homes; and
- people visiting the wider countryside, rather than purpose built facilities.

Visiting the countryside also continues to be a seasonal activity and concentrated into weekends.

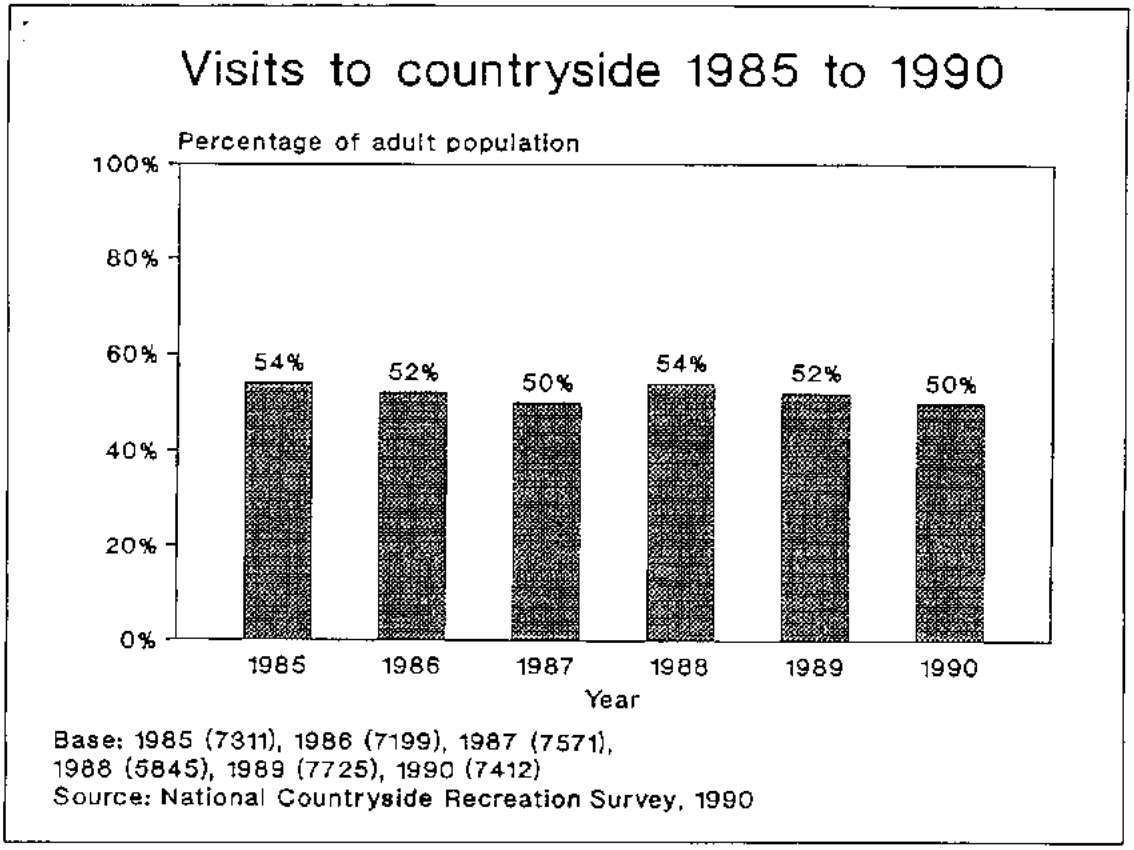

Fig. 7. Visits to the countryside 1985-1990

Other surveys also show that people continue to visit the countryside for much the same reasons, are fairly satisfied with what they find there, and, if they do complain, it is about the same things.

The fact that the market for countryside recreation appears to have changed very little is perhaps not surprising as the factors which constrain people from visiting the countryside have not changed significantly either. Although social and economic indicators (e.g. disposable income and car ownership) show that the 1980s was an increasingly affluent period [2], this tended to benefit those people who are existing customers, rather than potential ones, and there is still a significant number of people who do not have access to transport or the other resources which enable people to get the countryside. Looking ahead to the short and medium term, it seems unlikely that these constraints will be reduced to any great extent and so it also seems unlikely that the overall market for countryside recreation will grow significantly.

Nevertheless, while the general characteristics of the market may not have changed significantly in recent years, there is evidence that changes are taking place within the market[9]. These changes include:

- A growing interest in active sports and recreation as part of a healthier lifestyle. Participation has been growing in cycling, golf and some water sports, and interest has been stimulated in part by new and more affordable equipment, such as all-terrain bikes and jet skis.
- A growing concern about the environment. This has led to a more active interest in wildlife, nature conservation and the rural environment.
- Increased participation in activities on an independent basis, rather than with a club or organisation – this is evident from the growth in individual membership of sports organisations.

On the ground these changes mean that more people are looking for things to see and do and, as the conference last year highlighted, more people are wanting to get 'off the beaten track'.

More general assessments of leisure markets indicate that people's expectations are increasing and some customers require not only more but also better facilities and services and a better quality 'experience' in every respect.

Change is also apparent at the local level and, while the overall market for countryside recreation may not be growing substantially, many popular recreation areas are experiencing growing pressures from increasing numbers of visitors.

These types of changes are not necessarily detected by the national surveys, either because they affect relatively small groups of visitors or specific locations (these surveys are not designed to monitor changes on this scale) or because they reflect changes in attitude, a dimension not covered by the national surveys.

The market for countryside recreation also is subject to external changes such as social and demographic changes and changes in the leisure market as a whole. These aspects are beyond the scope of this paper but other authors have explored what this might mean for recreation in the countryside [5, 9].

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE?

This review suggests that there is still considerable scope to make it easier for those people who do not go to the countryside to get there, through facilitating access and making people more aware of the opportunities on offer. However, given the nature of the main constraints on visiting the countryside, expanding the market is more likely to be a gradual than a sudden process, and most of the customers who come to the countryside in the next few years will be the ones who have been before.

To meet the needs of these customers this review suggests that it will be important to:

- become more aware of the subtle changes which are taking place in the market and to explore change at the local, as well as national, level.

This will mean exploring people's motives, expectations and attitudes to a greater extent than most surveys tend to, and finding more effective ways of monitoring small scale changes and changes in where people go and what they do in the countryside.

A more in-depth look at people's requirements may demonstrate whether most people coming to the countryside really are looking for just a car park, good toilets, a good view, a nice walk, and somewhere to get something to eat and drink, or whether this reflects limited horizons rather than real preferences.

Finally, perhaps what is needed more than anything else is for policy-makers, planners and managers of countryside facilities and services to listen to the customers when they do communicate their views and to respond to them. Hopefully then, customer surveys will not continue to produce the same list of complaints as those described here.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The estimates of participation in countryside recreation in the introduction to this paper come from two national surveys – the 1992 UK Day Visits Survey (UKDVS) and the 1990 National Countryside Recreation Survey (NCRS).

The 1992 UKDVS was commissioned by the Countryside Commission, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Department of Employment, the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland's Environment Service, Scottish Natural Heritage, the Scottish, Wales and Northern Ireland Tourist Boards, the Forestry Commission, and British Waterways. It provides information about leisure day visits to/from people's homes to destinations within the UK which last for three hours or more. The survey found that 67% of the adult population (15+ years) in the UK had made at least one visit to the countryside (excluding the coast) in the previous year and 30% had made a visit in the previous month.

The 1990 NCRS was commissioned by the Countryside Commission and provides information about visits to the countryside (including the coast) in England and Wales to/from people's homes and visits made while people were on holiday away from home – the survey found that around 80% of all visits were *day* trips. The survey recorded all visits, regardless of their duration, and found that 75% of the adult population (16+ years) had made at least one visit in the previous year, while 50% had been to the countryside in the previous month.

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APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL TABLES

Table A1.1. Features Liked by Visitors to Sites in Central Scotland

Features liked	Site			
	Gullane	Yellowcraig	Roslin Glen	North Pentlands
	Percentage of visitors			
LIKES COMMON TO ALL SITES				
Peace and quiet	27	34	47	25
The scenery/view	20	28	25	44
Good walks/good for walking dog	8	21	26	22
Plenty of space/free to roam	16	12	3	13
Suitable/safe for children	6	5	20	4
Not too crowded	12	14	11	8
Well laid out/well kept	31	18	14	8
Close to home/easily accessible	9	7	8	22
LIKES PARTICULAR TO INDIVIDUAL SITES				
Sport/sporting facilities (eg. golf,skiing)	-	4	-	14
Facilities for children (eg. Tarzan area, adventure play)	-	5	-	-
Facilities in general	2	9	-	3
Variety of activities	4	1	-	4
Natural features	-	20	25	12
Varied scenery	-	6	-	7
The wildlife	5	13	11	4
Not too formal/managed	6	5	4	3
Fresh Air	4	4	-	10
The sea/seaside/beach	59	57	-	-
Free/inexpensive	-	-	-	-
Good car parking provision	5	8	-	-
Sheltered/good climate	9	6	-	-
Relaxing	2	-	4	3

Note: Features mentioned at only one site and/or by only a small percentage of respondents are excluded

- indicates not relevant to that site.

Source: Countryside recreation in Central Scotland [10]

Table A1.2. Aspects Enjoyed by Holiday and Day Trip Visitors to the Erne Lakeland

	Type of visitor	
	Day trip	Holiday
	Percentage of visitors	
The scenery, lakes, countryside	67	51
Peace and quiet	28	39
Relaxation	11	6
Friendly people	9	19
Water sports/cruising	11	13
Clean and tidy	8	3
Everything	6	2
A visit to a specific place	-	6
Other reasons	16	20
Base figure (N) =	54	60

Source: Erne Lakeland visitor surveys - self-completion questionnaires, 1992 [11]

Table A1.3. Aspects of Countryside Sites around Gateshead Liked by Visitors

	Percentage of visitors
Peace and quiet	62
Wildlife/plant/trees	44
The view/scenery	38
Good for walking the dog	28
Convenient	24
Not too busy	18
Good for children	17
Plenty of space	16
Easy to park a car	5
Other	10

Base: All visitors (594)

Source: Survey of countryside recreation sites around Gateshead, summer 1992

Table A1.4. Features Liked by Visitors to Orkney, Summer 1989

	Percentage of visitors
Scenery/landscape/countryside	50
People/hospitality	41
Peace and quiet	35
Historic/pre-historic sites	25
Wildlife/birds/nature	12
Remoteness/isolation	7

Base: All respondents (467)

Source: RSPB Orkney Survey [8]

Table A1.5. Features Disliked by Visitors to Sites in Central Scotland

Features disliked	Site			
	Gullane	Yellowcraig	Roslin Glen	North Pentlands
	Percentage of visitors			
DISLIKES COMMON TO ALL SITES				
No dislikes	46	62	44	59
Litter/site dirty/poorly maintained	23	9	13	7
Condition of the paths and roads	4	3	7	3
Activities of other users (including dislike of dogs)	10	8	6	10
Toilet facilities (lack of or poor condition)	9	6	6	*
Lack of or poor condition of other facilities	4	3	2	6
DISLIKES PARTICULAR TO INDIVIDUAL SITES				
Views restricted	-	-	3	-
Flies	-	1	-	-
Too crowded/queues	4	3	2	-
No shelter/windy	1	1	-	-
Traffic/cars	-	-	6	2
Charges for parking	12	9	-	-
Access to site poor	2	-	3	-
Car parking too far from beach	-	3	-	-
Too formal/developed	-	-	7	3
Opening hours of facilities	-	-	-	-
Layout/design of golf course	-	-	-	-
Horses/damage by horses	-	-	12	-
Trees being felled	-	-	10	-
The military presence	-	-	-	6

Note: Features mentioned at only one site and/or by a small percentage of respondents are excluded.

\- Indicates not relevant to that site
* Indicates less than 0.5%

Source: Countryside recreation in Central Scotland [10]

Table A1.6. Aspects Spoiling the Enjoyment of Holiday and Day Trip Visitors

	Type of visitor	
	Day trip	Holiday
	Percentage of visitors	
Poor weather	36	58
Litter	23	12
Poor standard of facilities	17	9
Pollution of the waterways	15	1
Too many people	10	1
Not enough signposts	9	0
Poor fishing	0	5
Speed boats	2	2
Other aspects*	11	23
Base figure (N) =	22	33

Note: It should be noted that the bases for these figures are very small, as only around one half of the people completing a self-completion questionnaire voiced a complaint about the area.

* 11% of holidaymakers complained about specific bars/restaurants and 5% complained about the violence associated with terrorism.

Source: Erne Lakeland visitor surveys - self-completion questionnaires, 1992 [11]

Table A1.7. Facilities and Services Used by Day Trip and Holiday Visitors to the Erne Lakeland and Level of Dissatisfaction

	Day trip		Holiday	
	Used	Dissatisfied*	Used	Dissatisfied*
	Percentage of visitors			
Toilets	69	6	80	20
Picnic site	40	4	30	6
Footpaths/nature trails	42	5	40	4
Information boards	25	1	40	3
Visitor centre	34	1	45	1
Car park	61	1	62	<1
Pub/cafe/restaurant	32	0	41	10
Shop	31	4	48	10
Marina	30	0	36	<1
Jetty	20	3	27	1
Slipway	13	15	12	1
Base figure (N) =	248	-	375	-

Note: * The figures in these columns show the percentage of those visitors who had used the facility who were dissatisfied with that facility.

Source: Erne Lakeland visitor surveys, 1992 [11]

Table A1.8. Changes and Improvements Requested by Visitors to Sites in Central Scotland

Changes/improvements requested	Site			
	Gullane	Yellowcraig	Roslin Glen	North Pentlands
	Percentage of visitors			
ASPECTS COMMON TO ALL SITES				
No changes	42	57	22	41
Improve/enhance landscape/ better maintenance	12	1	18	5
Improve roads/path	4	1	25	9
Improve/provide more toilets	10	13	11	4
Improve/provide more information/signposting	1	3	22	9
Provide cafe/tea room/ snack bar	8	4	3	4
Improve/provide children's play facilities	2	4	4	*
Better control over users/ dogs/restrict numbers	2	3	6	2
ASPECTS PARTICULAR TO INDIVIDUAL SITES				
Maintain natural features	3	2	7	8
Provide more picnic tables/ areas	2	2	6	1
Provide sports facilities	3	-	6	1
Provide litter bins/collect litter	9	6	-	4
Provide/repair seats	2	2	-	-
Improve car parking	2	-	2	2
Provide shelter/changing facilities	2	-	-	-
Abolish parking fee	6	-	-	-
Improve golfing facilities	-	-	-	-
Extend skiing facilities	-	-	-	8

Note: Features mentioned at only one site and/or by a small percentage of respondents are excluded

- Indicates not relevant to that site
* Indicates less than 0.5%

Source: Countryside recreation in Central Scotland [10]

Discussion Summary

GARETH ROBERTS *(Countryside Council for Wales)* said he was very interested in the long term attitudes of people to the countryside going back over several hundreds of years. He referred to an 18th century treatise by Edmund Burke, *Philosophical Treatise on the Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. The publication of this book had resulted in considerable interest being taken in the idea of getting into the countryside for its enjoyment. Mr Roberts felt it was necessary to examine in more depth the reasons why people felt they needed to go to specific locations. It seemed to have a lot to do with fashion. A recent publication, *The Englishman's England*, had begun to investigate this issue but he would like to learn more about any research that was being done in this field. SUE WALKER agreed that the cultural influences on people had not been explored to any great extent. She believed that some of the rather bland answers in surveys arose from the fact that people found it difficult to articulate what it was that prompted them to visit a given place. However, there did seem to be something about getting out into rural areas which had quite a strong attraction for people. It was the rural setting that provided the appeal. MARTYN EVANS *(Countryside Council for Wales)* suggested that it might simply be that English people felt the need to return to their roots – England had been a predominantly rural country through the centuries, until comparatively recently. SUE WALKER agreed that there did seem to be an in-built perception that towns and cities were bad and the countryside good.

ROBIN GRAY *(British Waterways)* referred to a pie chart Sue Walker had shown (Figure 3). It indicated that a large percentage of people felt they knew their local countryside 'fairly well' or 'very well'. He believed that for these people it was probably particular honeypot sites that they were familiar with, places where they took their visiting friends and relatives. Secondly, he asked whether any research had been done on countryside managers and their perceptions of the countryside. He suggested that many of the results from the surveys, about facilities, toilets, reasons for visiting, would be completely turned on their heads if the managers were interviewed. SUE WALKER thought the second point was a particularly good one. People who worked in the countryside often had a completely different set of expectations from the customers they were there to serve. It was something which the conference might well explore in more detail in the workshops. Referring to Mr Gray's comments on the pie chart, she said that the results had been backed up by questioning people further about their knowledge of the countryside. With the exception of the places they visited regularly and knew really well, a significant number of people were lacking in confidence about where to go and what to do in the countryside. They were loathe to go off the beaten track.

BOB FORD *(Department of the Environment)* raised the question of the conflict between the people who owned and managed the countryside and their willingness, or otherwise, to welcome other people into it. SUE WALKER said that it was basically a question of whether we should be concerned that we had only 50% of the population going to the countryside, or relieved about it, because if we increased the market we would increase the potential problems of pressures and damage to the countryside. She did not propose to answer the question although she had her own views on it. She thought it was more properly a question for the conference as a whole to address in terms of who were the customers and how they were catered for in the countryside.

Quality Management: Theories and Themes

Francis Buttle Ph.D*

Manchester Business School, University of Manchester
Institute of Services Management

ABSTRACT

Quality has become a major management issue in the 1990s. It has been shown to impact upon revenues, costs and profitability. A number of theories have been developed to help managers to understand the nature of quality. The most widely applied model is SERVQUAL. As these theories have developed so have a number of associated management practices, among them blueprinting, benchmarking, internal marketing, complaints management, empowerment, and unconditional service guarantees. This paper reviews these theories and themes.

INTRODUCTION

This review of theories and themes within the broad area of quality management is part of an effort to meet two of CRN's aims: to meet the needs of CRN members for advice, information and research; and to disseminate the results of good practice to CRN members.

At best, this can only be a partial review of the field. The electronic database, ABI/Inform, lists over 36,000 citations under the key word *quality*, since January 1987. Delimiting the search to *service quality* produced over 1,000 citations. Since January 1989, every month has seen the appearance of a further 596 new articles. The field is growing more rapidly than the rabbit population in British Rail embankments!

Theories selected for review here are those of the Scandinavian school led by Christian Gronroos, and the American school of Len Berry, A. 'Parsu' Parasuraman, and Valarie Zeithaml. The themes explored include blueprinting, benchmarking, internal marketing, complaints management, empowerment and unconditional service guarantees.

First, why bother with quality?

WHY BOTHER WITH QUALITY?

R.E. Allen, the Chairman of telecommunications giant AT&T, captured the rationale for making quality the primary focus of an operation when he said: "Quality does all. It saves. It sells. It satisfies".[1]

* Manchester Business School, Booth Street West, Manchester M15 6PB
Telephone 061-275 6333 Telex 668354 Fax 061-273 7732

Support for the quality ethic comes from a number of sources. The PIMS database (Profit Impacts of Marketing Strategies) is a longitudinal study designed to identify the drivers of corporate performance. Quality is a driver. The data indicate that service organisations rated as having better than average service quality, typically charged 9% more than competitors, grew their market share at 6% p.a., and achieved 12% profit on sales. Those rated worse than average were unable to command premium prices, experienced market share declines and averaged a mere 1% profit on sales.[2]

Taking an even broader perspective, quality impacts upon all components of the return on investment formula, enhancing revenues, reducing costs and, in some cases, constraining capital investment.[3] Revenues are enhanced because customer satisfaction ratings rise, market share increases, customer retention rates improve, positive word of mouth is engendered, and higher margins can be earned through better prices. On the cost side of the equation, higher volumes enable improved economies of scale to operate so that unit costs fall, customers make fewer demands for repetitions, repairs and replacements, there is less waste in production processes, and product liability (legal) costs are reduced. Capital investment may even be constrained. A garage may need fewer tow trucks to pick up previously 'repaired' vehicles, if it adopts a 'get it right first time' attitude.

It is estimated that it costs between five and 12 times as much to win a new customer as to retain an existing customer.[4] Not only are these retention costs lower, but the future income stream and contribution to profit from retained customers is very much higher than that earned from first-year customers.[5] Data from the credit card industry indicate a loss is made from a first year customer, due to the high cost of acquisition; however, a profit is made in year two. By year five, the annual profit from that same customer has doubled. Similar data have been collected for other service sector businesses. It makes economic sense to focus on customer retention through quality. This has led to a clamour for marketing practices to be revised. The criticism has been made that marketing practitioners have been overly concerned with transactions, and insufficiently concerned with relationships. Historically, it has not mattered where sales volumes have come from. Now it does matter. Marketers want to develop long term mutually satisfying relationships with customers. We have seen the emergence of 'relationship marketing'[6], in which management attempts to develop financial, social and structural bonds with customers.

WHAT IS QUALITY?

So, the pursuit of quality makes sense. But what exactly is quality?

Five different approaches to defining quality have been identified as shown in Table 1.[7]

The transcendent definitions associate quality with innate excellence. Art, literature and music are often defined this way. Product-based definitions view quality as some measurable product attribute; water quality is typically measured this way. User-based definitions bring customer considerations into focus. The best quality product is whatever produces the highest level of satisfaction, either for an individual or for a segment of customers. Operations-based definitions take a supply side perspective in that they associate quality with conformance to some predetermined specifications. This is consistent with the 'get it right first time' attitude mentioned earlier, and finds expression in the application of statistical process control and reliability engineering. Value-based definitions go one step further. They associate quality with price or costs. The highest quality product is one which provides optimal performance at acceptable price or reasonable cost.

These definitions reflect different perspectives on quality: user-based definitions reflect an external customer orientation; operations-based definitions reflect an internal, organisational bias. Contemporary management practices emphasise customer determined definitions of quality. Management's role is to manage customer expectations of quality and to design the organisation and its outputs so that these expectations are met or exceeded to the delight of the customer.

Table 1. What is Quality?

