The development and delivery of high-quality customer service is an important goal for any information technology (IT) administrator in higher education. Statements about the importance of customer service are liberally placed in IT administrator job descriptions, and anyone who has run the gauntlet of the interview process for these positions knows well that success or failure frequently hinges on this issue. And yet, the consistent delivery of high-quality customer service has never been more difficult. Resource limitations, recruitment and retention of good staff, fast-paced technological change, and the insatiable demand for new technologies all contribute to an environment that defies customer service management. Try as one might to maintain a high level of personal service, users' expectations continuously threaten to exceed all best efforts. In these times of rapid change, the classic elements of good service—courtesy, promptness, integrity, friendliness—are not by themselves sufficient to meet users' expectations. Successful IT strategies must thus pay close attention to such expectations and find ways to keep them balanced against the realities of staffing, budgetary, and other resource constraints.

The Meteoric Rise of Users' Expectations

Within the past decade, professional and social pressures to use office-automation software, e-mail, and the Internet have swept through higher education like a wildfire. Today it is virtually unthinkable for a college or university not to have a solid and fast connection to the Internet and nearly universal use of e-mail. In a sense, the "missionary" work of IT officers has succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Longtime foes of computerization—in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, in the administration, in the dark corners of governing boards—were converted (or at least became resigned) to the inevitability of all-pervasive technology. One by one, members of the faculty requested computers for their offices, learned how to send and receive electronic messages, and became avid fans of the World Wide Web. Many of them started to weave these technologies into their teaching. Unfortunately, someone forgot to remind those in the IT department: "Be careful what you wish for."

Although the proliferation of technology at colleges and universities has been accompanied by a growth in resources, such growth pales in comparison to the increase in users' expectations and demands. Networks are expected to be up and running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Hardware should not fail, and if it does, it should be fixed instantly. Software is expected to perform flawlessly and in perfect harmony with all of the other software on a desktop computer and on all the campus servers. Users expect everything to plug into everything else, and when they run into compatibility difficulties with versions of software or obsolete hardware, they complain about the IT industry and the people who work in it.

The bottom line is simple: with the successful delivery of the products and services that the IT industry has developed, the majority of people in higher education institutions are hooked on
technology. Now they want more. And they expect to get it. And if they don't, they become angry—very angry. Yet no matter how many dollars are added to the IT equipment budget, no matter how many staff members are hired, no matter how many services are automated, users' expectations tend to rise faster than the IT department's ability to meet them.

Keeping the Cards on the Table
Quite clearly, to provide high-quality customer service, IT administrators need to get out in front of the demand curve. Yet they must do so extremely carefully. The motives and actions of a chief information officer (CIO), like those of any other campus administrator, are under constant scrutiny and can be easily (mis)constructed as manipulative, self-serving, or out of touch with the needs of the community. The very phrase “shaping users’ expectations” can conjure images of Machiavellian plotting on the part of the IT organization. (Sadly, there are enough cases where such plotting does occur to convince users that skepticism is reasonable.)

The IT department must tread a narrow path of helping users to understand the constraints inherent in technology support while preventing them from feeling stymied or pushed in directions they don't want to go. The key to success is openness. Rather than retreating into the back room to figure out how to modify users’ expectations, IT administrators should develop the more productive strategy of inviting users into the back room so that the users can see the resource boundaries firsthand.

Unfortunately, this is almost always easier said than done. For the most part, users aren't especially interested in seeing the reality of IT budgets, the frustrations of staff recruitment, or the complexity of unstable systems technologies. What they want are results, not a crash course in how the world looks from the perspective of those in the IT department. In fact, efforts to communicate the “inside view” of IT may appear to skeptics as little more than a self-serving apology for why users’ requests are repeatedly denied.

Thus, IT administrators must find ways to keep the cards on the table without provoking this type of response. One way is to enlist allies and make sure that they have the facts straight. This is where faculty technology committees, institutional planning groups, student organizations, alumni chapters, and key board members can be invaluable. Even in the smallest colleges, it may be impossible to “reach the masses” with pertinent information provided in a timely and effective manner. By reaching pivotal individuals in pivotal groups, however, the IT department can plant the seeds of the “inside view” and let the seeds propagate through the natural channels of institutional communication. Ultimately, the result of sowing these seeds is a shared understanding that approximates reality. The constraints of recruitment difficulties, budgetary limitations, and ever-changing technologies gradually become part of the “common knowledge.” And the credibility and the integrity of the IT organization remain intact.

Expectations and the Need to Know
So what exactly are the styles and types of information that faculty technology committees, institutional planning groups, student organizations, alumni chapters, and key board members need to know to help shape users' expectations? How is this information delivered and how often?

For starters, the IT organization needs to creatively provide the proper spin on the promises and advertisements that arrive daily from the media and from the marketing arm of IT vendors. Nothing works “right out of the box,” of course, but this is precisely what the ads would have users believe. In addition, it is imperative that IT administrators be proactive in promoting a realistic vision of what the new technologies can and cannot do. Stories of real-world applications and real-world limitations should be distributed around campus whenever they are available. (Recently, public key infrastructures, campus portals, course management systems, and wireless data networks are good examples of new technologies that can easily outpace the IT department's ability to deliver.)

Decision processes for hardware and software acquisitions should also be delineated as far in advance as possible—long before the final decisions are made. Many of the factors that go into these decisions are hard to understand (such as compatibility with existing systems), and they need to be put on the table in the early steps of a decision process. When an IT administration has to say “no” or “whoa,” there should be clear and concise explanations, the earlier the better.

Credibility regarding the big IT issues on campus comes naturally after credibility is gained on the small issues. A sincere and regular line of user communication has never been more important. Although many campus IT units have stopped issuing newsletters, substitute methods for proactive communication must be found. If users are not told what's being planned, they will assume the IT department isn't paying attention to the planning process at all—strategic or otherwise.

Finally, there is no substitute for the trust and comfort that comes from old-fashioned customer service practices. Being on time to meetings, providing reports when requested, and maintaining a professional demeanor are examples of the small building blocks that can construct a major foundation of trust. Obviously, this is critical for the entire IT team, from the CIO to the clerical staff. How those in the IT department look and how they behave are often the most telling signs of just how much they will be believed.

Any IT manager knows that users' expectations can quickly escalate. Thus, shaping these expectations while they are being formed is probably one of the most important responsibilities of IT management. Unless IT administrators pay as much attention to this task of shaping users’ expectations as they do to the more visible and more quantifiable task of obtaining resources, they will never succeed in satisfying the user community.

John Bucher is Director of Information Technology at Oberlin College.