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# Operations Alive: Services Management!

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A challenge in any Decision Science academic discipline is making the material real for students. There often exists a great dilemma of providing material and examples that are simple and “clean” enough to be easily understood by students, yet at the same time capture the realities of business management. This is a particular problem if students have no practical experience with the discipline.

A field where this is less of a problem is Services Management. Even students with little or no work experience have extensive practical experience with service businesses—as consumers! Thus students have class topics available that they can easily digest and relate to their own experiences. Furthermore, students tend to have poignant recollection of problems they have encountered with service providers (such as waiting a long time to see the dentist). These recollections can be great tools in identifying specific business problems that may be systematically resolved by good decision tools.

A further reality advantage in teaching Services Management is the fact that between 60 and 80 percent of the economic activities of developed nations are in the service sector. Students realize that an even greater percent of jobs for college graduates are in the service sector. Thus students are motivated to learn about Services Management if we can just present substantive material in an appropriate way.

A particular challenge in teaching topics in a Services Management course or as part of an operations or marketing course is the relative scarcity of teaching materials. Texts and other books have been published on the topic, but there is not as much selection as is found in more traditional disciplines. A group of DSI members has made efforts to help overcome this challenge.

## Advancing Services Management

At the 1996 DSI National Meeting in Orlando, a group of about 40 Institute members gathered to initiate a service management interest group known as SOMA. The idea was to form a network of academic professionals and others with interests in Services Management. The primary objective of the network is to facilitate the exchange of information about the field. (SOMA originally stood for Service Operations Management Area, but to avoid limiting the focus to purely operations, the acronym has been broadened to Service Organization Management Area—the group is also known to some as SMIG, or Services Management Interest Group. SOMA currently has almost 300 members.)

Some of the activities of SOMA include a website that serves as a repository of information pertaining to Services Management. That website (<http://soma.byu.edu>) is freely accessible to anyone. A key feature of the website is that all of the information is contributed by SOMA members.

Membership in SOMA is somewhat unique in that there are no dues, journals, or paper publications. Member names show up on the website membership list, and members receive a monthly emailing dealing with announcements pertaining to Services Management such as current article references, journal calls for papers, and meeting announcements. (Note: member email addresses are not given out to anyone else for mass mailing purposes.)

The primary meeting sponsored by the group is an annual mini-conference held the Saturday of the annual DSI national meeting. These mini-conferences have been held the past three years. The 1997 meeting emphasized teaching Services Management, followed by a Services Man-



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agement research theme in 1998, and Services Management practice in New Orleans last year. This year we will have our fourth annual mini-conference in Orlando.

### **2000 Mini-Conference in Orlando**

This year's Services Management mini-conference will be on Saturday, November 18<sup>th</sup>, at the conference hotel, the Orlando Marriott World Center. The meeting will have two themes. Morning sessions will focus on Services Management "Power Teaching Tools." The idea is to provide instructors with some first-rate activities that they can take back to the classroom to enhance Services Management-related courses.

For example, I am putting together a session on "Documenting Service Processes," which will demonstrate a couple of methods for bringing Services Operations Management from the neighboring community into the classroom. As part of that, I will describe my experiences assigning student teams to create videotaped documentaries about specific service business processes. The teams present their videos to the class with process analysis and problem solutions. The students find the videos enjoyable, and it greatly enhances the realism of the course material.

In this mini-conference session I will describe the video production process, including the instructions I give the students and the technologies needed for editing and showing the videos. I will describe how to get started with video production equipment for under \$300, plus a simple camcorder and a computer for editing. The goal is to enable interested mini-conference attendees to implement such a program in their courses the next semester.

My session will also feature a presentation by Bob Johnston from Warwick Business School, UK. Bob will describe Service Transaction Analysis (STA), which is an extension of the walk-through audit tool. STA is a simple but very powerful—and fun—instrument for helping students and managers analyze and improve service processes. Its main advantage is that it provides a structured approach to service process analysis that evaluates both subtle and

not-so-subtle aspects to provide a quality profile of the service. It has been implemented by many organizations in the UK to great effect. Again, the goal of the mini-conference presentation is to enable participants to use this effective tool in their own classes.

The afternoon sessions of the mini-conference will be on "Internet/e-Commerce Issues in Services." New technologies are very important to Services Management. The bulk of the e-commerce revolution involves service companies. Internet technologies are dramatically transforming the way many services are delivered. The afternoon sessions will include presentations by individuals who understand the transition to the "information economy" and are adjusting their research and teaching accordingly.

### **Become Involved!**

The goal of SOMA is to help advance Services Management by sharing information and networking. We do not want to detract from regular DSI activities, but rather enhance them. In particular, we are eager to promote attendance at the regular POM/Services Track, which this year is being co-chaired by SOMA member Kathleen McFadden.

A particular purpose of the Services Management mini-conference is to provide more interaction than usually happens at regular sessions. Along these lines, we usually go to dinner together as a group after the mini-conference—an event probably only rivaled in magnitude by the Ohio State dinner group! All DSI members are invited to attend the mini-conference, but attendance at the dinner requires an RSVP for planning purposes.

The Services Management mini-conference should be of value to those who have experience with services teaching and/or research, as well as those with new interest in the area. SOMA has a particular mission of assisting those who are new to Services Management in making the transition from traditional disciplines. We are eager to be a resource for newcomers to Services Management as we share our ideas and successes.

Also, we encourage interested DSI members to join the SOMA "membership list," which can be done through the website (<http://soma.byu.edu>). Or, you may contact me directly, and I will add you to the list. You will find that we have an increasing variety of Services Management resources at our disposal.

We hope to see many of you at the Orlando mini-conference on November 18<sup>th</sup>, and many new signups on the SOMA website! ■

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