I	**Transcendent definitions** "Quality is neither mind nor matter, but a third entity independent of the two ... even though quality cannot be defined, you know what it is". R.M. Pirsig. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.* New York: Bantam Books, 1974.
II	**Product-based definitions** "Differences in quality amount to differences in some desired attribute or ingredient". L. Abbott. *Quality and Competition.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1955.
III	**User-based definitions** "Quality is fitness for use". J.M. Duran (Ed.). *Quality Control Handbook,* 3rd ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 1974.
IV	**Operations-based definitions** "Quality is the degree to which a specific product conforms to a design or specification". H.L. Gilmore. 'Product Conformance Cost'. *Quality Progress,* June 1974.
V	**Value-based definitions** "Quality is the degree of excellence at an acceptable price and the control of variability at an acceptable cost". R.A. Broh. *Managing Quality for Higher Profits.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1982.

WHAT ABOUT SERVICE QUALITY?

It is relatively easy to assess the quality of a manufactured good. However, members of CRN are not manufacturers. You are service providers. Services differ from goods. Unlike goods, which are objects, services are actions or performances.[8]

Services are intangible-dominant outputs. Intangibility means that the customer cannot touch, taste, smell or otherwise experience the performance before it is produced. Consumers of services have fewer tangible clues to help them assess quality prior to the experience. After the experience they may take away no tangible proofs of the service performance other than photographs or tickets. In the absence of tangibles, service quality evaluation is particularly difficult.

Most service performances, including those of CRN members, are highly variable or heterogeneous. It is difficult for management to maintain a consistent standard of performance when there is a high level of human input. People are inconsistent. A B&B proprietor who sparkles in the morning may be worn out and fractious in the evening. As Graham Taylor, England's football manager put it after his team was hammered by Norway in the

World Cup qualifiers, 'We can all have a bad day at work!' Some service providers have attempted to overcome this problem by scripting routine interactions between staff and customer (e.g. telephone enquiries), or by mechanising some interactions (e.g. ATMs). This has been dubbed the 'industrialisation' of service.[9]

Service performances more often than not take place on the premises of the service provider, and involve interactions between customer contact staff and other customers. Whereas the premises may provide clues as to service quality, and the performance of customer contact staff can be managed to some degree, interactions between customers are more difficult to control. A customer's evaluations of the behaviour of other customers may have a significant impact on the overall evaluation of service quality.

A further problem in service quality evaluation is the simultaneous production and consumption of the performance. A visitor to a TIC consumes the performance of the counter staff at the same time as it is being produced. Performances have to be right first time because there may be no opportunity to perform the service a second time to the convenience and satisfaction of customers. A coach tour which fails to arrive at its destination due to mechanical breakdown, or unanticipated road congestion, can be gravely dissatisfying to customers. This is particularly so if they are visitors and have no opportunity to repeat the tour.

The concept of 'Moments of Truth' (MOT) is helpful in understanding what is meant by service quality. MOTs occur when customers come into contact with the service organisation's personnel or processes.[10] These service encounters play a formative role in determining the customer's evaluation of service quality. These moments of truth need to be managed in order to produce positive evaluations. Customers generally enter into these service encounters with particular expectations formed from previous experiences of the service provider or similar organisations, word of mouth, and advertising. These expectations are not static. As customers gain more experience, their expectations change, and normally become more demanding. As British holidaymakers experience improved levels of customer service in, say, the American marketplace, they demand more of domestic service providers. It has been suggested that customers have a 'zone of tolerance', which is represented as a measurable gap between desired and adequate performance expectations.[11] Customers may desire to check out of a hotel in less than one minute, but find a three minute process adequate. The management challenge is to close the zone of tolerance, and exceed desired expectations.

SERVICE QUALITY THEORIES

Since the mid-1980s there have been considerable strides made in understanding the nature of service quality, and in its measurement and management. There are two major theoretical camps. The Scandinavian school is led by Christian Gronroos, the American School by Len Berry. Perhaps predictably, the American approach to service quality dominates the literature, and is the more widely adopted in the UK.

Gronroos has identified two main components of service quality. These are the 'what' and 'how' of service quality.[12] 'What' refers to the technical (outcome) quality of service performance. If a customer expects to check out of an hotel in three minutes, and this expectation is met, then outcome quality is high. 'How' refers to the functional (process or interactive) quality of service. If the check-out was unfriendly, then the customer might negatively evaluate functional service quality. A third component of service quality has

been proposed by Gronroos; he calls it reputational quality, which is a function of the standing of the service organisation.

It has also been observed that customers may make two distinct evaluations of service quality: one at the time the service is being performed, and the second after service performance.[13] The former is likely to be more concerned with functional quality; the latter with outcome quality.

The American research team of Len Berry, 'Parsu' Parasuraman and Valarie Zeithaml have developed an instrument to measure service quality, SERVQUAL. First published in 1985[14], the model has been widely applied in a number of service sectors, including hotels, hospitals, banks, credit card companies, building societies, tour operators/holidays, repair and maintenance services, airlines, general practitioners, long distance telephone companies, construction services and computer services. The authors claim that the instrument is "...applicable across a broad spectrum of services", and "...can be adapted or supplemented to fit the characteristics or specific research needs of a particular organisation".[15]

In a period of qualitative research which the developers performed as a preliminary to scale development, ten dimensions of service quality were identified: reliability, responsiveness, understanding/knowing customers, access, communication, competence, security, courtesy, credibility and tangibles. During scale purification these variables were collapsed into five factors: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles, as defined in Table 2. The dimensions, empathy and assurance, represent seven of the original ten dimensions: communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing customers, and access.

SERVQUAL takes the customer's perspective in defining service quality as the gap between expected and perceived service performance. The instrument seeks to measure customers' expectations of service providers in the particular service context being investigated, and their perceptions of the performance of a particular service provider. The instrument takes the form of a 22-item scale, which is presented in two forms to respondents. In the first administration, respondents are asked to agree or disagree on a seven-point Likert scale with items such as: 'When customers have problems, these firms in the xxxx business should be sympathetic and reassuring.' This expectations item is matched with a perceptions item, expressed thus: 'When you have problems, company yyyy is sympathetic and reassuring.' The 22 items capture data on all five dimensions of service quality. Analysis can take several forms: item-by-item gap analysis; factor-by-factor gap analysis; overall service quality gap analysis. Each can be of value to the service provider commissioning the research.

Table 2. SERVQUAL's Five Factors

Reliability	Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
Assurance	Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
Empathy	Caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers.
Tangibles	Physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel.

These gap analyses become even more significant when they are linked to data reporting the items or factors which are important to customers. For example, SERVQUAL research might reveal a tangibles gap. The firm might be tempted to invest in improving the physical appearance of their buildings and grounds as a consequence. This would make economic sense only if the condition of the service organisation's tangibles was important to the customer. Most SERVQUAL-type research therefore asks for supplementary information. Typically, respondents are asked to allocate 100 points between the five factors in a way which represents their importance. The results can then be charted in a two dimensional matrix of four quadrants, the significance of which is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Importance/Performance Matrix

Quadrant	Description	Strategy
I	Important expectations met or exceeded	Exploit this competitive strength
II	Important expectations not met	Improve performance
III	Unimportant expectations met or exceeded	Educate customers to view factor as important
IV	Unimportant expectations not met	Monitor for changes in importance rating

THE GAPS MODEL

The Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml (BPZ) team have developed what they call the Gaps model of service quality.[16] Having defined service quality as the customer identified gap between expected and perceived service performance, they have identified four other gaps which have a causal effect on the size of this gap.

Gap 1: Managers' perceptions of customers' service quality expectations may differ from the actual expectations of customers.

Gap 2: Managers' perceptions of customers' service quality expectations may be inadequately translated into service quality specifications. For example, customers may understand 'fast service' to mean service within one minute; managers may understand this to mean service within three minutes and design the service delivery system accordingly.

Gap 3: The actual delivery of the service may differ from the service quality specifications. Even though 'one minute service' was specified by management, the system or personnel only produce 'three minute service'.

Gap 4: This is the gap between perceived service quality and the quality promised or implied in external communications with customers.

These four gaps conspire to produce Gap 5, the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of service performance. The Gaps model appears as Figure 1.

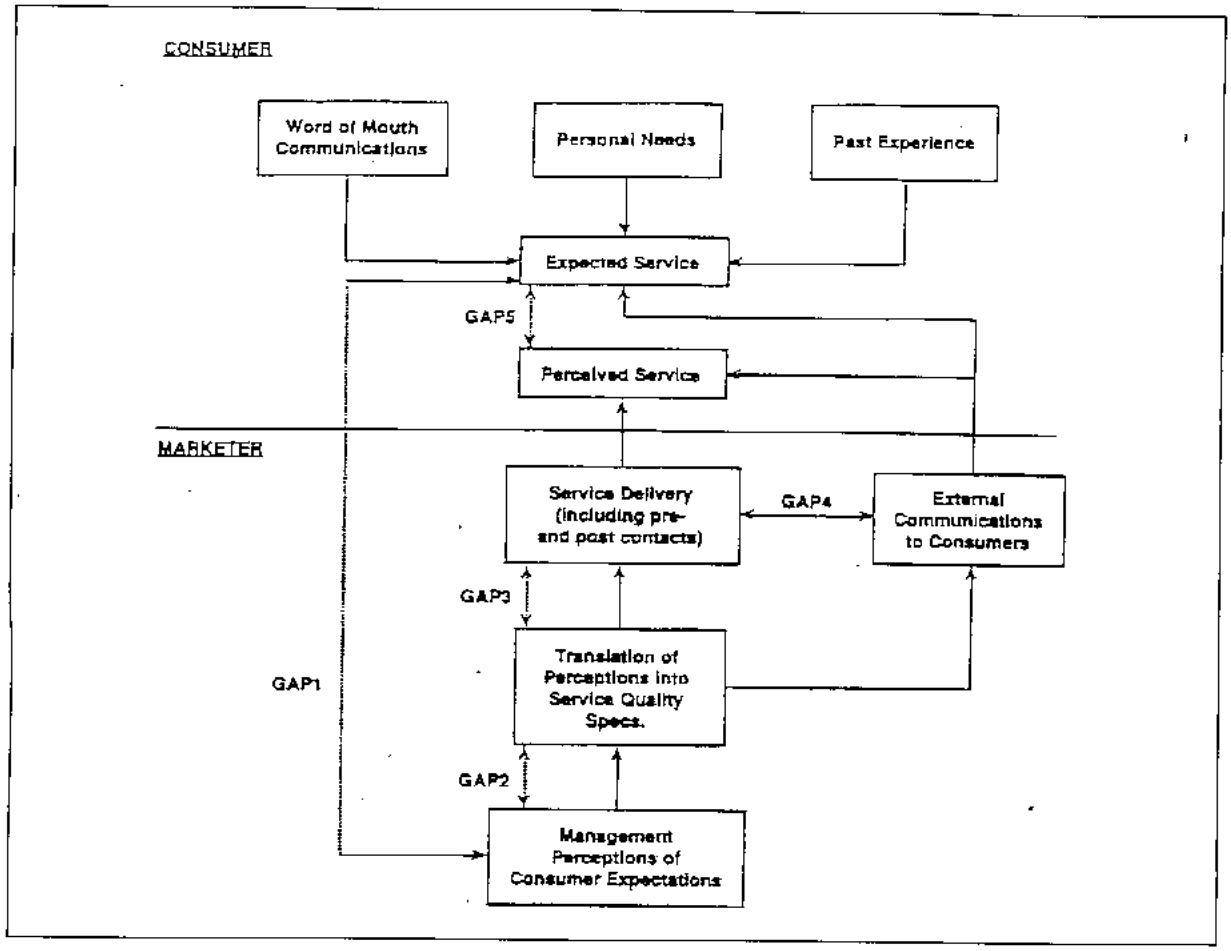

Fig. 1. The Gaps Model

Table 4. Potential Causes of Gaps

Gap 1	Market research orientation Upward communication Levels of management
Gap 2	Management commitment to service quality Process for service quality goal setting Task standardisation Perceived feasibility of meeting customer expectations
Gap 3	Existence and effectiveness of teamwork Employee/job fit Technology/job fit Employees' perceived job control Existence and effectiveness of supervision Role conflict Role ambiguity
Gap 4	Degree of horizontal communication between operations, marketing and advertising people Propensity to over-promise

The task for managers is to close Gaps 1–4 so that customers' perceptions of service quality match or exceed expectations. BPZ have provided further assistance to managers by identifying a number of potential causes of Gaps 1–4. These are outlined in Table 4, and are discussed in detail in their 1990 book.[17] By way of illustration, one potential cause of Gap 1 is the market research orientation of the service organisation. The gap may be related to the amount of market research that is conducted, the relevance of that research to service quality issues, management's ability/inability to interpret the data sensibly, management's confidence in the market researcher, and the origin of service quality data. Remarkably, some service quality research has not directly sought data on customer expectations from customers themselves, but, for reasons of convenience, has opted to collect data from distributors! The message for management is to identify the causes of gaps and to work to close them.

A number of summary observations can be made about SERVQUAL research.

1. The five component factors of service quality – reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles – are fairly robust. It seems that they are major components of service quality across service sector industries.[18]

2. Most studies identify the most important factor as reliability, the ability to perform the service dependably and accurately. Second place is normally accorded to responsiveness. Ranked fifth in most cases is tangibles. Clearly, the interactive performance of customer contact staff is critical to receiving high ratings. Customer care issues are paramount.

3. Service quality is not isomorphic with customer satisfaction. Studies show that between 50% and 60% of the variance in customer satisfaction is accounted for by service quality ratings. Other factors, such as value for money, convenience, and choice may be significant contributors to high customer satisfaction scores.

4. High ratings for service quality are associated with strong customer satisfaction scores, which in turn are associated with higher customer retention, and these in turn with higher profit margins, higher employee satisfaction, lower employee turnover, which in turn promotes greater customer satisfaction. This has been dubbed the 'cycle of service excellence'.

5. Some SERVQUAL studies have found that a single scale item accounts for a significant percentage of variance in overall service quality scores. Typically, this is an item concerning reliability. The following five statements together compose the reliability score for the SERVQUAL scale (these are the expectations statements; there are, of course, matching perceptions statements).[19]

- When firms promise to do something by a certain time they should do so.
- When customers have problems, these firms should be sympathetic and reassuring.
- These firms should be dependable.
- They should provide their services at the time they promise to do so.
- They should keep their records accurately.

As concern for service quality has grown, a number of parallel management practices have developed which enable service providers to produce higher service quality scores. Among these practices are blueprinting, benchmarking, internal marketing, complaints management, empowerment, and unconditional service guarantees.

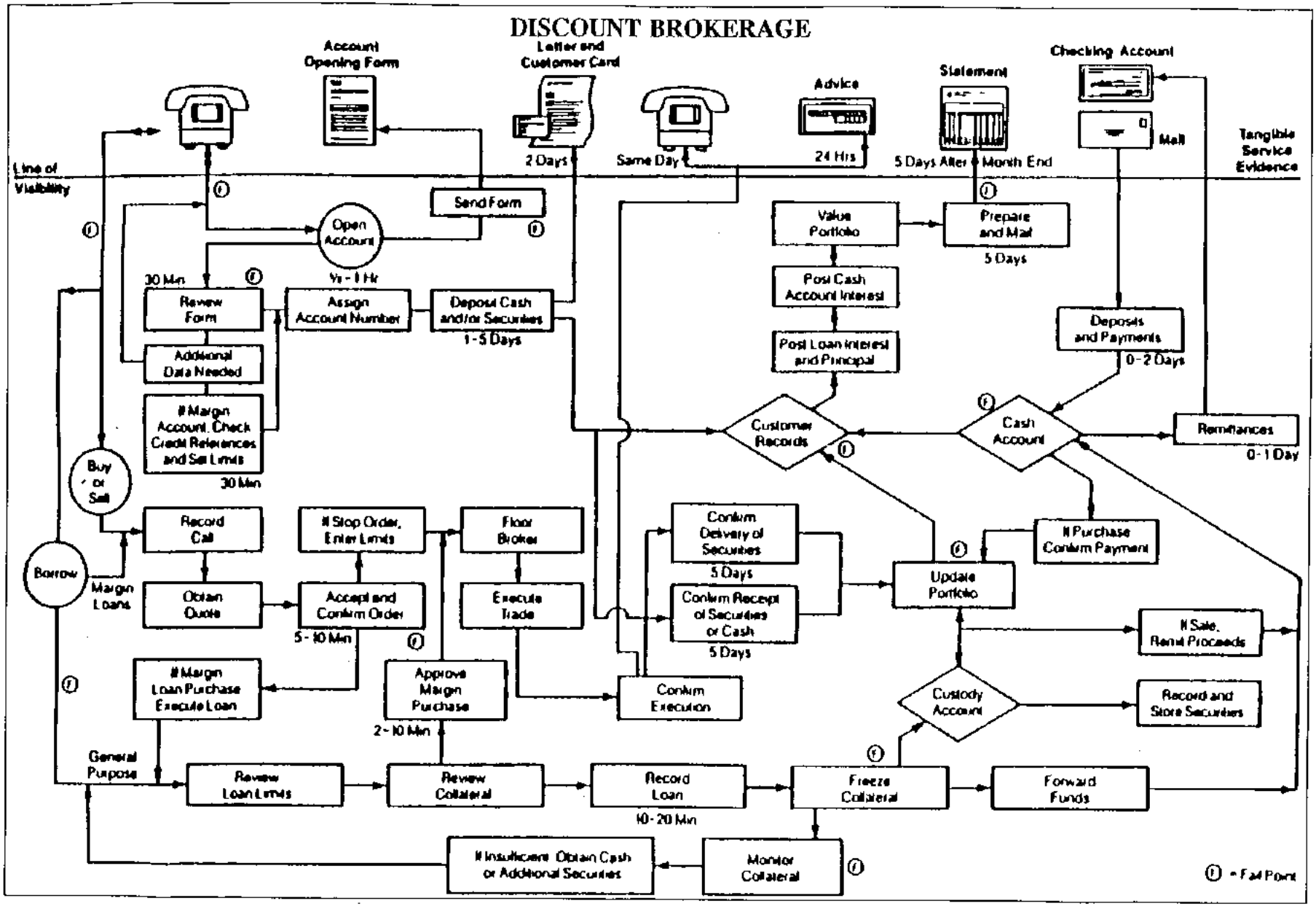

Fig. 2. Example of a service blueprint

BLUEPRINTING

Blueprinting is a method of depicting service production and delivery processes, and the actions and interactions of participants in those processes.[20] The flow chart (see truncated example in Figure 2) can be used for two purposes: to show what does happen when customer meets service organisation or to spell out what should happen in the moments of truth. The first purpose is diagnostic, the second prescriptive.

There are many opportunities for blueprinting in CRN service organisations: dealing with customer enquiries in a TIC, developing a complaints handling process, taking a booking for a canal barge hire, and so on. As shown in the example, blueprints are composed of two sets of processes: those visible to the customer, and those which are invisible. These are equivalent to 'front of house' and 'back of house' concepts. The 'line of visibility' separates them. Whereas the moments of truth are above the line of visibility, the processes and practices back of house can have a significant impact upon the customer's perceptions of service quality.

Blueprints offer a number of benefits. They show individual employees how they fit into the overall process of producing customer satisfying services. This is, of course, helpful in producing the team thinking so important to successful service provision. Blueprints also identify fail points. A fail point is where the process repeatedly breaks down. The letter 'F' in the sample blueprint illustrates where there is a fail point. Fail points might indicate faulty process design, inadequate training or the need for clearer job descriptions. They can also be used to identify cost savings, where processes are redundant, repeated, or inefficiently performed.

BENCHMARKING

The Xerox Corporation claims to have invented benchmarking in 1979. Benchmarking is the process of continuously measuring service performance, processes and technologies against the best in the business, and against excellent companies in other sectors. Xerox, for example, benchmarks its distribution, warehousing and order tracking process against that of L.L. Bean, the American mail order business. It benchmarks its billings and collection technology and processes against that of American Express. It benchmarks its credit control technology and processes against British Airways.

Benchmarking is continuous, and involves in-sector and ex-sector comparisons. The CRN Conference is an opportunity for sharing information and identifying excellence worth emulating. SERVQUAL-type studies can identify operations which have excellent service quality. Further analysis can identify what it is about those operations that produces excellent service – is it first rate customer contact staff training; is it the best of modern technology, or carefully blueprinted fail-safe processes? Xerox claims that their customer retention rate has risen from 55% in 1981 to 87% in 1990 as a consequence of benchmarking.

INTERNAL MARKETING

The traditional focus of marketing has been on external customers. The mandate to produce better quality service has brought internal marketing to the forefront. Essentially the idea is to value employees as if they were customers. The pay-off is that satisfied employees are more likely to produce the excellent service that generates customer satisfaction and retention.

Gronroos defined internal marketing thus: "The internal marketing concept holds that an organisation's internal market of employees can be used most effectively and hence motivated to customer consciousness, marketing orientation and salesmindedness by a marketing-like internal approach and by applying marketing-like activities internally".[21]

Internal marketing aims to attract, develop, motivate and retain the best employees by designing jobs, working environments and rewards which meet their needs. Internal marketing provides human resource management with a non-confrontational metaphor for team building.

It has been claimed that the internal marketing concept is appropriate in three particular contexts.[22]

1. *When developing a service culture in an organisation.*

   Cultural change cannot be achieved by fiat. Employees have to 'buy in' to the vision at ethical and/or rational levels. This requires visionary leadership with the clout to bring about change in employee attitudes and behaviours, through powerful internal marketing.

2. *When maintaining a service culture.*

   As systems, organisations tend to resist change. Revisionist movements wishing to return to the previous culture may undermine the change process. Continuous internal marketing can be used to prevent slip-sliding.

3. *When implementing marketing strategies and plans.*

   Plans which are produced at middle management level have to be approved by superiors and implemented by subordinates and external agents over whom the planner may have little or no authority. Internal marketing can be used to market the marketing strategy.

Internal marketing can also produce significant benefits in any process organisation, that is, one in which services, or goods for that matter, are the outcome of a series of steps or stages. If each person performed his/her task in the series in the understanding that the next person was a customer whose quality expectations must be met, then the net result would be better quality service outputs from the process as a whole.

Among the potential benefits of internal marketing are the following:

- accelerating the pace of change;
- promoting employee involvement and team building;
- motivating appropriate employee behaviours;
- integrating business functions under a single mission;
- stimulating employee retention;
- reducing inter-departmental conflicts;
- reducing cost inefficiencies;
- promoting employee retention;
- facilitating employee recruitment.

Lovelock has proposed a stepwise approach to developing, implementing and monitoring

an internal marketing programme.[23] The approach parallels the normative approach to external marketing strategy development.

COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT

Management's approach to complaints is undergoing a tidal change. Complaints were looked on as the acceptable, though disagreeable, price of variance in quality. Heads would roll if complaint levels were thought too high. Today, enlightened managements are looking on complaints as vital input to programmes of continuous quality improvement. Some companies have installed dedicated fax and phone lines, and 0800 numbers, to handle complaints. Furthermore complaints are actively solicited.

Why has management learned to value complaints positively, rather than negatively? Complaints data reveal fail points in service delivery processes, thus providing the stimulus for improvement. Customers who are dissatisfied with service quality have a number of options (see Figure 3). They might tolerate the dissatisfaction and remain a reluctant customer. They might complain to the organisation or contact employee and seek redress. They may sample another service provider with a view to switching. They may complain through public channels such as newspapers or magazines. They may utter negative word-of-mouth. Or they may boycott the service provider forever.

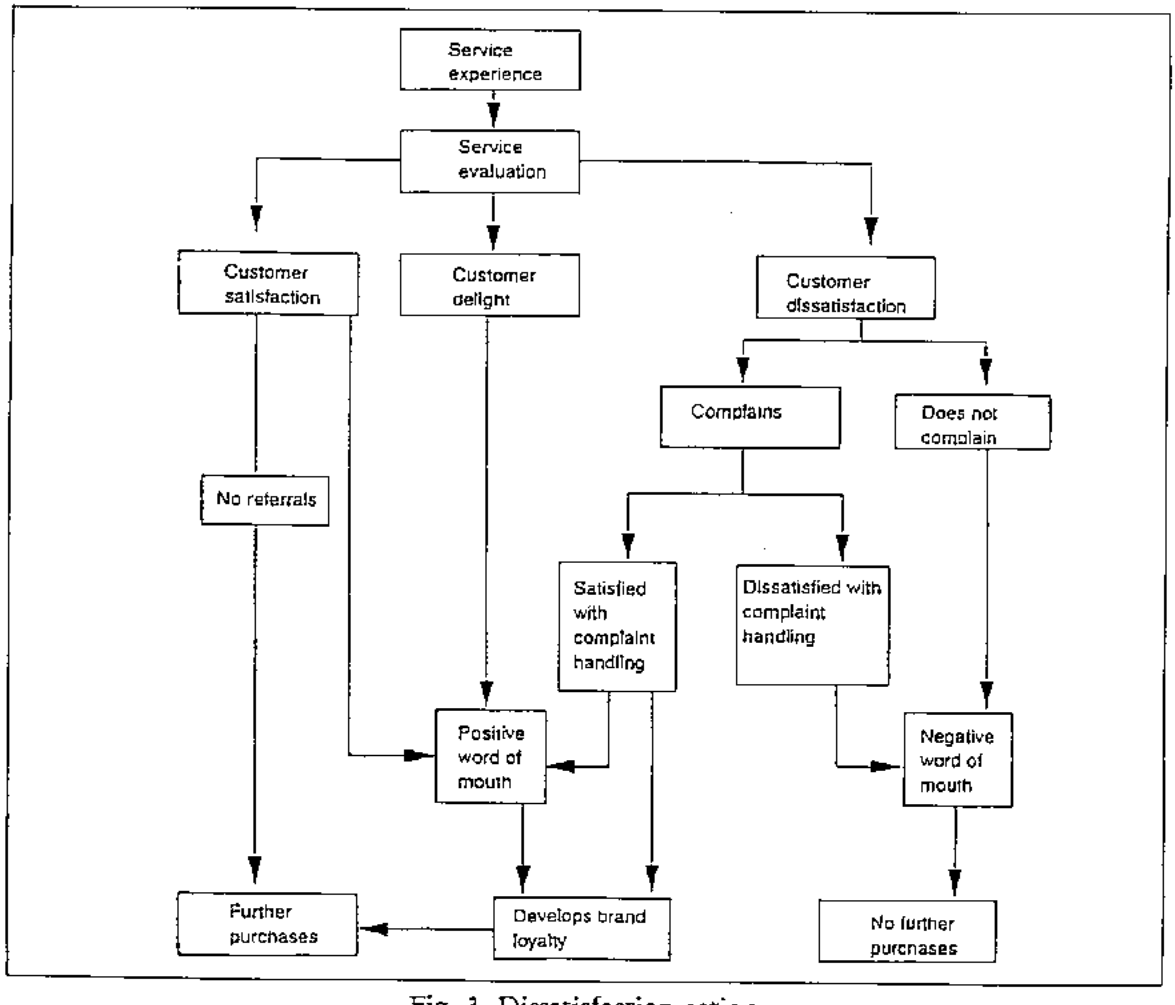

Fig. 3. Dissatisfaction action

Data from TARP indicate that 5% of dissatisfied customers complain to management; 45% complain to the customer contact person; 50% do not complain. Furthermore, although satisfied customers tell five people about their experience, dissatisfied customers typically tell ten people.[24] At best, assuming that contact persons have the authority to redress complaints, only half of complaints are dealt with to the satisfaction of customers. Active solicitation of complaints can produce significant benefits:

- **More efficient marketing.** It is between five and 12 times as costly to replace a defecting customer as it is to keep that customer.
- **Higher employee morale.** Successful service recovery lifts employee morale when they are empowered to act.
- **Loyalty.** A recovered customer can be more loyal than customers who have never experienced a service breakdown and had cause to complain.
- **Positive word-of-mouth.** A recovered customer has good stories to tell about the service provider.

Hart, Heskett and Sasser have developed a set of recommendations for companies wishing to enjoy the benefits of successful service recovery. They recommend measuring the costs to the organisation of replacing a defecting customer, making complaining easy, monitoring service breakdowns, acting fast to prevent negative word-of-mouth, giving contact staff the authority, responsibility, training and incentives to provide recovery, and closing the loop by thanking customers for complaining and telling them about service improvements they have precipitated.[25]

EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment implies management relinquishing some of its traditional territory. Empowerment involves devolving authority, responsibility and resources to customer contact employees so that they can deliver empathically responsive, excellent service. The 'get it right first time' attitude requires contact employees to be flexible and sympathetic in their interactions with customers, for the simple reason that not all customers require the same sort of service. TARP have recommended a two-part approach to customer service strategy: a 'get it right first time' attitude to service delivery backed up by effective complaints management.

Empowerment needs to be supported by adequate training of contact staff, mentoring of novices and monitoring of outcomes. It seems unlikely that contact staff would be able to perform services which meet the criteria of the SERVQUAL instrument unless they have this sort of support. Empowerment has been accompanied by the delayering of management hierarchies. Empowered employees no longer need to report all problems to supervisors. It is not uncommon for them to be allocated a budget or set a ceiling below which they can compensate complaining customers.

Empowered employees are found in retailing (shop staff allowed to negotiate deals with customers), hotels (reception staff negotiating room rates with transient guests), restaurants (table service staff offering recompense to complaining customers). Managements are often concerned that empowerment can be abused by indisciplined staff. It does seem probable that empowerment works better in organisations which have developed a business-wide commitment to excellent customer service.

UNCONDITIONAL SERVICE GUARANTEES

Unconditional guarantees are a cherished feature of manufactured goods marketing strategy. They are relatively new in the services area, having been introduced by American retailer Montgomery Ward in 1872. Service guarantees focus on the performance of people and systems, not simply on the conformance of tangible goods to specification. Many managements therefore feel uneasy about introducing unconditional service guarantees (USGs). Processes occasionally break down, and all employees have bad days. There is therefore a greater perceived risk attached to USGs.

Service guarantees are of two kinds. They can be explicit or implicit. US hotel operators Hampton Inns declare explicitly: "We guarantee high quality accommodations, friendly and efficient service, and clean comfortable surroundings. If you're not completely satisfied, we don't expect you to pay". Four Seasons Hotels have a reputation for excellence that is second to none. Their USG is implicit in that reputation and might perhaps be undermined in the perception of their high spending target market were they to offer an explicit guarantee equivalent to that of Hampton Inns. Explicit guarantees in turn can be either specific or general. Whereas the Hampton Inns guarantee is general, Domino's Pizza is specific ("Your Pizza delivered to your address within 30 minutes, or $3 off the price").

USGs produce significant benefits. First, they facilitate the development of a service culture which permeates the entire service organisation. Second, they are powerful marketing assets. Hampton Inns reported that their USG generated $8 million of additional revenues in a single year, more than nine times their original investment in the programme. Why? They reduce the customer's perceived risk, which is generally higher for intangibles. They improve customer retention rates. Customers have no need to switch service provider if they are guaranteed unconditional satisfaction. They can sustain a premium pricing strategy. They free management to focus on the future, there being fewer service breakdowns. They generate higher employee productivity, there being fewer repetitions of service performances. They eliminate many inter-departmental conflicts since the whole organisation commits to the USG.

There are other benefits. When the guarantee is invoked it is a clear indication of a fail point in the design of the service or its delivery system. Useful complaints data are stimulated and rewarded. USGs also set clear standards for service system design and employee performance.

A number of characteristics typify the successful USG.[26] First, they are unconditional. There are no ifs, ands or buts. Second, they are specific in their promises. Domino's Pizza does not promise fast delivery. It promises delivery within 30 minutes. Third, the promises are significant to customers. Bugs Burger Bug Killers (BBBK), which is the premium priced, market leading pest eradicator in the USA restaurant sector, guarantees to eliminate every "roach, rat or mouse nesting on the premises". Fourth, the remedy is significant should there be a need to invoke the guarantee. BBBK waives payment, pays any fines levied by health authorities, recompenses the restaurateur for lost profits, and pays an additional $5000 if the premises are closed down. Fifth, it is easy to invoke the guarantee. And finally, it is easy to collect the remedy.

Hart has developed a six-step process for developing a successful USG.[27] First, employees at all levels must buy-in to the USG idea. Second, they should be involved, with customers, in brainstorming the USG proposal. Third, an employee task force should be tasked with developing the specifics of the guarantee, seeking input from across the organisation and

from customers. Fourth, employee workshops should be held to discuss fears/concerns about the roll-out and to be trained in how to deal with invocations. Fifth, the plan should be deployed throughout the organisation and tested on sample clients. Sixth, the USG should be launched into the marketplace, focusing firstly on current clients, and then more broadly on the broader customer market. Hart recommends a full-blown media launch, with press releases, advertising, direct mail and even a rally.

CODA: THE CITIZEN'S CHARTER, AND BS 5750

Citizen's Charter

In the UK the Citizen's Charter is an attempt to introduce specific guarantees. The Citizen's Charter covers all public services: schools, hospitals, council housing, police, courts, prisons, postal services, tax offices, benefit offices, job centres, railways and roads, Whitehall and town halls, as well as once public services which are now privatised, i.e. electricity, gas, water and telecoms. Six principles of public service underpin the Charter. They appear in Table 5.

Table 5. The Citizen's Charter Six Principles of Public Service

Standards	Setting, monitoring and publication of explicit standards for the services that users can reasonably expect. Publication of actual performances against these standards.
Information and openness	Full, accurate information readily available in plain language about how services are run, what they cost, how well they perform and who is in charge.
Choice and consultation	The public sector should provide choice wherever practicable. There should be regular and systematic consultation with those who use services. Users' views about services, and their priorities for improving them, to be taken into account in final decisions on standards.
Courtesy and helpfulness	Courteous and helpful service from public servants who will normally wear name badges. Services available equally to all who are entitled to them and run to suit their convenience.
Putting things right	If things go wrong, an apology, a full explanation, and a swift and effective remedy. Well publicised and easy to use complaints procedures with independent review wherever possible.
Value for money	Efficient and economical delivery of public services within the resources the nation can afford. And independent validation of performance against standards.

The Citizen's Charter does recognise that what gets measured gets managed, hence the emphasis on standards. However, the standards are not customer determined. They are bureaucratically constructed compromises between what has been historically achieved and what can be achieved in the future under assumed resource constraints. There are also shades of SERVQUAL in the principle of courtesy and helpfulness, and in efforts to measure the gap between prescribed standards and output performance.

The Citizen's Charter also acknowledges the importance of effective complaint handling procedures, and service recovery. The Charter documents themselves are a statement of the

service vision, which has undoubtedly been internally marketed to public service employees.

BS 5750

BS 5750 is a third party quality assurance certification programme, which sets out how an organisation, or some part of it, can establish, document and maintain an effective quality system.[28] The objective is to be able to demonstrate to customers that the organisation is committed to quality. The quality definition which is explicitly incorporated into BS 5750 is conformance to specification.

BS 5750 is the British equivalent of the European certification programme, EN 29000, and the international programme, ISO 9000.

The status of 'BSI Registered Firm' can only be accorded to those who have developed a quality manual which has been approved by BSI approved assessors. Registration is granted once the assessment team is satisfied that the organisation is implementing the accepted quality system and have agreed to a required level of future audits.

BSI have developed a special standard for service industries. The self-appraisal criteria for quality system documentation is contained in the booklet 'Quality Manual Appraisal for Service Industries'. This sets out BSI's certification requirements. Documentation is required in 20 areas, as detailed in Table 6. Each of the major headings poses several questions for the self-assessors.

Table 6. BS 5750 Documentation

- Management responsibility
- Quality system
- Contract review
- Design control
- Document control
- Purchasing
- Purchaser supplied product
- Product identification and traceability
- Process control
- Inspection and testing
- Inspection measuring and test equipment
- Inspection and test status
- Control of non-conforming product
- Corrective action
- Handling, storage, packaging and delivery
- Quality records
- Internal quality audits
- Training
- Servicing
- Statistical techniques

For example, under the heading, Process Control, eight self-assessment questions are posed, *viz*: How do you ensure a standard service is provided? Do documented work instructions define all activities having an influence on the quality of service provided? Do procedures

exist for controlling, reviewing and updating these work instructions? Are standards of service workmanship defined and documented? How is monitoring and control of suitable processes defined? Does the system ensure that the processes and equipment used have the required capability? How are any special processes identified and do procedures exist to cover their control and monitoring? Is it stipulated that records shall be maintained for special processes, equipment and personnel as appropriate?

Some elements of the standard certification scheme may be redundant in some service sectors, for example, the requirements for documentation concerning handling, storage, packaging and delivery. BSI will work with individual service sectors to design and operate a customised quality assurance scheme.

BSI claims several advantages accrue to registered firms: certification is a first class marketing tool; registered firms can benefit from linking in to BSI's ongoing publicity programme; major buyers such as the Ministry of Defence have acknowledged the value of BS 5750 certification and registration; customers are less likely to insist on their own second party quality assessment; company morale rises; costs are reduced; sales, competitiveness and profitability will improve; listing in BSI's Buyer's Guide; help in export markets as BS 5750 becomes more harmonised with international practices.

BS 5750 is not without critics, who have charged it with being insufficiently focused on issues of concern to customers, too costly and time consuming to implement, and too bureaucratic for small firms with few customers. Others complain that the benefits cited by BSI have not and cannot accrue to certified firms. Criticisms aside it is true that many customers now insist that their suppliers are BSI registered.

CONCLUSIONS

Quality is a big issue for service organisations, whether for-profit or not-for-profit. Quality impacts upon costs, revenues, profitability, customer satisfaction, customer retention, and employee retention. There are several classes of definition of quality, but contemporary thinking privileges those which value customer perceptions. The intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, and the heterogeneity of services makes service quality harder for the customer to identify. The leading technology for measuring and managing service quality is contained in the SERVQUAL model.

A number of management practices have evolved which are associated with organisational efforts to enhance service quality. These are blueprinting, benchmarking, internal marketing, complaints management, empowerment, and unconditional service guarantees. Although these have been treated separately in this paper, they are not separate. For example, the unconditional service guarantee your service organisation is considering developing could be benchmarked against that of BBBK, L.L. Bean or Lands End Direct Merchants. Its success may depend to a large degree on your willingness to empower service employees to give perfect service. A complaints management process can be blueprinted and internally marketed to customer contact employees who are empowered to recover dissatisfied customers. In combination, these management practices can be a powerful source of quality-centred competitive advantage.

In the UK the Citizen's Charter is recognition of the political significance of customers' concerns with the quality of public sector services, whilst BS 5750 provides an approach to the development of a documented quality assurance system.

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Panel Discussion Summary

PANEL

Annette Pritchard	*Wales Tourist Board (Chair)*
Alan Mattingly	*Ramblers' Association*
Judy Ling Wong	*Black Environment Network*
Michael Handford	*Inland Waterways Association*
Colin Palmer	*British Mountain Bike Federation*

ANNETTE PRITCHARD introduced the panel and welcomed delegates to the session which was intended to follow a 'Question Time' format.

TONY PHILPIN *(Pennine Way Co-ordinator, Calderdale Leisure Services)* referred back to the dichotomy between the user-led approach and the manager-led agenda which had been raised earlier. He asked for the panel's views on where we were at and where we ought to be. In relation to his own user group, cyclists, COLIN PALMER suggested that the first question to ask was whether cycling in the countryside was a problem or an opportunity to be encouraged. If it was regarded in a positive way, as an opportunity, it was then possible to identify the users' needs. In cases where that had been done it had become apparent that the needs of the user and the aspirations of the manager were very close. Where land managers and agencies still regarded cycling as a problem, possibly to be suppressed, then the aspirations of the user and the requirements of the land manager were poles apart, and would remain so. MICHAEL HANDFORD explained that his organisation had been formed in 1946 to oppose proposed extensive closures in the canal network. Overall, the users and the managers enjoyed good relations nowadays although this had not always been the case in the past. Good communication was essential.

ALAN MATTINGLY said that, not surprisingly, he believed that predominantly provision should be user-led rather than management-led. However, he recognised that there were obvious cases for restrictions on motor vehicles and, in especially sensitive areas, a case for restricting access on foot. He made the point that most users (although he did not like that term) did not regard themselves as customers. The term 'customer' implied payment, which opened up a whole new area for debate. Ramblers regarded themselves as citizens with certain rights and expectations, but also with certain responsibilities.

JUDY LING WONG said that her organisation represented a particular group of people who were new to the environmental movement. However, ethnic minorities were only one of many groups of non-participants. As such, they were creating a model for bringing in people who were not aware of the benefits of the countryside. Black Environment Network was trying to create a climate in which participation could take place. Judy also had a problem with the terms 'user' and 'customer' because the same people were also potential contributors to the care of the countryside. One important factor was to define the role of recreation in the big picture of the environment. Some 80% of the population lived in urban areas. For very many people the countryside at large was a missing experience. Was it reasonable to expect people who had no experience of the natural

environment to take care of it? If the agencies and organisations represented at the conference could provide access and opportunity to experience nature, then through enjoyment would come love of the countryside; through love of the countryside, access to information about what needed to be done. Following from that would come the practical contribution to caring for what was loved.

TONY PHILPIN agreed with the comments on the term 'customer'. Terminology was a problem because the words used to describe people who were out in the countryside enjoying recreation and so on, did determine the agenda to some degree.

JIM SAUNDERS *(Offa's Dyke Centre)* agreed with Judy Ling Wong. Historically, both conservation groups and landowners had regarded visitors to the countryside as a threat. The situation was much better than it had been in the past. Farmers and landowners, in particular, had come to realise that they needed public support, part of which came from good customer relations with visitors to the countryside. MICHAEL HANDFORD thought that following the county council elections in May of this year there had been a geological political change in many areas of the country. Essentially, control of the countryside had passed from farming interests and he did not think it would ever return. He believed that the taxpayer and the town dweller in the countryside now had far more political clout than the farmers. ALAN MATTINGLY thought that was an unduly optimistic interpretation of the situation.

SIMON SALEM *(British Waterways)* said that in a recent consultation process with users it had been made clear that they did not like to be called customers. In the absence of a completely acceptable term, they preferred to be called users. One important point was to realise that it was not sufficient to look at users in terms of conventional market research. It was also necessary to enter into consultation with both user groups and individual users.

JOS JOSLIN *(Ridgeway Officer, Oxfordshire County Council)* agreed entirely with the point Judy Ling Wong had made, that it was essential to provide the opportunity for people who had had no experience of the countryside to go out and enjoy it. It was important that people experiencing nature for the first time should enjoy the experience and want to repeat it. The problem was that there was invariably a time lag before they learned how to behave in the countryside. There was a need for an educational process which should be linked to the national curriculum in schools.

JUDY LING WONG said that the Black Environment Network was working with ideas and testing them out as demonstration projects. For example, they were currently setting up projects in which people returned over and over again to the same part of the countryside, providing a learning process in which people could see nature through the seasons, see the kind of conservation work that was done throughout the year. In this way, they could both enjoy themselves and contribute to the countryside. Another project involved using the school as a community base because in many inner city areas there was no sense of community outside the schools. The parents became involved through the children, resulting in a community group going into the countryside. People were a resource. If they could be encouraged to go into the countryside, to understand and learn about it, then they could also contribute to its care.

MICHAEL HANDFORD advocated having vision. The users should be setting the future agenda for the managers. He well remembered when there had been only one canal restoration scheme in the British Isles; now there were 130. That was the result of people having vision.

ALAN MATTINGLY agreed with the points made by Jos Joslin, which went back to the question of the long term agenda referred to earlier by Gareth Roberts. He felt there was a danger of becoming so preoccupied with short term issues that we lost sight of the long term issues. We should be thinking in terms of initiating procedures which, over the next 50 or 100 years, would change people's culture almost, people's attitudes towards the countryside. The Ramblers' Association would like to see over that period a change in the culture and attitudes of many landowners and farmers which, compared to other countries, were still extremely restrictive towards people coming onto their land. In Sweden, for example, people had much wider rights of access to the countryside. By and large, that seemed to be accepted by those who owned and farmed the countryside. At the same time, there was a much more deeply ingrained culture of responsible behaviour in the countryside. BOB FORD *(Department of the Environment)* doubted whether the Swedish experience, in a large country with a small population, would translate to the English situation of a small country with a large population. ALAN MATTINGLY disagreed. He pointed out that there were areas of Sweden which were quite densely populated and the system still worked. Equally, there were many other countries which had the same kind of access rights.

