

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Ratepayers just want basic service delivery at a fair cost

There is a view that Western Australia is over-governed. With representatives in two chambers at the Federal level and the State level as well as local councillors, it is not difficult to make that argument.

And although grand words and noble ideas are aired and debated in the Federal and State Parliaments, the truth is that perhaps the most important — albeit basic — functions are provided by our councils.

Or at least they should be. But too often it seems councils can lose sight of the tasks ratepayers expect them to concentrate on.

Collecting the rubbish, keeping the streets clean and the parks safe and usable, and attending to overhanging trees and suchlike. It ain't rocket science.

And if it is kept simple it should not require excessive expenditure.

Yet an investigation by The West Australian reveals today that a number of councils are set to put up rates well in excess of what would seem to be fair and reasonable, especially in the current economic climate which has many West Australians keeping a tight hold on their purse strings.

It is noteworthy that Local Government Minister David Templeman has called on councils to think about "families" who are "tightening their belts" to make ends meet.

"I think all local governments need to be very mindful of a lot of communities, a lot of families ... are tightening their belts with their financial situation and I think there is a big expectation councils will do likewise to reflect that," he said.

WA Treasury figures show that Perth's consumer price index rose just 1.2 per cent in annual average terms to March.

But proposed rate hikes include the Town of Cottesloe with 3.5 per cent, City of Nedlands with 2.96 per cent, City of Vincent at 2.9 per cent and the City of Perth with 2.85 per cent.

And the City of Rockingham, in the spotlight because of the local shanty town which The West Australian has highlighted, is handing out a rise of 3.6 per cent.

Earlier this month there was a tragic twist at the homeless community when a man who was the face of struggling residents took his own life.

If ever there was a sobering reminder of what really counts that was it.

State Upper House Liberal Simon O'Brien has given notice of a push to establish a select committee into local government.

Such committees can sometimes be a waste of time and effort and result merely in the presentation of conflicting views in a document which then gathers dust. But perhaps now such an inquiry is worth pursuing. Ratepayers just want effective and efficient service delivery from councils.



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Why the customer is NOT always right

GARY MARTIN



Bosses who put customers before employees will create morale problems.

If you have ever worked in a customer-facing role, how many times have you had to grit your teeth, take a deep breath and silently repeat to yourself "the customer is always right" while dealing with a consumer more painful than toenail removal?

The reality is the motto "the customer is always right", which has been drilled into anyone working in a customer service role, is just so wrong.

This phrase, coined in 1909 by British department store owner Gordon Selfridge, was an attempt to convince employees to give great customer service. It was — and still is — widely recognised that in so many ways the happiness of a customer is vital to business success.

Fast-forward a century and many businesses are blasting out this well-intended but misdirected motto whenever they can, often to the detriment of their exasperated employees.

Customer service operatives will explain that consumers are increasingly pushing boundaries by making unreasonable requests that prompt employees to break rules, threatening to post derogatory customer service reports on social media if they don't get their way and — most alarmingly — intimidating, abusing, spitting at and even slapping those who are there to help.

A survey by the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association revealed that in the past year 88 per cent of employees had experienced verbal abuse from a customer, 15 per cent had been subjected to physical violence and 11 per cent had encountered sexual harassment. These startling statistics simply confirm what many involved in the delivery of customer service have known for some time. Take, for example, the couple arriving at a trendy restaurant only to be told by the maître d' that there was no record for their booking. After berating the head waiter for inconceivable incompetence, the couple checked their calendar to discover they had turned up a week early.

And what about the barista who was spat at when he told a customer he was unable to fill a coffee order for a cappuccino without milk, foam or chocolate sprinkled on top.

Or even the electricity customer who yelled down the phone at a client service employee that he had been receiving his quarterly accounts only every three months.

It is these types of customers who leave many customer service operatives marinating in misery

because increasingly the line between rational expectations and unreasonable demands is being crossed. And with some customers simply being bad for business, it is no wonder some businesses have started to "fire" their worst customers, compile lists of secretly banned customers and drift away from another oft-quoted maxim — the more customers, the better.

When bosses try to instill a "customer is always right" mentality in their workplace they create winners and losers — because if the buyer is always right then it follows that the employee must always be wrong.

That arrangement puts the consumer in a position of authority that in today's world seems to act as a solid platform from which to discharge a raft of dysfunctional behaviours — many of which impact adversely on the health and safety of customer service employees.

And it is not just health and safety that are at stake. Bosses who put customers before employees will create morale problems larger than Donald Trump's ego. It is those morale problems that lead to disengagement and lower productivity, which ultimately extinguishes any semblance of quality customer service.

The bottom line is the customer isn't always right. Thinking otherwise will only deliver service with a scowl. Put employees first and then watch them put customers first — after all, happy people equal happy customers.

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