Referring to the contribution from Jos Joslin, COLIN PALMER posed the question as to how tolerant we should be of new user groups which were accessing the countryside. It was unrealistic to have too high an expectation. Taking his own user group, undoubtedly the mountain bike had allowed a sector of urban society to access the countryside, a sector which had never previously done so. It was unrealistic to expect them to know how to behave in the countryside when the education system had not briefed them to be what we called responsible. There were possible ways forward on this but they would be slow in their impact. Undoubtedly, year on year, there would be new, often young, users coming into the countryside who would annoy and irritate. Colin proposed that this should be tolerated; that they should be made to feel welcome. They had as much right to be there as anyone else. Even just saying hello to them could help.

JUDY LING WONG suggested the manufacturers of mountain bikes could play a role in educating their customers, perhaps with a booklet outlining good principles of how to behave in the countryside, or to provide finance for clubs. It was necessary to be imaginative. COLIN PALMER said that the idea of an information leaflet had been tried but there had been practical difficulties in implementing it. No answer had yet been found to the problem of encouraging the cycle industry to accept some responsibility in this area.

BILL BREAKELL *(North York Moors National Park)* thought it important to provide information to youngsters in their own kind of terminology. JUDY LING WONG agreed. A lot of very good material was produced which was far too elaborate for newcomers into the environmental movement. A simple message was required in order to arouse interest in the first place.

Going back to the point that Colin Palmer had made about being tolerant of new users of the countryside, JEREMY WORTH *(Countryside Commission)* warned against implying that people should only come to the countryside on our terms. It had to be recognised that citizens' rights were not the ones that we would like them to have but the ones that they did have under the law.

As a landowner, MIKE TURNER *(The Big Sheep)*, returned to the problem of access. Many landowners were very wary about access. There was a need for education. He accepted that he was more likely to tolerate unacceptable behaviour from his customers because they

were paying to come. However, he pointed out that according to the research that had been presented to the conference, people's expectations in the countryside were toilets, firm paths and somewhere to eat. Disregarding those, what did the panel think people really wanted from the countryside?

ALAN MATTINGLY thought the research presented by Sue Walker had been conducted at specific sites. He believed that the responses from people out walking on the rights of way network would be quite different. They would want rights of way that were reasonably waymarked, not obstructed and about which they could find information relatively easily. For the most frequent users of the countryside the primary needs were not toilets, car parks and hard walking surfaces. However, there were great dangers in generalising about what the public wanted, in regarding the public as a single amorphous mass. There was a need to look into the different needs of the various groups.

COLIN PALMER agreed that we did not know precisely what people wanted in the countryside. There had never been a comprehensive survey to ask that question, and it was dangerous to generalise. There had been some smaller surveys of his own user group. One survey had been done in the Lake District National Park, which tended to attract cyclists who actually wanted to sweat and groan! Another survey had been done in the Forest of Dean which attracted the family cyclist, the casual cyclist. Colin suggested that when the results of those two surveys were analysed the results would present two totally different pictures. To try to meld them together would be wrong but he anticipated that a lot would be learned from them. Another point was that the results of any other surveys should be made more widely available.

MICHAEL HANDFORD agreed with the previous comments. He thought it would be impossible ever to define what visitors to the countryside wanted *en masse*. It had to be broken down into separate groups because different groups had different interests and therefore had different needs. His association was very aware of what their own members wanted. The key factor was that they were looking at quality rather than price. He thought that might well be the case over a much wider section of users.

JUDY LING WONG said there was an emerging picture in her user group as people were being made aware of the opportunities for participating. Many of the problems were not related to their ethnic origin but to their economic situation and these applied equally to working class white families. If you took a group of children out and told them to wear old clothes, you had to be aware of the fact that many of them only had old clothes. They might have only one pair of trainers and their mothers would be devastated if they returned having ruined them. The same applied if they were instructed to be prepared for wet weather. It was very expensive to equip a child with the necessary gear. Such details had to be taken into account; they were very important to the people concerned. There were also specific social problems in providing opportunities for ethnic minority groups. Providers had to be aware of this. Black Environment Network ran training courses for personnel in environmental organisations.

ANNETTE PRITCHARD closed the session by thanking both the panel and the audience for their participation.

Customer Care Training Developing a Sound Approach

Gerry Carver

Consultancy Director
L&R Leisure plc

INTRODUCTION

We live in a fast changing world. The most important changes as far as countryside recreation and rural tourism are concerned are the social, economic and environmental ones. Changes in prosperity, including the growth in car use and leisure spending, and increasing environmental concerns have significantly altered attitudes to, and activities in, the countryside.

Those involved in countryside recreation and rural tourism have increasingly had to concern themselves with customers in recent years. I use the term 'customers' very loosely. We might define it as people who have an interest in and visit the countryside. Whether it has been the management of the impact of visitors on the countryside or management in the more competitive business sense, there has been an increase in concern for customers.

We have moved from the traditional picture of the visitor to the countryside. It has become a more complex mixed economy. We have people who want to stay in the countryside on camping sites, in caravan parks, in forest lodges, hotels and guest houses. People want to eat in the countryside. We have encouraged them to take boating holidays as more canals become available and, of course, there are the inevitable toilets and information centres which have been a response to the pressure of visitor demand. We have had to respond to different client groups. There has been increasing emphasis on providing some sensible access wherever possible for the disabled. There may be some who are considered unwelcome customers by virtue of their noisy sports. As the visitor economy becomes more mixed, the customers become more varied and demanding so that all sorts of conflicts arise. We have heard of those this morning already.

This has been the backcloth to the customer revolution of the past decade. The increased range of leisure and holiday experiences has meant that public and private organisations are in the business of satisfying customers who have significantly different perceptions and much higher expectations. The whole business of management development, staff training, customer care, and so on, is what I call part of the software. The hardware consists of the visitor centres, the information centres and so on. I realise that the chemistry between the facilities (the hardware) and the interaction of staff with visitors and the general atmosphere (the software), is a very complex mix. Every sector of leisure and tourism has its special characteristics and its idiosyncrasies. On the spectrum of delegates here today, we embrace some with strong environmental motivations; many from public authorities; and some with jobs that are related to economic development. The balance that was mentioned last night, the triangle between local community interests, the environment and the visitors, is obviously a difficult balance to achieve.

However, the fundamental principles of customer care apply equally to countryside recreation and rural tourism as to any other sector. What is important is how you apply them to your particular area.

The eighties was the decade of customer care for many public and private organisations. Regrettably, the record of achievement did not match the attention customer care was given. The nineties is rapidly becoming the decade of quality service. Time will tell whether the action and achievement will match the talk in this decade.

Unfortunately, in the past, customer care has been taken out of context, misunderstood, misrepresented and generally poorly implemented. Why has customer care training been at best disappointing and at worst disruptive?

Whilst starting by asking how we can improve things for the customer – too many organisations have seen customer care training as a means of telling front line staff how to behave or even more naïvely encouraging them to smile and be nice to people. Nor can customer care be packaged into one seminar or a set of rules.

The 'Have a nice day' approach has no place in quality service and customer care. It come from America and it belongs to that culture, if it belongs anywhere. There are three levels of service to think about with regard to customer care. There is the primitive service epitomised by 'Fawlty Towers'; there is the programmed service which very few of us take to easily – it is the McDonald's type of service; and there is professional service. The latter is really the approach to try to generate. Hopefully, I will give a few hints this morning about how that professional approach can be generated.

Customer care is essentially an attitude of mind which influences not only our behaviour towards our customers but everything we do in our operation. Behaviour flows from the right staff attitude – with the right attitude and involvement the core customer care skills can be sensibly developed.

THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT

Our first starting point for customer care training must be a recognition of the vital role of management. Customer care starts at the top – not with front line staff. That is undoubtedly one of the mistakes of the eighties. Sound leadership of the operation must pursue what we at L&R see as eight essential steps to successful customer care. I emphasise that customer care training does not start or finish in a lecture theatre. Quality of management is the starting point.

These eight steps are:

1. Know the marketplace
2. Understand your visitors
3. Achieve teamwork
4. Ensure good technical and personal skills
5. Establish efficient systems
6. Provide excellent service
7. Make continuous improvements
8. Work within the community.

1. Know the Marketplace

Good customer care demands that managers and staff understand the rapidly changing countryside and rural tourism environment, because it greatly influences customers' expectations, decisions and experiences. It is time consuming to keep abreast of what is going on but even more so to pass on the relevant bits to the rest of the staff team.

2. Understand Your Visitors

Developing an understanding of your visitors, and their widely differing demands, places you in a better position to tailor your service to their satisfaction. It is also important that you adapt to meet the needs of the different customer groups which you serve. Consider the school trip to the countryside. Some sites do it brilliantly; some sites do it appallingly. I am sure that those who do not do it well just do not understand that particular sector of the market.

A point to remember is that half of Britain's tourists do not have English as their native tongue. And they do not all turn right at Gatwick and head for London. Many foreign visitors are keen to explore the countryside and our beautiful old buildings in rural settings.

In terms of understanding your visitors, there has been a very interesting dialogue today about what people are seeking. We do not have time to go into the very many aspects of this but my experience suggests that it is a good starting point to recognise that visitors are essentially looking for fun, challenge, activity and interest. Their visit will offer some or all of these.

I can give you a little pointer on the motivations of people who go for a short walk in the countryside near to their home. You try to have a conversation at home in a modern society! Dishwashers are beginning to replace washing-up which used to be quite an important social occasion to chat. If you look at people walking on a Sunday you will see husbands and wives having their only proper conversation of the week! That kind of motivation must not be overlooked.

3. Achieve Teamwork

Everyone will agree that a harmonious team approach is essential for successful customer care. Yet an infinitely smaller number of operations achieve that harmony. Vital factors include leadership from top management and valuing front line staff. Valuing front line staff means taking time and care to show them what happens in the operation. Show them around the parts of the operation they do not normally see to give them a fuller appreciation of how the organisation works and how it impacts on the customer. It is also important that the quality of service you give to each other in the organisation is good. The quality of service begins at that point. Mention was made last night that some of our customers are partners; some of our customers are funding agencies. So it is important to have an appreciation of these different customers. We have to achieve teamwork with partners, and even with funding agencies from time to time.

We undertook some work at a visitor attraction under a new management. The greatest benefit of starting to talk about understanding visitors and customer care with the staff was that it actually brought people together from different parts of that park for the first time. The people involved in the tropical bird park had never sat down in the same room for more than five minutes with the people who worked 250 yards away in the maintenance depot, or in another part of the operation. We pay lip service to teamwork but do we really do all that we can?

4. Ensure Good Technical and Personal Skills

This is at the heart of customer care and I will come back to it. Technical skills are those essential to each job. Our experience of working with countryside rangers, with the Forestry Service in Northern Ireland, and with water authorities, has shown that there are some brilliant technical skills amongst those staff. However, they have never had the opportunity to develop, or in some cases use, personal skills. One of the changes that has occurred is that people who are now at the front line, whose original vocation and work was highly technical, are being asked to have a much stronger interface with customers, and they need help with this. That is where the personal skills aspect comes in because they are finally decisive in terms of the customer's experience.

We have also done quite a lot of work in the major national museums, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. There too, people in peaked caps who used to be security warders have had to learn to deal with customers. The peaked caps have gone in most of those situations now. The people involved did not initially have the skills, the experience or confidence. They may have had some skills but not all of them. So do recognise that personal skills do need to be developed and people do need help with them. Remember, people may visit initially out of curiosity but if you want them to return or recommend a visit, it is the impression gained from everybody they meet which will give them a positive reaction.

5. Establish Efficient Systems

To enable staff to apply their personal skills, your operation has to be very well organised. Your systems are the way you undertake both simple and more complex tasks on a repetitive basis. Good systems enable staff to know what to do, and how and when to do it. This leads to greater efficiency and speed of service.

I can quote one practical example of a good system. It is at Amberley Chalk Pits Museum. Before you pay for entry you are told what special exhibits are working on that day. There is a large board outside listing all those that are currently in operation. The literature mentions them all and so there is a danger of going along on a midweek afternoon expecting everything to be working and then being disappointed. The board tells you what is actually working on that particular day. It is being honest with the customer and it is about efficient systems.

Obviously, we have to achieve a balance between systems and the personal skills and service we provide. Many of us have been to a tourist attraction where there were plenty of pleasant staff around, and they were enthusiastic, but they were so disorganised that it spoilt the day. Or maybe we went to a stately home or gardens where everything was highly organised but we did not really feel welcome because of the attitude of the staff. So there has to be a balance between those efficient systems and the skills that are employed.

6. Provide Excellent Service

Essentially, good service has two components. Firstly, the primary service, which includes good accommodation and food, clean premises, efficient organisation and clear information, as well as the courtesy and friendliness of the staff. It is important to emphasise that people's expectations generally now are for better service. They see that as being part of the primary service. The secondary service is the extra effort or spontaneous thought which adds value and often makes the stay or visit memorable. A good guided tour is part of the primary service. A secondary service may be that somebody has asked about something,

the guide did not know the answer in detail but at the end of the tour he made the effort to get it for them. That may be the incident which makes the visit memorable for that person.

7. Make Continuous Improvements

Excellent customer care is about identifying all the critical points and continuously improving them. Remember that potential visitors probably start by looking at a leaflet – a point to remember if you are involved in producing such material. And do not forget that Mum usually makes the decision!

It is important to make improvements in areas like signing. Technology moves on, people's appreciation of better designed quality information systems means that we have to seek improvements continuously. A fundamental principle of customer care is that you never stand still – never accept that you are as good as you can get. The service can always be improved or fine tuned, and you must continually reassess customer expectations.

8. Work Within the Community

True customer care must extend beyond your operation, because satisfaction with a stay or visit will not depend entirely on you. Everything from railway stations and car parks to public toilets and signposts affect the customer. It is not an easy task, but try to work with all local interests and user groups to enhance the customer's entire experience. A lot of progress can be made with the right approach.

DEVELOPING CUSTOMER CARE PROGRAMMES

Our experience of implementing customer care and quality service leads us to focus on three elements – desire, design and delivery. The approach has to be based on three things: understanding the practice of high quality customer service; a recognition that leadership and example from the top are instrumental; and then, that the reality is that grass roots staff performance directly determines the customer experience. If you are attempting to put some sort of programme or plan together, desire, design and delivery are key.

Developing a Desire

There is no doubt that a good organisational climate creates the right conditions for successful customer care training. Pursuit of the eight essential steps in a co-ordinated fashion is by far the best way of developing that climate and the right conditions.

Whether you are contemplating training for a large or small organisation, or a more disparate group such as a farm holiday group, there must be a desire to improve and a willingness to participate positively in the training. That desire will stem from the participant's attitude – so attitude is the key to successful customer care training. Attitudes are a way of organising our world and understanding our place within it – that is why we are all highly resistant to change. Personal esteem and job enrichment are very important within the framework of developing better service. There is plenty of research to say that what motivates people in their job has a lot to do with personal esteem and job enrichment.

You may have heard a quote from Tom Peters who said, "Take a sample of any ten people who work on the front line for you and find out what they are doing when they are not working for you". His example was that one was building his own home; another repaired television sets on the side; one was a deacon in his church; two were leaders of scout

troops; one was a leading actor in an amateur drama group; one ran a boys' football team; and two played in bands. In other words, he said, "90% or more of your staff are enthusiastic, committed and highly capable – except for the eight hours they work for you"!

The farmer's wife, for example, must have a clear picture of how her objectives in running bed and breakfast relate to the farm holiday group of which she is a member. Only then is she likely to respond well to the training opportunity.

Indeed the very first stage of a customer care programme should build an understanding of quality service and the issues involved – and by so doing provide a raison d'être for the training programme. The desire should spring from participation and ownership of the training.

Designing the Programme

What about designing the programme itself, given that we have got this sensible approach in the background? Definitions of customer care have been a little thin. Be clear whether it is a quality service programme you wish to promote or whether you want a specific focus on training for the customer interface. If you view quality service as an iceberg, the customer care element is the small proportion of the iceberg which is visible.

The most successful customer care programmes are those which invest sufficient time in exploring the nature of existing customers and the characteristics of the current customer interface. If the content of the training is not tuned to the practical realities of your operation then you run a much higher risk of failure.

We are working at the V&A at the moment and they are very keen to develop quality service, and within that some of the customer care elements for their staff dealing with customers. They started out by doing a very sensible analysis of the training needs. Do not forget to think about the needs, and involve your staff. It is quite surprising how positively staff will respond in identifying where their own weaknesses are. People are quite honest. Once they have done that you can build on it.

Quality service is more global and holistic – remember that. It is all-encompassing, it is more than just front line staff, and it involves the internal customer. Be clear, when you say customer care, do you mean the bits on the top of the iceberg, which are to do with the interface, or are you talking about a wider issue of quality service which Francis Buttle referred to this morning.

The prime focus should be on those customer care skills most appropriate to your group or operation – whether it be verbal communication, presentation skills, personal appearance, non-verbal face to face skills, telephone manner, written communication or handling difficult customers and complaints.

There are dangers and risks with customer care skills. I would be shocked if there are not ten people in this room who are still totally cynical about the whole business of customer care! There are risks and dangers, and that is why it is so important to go about it in the right way, if you believe that it is a route you want to take as part of improving your service. Make sure that any training is a compliment, not a criticism. The biggest problem we find with training on the quality service/customer care front is that wrongly done it is perceived as a criticism – "You're no good at customer care skills so here is a training

programme, go on it". Telling staff that it is important because budgets are being cut and we have got to make more income, is another good way of ruining training. Avoid as much marketing and management jargon as possible. In designing the programme make sure that you have got something which is sensible, natural and sincere. That approach gives you a much better chance of succeeding.

The design of the programme will be greatly influenced by operational requirements. We organised training for the Staffordshire Peak and Moorlands Farm Holiday Group in 2½ hour modules, delivered mid-morning between serving breakfast and lunch and using various farmhouses to host the sessions. There are inevitable difficulties in getting staff together without temporarily reducing the service to the customer. Careful planning and consultation should avoid a situation we faced with one countryside client. An instruction had been sent to staff at various visitor centres to close for the day and attend a customer care course! Needless to say this initially led to a cynical attitude on the part of the staff! Our experience has been that where there is a will to achieve progress, operational difficulties can be overcome to provide training time.

Delivering the Programme

L&R's experience goes back to the 1970s. We have no doubt that the nature and quality of delivery is a vital factor in achieving success in both quality service and customer care training. Successful training needs to go beyond just the development of understanding and lead to competence. If the presentation of the training is thought provoking, interactive and highly enjoyable then you have a much greater chance of achieving the desired competence, especially if there is a sensible follow-up and evaluation.

The organisation of the training modules should be informal with an underlying team building element. Group activities can be very effective in generating enthusiasm. It is important that the sessions are seen as non-threatening and the confidence of participants should be developed before involving them in any role play activities.

The overall approach is likely to benefit from outside training support, especially if the programme is breaking new ground for the group or organisation. In our experience the best approach is to treat customer care and quality service programmes as long term investments.

If it is possible to gain some outside support, this will help ensure a sound programme strategy. In addition it will provide a lively content at key stages, and above all help the organisation to take to the water itself by providing 'training the trainer' sessions.

If your desire is to design and deliver successful customer care training in your countryside or rural tourism operation, you will gather it is as much about how you go about it as what you actually put in the programme! There does need to be a recognition of the need to improve and to tackle real issues, and the determination and single-mindedness to pursue it.

In conclusion, remember that if your training programme is perceived as a criticism, rather than a compliment, you have failed before you start! Finally, whether you are involved in a groundwork trust, a long distance walk, a private estate, a local authority, or a national park, I hope you will agree with Walt Disney when he said, "You can dream, create a design, and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it takes people to make the dream a reality". Training in quality service and customer care is worthwhile if you go about it in the right way.

Discussion Summary

IAN FULLERTON *(East Lothian District Council)* raised the question of how to communicate with the people who do not currently go out into the countryside, and even whether it was desirable to do so anyway. SUE WALKER *(Centre for Leisure Research)* thought that one way forward was to try to work with people as happened, for example, in the case of some sporting activities, where enthusiasts actually went out, as animateurs, to get people involved.

MICHAEL GRAHAM *(Angus District Council)* was concerned about the people who did not want to participate. Fifteen years earlier the provision of leisure centres had been seen as the panacea for all ills which would lead to a fitter and healthier society, occupy the unemployed, and so on. The fact was that only 11% of the population actually used leisure centres. The conference had been told that approximately 50% of the population visited the countryside. He suggested it might be realistic to accept that the other 50% just did not want to visit the countryside. SUE WALKER disagreed. She acknowledged there was and would always be a disinterested group but she felt there was still a big gap between those people who, because of their social background and access to the necessary resources (transport mainly), were able to visit the countryside, and those who were not. There was still a lot of scope to facilitate access to the countryside for disadvantaged groups in the population. JUDY LING WONG *(Black Environment Network)* thought there were practical ways and mechanisms which could be used to encourage new users into the countryside. One such mechanism was through the National Trust which paid expenses of the volunteers manning its properties. Many working class people and ethnic minorities were taxpayers; they were paying for the care of the countryside and there was no reason why some of that money should not be put back into grants to enable them to go into the countryside if they could not afford to do so.

In relation to the SERVQUAL model he had presented, FRANCIS BUTTLE *(Manchester Business School)* was asked whether tangibles should be rated as least important in the case of the countryside. He suspected that tangibles might be more important for countryside-based recreation than for city-based activities and services such as health services or leisure and recreation services.

SIMON CURRY *(Rochester-upon-Medway City Council)* asked how the term 'countryside' could be defined in terms of marketing it. GERRY CARVER *(L&R Leisure plc)* said he was not in the business of marketing the countryside. He had tried to make the point that where people were providing a service through facilities, information centres, and so on, then there were different ways of doing it – better ways and poorer ways. FRANCIS BUTTLE regarded the countryside as a means to an end; it was a question of marketing the ends. It was a matter of identifying the desired benefits and then seeing if they could be delivered through the countryside. Then the countryside became a means to an end, whatever the customer thought it was. His own definition of the countryside was irrelevant because, as a marketer, he would respond to his customers' preconceptions of what counted as countryside.

IAN FULLERTON made the point that one could only respond to the customers who were already there. They were the A, B, C1s, as Sue Walker had shown. Marketing for them was relatively easy. It was for the 'don't knows' and the non-users that the marketing was more challenging. RICHARD BROADHURST *(Forestry Commission)* advocated a

move away from the sharp distinction between town and countryside which resulted in distancing and alienation of many town dwellers. He suggested this could be achieved by encouraging the urban population to become familiar with the green areas in and around towns initially. This might provide them with the impetus to explore the wider countryside. MIKE TURNER *(The Big Sheep)* thought this was a very relevant point. He believed it was important to make a first experience in the countryside a good one, so that people would want to return. His own operation was geared to do that. FRANS SCHOUTEN *(Synthesis International)* commented that there was a confusion of terms. For most people present the countryside was the hardware they looked after while, from the marketing point of view, countryside was the software they provided. Visitors had expectations when they went into the countryside; they had seen wildlife films on television showing that a forest was full of life, but when they went there, it seemed to be completely empty! He suggested nature could be manipulated, for example by providing the optimum environment at a given site for a particular species so that visitors would be assured of seeing that bird or animal when they went there.

KEN PARKER *(Peak Park Planning Board)* drew a distinction between public sector providers and the private sector. Public sector facilities were not profit-making and suffered from lack of funds to maintain them and to finance the kind of service quality which had been mentioned. FRANCIS BUTTLE suggested that pursuing service excellence was a worthy objective in its own right, regardless of whether the operation was a profit-making one. He quoted Philip Crosby's book *Quality is Free* which provided plenty of evidence that quality improvements paid for themselves in the long run. This applied in non-profit making organisations because high quality meant cost effectiveness. There was less need to recover when service broke down; training was more cost efficient; staff turnover was lower; recruitment and training costs dropped and morale was higher as people bought into the idea of improved quality. He admitted that it cost money to implement the SERVQUAL model, about £7,500 for a benchmarking study to establish where an organisation stood in terms of service quality, but the findings could be used to measure performance against other organisations providing similar services and to give a benchmark against which to measure service improvements. Francis referred to the expression 'Quality is a journey, not a destination'. There were many ways to improve service quality at minimal or no cost, such as developing better processes for handling telephone and letter enquiries; being more responsive to visitor or user complaints; inventing a process to encourage customers to complain; role playing encounters with visitors; giving customer care training to 'technical' people, such as rangers, who met with users. There was a lot that could be done. Not all service quality improvements involved SERVQUAL and not all cost money.

GERRY CARVER commented that the customer care approach he had talked about was entirely appropriate to non-profit making organisations. SUE WALKER suggested that the customer might be more prepared to pay if the quality of service was improved.

In closing the session ANNETTE PRITCHARD *(Chairman)* thanked all the speakers for their contributions to a lively discussion.

Workshops

On Wednesday afternoon a series of workshops was held to explore the practice of customer care programmes and quality management in various countryside contexts. A number of the workshops were run twice to give delegates the opportunity of attending two of them.

The workshops considered the following topic areas:

- Paid Access Sites

  'The Big Sheep', Bideford (Michael Turner, Manager)
  The National Trust (Hilary Lade, Manager, Fountains Abbey)

- Training Schemes

  Wales Tourist Board 'Welcome Host' Scheme (Merfyn Walters, Co-ordinator 'Welcome Host' Programme)

- Open-access Managed Recreational Sites

  Inland Waterways (Simon Salem, Marketing Development and Communications Manager, British Waterways)

  Country Parks (Ian Fullerton, East Lothian District Council)

  Forest Parks (Chris Probert, Forestry Commission, Kielder Forest)

- Environmental Sites

  Nature Reserves and SSSIs (Martyn Howat, Senior Site Manager, English Nature)

- Footpaths and Rights of Way

  Calderdale (Ian Kendall, Senior Countryside Officer and Tony Philpin, Pennine Way Co-ordinator, Calderdale Leisure Services)

Appointed rapporteurs reported back the findings of their groups in the Feedback session on Friday morning.

Feedback from the Workshops

Chair: Peter Scott

Director, Peter Scott Planning Services

PAID ACCESS SITES

The Big Sheep

JOAN BOWLEY *(Rural Enterprise Consultant, ADAS)* reported that The Big Sheep had been billed as England's most entertaining and imaginative tourist attraction. It had won many prestigious awards and had been featured on television in many other countries.

The Big Sheep linked in with a 400 acre farm in north Devon, run on a flat management structure by Mike Turner, Director, and his wife and son. Mike was responsible for the general management and the economic side; his wife organised the catering with imaginative and innovative menus, using local produce; his son presented the demonstrations and the entertainments. There were 14 full-time personnel on the farm/entertainment structure and 50 part-timers.

Originally, when the Turners had decided to diversify, they had looked at a number of other operations doing similar things and learned from their mistakes. They had decided to be different from everyone else and to build on their own knowledge. Michael had vast experience and was a very good PR man. Obviously, the whole family was very talented.

The Big Sheep was a unique experience. When people went in there was a notice saying 'If you enjoy this, tell others; if not, tell us'. Indeed, there was a money back guarantee for anyone who had not enjoyed the visit. It had never been claimed!

Farmers came from all over the world, including Australia and New Zealand, and were very well entertained. They were people who thought they knew the industry but they all learned something new. But this was an entertainment for the general public as well as for farmers. There were elements of agriculture that were left out. The animals were never seen under stress because it was unashamedly intended to create a fantasy world. The Big Sheep presented the good aspects of farming. Mike Turner did not look on it as farming, it was entertainment – 'England's most entertaining and imaginative tourist attraction'.

There was a very high standard in everything, with great attention to detail. Everything was very clean although not antiseptic. There were continuous live demonstrations throughout the day and the entertainment was planned to take five hours. Some people thought they would be able to enjoy the whole experience in an hour or so, but they invariably returned.

Joan said that what she had learned from Mike Turner had made her keen to go and visit The Big Sheep herself. She was sure other delegates would also want to go. Her reaction

highlighted the fact that marketing was done mainly by word of mouth although several thousand brochures were produced each year and Mike made sure of reaching the press by sending out 500 faxes to press agents, telling them about the latest events, such as sheep racing. He had had endorsement from the RSPCA for this activity. They had agreed there was no cruelty involved. Mike had taken advantage of this to send out a further 500 faxes to press agents saying that the RSPCA had sanctioned sheep racing. People were flocking to see it. Visitors tended to come on repeat visits because of all the different aspects of the entertainment.

The National Trust

SALLY ASH *(Business Analyst, British Waterways)* said that the workshop had had a very interesting presentation from Hilary Lade, Manager of Fountains Abbey. She presumed most people present knew Fountains Abbey, a beautiful atmospheric monastic ruin in North Yorkshire which was The National Trust's most visited property.

At Fountains Abbey success meant more visitors, happy visitors, and also happy staff because there was an obvious feedback loop. It also meant more cash. Hilary had presented her view in terms of four key ingredients: getting the people factors rights; getting feedback right; getting the right information; the right facilities. Most of the discussion had focused on the people aspect which had generally been agreed to be the most important.

Staff were very much involved, taking a problem-solving approach from the start. Hilary had joined just two years ago, coming from Shell. She had brought in an operations manager from Marks & Spencer. This commercial background at managerial level had obviously had a considerable influence on the training programme which focused on the workshop approach rather than formal lectures in training sessions. One of the first things Hilary had done had been to get all the staff to take the perspective of visitors, to look at their jobs through the eyes of the customers. This had benefited the development of the customer care programme in that staff members felt they had a similar vision and common objectives.

It had been pointed out that developing a customer care programme had special difficulties in a situation where three-quarters of the staff were volunteers, as was the case at Fountains Abbey. One of the practices within The National Trust was to arrange special events for their volunteers who were paid expenses only. This provided a motivation.

There had been an extended discussion within the workshop on the topic of contractors. This was not a particular problem at The National Trust but in Sally's own organisation and in the Forestry Commission a lot of use was made of outside contractors and it was seen to be quite a serious problem to motivate them in relation to customer care and quality of visitor experience. Contractors did not generally have direct contact with visitors and the problem was how to motivate them. The workshop had not identified a clear answer to this but a number of suggestions had been put forward such as specifying their attitude to customers in the contract (not particularly feasible); treating them as visitors; hosting them to a visit to the site so as to promote understanding. It was a question of developing communication and understanding between all the groups of people involved in the site.

The question of maps had been raised. The point had been made that maps needed to be understandable, and pictorial if possible. It had been agreed that signing was very important and that it should be kept positive.

MIKE BONNER *(Research Officer, The Sports Council)*, reporting on the parallel workshop, added that Hilary Lade had pointed out that the volunteers themselves provided a very good temperature gauge as to what was going on at Fountains Abbey. Equally, they provided a direct link with the local community which was felt to be especially important. At places like Fountains Abbey the customer service programmes were entirely dependent on volunteer structures.

BOB FORD *(Department of the Environment)* asked what benefits the volunteers perceived from working at Fountains Abbey. MIKE BONNER replied that many of the volunteers were either retired or single people who tended to be lonely. Therefore, they were pleased to be part of a volunteer service which was serving the public. NICHOLAS MEECH *(Nicholas Meech Environmental Art and Design)* referred to the new visitor centre building and asked whether this had been the result of market research which had identified such a requirement. SALLY ASH said that her group had not discussed it in those terms but Hilary Lade had commented on the level of facility provision that she felt was appropriate. In fact, the visitor centre had been designed and planned before she had taken up her post. Sally had gained the impression that Hilary felt it was a bit 'over the top'; she believed the basic things had to be right, for example, the loos had to be functioning and clean. Beyond that, the extra frills were probably not worth the investment involved and it might be better to concentrate on the more intangible elements.

TRAINING SCHEMES

'Welcome Host' Scheme

KATE DAY *(Access and Recreation Officer, Cambridgeshire County Council)* reported on the Wales Tourist Board 'Welcome Host' programme. She said her eyes had been opened by a Welshman who had said that basically the Welsh were totally indifferent to tourists, they did not like them and were quite happy to sit in Wales and carry on doing what they had always done! This was a problem for the Welsh because tourism was a big industry for them. Hence, the Wales Tourist Board had set up the 'Welcome Host' initiative. There was an excellent promotional pack, available to delegates, which explained it in detail.

'Welcome Host' was a training programme which had been set up to encourage the community to value its visitors. It had been developed from an idea set up in British Columbia in 1986 and had been launched in Wales in 1992. There was a one day training programme, delivered by 60 trainers through a network of co-ordinators selected from local communities. The consumers of the training programme were members of the community at large, community businesses who would benefit from the visitors they wanted to attract to their sites.

There were two target markets for the programme. The first was the very small businesses – the post offices, the local farm shops, local schools and colleges. The second target market was corporate – the banks, the brewers, the big retail stores, and so on.

The one day course cost a maximum of £35. It was divided into eight modules dealing principally with communication skills. The programme received financial support from the Training and Enterprise Council. A wide range of people was involved, from very young to very old, small and large businesses – the whole spectrum. At the end of the one day training course, participants received a badge and a certificate. So far, 12,000 people had

been through the process and the scheme had generally been accepted as being a great success.

The English Tourist Board was now setting up similar schemes in England and apparently the New Zealanders were starting up a scheme involving kiwis. The workshop had not gone into that in detail!

A point that had arisen from the discussion was the importance of targeting the top people in an organisation. If you started at the top it would cascade down; if you started at the bottom it was much more difficult to send the message back up. Also, if the top people became involved it resulted in good PR.

It was necessary to be sensitive to the community needs. An example had been quoted of a community in a village called Llangors where there were only 64 residents. A number of them had been involved in a 'Welcome Host' programme.

It was important to involve a wide range of personnel. This applied to any organisation. It was no good having a pleasant receptionist if the enquirer was then passed on to a grumpy officer.

Expectations could be shattered if the badge holder did not live up to 'Welcome Host' standards. The Wales Tourist Board had decided they needed some sort of monitoring or feedback system to make sure this did not happen. The point had been made that your public image depended on the service you delivered rather than a certificate to say you had been through a given training programme.

The workshop had felt that schemes such as 'Welcome Host' were important in opening up channels of communication between people. Another point which was particularly pertinent for people working in local authorities was the importance of matching good customer care with good facilities.

RICHARD BROADHURST *(Senior Recreation Officer, Forestry Commission)*, representing the parallel workshop, added that his group had spent some time discussing how standards could be maintained over time. The group had comprised local authority people, farmers and a forester. Everyone had applauded the scheme and had said they would recommend that their organisations should take part in it. Given that the English Tourist Board had come to an agreement with the Wales Tourist Board, and that the Scottish Tourist Board was considering the scheme, that was quite interesting. However, a problem had been foreseen in maintaining the scheme after the initial enthusiasm had worn off. The answer might be to set up quite soon some kind of independent inspection, possibly involving peer group pressure. KATE DAY agreed; her group had also raised the question of staff turnover. An operation might have a 'Welcome Host' certificate but it would not necessarily mean that all staff members had been through the course.

MERFYN WALTERS *(Co-ordinator, 'Welcome Host' Programme)*, leader of the workshop, amplified the reference to Llangors. This village was situated north east of Brecon on a lakeside. It had some businesses related to the provision of water sports and caravanning. Sixteen of the 64 residents had attended a 'Welcome Host' programme – 25%. It was hoped to develop this level of participation elsewhere.

OPEN-ACCESS MANAGED RECREATIONAL SITES

Inland Waterways

MIKE BONNER *(Research Officer, The Sports Council)* reported on the issues which had arisen out of the discussion in the workshop. Customer care had come a long way in the past 20 years. At that time the emphasis had been on keeping the water in and keeping the customers out!

There were seven issues which had been identified.

1. Market Research

It had become clear that there was now a definable need for market research and it had a customer focus. The workshop had agreed that previously it had not been well linked to operational activity. Most importantly, when research was undertaken the findings should be usable and accessible to managers.

2. Customer Care

The workshop had spent quite some time discussing this. Again, it had been related to the British Waterways experience. It had been felt that training, of itself, was not solution. It could not be undertaken in isolation from other activities. Training should be a top down operation with senior managers coming first, rather than the front-line personnel. Training should be both sustainable and continuous; it was important to involve the employees themselves in designing training modules. A multi-skills approach was essential. It was no use training people to deal with customers in only one area of activity.

3. Standards

It had seemed that standards were being developed at two levels. In the case of British Waterways, they had established a charter, *Caring for Britain's Waterways*. It had been felt that such charters should convey general standards and principles, be easy to understand and in plain English, and above all, give the customer some reassurance. Equally, it appeared to be very difficult to avoid the detail of some standards, for example, the variation in required quality of different towpaths. Even so, the setting of such standards was regarded as being vital to service provision. Standards had to be accepted by managers. As was the case with British Waterways, a charter should make clear how to gain access to further documents which provided the detail. Clearly, some customers would want to have detailed questions answered.

4. Performance Measures

This followed on from standards. It had been concluded that a quality audit was needed to establish whether physical and service standards were being met within cost limits.

5. Consultation and Communication

It had been regarded as vitally important to win outside commitment to customer care. This involved preparing the ground by PR work; the media, particularly specialist magazines; seeking the views of concerned individuals, focusing on particular user groups and doing market research.

6. Priorities for Public Policy-makers and Providers

This was an issue that had arisen from discussion rather than from the presentation. From a political and a moral standpoint, the question had been asked, should the public sector be responsive or proactive in meeting customer needs; how much direction should come from public bodies? Bearing in mind the discussion which had already taken place at the conference, were toilets really more important than a natural countryside experience?

7. Volunteers

The group had spent some time on the subject of using volunteers. The conclusions were that they could be an important means of meeting customer service objectives. However, a cautionary note had been sounded; there were both good and bad experiences. The bad experiences had seemed to stem from areas where it was very difficult to control enthusiastic volunteers once they had taken over.

In conclusion, Mike Bonner quoted the British Waterways by-line, 'It takes longer than you think to do it well'.

SIMON SALEM *(Marketing Development and Communications Manager, British Waterways)*, leader of the workshop, commented that there seemed to be a number of common themes emerging from the workshops, which he found reassuring.

Country Parks

MICHAEL GRAHAM *(Director of Parks and Recreation, Angus District Council)* said that the global title of 'Country parks' and the wide brief given to the presenter had formed too broad a subject to be dealt with in a single workshop. Therefore, Ian Fullerton, presenter, had concentrated his address on the benefits that customer care could achieve through statistical information, and the methods of collecting and processing information.

After a general introduction to familiarise the workshop with the geographical location, extent and social spectrum of the area under study, Ian had honed in on three particular locations where information had been gathered and surveys undertaken regularly over a period of years. However, he had initially issued a warning against the gathering of statistics becoming the *raison d'être* and consequent erosion of rationale.

The overall usage of the three selected sites was based on automatic recording of car entries, with a multiple of car occupancy determined by regular manual surveys over specific periods by the ranger service, and then further refined by an allowance for users entering by bicycle or on foot, as these did not trigger the automatic recorders.

These figures were available on an hourly basis throughout the week and, for the 15 years availability at one site, had shown a surprisingly constant rate of increase year by year. In the three years since computer-based centres had been installed, graphic print-outs had shown the annual peaks and troughs on a regular pattern and also highlighted any irregularities for further investigation. This information provided the basis for managerial decisions on such subjects as staffing levels.

However, when the statistics had been used with relatively short term surveys on visitor dispersal throughout the parks, they gave much needed information on specific user interest and preventions needed to restrict access to sensitive areas. One surprising result had been that in a survey generating over 1,000 responses, 27% had stayed within the car park area.

They came, they saw, and they went away again. The same surveys had been used to determine user likes and dislikes, resulting in expenditure in the two areas which had been mentioned over and over at the conference – £100,000 per annum on litter picking, and £40,000 capital expenditure on improvement of toilets.

Ian had then touched on the conflicts between the various user groups and his solution which was their representation on the local park management committees, the introduction of management objectives drawn up in consultation with staff, and the issue of annual repor specifically relating to these objectives.

Staff training on customer care was led by groups of inter-departmental staff and its content, surprisingly, was considered to be less relevant by longer serving members than those newly recruited.

In conclusion, Ian had indicated that statistical comparison with other Scottish parks would probably result in an increase in the ranger service with consequential improvement in customer care. An annual comparison of the statistics was useful as a means of indicating value for money, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The presentation had been followed by a wide-ranging discussion on such diverse subjects as the effect on statistics of special events such as guided walks; the need for awareness surveys of users; the use of statistics in targeting advertising; the involvement of staff in establishing actual user needs, compared to those predicted from statistical information; and the effect of the views of local residents on such topics as pricing policy and future developments.

All in all, it had been a most stimulating and informative workshop.

KATE DAY *(Access and Recreation Manager, Cambridgeshire County Council)* said that the parallel workshop had identified visitor surveys as serving a useful function in convincing local authority members of funding requirements. ROGER ORGILL *(Senior Development Officer, The Sports Council)* referred to guided walks, which had been mentioned. He asked whether there had been any further thought given to gauging the reaction of customers to a more interactive approach, with the rangers for example. IAN FULLERTON *(Divisional Manager, East Lothian District Council)*, presenter, thought most rangers had a variety of approaches to guided walks. The area under discussion was a coastal one and he would say that 50% of the guided walk programme was very interactive. There had not actually been any assessment of customer satisfaction in a structured way but the authority was very keen to get feedback from the rangers on customer response. In fact, the guided walk programme had been changed extensively in response to feedback from rangers and their customers.

Forest Parks

TERRY SUTCLIFFE *(Principal Planning Officer, Cleveland County Council)* said that Kielder Forest needed no introduction but he explained the way in which the workshop had looked at it. This had been particularly from the view of the forest enterprises operation there. Kielder was the largest man-made forest in Europe. Within the forest itself there was Kielder Water, again a large visitor attraction. The problem was how to deal with customer care quality when there were two large operators in the same area. That theme of co-ordination had emerged throughout the discussion.

The scale of the attraction at Kielder was large, with its 15 car parks, five toilets, £100,000 budget for management, maintenance and development, and a staff of four. The operation was seasonal at the present time although attempts were being made to widen its appeal over the year. Some 60% of visitors this year had come from the tourist market with the remaining 40% coming from the local market. Last year it had been practically the reverse. So there was a considerable variation. A rainy season could account for this. The tourist could not go home whereas the local residents would stay at home.

The theme of the presentation had been to look at customer care through quality assurance. Chris Probert was committed to bringing quality assurance into the whole of his operation, the strategic planning as well as the day-to-day operation. He had put forward two steps within the operation that he wanted to highlight throughout his talk, and he had done this very successfully.

Step 1 was bringing the recreation network up to standard, getting things put right that perhaps had lapsed over the past ten or more years, as previous managers had concentrated more on development than actual management, a trap that people fell into all too often. That in itself had created quite a lot of discussion.

Step 2 had been working with customers, not just the visitors. Chris had identified the customers as including all the partners within the operation – his colleagues within Forest Enterprise, the people who could have a major influence on the operations, the forest managers, felling managers, the people bringing the timber out, the influence those operations could have on recreational patterns that had been allowed to develop. It also involved the local authorities and the water authority. So, the wide range of customers was something which Chris Probert had taken on board; to implement quality assurance overall was a real challenge.

He had gone on to quote a range of examples of quality assurance which were all aimed at increasing customer care. The first one had been facility improvements and then getting the system of inspections up and running. Again, it had come back to doing it not just once but every week, or every day in some cases. It was a question of maintaining the standard you had set throughout the life of the particular facility.

Another example had been improving visitor centres, maintaining the quality to the customers by ensuring that such things as the audio visual and interactive displays were working. People increasingly expected higher standards. Chris had taken a lot of care and put a lot of money into ensuring that there were maintenance contracts for equipment and established procedures for getting equipment repaired quickly.

In terms of promotion, the point had been made that the production of leaflets was quite easy but it was important to ensure that they were distributed effectively to the target groups.

In terms of marketing, Kielder was a long way from a large centre of population. It was a facility with its own unique feel. Chris had looked at niche marketing, with such innovations as dog sleighs and mountain bikes to heighten the profile of the area. Communication was essential in an operation such as Kielder; if mountain bikers took the wrong route they were liable to meet a convoy of 40-ton lorries loaded with timber. The forest operators would not appreciate it if they could not get their trucks in and out on schedule. So it was a question of communication within the organisation itself and with

those around it, particularly the other operators, people who were feeding off Kielder. It was a massive resource with many interests operating within it. Some criticism was levelled at Northumbrian Water which had recently completed a £1.8 million visitor centre adjacent to Kielder Water. However, many of the visitors would also be using the forest itself. There had been a certain lack of co-ordination with the other partners.

The small team of four people were looking to keep customer care at the top of their list. Chris had set the standards himself but wanted other people to comment on them to provide for a cross fertilisation of ideas. The group had agreed that it was the job of the centre manager or the facility manager to set the standards in the first instance.

The discussion had centred on a number of points. One was the role of BS5750, how far it could be taken and how valuable it was at the end of the day. Some doubts had been expressed as to the value of going the whole way down the road to accreditation. It was suggested that it might be better to be selective in the process, to make use of the aspects which could be adapted to your facility and particular needs.

Quality assurance in a declining budget situation was seen to be important. There was discussion on how to deal with that, the dilemma of having to cut back on some facilities if the funds were insufficient to maintain the highest quality in all of them. It was seen as a balancing act. Quality control could be a problem where there were concessions on a site. The group had considered quality assurance in relation to writing recreational strategic and development plans, how it could be made to work.

Finally, the topic of 'Recofax' had come up. This had seemed to require some further explanation. Terry suggested that the discussion had been dominated by the foresters who all understood it and nobody else had liked to ask for clarification!

RICHARD BROADHURST *(Senior Recreation Officer, Forestry Commission)* explained that Recofax was a series of information sheets on different aspects which had been developed within the Forestry Commission. The first ones had been concerned with footpaths, trail management and so on. There was one in preparation on play. They were primarily designed for use within the Forestry Commission although it had been suggested that they could be developed and made available to others.

ENVIRONMENTAL SITES

Nature Reserves and SSSIs

KEVIN BRIGGS *(Senior Lecturer, Farnborough College)* reported that the workshop had concentrated on National Nature Reserves, given the background of the presenter, Martyn Howat, Senior Site Manager for English Nature. He had explained that English Nature was responsible for a series of nature reserves with a wide range of conservation values. They advised site owners on the management of SSSIs and provided funds to various agencies to increase the enjoyment and understanding of the sites. However, English Nature had a very limited budget. Approximately 60% went on staff and overheads, 20% on management agreements and pay-outs, leaving 20% for site management.

He had established that many of the National Nature Reserves already had a high level of recreational use, mainly by specialist or family users, although some reserves had many users, including horse riders, mountain bikers, windsurfers and wildfowlers, which would appear to conflict with the ethos of a National Nature Reserve.

Over the past year English Nature had implemented many new initiatives to develop and increase customer care on their reserves as their own needs had changed. They now had to be seen to be providing a good service for the taxpayer. The provision of basic interpretive guides, signs and walks had been improved. Nature reserve signs had been revamped with a reduction in the text, the Latin names and the complicated maps. Signs at reserves now actually welcomed people, gave some simple facts, a clear map, a name, address and phone number for further information. Separate from the signs was a visitor management post which carried the notices and the regulations on a particular reserve. So the cluttered appearance which used to be common had now largely disappeared.

English Nature had undertaken market research at a sample of sites to assess visitor needs. These sites were related to visitor numbers and constituted three groups. A sample of the results had shown that they appeared to have it right at some sites, such as Ingleborough where little customer care was required. However, at other sites such as the the lower Derwent Valley, nearer the centres of high population, there was still a great number of considerations required.

They had improved by forming recreational partnerships with site users to increase awareness and save on their limited resources. For example, the wild flowers at Lindisfarne National Nature Reserve now provided their own paid wardens. English Nature communicated with a whole range of other authorities in their new openness. They linked with other conservation bodies to gain from interpretation and customer care, and also on staff training.

The discussion which had followed the introduction had ranged between two extremes – the 'all nature and no people', whereby the site should be for the purist, specialist, with limited access by permit only, to the other view that all people should be allowed, resulting in 'no nature, as taxpayers everyone should have access'.

Martyn Howat had added to this using some archive data from a 1947 report outlining access to National Nature Reserves and proposing that basically access should be allowed to most sites, provided there was no damage, but that some sites should have restricted access. Within the same report it had also been stated that some of the reserves which were more robust should be designated as educational reserves, with unlimited access for enjoyment and awareness – an option that did not appear to have been taken up.

Access to fragile habitats had proved a stumbling block in the discussion but it had been thought that each reserve should have a calculated carrying capacity, defined by the limits of acceptable change, set well in advance, and that increasing visitor access should be carefully monitored and reviewed.

Their market research had been seen as being extremely encouraging for the organisation. It was thought that the surveys needed to have a more site-specific element added, and information on the public's perception of nature conservation should be explored. Off-site surveying to look at the possible requirements of non-users had been another possibility.

The problem that the public faced in the increasing plethora of designations, signs and terms relating to the countryside, had been seen as unhelpful and confusing; clarification and simplification of that would be a good idea.

Access to the National Nature Reserves should be seen as part of an increasing personal development programme, increasing awareness and interest in conservation, starting from visits to country parks and duck feeding, with access to National Nature Reserves coming from increased respect for nature and requiring better standards of visitor behaviour.

More evaluation surveys would be required for the expectation of the visitor to be assessed. The question was posed as to whether National Nature Reserves were really as exciting as the wildlife documentaries would lead people to believe.

Basically, more feedback was seen to be needed on every issue. The final point to be explored took up a lot of time in both groups. It centred around English Nature itself, was it really a surviving red data species or just continuing as a captive breeding programme! Which was more important, the survival of conservation or of English Nature? It was thought that they had a mission to conserve nature, to make the public aware of the need for management and to promote their organisation. The group thought they now communicated very well with the professionals through their new publications but there was still a long way to go in communicating with the public at large, in getting through what they actually did, what their work was, and especially, their successes. They needed more media exposure at all levels, particularly at the local level of radio and television, and the staff should be seen to exude this new policy of openness and customer care, which seemed to be lacking in many cases. They had to get people on to their reserves and they had to manage the people. English Nature needed to encourage public support.

The final point to be raised was that English Nature was developing a new gazetteer of all National Nature Reserves to allow people access, to tell them exactly what was going on at the sites, and to encourage more visitors. It was thought that if the book and the other initiatives mentioned were successful, they would need to plan for increased access and customer care, and perhaps that 1947 report should be taken off the shelf, dusted down, and the requirement for national educational reserves should be reconsidered.

In response to a query from the floor, KEVIN BRIGGS said that there had not been any discussion regarding the mapping of the nature reserves and SSSIs. TONY PHILPIN *(Pennine Way Co-ordinator, Calderdale Leisure Services)* could not see how it would be possible to get carrying capacity figures, which had been mentioned. GARETH ROBERTS *(Countryside Council for Wales)* asked who had been involved in the debate about limits of acceptable change; was it on a site-by-site basis? It was explained that the site managers of the NNRs were responsible for the continuous monitoring of species on all sites. Where the number of visitors seemed to have a perceptible effect on the quality of nature on the site then restrictions would be considered. ROGER ORGILL *(Senior Development Officer, The Sports Council)* wondered about the process of moving from feeding the ducks in a local park to a nature reserve. He thought the sort of customer who fed the ducks was likely to expect to find bigger and wilder animals in a National Nature Reserve and would be somewhat disappointed because they were highly specialist and probably very low key in terms of what they were expecting to see. KEVIN BRIGGS agreed. PETER SCOTT *(Chairman)* commented that since this brought up a whole set of issues it was a pity that there was not more senior management commitment from some agencies, local authorities and other people, to the CRN conference.

FOOTPATHS AND RIGHTS OF WAY

JOS JOSLIN *(Ridgeway Officer, Oxfordshire County Council)* reported that the workshop had had two speakers from Calderdale: Tony Philpin, the Pennine Way Co-ordinator, who

had discussed informal access on a linear national trail; and Ian Kendall, Senior Countryside Officer, who had looked at area-based recreation.

Tony Philpin had explained that the Pennine Way was very involved in its restoration programme at the present time so that the national trail was not currently being managed from a user base. Many millions of pounds were being spent on the Pennine Way but it was not being led by user needs, in Tony's opinion anyway.

There was one particular issue affecting him at the moment, that national trails were set up to give walkers, horse riders, back-packers, and so on, a quality of experience. Obviously that was directly related to the quality of the landscape through which the path went. At present there were a number of threats to the quality of that landscape, specifically on the Pennine Way, with wind farms springing up all over the place. He was concerned about how management could resolve that problem.

Tony had also talked briefly about the difference between promotion and marketing. Many centre-based activities could promote participation and perhaps had a higher carrying capacity than some of the national trails. Marketing was more concerned with optimising the level of use. Setting standards for the level of use was quite a problem.

Ian Kendall had then described a very successful and innovative customer orientated service on an area basis in Calderdale. Basically, the service had been set up in 1986 when the authority had taken over from Yorkshire County Council. This was a time when tourism was needing to replace the textile industry as a major economic function of the area.

Initially it had been accepted that in attracting people to an area it was necessary to have a good infrastructure to cope with them. He had also made the point that customers were not just the tourists and visitors, they were very much the community, the landowners, the people who lived there.

To cope with the development of the service a green forum had been set up in Calderdale which was now seven years old. That green forum consisted of a whole range of users, people with interests in the area and in the service. They had met once a month for over seven years – an impressive record.

Another development in Calderdale in terms of maximising resources had been that the service was kept close to Countryside Commission trends so that they had been able to maximise grant aid.

Ian had said that what the customers wanted in Calderdale was basically a well maintained rights of way network. That was the core function of his service. They had set up a very simple infrastructure based on five sectors within the Calderdale area, with a great deal of local involvement. There was a large volunteer scheme, where the volunteers went through a six month training period and thereafter a six month probationary period. So there was an ethos of local ownership of the rights of way network and the service.

The ensuing discussion had covered a variety of topics. First of all, customer care had to involve the whole community; it was not just concerned with the visitor to the rights of way paths. That led to a community ownership of the service and of the countryside. However, there were three dilemmas with regard to the management of the countryside and the rights of way network. Firstly, even if you knew what the customer wanted,

different customers would want different things from the same path or the same area. The countryside was a very clear product but it had multi-use, leading to multiple needs from different customers. The problem was how to cater for all the varying needs.

Another dilemma was that customers sometimes had unrealistic expectations of the countryside. Should these be met, could they be met? Probably not. There had been consensus that the aim should be to meet agreed customer needs after consultation with the various groups.

The third dilemma was the one mentioned by Tony, about wind farms along the Pennine Way, highlighting that external influences, frequently detrimental and outside the control of the managers, could affect the quality of our product. The weather was the obvious one. We could not control that but people's expectations were unlikely to include bad weather. Then there were the wind farms, road developments, and so on.

Some time had been spent discussing the value of BS5750. The question of whether people should pay for access to national trails had been touched on, or whether it was better that they should pay extra in their accommodation charges towards such trails. The targeting of resources had also come up, how to establish priorities, where to target limited resources. The value of the Parish Paths Partnership had been discussed.

The suggested way forward had been, first of all that we needed excellent information about our product. Regular surveying was essential to provide information on the product and its current condition. That information needed to be properly managed so that it was used to best advantage. Mechanisms should be set up to provide access to that information for all who needed it, not just the managers. The way forward had been seen as working in consultation with all those who had an interest in the countryside so that standards of quality and service could be agreed.

TONY PHILPIN commented that he did not see the right of way network as a product but as a resource. His emphasis would be resource management rather than product management.

PETER SCOTT thanked all the rapporteurs for their presentations and said there were a few minutes left for general points to be made. He considered that the interesting aspect that had emerged from the workshops was that it had been shown that customer care applied to all the different situations.

TIM LAKER *(Hampshire County Council)* said that as far as the rights of way network was concerned, face to face customer care was less relevant. The important aspect was resources; they should be targeted to an agreed expectation.

MIKE TURNER *(The Big Sheep)* thought one point had been largely overlooked in all the discussions, the fact that customer care cost a lot of money. He foresaw increasing pressure with regard to finance which would only exacerbate the problem. Concessions had been mentioned in one report back. At his own operation they were totally against franchising because of the lack of control over the franchisee. However, he thought it likely that concessions would become more common in the future because of financial constraints. He also referred to BS5750 which had come up in several groups and suggested that the Government initiative 'Investors in People' might be more relevant to many people present. It had more to do with staff training than BS5750. PETER SCOTT agreed and

pointed out that the TECs (and in Scotland the LECs) had a great deal of experience in customer care training and quality assurance systems.

On the question about the cost of customer care, SALLY ASH *(British Waterways)* suggested that from the point of view of the public sector bodies, the cost of not implementing customer care programmes might be the loss of funding in the future, not to mention the loss of customers. CHRIS BROWN *(Cambridgeshire County Council)* picked up the point made about resources on the rights of way. He agreed that people wanted the tangibles, they wanted the rights of way open and usable. The problem was that local authorities could not immediately provide that. Even the Countryside Commission had set the year 2000 as the goal for providing the ultimate tangible.

PETER SCOTT closed the session by thanking all those who had contributed to it.

Customer Care and Service Quality – Making the Connection to Performance

Tony Bovaird

Aston Business School

This session asks whether we can measure quality. Can we take performance assessment, performance review and performance measurement, further than traditionally has happened? Not so long ago, performance measurement was about how much had been spent by 31 March. Now we want to have quality management in our organisations and we want to measure whether we achieve quality. That is a very long way from where we were a few years ago. Is it possible? Can we make that connection?

I would start by suggesting that when we are dealing with customer care and trying to assess people's reactions to the quality of what we do, we have got to be clear that it is not an entirely 'rational' business that we are in. Therefore, measuring our achievement cannot be as systematic as perhaps a scientist would like. Peters and Waterman, in their book *In Search of Excellence*, looked at major US companies and suggested that the most successful companies were obsessed with customer care, and they showed examples of how totally irrational that was, and I would remind you of the comment made by Mike Turner of the 'Big Sheep' a little while ago about just how much customer care costs. Indeed, Peters and Waterman maintained that these companies became so involved with their customers that they spent 'too much money' on them. Of course, one has to remember that they were the most successful companies! So we must be careful when we say that their obsession with customer care was irrational.

In the health service a lot of research has been done on 'placebos' showing that people recover even though they are not getting any drug. Placebo work is very controversial, even perhaps unethical in some cases. However, in many research studies throughout Western Europe and North America, placebos have turned out to be nearly as effective as chemotherapy intervention – and intervention kills people! Now, the interesting thing for our purposes today is that it appears that the conditions under which placebos work best embody exactly the characteristics which customers say they care about when they are being questioned about customer care – a doctor who explains everything that is going to happen, including the fact that you might not be getting anything at all; a system which seems to be personalised and individualised; a demonstration to the patients that they can take control of their own lives and deaths, their sickness, their illness, even their terminal decline; bringing people into the service, letting them manage their own service for themselves and use the rest of the staff as support (Harrison, 1991). It is exactly the things that people ask for in customer care surveys in the health service that are the conditions that make placebos work best!

So maybe placebos work well because under certain conditions of treatment we actually make ourselves better, and those conditions are about having a humane, decent, personalised experience inside the service system. In other words, maybe customer care

makes people much better off than the service does – that is a threatening idea for professionals! It could be that for a high proportion of the people who consume your service, the friendliness, the warmth, the personal interaction, the humane experience they have, is infinitely more important than the fact that it is taking place in the countryside, in the town, in the educational resource centre, or wherever. So, when we measure the effects of customer care we should be aware of these wider 'irrational' dimensions. We should be trying to capture the success we have, and the achievements we have, in making people better off – and not just the effects of introducing a customer care programme with a few initiatives in it which might or might not have been noticed by people, and might or might not have been appreciated by them.

If we are to measure the achievement of quality then we need to have some idea of what we mean by quality. The definitions I would suggest are ones which by and large have surfaced during the conference so far (Figure 1).

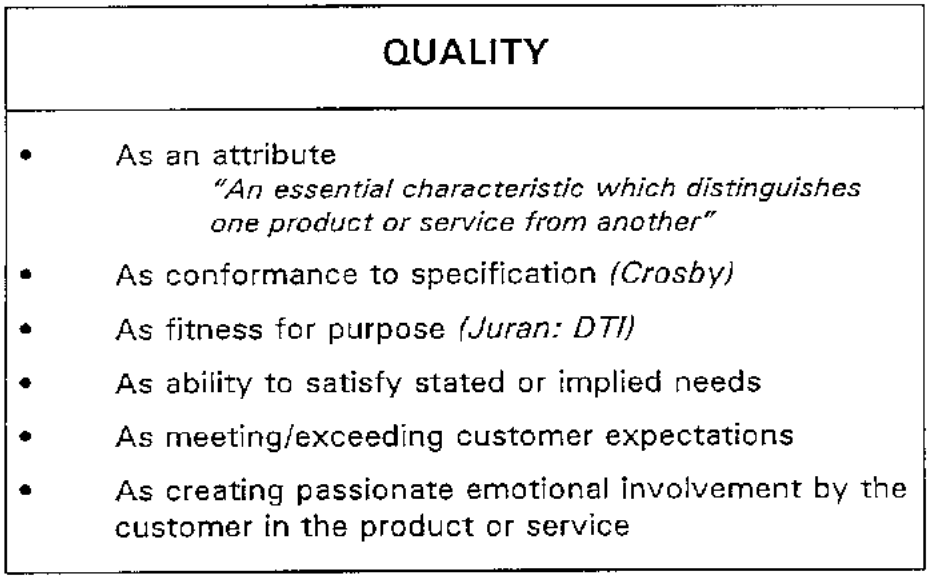

Fig. 1.

I want to argue that there is a whole set of definitions of quality that you are free to adopt. There is no standard version or definition, nor could there be. 'Quality', after all, is only a word. As Lewis Carroll wrote, "Words mean precisely what I intend them to mean". People do mean different things by 'quality', and they have the right to do so. You should be aware of this. You also have a right to your own definition – and other people should respect yours, however daft it may be.

But I want to argue that there are a number of common threads to these different approaches to defining 'quality', which can be seen in both the public sector and the private sector at the moment. If you are going to assess your achievement of quality, you should be clear about which definition your organisation is focusing on for the moment.

You can define quality as an attribute – for example, one of the qualities of a particular service might be that all of the interpretation signs are in three languages. 'Quality' as just an attribute is one way of defining quality, a very low level way, but it actually stems from the old dictionary definition. Another definition is 'conformance to specification', so you need to have a spec. That is the definition which Deming and Crosby have focused on, and

a lot of the private sector literature is on this. Of course, as Joe Juran asked years ago, if a spec is written by morons and implemented by charlatans, what do you get? Not quality in the normal sense of the word. Therefore, this is a rather low level definition of quality, but that is one definition within BS5750!

So Juran, and indeed our own dear DTI, have at times used the definition of 'fitness for purpose' which is also written into BS5750. And fitness for purpose fundamentally means achieving the objectives set. So we are back into objective-led management – and we know all about that in the public sector, don't we?! We can write objectives within five minutes for anything at all. We can even remember sometimes where we put the last set of objectives we wrote. So, beware – this is not a field in which the public sector has a proud record (Bovaird, 1992). So, that is another way of defining quality: just say clearly what your objectives are and measure whether you achieve them.

BS5750 actually goes further. It also includes a definition of quality which is 'the ability to satisfy stated or implied needs', defined by external customers (politicians, for example). That part of BS5750 is not often talked about in the private sector, nor, funnily enough, in the public sector where you might think it offered a particularly interesting way forward.

In the consumer psychology literature about which you were hearing yesterday, the SERVQUAL approach talks about either meeting customer expectations or exceeding customer expectations. Here, measuring the achievement of quality entails knowing what the initial expectations were. I loved the way you kept raising that during the feedback session this morning because you have just driven a coach and horses through almost all the market research done in this country, since it hardly ever standardises measures of customer satisfaction by looking at the expectations of the people who were asked. And you were blithely talking about how interesting it was, and how you were going to do it, and how valuable the information would be. What an innovative bunch! This work you are about to launch into is going to change the face of British consumer research. And quite rightly; I think that 'meeting or exceeding expectations' is an interesting vision of quality.

The last vision of quality comes from Myron Tribus of MIT. He says that quality cannot be measured, cannot even be defined. All you can check is your reaction to it. It is like being in love; you cannot define it, you cannot measure it, but boy, it feels different. And that is exactly what quality should be doing. Quality ensures the achievement of pleasure and joy through the process as well as the outputs. Quality is that which creates a passionate emotional involvement between the people and the service concerned. If Kelloggs cornflakes can create an emotional, passionate involvement between their product and the consumer, how can we lose out in the public and voluntary sectors with our infinitely superior products?

You might say that is an enormously ambitious task. In a sense, I see the list in Figure 1 as an increasing tariff of definitions. The harder ones are towards the bottom. You have the right to choose any one of these approaches to defining quality; and the definition will determine how you measure quality. That is my basic message. I do not think anyone can complain to you if you have said clearly what your definition of quality is and if you have assessed your achievement against that. You have choices to make here and which definition your organisation plumps for on that list will be determined by how much you think you can get away with, how ambitious you think you can be, what sort of measurement systems you think you can put in place, what the political commitment is, and how important you think various stake holders are (that is, various groups of your customers, end-users, funders, and so on).

I do not want to suggest that any one of these approaches is right, only that you must choose, and you will be assessing your performance and quality against that definition.

Let me move on to what we are actually going to measure and how we might measure it. One of the things I am concerned about in the evaluation work we do, looking at the achievement of quality in the different types of agencies we deal with, is that we can become very narrow and compartmentalised in assessing quality, in assessing the impact we have on customers, and in assessing how much they care about what we do. Very often, a lot of the customer care literature and consultancy approaches are actually more about how good is the organisation, rather than the interface with the quality of life out there in the environment. We must recognise more clearly that through the services we offer to the world out there, we help people, and that this service interaction helps in a number of ways – it helps people privately, in their individual lives. It also helps the families around those people; and it helps their social and community life. The services we offer have an impact not just on individuals and families but on the community as a whole, the way it thinks of itself, its identity, how successful the community regards itself as being, how nice a place this is to live in. The services we offer and the way in which we offer them also have an impact on our political life – they can work to support democratic processes, or sometimes can completely negate them (Figure 2).

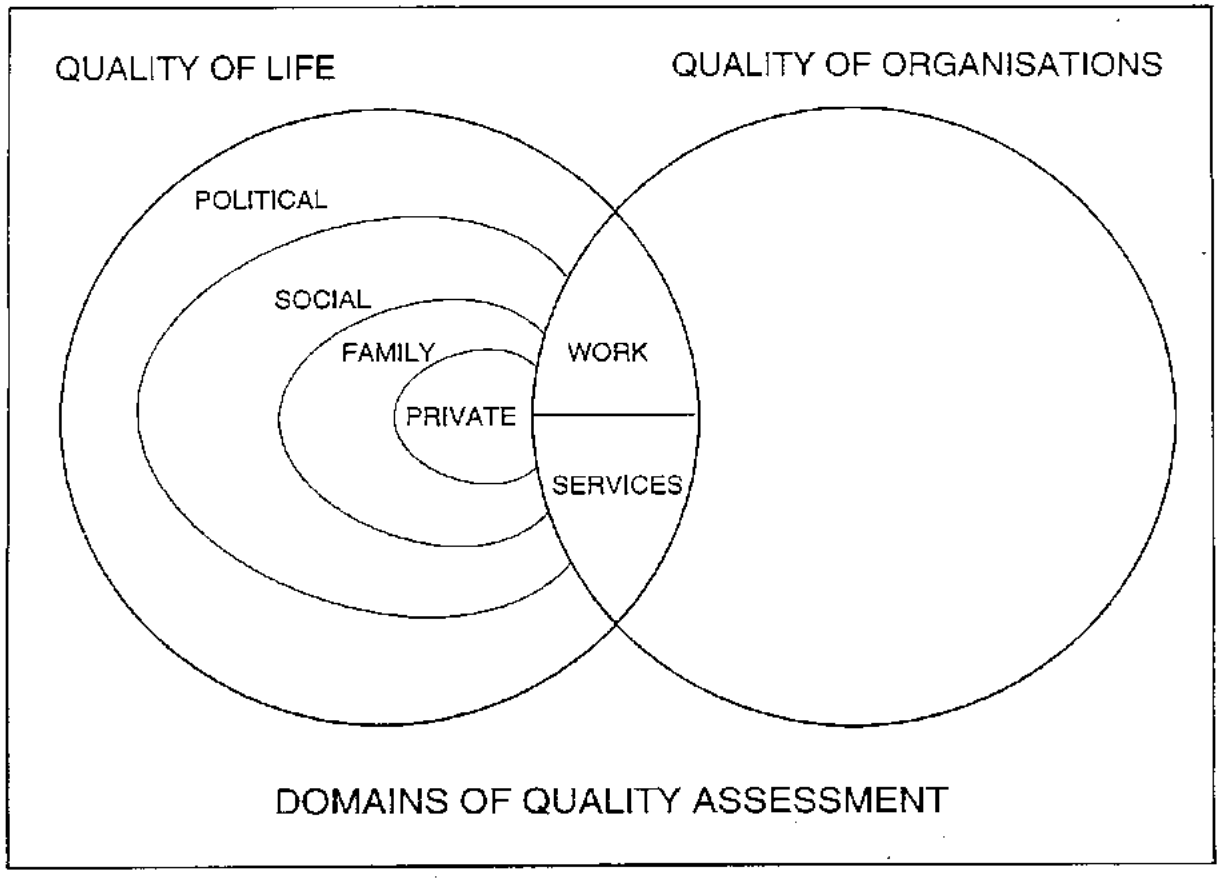

Fig. 2.

So we have to be conscious that the service interaction brought about by our organisations is not just making individual users feel good or bad; its effects go wider. As responsible users of public money we should not just be assessing how good we are as an organisation,

or how good our services are in helping customers, we should look at the wider family, social and political impacts of the way we do things and what we choose to do.

So customer care has to take account not just of a range of stake holders but of a range of dimensions in which we impact upon stake holders. At our peril we ignore the difference between elected local government and appointed local health committees. At our peril we ignore the difference between urban development corporations as compared to patch-based inner city regeneration approaches with joint working between local authorities and community organisations. If we do not recognise the political, social and community impact of what we do, as well as the individual impact, we are missing a lot of the long term changes we bring about by using public money. So customer care is about a wide range of things for a wide range of people. In assessing our achievements, let us not be too individualised and too short term in our evaluations.

What does that add up to, practically? Assessing the achievement of customer care involves a three-fold approach – assessing organisational excellence, assessing service quality, and assessing how successful the communities are in which we work (Figure 3).

ORGANISATION EXCELLENCE SERVICE QUALITY SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES		
For a...	**Quality is...**	**Performance is assessed by...**
Public Agency or Company	Satisfaction of .... funders .... staff .... (end-users)	SURVIVAL ADAPTABILITY EFFICIENCY PAY-OFFS (to funders, staff, users...)
Service System	Satisfaction of .... end-users .... professionals .... (funders)	MARKET RESEARCH MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES
Community	Quality of life .... outcomes .... security/support .... conformity to to social norms	MARKET RESEARCH ('IMAGE OF THE LOCALITY') (MIGRATION/ HOUSE PRICES)

Fig. 3.

I would argue that doing some things for individuals in certain communities is an absolute waste of time. They either do not want it or are not ready for it. However good the service might be in community X, when you do the same things in the same way in community Y, those people cannot make proper use of it. They will not react in the same way: the social infrastructure is not there, or to put it differently, it is not a successful

community. Therefore, when we are spending public money I want to know not only that we have excellent organisations which are delivering good quality services to the customers they choose, but I want to recognise that excellent organisations are often very narrowly focused. They have their own target groups; they often leave out most of the social priority groups identified in the political process. Indeed, very often they are excellent organisations *because* they are narrow, because they only attempt to help some people. So, in assessing the excellence of these organisations, we are looking at only part of the picture.

I therefore want to suggest that the *service system* be assessed, to see how good is the performance of the portfolio of organisations which is delivering countryside care – how well is the overall set of services actually helping our chosen range of target groups. The irony here is that an effective service system which is really getting good services across to the people we most want to help, may have to put up with a lot of mediocre work, because the excellent organisations are already moving on to other types of work. We will want to help some of the really dud organisations to become better, of course, but choosing an excellent service system does not just mean choosing the excellent organisations. You are damned if you go down that route because excellent organisations will beat you every time at just doing the stuff they want. And I applaud them for it.

Finally, having an excellent service system which is designed to help the people you want with the services you know they need, will be wasted if you give it to the wrong communities. Community development may be necessary before you have successful communities, and therefore in order to have successful services. We are wasting a lot of money doing stuff we know is valuable, in a way we know works, in places where no idiot would go unless they were forced to. And evaluation must be able actually to say that. I know you might get sacked if you said these things – that is why I am in a university!

What do we actually measure if we are trying to assess quality (Figure 4)?

WHAT DO WE MEASURE?

- Checklist of inputs and processes
- Adequacy of QA system – cross checking and problem solving processes
- Performance indicators
  - outputs (e.g. litter picked, interpretation leaflets distributed)
  - outcome (e.g. litter visible, treatment of key countryside amenities)
  - user feedback (e.g. complaints, market research)
- Critical success factors
  - mixture of above

Fig. 4.

I want to suggest that there are at least four basic approaches we might take. If you are trying to assess quality and the impact of your work on the different customers that you care for, you can just have a checklist, basically of the inputs you want to have and the processes you want to put in place. This is a very qualitative approach. There is hardly any measurement involved. It is a set of yes or no answers to a checklist of questions. Do we have these inputs, do the staff have the right qualifications, do we have the right processes, have they operated at the right time according to the manual? It is a BS5750 approach. And qualitative checklists of yes/no answers are now at last acceptable in human conversation. You do not have to have big numbers any more in order to be credible and to protect budgets – I hope. (Actually, I am not sure about this, big numbers still matter in most organisations. There is still a lot of over-quantification).

You can step back a stage, though, reject all that and simply say that you have a good system if the quality assurance process is itself adequate. You are just going to check whether the QA approach is in place and is adequate to make sure that the standards you have defined will be reached every time. This approach necessitates that you can demonstrate to the satisfaction of an outsider that the processes you have put in place in your system will guarantee the standards that you have set, because they contain internal cross checking systems and problem solving systems that come into play when a deviation from standard occurs. It will be spotted and put right.

In Toyota they do not bother to check out what parts have been delivered before they pay the invoices from the suppliers. They just pay on the order note they sent. They do not check whether the stuff has come; they do not look at the invoice. That would increase the clerical cost by 15-fold. They just pay on the order note. If they did not get the stuff, they would not be producing the cars each day. So they assume they received the ordered components.

It is not quite so simple for you because a lot of the time you do not know what you are producing. But if your QA system continually cross checks that the standards you have set are going to be met; and sets problem-solving procedures in motion when they are not met; and when those standards are sufficiently low for you to be able to say 'right first time, every time' with confidence; then *in such circumstances* you do not have to spend a huge amount of money on performance measurement, and you would be ill-advised to do so. There is a little sting in the tail in that; we may come back to it later.

Performance indicators are, however, the chosen way of the Treasury. We can, for example, have performance indicators on outputs, e.g. the amount of litter picked, the amount of information leaflets actually distributed (of course, these two can run counter to each other!). Such indicators are often quantified but they can also be on a checklist, so you can have qualitative approaches.

We can go further; we can try to have performance indicators of outcomes, e.g. the amount of litter visible. We used to say that such an approach would be crazy, you would never get away with that. Interestingly, however, we are actually now running a large part of the refuse collection system of Britain on the basis of visual inspections by monitoring teams on a random basis, after collection, with a score on a scale from 0 to 10 for each patch, and with penalty clauses imposed on the privatised collectors, or the in-house collection team, if the refuse has not been collected and if there is still litter visible on the streets.

So perhaps in countryside recreation, too, we could have outcome measures – the treatment of countryside amenities, the amount of graffiti, the number of gates left open. These might not be too difficult to devise but would always be patchy. You might end up with a long list of them – which would be cumbersome – but it is usually feasible if the will is there.

Another approach is to have user feedback. In those organisations where the customer care approach is end-user driven, you will certainly be talking about end-user feedback of some sort. A lot of what I heard this morning was actually moving towards a discussion of the way in which we can get better feedback from the end-users of the system and from other intermediate customers as well. There are two fundamental approaches here. One is to use complaints and the other is to use market research. I abhor complaints systems as a measure of performance. Complaints systems are essential if you are to be honest with your customers, your staff and yourself, because they allow you to find out some of the things that have gone wrong and to put them right. They must be taken seriously and the complaints addressed, *but* they should never be used to assess your performance because only an unrepresentative group of the people who are dissatisfied ever complain. They are often very unrepresentative – articulate, big-mouthed, better educated, often with a very substantial complaint, sometimes bloody-minded. So they are unrepresentative of most dissatisfied people, never mind the high proportion of people who are actually satisfied. To use that as a performance indicator for your service is absurd. To redesign a service simply because of information you get through complaints is extraordinary, and it is beginning to happen in places. I do not like it.

So I want to suggest the need for market research – and then you have to employ market researchers such as university staff! There are, of course, problems of measuring customer satisfaction through market research but I would argue they can be overcome (Figure 5).

PROBLEMS OF MEASURING CONSUMER SATISFACTION
• Difficulty of designing unambiguous questions (to elicit unambiguous answers)
• Low interest by some stake holders in eliminating ambiguity
• Assessing expectations and how they influence satisfaction
• Expense and delay (*vs* 'quick and dirty')
• Danger of focusing too much on individualist objectives rather than social objectives.

Fig. 5.

If we are going to do market research, we have got to be honest and say it is dangerous stuff; it is not going to answer all our questions and it is going to be problematic. I would just argue that it does add an extra dimension to our decision-making, so we should use more of it.

There is a difficulty in designing unambiguous questions in such a way that they elicit unambiguous answers. That is true. But there is good and bad practice in this. The good practice is more informative than the bad practice, even though it is not perfect. I do believe that market research provides interesting results.

One of our problems is that market research is sometimes actually *designed* to be ambiguous, to elicit ambiguous answers to ill-defined questions, or questions which left out the real issues. This can be the case, for example, when you are going to use the results purely for publicity purposes. I do not come across many examples of market research in public and voluntary work where it has not been engaged in primarily to produce publicity bumph. The idea that most market research is done in order to redesign services to make them more successful is a bit of a joke. I am delighted to hear this morning that many of you have decided to go down that honourable road! But let us not close our eyes to the fact that we do have a problem in that cheating is sometimes part of the spec for market research.

Assessing expectations and how they influence satisfaction is to me the most critical problem in using market research – knowing from what base respondents gave their response. People who have only ever had poor quality will be delighted with the mediocre service you continue to give them. People who are used to something good somewhere else will be dissatisfied. You have to sort out somehow the basis from which the answer was given, the knowledge base of those respondents, the experience base they have, and the expectations they have built up. Your job is to meet or to exceed the expectations, however low or high they are, if they are your target group, especially if this is your definition of quality. Expectations are critical in market research; if you do not understand them, you do not understand the answers you get back. I have to say that this is a problem behind most of the market research currently done in the private and public sectors. (Of course, you might argue that does not matter, because we do not intend to use the results, other than to boast about them!)

The other problem is expense and delay *vs* 'quick and dirty'. Market research can be expensive and it can slow things down. The trite response is always to say that the best market research is getting out on the patch and talking to people – that your own professional staff, your own managers, should stay in touch, and therefore provide you with the cheapest form of market research. Of course, it is not all that cheap – it is using expensive staff time. But it certainly is a way of keeping the budget costs down and it is very valuable and rich market research.

Going beyond this, I have to say that I see an enormous role for quick and dirty little tests of the market, 'windows of market research', from time to time, and I am very sceptical of the really big blockbuster market research operations which are done once every three or five years. They look to me very often as if they are public relations exercises only, usually for funders. I would not rule them out; if you really are in deep crisis you need to become really informed. But 'quick and dirty' research done often, supplemented occasionally by a rather more rigorous approach on one part of your performance (e.g. for one target group in which you are interested) seems to me to be a compromise approach which should not bankrupt most organisations.

American public sector consultants often suggest that 1% of all budgets should be kept aside for performance review and monitoring. I think that sort of rule of thumb is very crass; surely we in Britain are far too sophisticated to fall for that – after all, we have long kept it down to 0.1%! I would suggest that 0.1% of the budget for performance review and monitoring may indeed be fine for standard programmes which you know are working and which are unchanging from year to year, like many things done in the public sector. But if you are doing anything exciting, interesting or innovative, which might fail, then 10% of the budget is a minimum expense, in order to find out if it is working and to stop if it is not. So that 1% rule seems to me to be far too crude.

The final point about market research is the danger of focusing too much on individualist approaches rather than social objectives. As I have argued earlier, the customers you are helping, the wide variety of interest groups and the stake holders, means that there are many impacts of your work which will not come back to you in the feedback from people on the site, the users; or even from some of the major stake holders with whom you engage in eye to eye feedback at steering group meetings, committee meetings, funding meetings, and so on. There are a lot of wider impacts and I fear that in our move towards customer care we have thrown the baby out with the bath water very often, that we are becoming far too narrow in our concern about who we are helping and how much we are helping them. We are not looking at the longer term, wider social impacts of what we do. We used to say that education was something that took a few years to sink in and its benefits took a little while to assess. You do not work out the benefits of a long term countryside education project by asking people who come on the first three Saturdays if they liked the look of the place. Surely, we have got to be just a bit more cautious than that.

Finally I want to go back to what we should be measuring. It is possible to argue that we can be quite selective in what we measure. If you wish to be strategic, being comprehensive and rigorous is actually an enemy sometimes – perfectionism is sometimes the enemy of good practice. So, if you can spot what you believe to be the *critical success factors*, the key inputs that you should get right, the key processes which will ensure the dimensions of quality you most care for, the key target groups you really want to satisfy every time, the key elements of their experience you want to make sure are right for them, then those critical success factors will provide the checklist upon which your monitoring and evaluation should focus.

I would therefore suggest that you should be concerned about the QA system in the work that you do and with *some* performance indicators of output, outcome and user feedback. These critical success factors should be identified – the things that you want to make sure you get right, and you *must* make them as small a number as you can afford to implement. So in checking your performance in actioning customer care you cannot afford to go over the top. Indeed, if you are too grandiose at the start the system will collapse in ruins very quickly and it will become a bad joke.

Therefore I want to argue for selectivity in performance assessment, as in every other part of strategic management; you should identify some critical success factors to monitor really closely and to get right. Do as little of that as you can afford, or more optimistically put, as much of it as you can afford.

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Customer Care in Practice

Professor Terry Stevens

Dean of Faculty of Leisure, Tourism and Health Care
Swansea Institute of Higher Education

In a recent article in *Tourism Management* (1993) Dr Marion Bennett (Scottish Hotel School) explores the challenges of customer service perspectives in the tourism industry. She explains that customer service as a concept is difficult enough to define, and this without the added complications of its consideration in the context of the countryside.

The dilemma inherent in this definitional conundrum lies in its subjectivity. In the service industries generally, the perception of the level of service required or provided will vary considerably depending upon an individual's stance. This perspective alters according to a wide range of variables which include socio-cultural, age, lifestyle and expectations. Expectations in turn are shaped by past experiences, levels of knowledge and awareness of a product, and a range of psycho-psychometric influences.

The outcome is, of course, that service and the quality of service is very subjective and *individually focused* – a key factor which has particular relevance given the nature of much countryside recreation participation. In addition, as Bennett goes on to point out, "compounding this subjectivity, is its intangibility and ephemeral nature".

This paper will examine the apparent increase in concern for their customers amongst providers of countryside recreational services and facilities. Is this a genuine, strategic, response or a short term knee jerk reaction to the well publicised, but often misunderstood, consumer focus of the emerging tourism attractions which often provide a direct competitive challenge to some of our countryside facilities?

For many observers this may appear to be a recent phenomenon emerging in the wake of well publicised examples of consumer-orientated management in other sectors of leisure delivery. Others will, however, recognise that customer care, in practice, has a long tradition for particular special interest markets, especially sporting and active recreation groups and, paradoxically, conservation-orientated membership organisations. Today, customer care as a priority agenda item for the countryside is stimulated by the dynamics of the marketplace creating innumerable competing claims on our leisure budgets (time, disposable income, and interests).

Traditionally there appears to have been scant regard to the consumer in the countryside for a number of reasons (see Table 1).

Table 1. Traditional Constraints upon Enacting Customer Care Programmes in Countryside Recreation

• Recreational use of resource not primary objective
• Dispersed sites and low volume use
• Customer difficult to identify, characterise and monitor
• No consistency or representative consumer voice
• Communication with user intermittent, brief and unstructured
• Countryside access was a free commodity
• Experience generally not facility related
• Customer unimportant
• Staff frequently limited in number and experience, often being volunteer

In addition, there is also the consideration that the countryside has generally been regarded as a collective commodity available for individual participation on its terms. Thus, as long as the collective welfare is maintained through the very existence of the countryside experience, there is no need to be concerned about an individual's response to it – the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Yet as we have seen with other sectors of the service industry:

> *"Probably the most important management fundamental that is being ignored today is staying close to the customer to satisfy her needs and anticipate his wants. In too many companies the customer has become a bloody nuisance whose unpredictable behaviour damages carefully made strategic plans, whose activities mess up computer operations, who dirties displays, and who insists that purchased products should work."*
>
> (Young, 1980)

That countryside recreation ought to be close to its customers seems a benign enough message, and there is considerable interest in applying the concept of customer care in a countryside context. Why should this be the case? The range of factors (see Table 2) give some interesting clues as to the likely status and intent of this growth phenomenon.

Table 2. Customer Care in the Countryside – Some Reasons for Interest

Positive Stimulants	Negative Stimulants
• Increasing consumer awareness and higher expectations of standards and service	• Landowners need consumer support
• Greater competition for leisure time	• Increasing pressure to make countryside pay
• Developing wider markets for countryside recreation	• Peer group and policy pressure
• Efficiency and effectiveness indicators	• Legal and political regulations
• Business-like approach	• Shift of emphasis from recreation to tourism

As a result of both sets of pressures, there has been a surge of interest in applying the principles of good practice in customer care in the countryside. Four years ago the Forestry Commission and the National Trust separately instigated staff development training programmes in this area. Today generic training packages exist for the leisure industry provided by:

ILAM (Cantle-Jones, 1993)
WTB (The Welcome Approach and Welcome Host)
MDC (Customer Care Practical Guide)
Insite

There remains inherent difficulties in meeting the requirements of fragmented service and the relatively small numbers of staff involved. It is also indicative that many of the constraints upon the development of a customer care philosophy in countryside recreation identified in Table 1 persist today – and are unlikely to change. Indeed, and paradoxically, there are trends emerging which are likely to reinforce the potential for a true customer care philosophy to emerge in the British countryside (see Table 3).

Table 3. Trends Likely to Constrain Further Customer Care in the Countryside

• Consumer not the customer is important
• Increasing limitations on use of the countryside (elitism)
• Polarisation in the marketplace
• Alternative opportunities
• Economic cutbacks and reduced investment in countryside recreation facility provision
• Uncertainty as a result of unitary authorities DLO/CCT extensions privatisation
• The countryside recreation experience remains diffuse and imprecise with management fragmented

Tables 2 and 3, therefore, illustrate a paradox inherent in this debate: factors likely to lead to increasing demand for more customer care in practice, whilst there is more than a hint that the picture is far from clear cut. Perhaps some clarity will emerge if we consider the following point made by Bennett (1993).

A definition of customer service can be advanced by distinguishing between two types of service. Technical, or material service as it is also known, relates to tangible aspects such as equipment, resources and staffing. These factors can be reviewed from various perspectives including pricing, quantity and timing. It is these physical aspects involved in the delivery of service which can be more objectively assessed and standards applied.

The second type of service can be referred to as functional or personal. This is the involvement of a human interface between consumer and producer. Personal service is, as the term suggests, a service tailored to the individual in terms of the latter's requirements. It encompasses promptness, knowledge, courtesy, accuracy and ultimately personal attention. It is these features which are intangible, subjective and thus more difficult to assess, but which may be critical to the successful delivery of material service.

The interrelationship between the two types of service is the process of marketing, with personal service often the determinant of the assessment of the overall product. The provider of countryside recreation services must, therefore, understand the market and shape the technical standards of service accordingly. Implicit in the adoption of standards is the need for consistency of approach built around clear goals and objectives (it should be noted that 'standards' is not synonymous with 'standardisation').

The application of a consumer-orientated approach in the countryside and market-led activity must always be placed in context (Stevens, 1993). Resource managers must balance environmental considerations with demands and needs of their visitors knowing that many visitors will have a keen eye upon management's environmental ethic, (NPRA, 1992). Increased usage has coincided with a debate on sustainability and environmental conflict. Customer care, at this level, takes on a completely different meaning with consumers feeling good as a result of a resource managers' care for the resource – thus creating an environmental 'overrides' for poor technical service provision.

Perhaps this is the essence of the argument and the point where we are in danger of going wrong. To date our attention has been placed on customer care in the context of:

(i) the countryside as a commodity, and
(ii) the contact with the consumer at the point of consumption.

It is not surprising, therefore, to report that we have sought comparisons in customer care programmes in leisure facilities ill-suited for translation to a countryside setting. All too often we have looked towards Disney (for example) and thought we have understood customer care at work and tried to transpose our experiences into the countryside setting.

This naïve approach was perfectly understandable but misguided. It is based upon perceptions of leisure provision which are primarily centred upon staff contact with customers and is facility dependent. Often the facility has predetermined service standard characteristics which, in their own right, are transferable between parks, hotels, restaurants. This is generally not the case with countryside recreation, particularly informal countryside recreation. We have looked at the delivery stage, Bennett's technical stage, rather than the market planning of recreation provision. Disney's customer care is not based upon a simple overlay of smiling, helpful young cast members. It is based upon understanding what a sector of the market wants. It is here that we fail to understand the philosophy and process of customer care and fail to invest our resources (this is the process of market research).

Table 4 illustrates how the problem of meeting customer demand is confused in a countryside context.

The concept of customer care applied to countryside recreation must bring benefits to a tripartite of:

- the consumer
- the resource manager
- the resource.

This triangulation represents the conundrum faced by recreation providers as expressed by the Sports Council (1992):

> *"Access is not an absolute right but carries with it responsibilities to the site, the landowner, the local community and other users".*

Table 4. Point/Counterpoint of Countryside Recreation Trends

Point	Counterpoint
• Search for more challenging and innovative recreational activities	• Demand for safe, clean and secure environment
• Need for environment safeguards	• Broadening access and accessibility
• Growth of activities requiring flexible access to countryside	• Countryside management becoming increasingly fragmented and unplanned
• Increased expenditure upon equipment	• No demonstrable change in attitudes to pay for access to the countryside
• Continued growth of membership of conservation bodies	• Elitist approach to the use of the countryside for recreation
• Significant increase in leisure opportunities and day visits	• Countryside as a whole remains an important recreational resource
• Consumer expectation increasing and more discerning	• Consumers are able to distinguish between types of recreational experience
• Participants seek 'own thing'	• Economies of scale demand volume business
• Increasing diversity of activities and venues and growth	• Remains a minority interest
• Populist and extensive use policies	• Increasing elitism

A heavy burden for the user, or is it? Perhaps implicit in these words is the way forward for customer care in practice in the countryside .....namely placing the responsibility for shaping the experience upon the user.

At present our provision is shaped by intermediaries, professionals who observe the customer activities and monitor their demand to identify their needs. Why not empower the recreationalist and involve various user groups to plan, design even manage the facilities and services? This would involve decentralisation, partnerships and empowerment (Lengeek, 1993).

This is an approach which has reaped significant rewards in the following examples which have been applied at a regional level:

USA – Appalachian Mountain Club
Switzerland – Swiss Footpath Association
Germany – German Mountain Walking Association
France – French Ramblers Association

At a national level, a number of agencies have adopted a market-orientated approach to planning the delivery of facilities and services. A critical feature of these approaches is the creation of operational standards and detailed manuals to guide implementation.

The issue of involving customers in the decision-making process as a feature of customer care in action has recently been predicated by the NPRA (1992). Their *Agenda for the 21st Century* makes the following observations relevant to the theme of this paper and this conference:

Agenda:	*'Park and recreation professional must be able and willing to identify, analyse, promote, and respond to change in society'.*
Issue:	*'There is a strong trend toward greater participation in the decision-making process by citizens and employees'.*
Agenda:	*'New leadership techniques will be required of park and recreation professionals, to facilitate consensus building and stimulate stake holder involvement'.*

The most pressing issue, therefore, if this thesis is acceptable is how can a democratic, representative, viewpoint be represented in the marketing process? We come full circle meeting many of the issues raised in Table 1 and confronting the question of securing a collective voice for an individualistic experience, customer care in the countryside is a marketing issue with marketing solutions. It is not achievable by the simple adoption of palatable easy-to-apply schemes which are palliatives not solutions.

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Discussion Summary

SIMON SALEM *(British Waterways)* said that as a marketing manager he used market research and he agreed with most of what Tony Bovaird had said. He asked for his views on the value of qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research. TONY BOVAIRD said that it had taken a long time to discover that eyeballing people and listening carefully to what they said rather than getting them to tick boxes was a wonderful way of finding out about the world. It was extraordinary that it had taken so long to discover.

ALEX YOUEL *(National Trust)* had been interested in Tony's comments on complaints and suggested they should be presented as suggestions and opportunities for positive feedback, as well as complaints. TONY BOVAIRD would be much happier with that emphasis but maintained that the people concerned would still be very unrepresentative of the users as a whole. In the final analysis, the service should be designed for the target groups you really cared for, so the (largely) random selection of data emerging from complaints could be grossly misleading.

ROB WIGHTMAN *(West Cumbria Groundwork Trust)* asked what was the value of factorial performance indicators. TONY BOVAIRD replied that the glib answer must be that the more technical something looked, the more impossible it was to convince any policy-maker that it had anything whatever to offer. However, he believed that as analysts, in all the agencies, we had a duty to inform ourselves as best we could of the basic relationships shown the previous day in the SERVQUAL diagram, which were determined in terms of staff motivation, staff satisfaction, and how they related to their interaction with the public, the expectations of the public, customer satisfaction and customer retention. There was a basic duty to model that and whatever information was available should be used. He believed that the statistical approach of the SERVQUAL model was an excellent tool.

GLENN MILLAR *(British Waterways)* raised the problem of multi-user groups at the same facility. TERRY STEVENS said that there was some research work going on in a number of places where there were multiple interest groups; the results might be of value to managers of facilities which faced conflicting demands. He pointed out that it was up to the management to lay down the criteria for use of a given site. SIMON CURRY *(Rochester-upon-Medway City Council)* commented that in many local authorities, including his own, the trend was increasingly to farm out land management of specific sites to specialist groups. The larger, multi-use sites tended to remain in-house. TERRY STEVENS suggested there was an inherent danger, in that the third party might be quite capable of managing the resource well but might not deliver in terms of customer care. This problem had arisen in some leisure centres since the implementation of CCT.

TONY BOVAIRD felt there had always been a reluctance on the part of the politicians to state their priorities clearly in terms of target groups but he thought the situation had improved a little since the advent of CCT. In the past the designated target groups in some local authorities had included about 92% of the population – whilst 35% of the usage came from the remaining 8%! TERRY STEVENS told a cautionary tale; he referred to some recent research at leisure centres where membership had been decreasing. Both the management and the ex-members had been asked to list 20 reasons for the decline. There had been only two points of commonality. The management had listed tangible reasons

relating to pricing policy, quality of sports facilities, lack of equipment, and so on, whilst the ex-members' reasons were related to ambience rather than the specifics of the service.

JOAN BOWLEY *(ADAS)* suggested that tourism and recreation interests in the countryside should work together more closely. TERRY STEVENS thought the two aspects were already closely linked. He quoted the case of three leisure centres in Mid-Wales which had been funded from the European Regional Development Fund on the basis that they added to the tourism appeal of the area. That was a direct interrelationship. The situation was obviously more complex in areas such as the rights of way network which often relied on landowners and other interests which did not derive any direct benefit from the tourism income to the area. On behalf of the Wales Tourist Board, MERFYN WALTERS said there was a clear policy for partnership between recreation and tourism interests.

TERRY SUTCLIFFE *(Cleveland County Council)* asked Tony Bovaird if he could identify any specific models where performance management in a local authority or countryside situation was actually working, with targets being set and achieved, performance indicators working, the whole system up and running, and sustainable. TONY BOVAIRD said that it worked best, particularly in the public sector, in situations where people had chosen to measure their performance, and change it in the light of the results, rather than having it imposed on them. Some of the best examples could be seen in inner city areas rather than in the countryside, basically because of the funding structure. As specific examples of good practice he quoted Bolton MBC and Mr Sutcliffe's own authority of Cleveland. PETER SCOTT *(Chairman)* said that there was a lot of performance measurement in countryside management services but it was very much output monitoring.

TONY PHILPIN *(Pennine Way Co-ordinator, Calderdale Leisure Services)* pointed out that if a quality goal was set of meeting or exceeding expectations, and was achieved, then expectations would be elevated, resulting in a spiral situation. TONY BOVAIRD thought that was what made it interesting; people became more knowledgeable in what to look for and appreciative when they found it. Raising people's expectations meant that they could lead a better life in the future. HELEN ROWBOTHAM *(British Waterways)* did not favour increasing expectations in that way, to produce that kind of spiral, because she did not believe the countryside could meet such expectations without suffering damage. She thought the emphasis should be on changing people's expectations to what was realistic in the countryside. TONY BOVAIRD took that point. Some expectations were totally unrealistic but there were others which were quite realistic and which had been ignored in the past. It was no good producing a charter which was impossible to achieve with the available resources. Managers and analysts had a duty to define the standards that could be achieved at a given level of resources. TERRY STEVENS disagreed. He thought it was right to raise expectations and to face up to the consequences. The alternative was a downward spiral of expectations.

GARETH ROBERTS *(Countryside Council for Wales)* said that the dilemma for the countryside agencies was to try to reconcile the myriad different expectations of the users of the countryside.. TERRY STEVENS thought the problem started with lack of communication links with the various groups. TONY BOVAIRD pointed out that there was a wide range of services in the public sector which, in theory, were available to all. In practice, they were used by only a small percentage of the population. We had to face the fact honestly that if communication was improved to the point where everybody wanted to use all the services it would result in catastrophe. This was the reason we needed political courage in explicit specification of which target groups should be given priority.

TIM LAKER *(Hampshire County Council)* said that virtually all the discussion had ignored the non-users of the countryside. BOB FORD *(Department of the Environment)* thought the emphasis had been on enabling people who were not interested in the countryside, or identifying and raising expectations. Government did not work that way. It reacted to demands upon it. TONY BOVAIRD regarded that as the difference between government and vote chasing. He believed government had a duty to lead. In more general terms, he felt the discussion had rightly concentrated on setting standards, publicising them and measuring achievement of them. However, it should be recognised that, hidden within this rather bland approach of 'quality management' there was a time bomb, because the only standards that agencies would politically be allowed to publish would be ones which could not be met in practice. In response to Bob Ford's point, TERRY STEVENS said that if the DoE had it on their agenda to look at performance indicators within the countryside context, then he hoped they would take cognisance of what had happened during the conference and involve the people concerned in the debate.

PETER SCOTT thanked the two speakers for their valuable contributions.

Closing Remarks

DEREK CASEY *(Director of National Services, Sports Council; Chairman, CRN)* I am sure we have all been impressed with the quality of the contributions made throughout the conference which have been epitomised by Tony Bovaird and Terry Stevens this morning. So, thank you to all the speakers.

It would be quite wrong and, indeed, impossible to summarise the key points which have been made over the past few days but there are three aspects which have struck me particularly from this morning, leading to better customer awareness and, therefore, to better customer care.

The first one has been the phrase which was used, that we should all see our jobs through the eyes of the customers. Sometimes it is very difficult to quantify that; it is not only about systems, it is about style and ambience, it is about atmosphere. I was reminded of the difficulty of defining customer care when I heard the quotation from Quentin Crisp when he was asked to define charisma. He said that charisma was trying to get people to do what they do not want to do, without using logic. Sometimes I think there is no clear logic in customer care either because ultimately it is the response of one human being to another human being, and that is the difficulty of seeing how we should go. Systems, ambience and style are all very important.

The second point that has come out is the importance of the commitment from the top down. It is a pity that more of the senior officers of some of the public agencies, in particular, are not here this week. That is something that CRN must address in the future. We do have a policy directors' meeting every year and I am sure this will be one of the points on the agenda that we will want to raise.

The third point is the importance of good and clear communication between the customers and the providers. I hope that the conference has added to good communication between all the individuals and agencies, private, public and voluntary, which are here this week.

Good communication is one of the reasons why CRN exists. I hope that over the past year, and in the future, you have been aware and will continue to be aware of some of the communication by CRN in this particular field. The communication is in many forms. CRN itself is essentially a forum for the national agencies, for the local authorities' associations, the research councils. It provides a forum to exchange ideas; it acts as a 'marriage broker' between different agencies which have the same fields of interest, bringing them together to encourage their collaborative work.

It also provides specialist workshops during the year, a range of practical sessions covering everything from footpath development and management, to economic factors, to the importance and influence of Europe in the development of countryside issues. I hope that many more people will become involved in the workshops during the coming year.

There is communication also in the form of a directory of research in countryside activities which is published each year; and in the form of the new *CRN News* which has

come out in the past few months. There is communication in the form of the annual conference which will be held in York in 1994. Good communication within CRN is important.
We have heard Tom Peters mentioned several times today; he said that excellent organisations did not believe in excellence, they believed in constant change and adaptation. CRN itself has changed and adapted over the past few months, having come from CRRAG into CRN in that time.

I would like to take this opportunity, particularly with the new secretariat provided by the Department of City and Regional Planning in Cardiff, and with Rob Wood, the CRN Manager, to say in what an excellent manner they have managed that change and adaptation over the past six to eight months. It has not been easy but I hope that over the next few years we will see the benefits of the changes and adaptations which CRN is trying to put in place.

I want to thank Rob Wood, along with Leeza Sharpe, Heather Mitchell and Bruce Stephen, who have been the backbone of this conference; the planning group, in particular Glenn Millar who has led much of this work; and Molly and John Robins from Janssen Services who provide the excellent report after the conference. I hope you will join with me in thanking them all for all their hard work that has gone into the background to this conference.

So CRN has been about and will be about good communication; it will be about constant change and adaptation. But going back to the question of customer care and the question of leadership, we also need good leadership for CRN. I have very much enjoyed my period of office as Chairman of CRN. I am afraid that on occasions other duties at the Sports Council and elsewhere have kept me away from being involved in some of the issues as much as I would have liked. Because of that I have had to rely very much on the leadership provided by the Vice-Chairman of CRN, Richard Broadhurst, as well as the sponsors and others involved. I am delighted that Richard is now taking over as Chairman of CRN. He will be an excellent leader, backed up by Jeremy Worth from the Countryside Commission as Vice-Chairman. The leadership is in good hands. So I would like to thank Richard and my colleagues for all their help over the past couple of years and I hope you will join me in welcoming Richard Broadhurst as the new Chairman.

RICHARD BROADHURST *(Senior Recreation Officer, Forestry Commission, Vice-Chairman CRN)* I would like you to visualise a triangle where the bottom left angle is labelled 'natural environment', the bottom right angle 'host community', and the top angle 'visitors'. If you wish you can substitute for the word 'visitors' one of the following: users, participants, contributors, citizens, taxpayers. I will use 'visitors'. This triangle is not my own; it was developed by the Tourism and Environment Task Force.

It is interesting that our conferences move around within that balance. In 1992 we had the conference theme 'Off the Beaten Track' which was concerned with access. That ranged between 'natural environment' and 'visitors'. This year we have looked at 'Customer Care' which perhaps is focused more closely on 'visitors'. Interestingly enough, because it follows many of the comments made by Tony Bovaird and others that we are not always addressing the right people in the services we provide, and Terry Stevens' comments about empowering communities, next year we are going round the triangle and down into the other corner to look at issues about involving communities. I think that is very important; it will be very interesting indeed, so see you at York next year. There will be many other

workshops which will range around those topics but they are three of the things that we have to keep in balance.

Finally, I want to thank Derek Casey for all the work he has put in, and the direction he has given, in shifting this organisation from CRRAG into CRN. There has been an enormous amount of hard work in trying to empower the network more, in encouraging everybody to play a part in the organisation, rather than just handing things down from the small group of agencies.

So I would like you all to join with me in thanking Derek. There will be other occasions for thanking him from the agencies and other people involved but I am sure you want to show your appreciation here and now.

God speed, and see you all in York next year on 13–15 September.

List of Participants

SPEAKERS

Nick Allen
Human Resource Manager
Center Parcs Ltd

Tony Bovaird
Senior Lecturer
Aston Business School

Francis Buttle
Senior Fellow, Services Management
Manchester Business School

Gerry Carver
Director of Management Development
L & R Leisure plc

Ian Fullerton
Divisional Manager
East Lothian District Council

Michael Handford
Inland Waterways Association

Martyn Howat
Senior Site Manager
English Nature

Ian Kendall
Senior Countryside Officer
Calderdale MBC

Hilary Lade
Manager, Fountains Abbey
The National Trust

Judy Ling Wong
Director
Black Environment Network

Alan Mattingly
Director
The Ramblers' Association

Colin Palmer
National Access Director
British Mountain Bike Federation

Tony Philpin
Pennine Way Co-ordinator
Calderdale Leisure Services

Chris Probert
Recreation Officer
Forest Enterprise

Simon Salem
Marketing Development
& Communications Manager
British Waterways

Frans Schouten
Partner
Synthesis International

Terry Stevens
Dean, Faculty of Leisure
Swansea Institute of Higher Education

Mike Turner
Director
The Big Sheep

Sue Walker
Senior Researcher
Centre for Leisure Research

Merfyn Walters
Welcome Host Co-ordinator
Wales Tourist Board

DELEGATES

Kathy Amos
Tourism Development Officer
Wear Valley District Council

Sally Ash
Business Analyst
British Waterways

Madge Bailey
Recreation Manager (Lee & Stort)
British Waterways

Geoff Barry
Recreation Forester
Forest Enterprise

Simon Bartlam
Countryside Manager
Wokingham District Council

John Bell
Executive Secretary
Caravan Club

Mike Bonner
Research Officer
Sports Council

Mick Bottomley
Recreation Manager
Forestry Commission

Joan Bowley
Rural Enterprise Consultant
ADAS

Bill Breakell
Tourism & Interpretation Officer
North York Moors National Park

Peter Brett
District Forester
Forest Enterprise

Kevin Briggs
Senior Lecturer
Farnborough College

Richard Broadhurst
Senior Recreation Officer
Forestry Commission

Chris Brown
Rural Group Leader
Cambridgeshire County Council

John Butterfield
Countryside Officer
Countryside Commission

Derek Casey
Director of National Services
Sports Council

Chris Coombs
Area Manager
Derbyshire County Council

Simon Curry
Senior Ranger
Rochester-upon-Medway City Council

Mike Dales
Recreation & Access Officer
Scottish Natural Heritage

Kate Day
Access & Recreation Manager
Cambridgeshire County Council

David Dixon
Asst. Countryside & Community Officer
Hampshire County Council

Martyn Evans
Senior Access Policy Officer
Countryside Council for Wales

Bob Ford
Policy Officer – Access & Recreation
Department of the Environment

John Gibson
Head Recreation Ranger
Forest Enterprise

Michael Graham
Director of Parks & Recreation
Angus District Council

Robin Gray
Recreation Manager
British Waterways

Catherine Hallam
Assistant Manager
CWS Agriculture

Tim Herbert
Research Executive
British Waterways

Jennifer Houiellebecq
Lecturer
Easton College

Anthony Hurst
Assistant Countryside Officer
Bracknell Forest Borough Council

Jos Joslin
Ridgeway Officer
Oxfordshire County Council

Tim Laker
Southern Area Countryside Manager
Hampshire County Council

Cameron Manson
Manager – Dalkeith Country Park
Buccleuch Estates

Nicholas Meech
Proprietor
Nicholas Meech Env. Art & Design

Heather Mitchell
Research Executive
British Waterways

Patrick Murray
Customer Services Officer
British Waterways

Geoff Nickolds
Development & Conservation Controller
Severn Trent Water Ltd

Roger Orgill MBE
Senior Development Officer
Sports Council

Sean Prendergast
Senior Rights of Way Officer
Kirklees MBC

Tina Heathcote
Youth Hostels Association

David Hope
Countryside Conservation Dev. Officer
Hertfordshire County Council

David Hume
Countryside Centre
Scottish Agricultural College

Tony Jackson
Pennine Way Manager
East Cumbria Countryside Project

Penny Knock
Head Ranger (Recreation)
Forest Enterprise

Jane Manning
National Training Officer
Youth Hostels Association

David Markham
Policy Officer
English Nature

Glenn Millar
Research Manager
British Waterways

Don Moxom
Warden
Chesil Bank/Fleet Nature Reserve

Richard Nicholson
Rural Economy Consultant
ADAS

Isabelle O'Brien
Dean Castle Country Park

Ken Parker
Assistant National Park Officer
Peak Park Planning Board

Annette Pritchard
Senior Research Officer
Wales Tourist Board

Richard Rigby
Recreation Land Management Officer
Essex County Council

Gareth Roberts
Head of Recreation & Access
Countryside Council for Wales

Tony Russell
Visitor Services Manager
Forestry Commission

David Sayce
Recreational Land Manager
Surrey County Council

Leeza Sharp
Forestry Commission

Bruce Stephen
British Waterways

Hilary Talbot
Research Manager
Centre for Rural Economy

Alan Teulon
Head of Countryside Services
Northamptonshire County Council

Caroline Thompson
Buccleuch Estates

Peter Webb
Forest Conservator
Forestry Authority

John Whittaker
Chief Warden
Oldham MBC

Robert Wilkins
Assistant Countryside Officer
Hereford and Worcester County Council

Jeremy Worth
Head of Recreation & Access Branch
Countryside Commission

Mandy Riley
Countryside Officer
Countryside Commission

Helen Rowbotham
Countryside Ranger
British Waterways

Jim Saunders
Offa's Dyke Development Officer
Offa's Dyke Centre

Peter Scott
Director
Peter Scott Planning Services

Fiona Simpson
Recreation & Education Support Officer
Forest Enterprise

Terry Sutcliffe
Principal Planning Officer
Cleveland County Council

Bill Taylor
Area Officer
Scottish Natural Heritage

Bob Tevendale
Park Manager
Midlothian District Council

Didi van Aacken
Partner
Synthesis International

Annette Weiss
Visitor Promotions Manager
Basingstoke Canal Authority

Rob Wightman
Countryside Programme Dev. Manager
West Cumbria Groundwork Trust

Robert Wood
Manager
Countryside Recreation Network

Alex Youel
Marketing Manager
The National Trust