

KANA. Case Study

Tilburg University

Tilburg University sees the student as a customer

Tilburg University has done something pretty unique among major universities, opting for an extensive customer contact system. Who are its customers? The students. Students can now answer their own questions first by searching an online knowledge bank, then, if necessary, submitting their question via a Web form. This innovative approach has proven far more efficient for staff and students. However, a change such as this must be presented to the discerning university crowd with proof as to its effectiveness.

Employees of the central student desk and student service center at Tilburg University recently had to endure these changes. The two teams merged to form the new, independent Student Desk department and also relocated to a new building. To top it all off, a totally new customer contact system arrived from KANA, including a centralized desk with a number system and a knowledge bank for customer contacts. Students are first required to go through the online knowledge bank, called "Ask Student Desk" to find the answer to their query before they send a Web form, visit the desk or call. In 2011, after the new system had been chosen, Julie Mol was appointed as project manager for the merger of the teams and implementation of the new system. She is now head of the Student Desk and operational manager of the online knowledge bank.




Julie had a lot of work to do to get her people excited about the innovations, starting with her own team. "Innovation can be exciting for people," Mol said. "Employees were accustomed to Microsoft Outlook; would it be replaced by something good?"

Also, people were skeptical about the contents of the knowledge bank. "Front-desk personnel were afraid that they would no longer have any value and would literally have to read out the answer from the knowledge bank to answer queries. Obviously, that is not the case," Mol said. "Our employees have extensive knowledge and experience, and can actively brainstorm with students."

Mol stated that the elimination of jobs is still not on the agenda. "We attach great importance to customer contact. Students will always come up with unique questions. Every situation is different, not every question can be answered with a standard phrase," Mol said. "Moreover, education regulations often change. This has consequences for the Student Desk, because a lot of questions are received that are not about the education itself, but on general issues, such as



Key Points

-  The amount of email received was reduced to 500 from more than 900 just one year earlier.
-  Web forms are answered within one day.
-  Students are very satisfied with the Student Desk and knowledge base.

Testimonial

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Julie Mol, Student Desk department head and operational manager of the online knowledge bank, Tilburg University

tuition, registration and deregistration, and exams. New measures also involve exceptions, which leads to specific questions."

"Is my son already registered?"

The online knowledge bank does cover most of the queries. The student receives an initial screen with seven different sub-knowledge banks, such as "I am a bachelor student," "I am a masters student" or "I have a question about a language course." The student will then see the suggested questions and answers or can ask the question in the search bar. If the answer is not sufficient, the student can click on "Contact" and enter the query on a Web form. The query will be received in the correct category and directed to the correct staff group. This makes it easier for the six employees, who can see who is dealing with a query in the system. They also know immediately from which student the query has come because the student number has been given.

"In the past, there have been instances where a mother sent an email asking about the status of her son's registration. We then had to send a mail back asking for her son's details," said Mol. "These types of emails have been significantly reduced."

Educating employees

Mol can use the system to generate reports that enable them to demonstrate internal results (e.g. service level). Three years ago, this was not yet possible during presentations to the university sectors involved on the selected KANA customer interaction software.

"Many people thought they already knew what the system involved and thus chose not to attend a presentation. They based their action on hearsay. In the initial phase, employees needed to be slightly 'educated.' Some faculty or employees from other departments were still telling students that they had to send an email to the desk, even though first contact now proceeds through the knowledge bank," Mol said. "Therefore, in personal discussions, we continue to emphasize the importance of the knowledge bank and that it is customer friendly to offer all answers to frequently asked questions from a single point. Students then have no need to wait for an answer."

Results

Demonstrable results are highly appreciated in these discussions. "That first summer, the inbox permanently contained about 500 emails with queries, as opposed to 900 the year before," Mol said. "We were able to deal with emails earlier, which reduced repeat traffic."

Mol does not know whether the number of telephone contacts decreased, because they were not previously measured. It is clear, however, that students are being helped more quickly. The Student Desk adopted a service level of three working days for responding to Web forms, while answering now takes place within one day. The latest assessment shows that students are satisfied with the Student Desk and knowledge bank. The Student Desk gets an overall score of 7, and students give a 3.7 out of 5 for answering a Web form. Furthermore, during the summer, primary student groups searched a given menu of the knowledge bank 25,993 times.

The demonstrable success has generated more interest in the system within the university. The Tilburg School of Economics and Management (TiSEM) was the first group to become involved. Two employees from the TiSEM education desk have been working at the Student Desk since November 2013. The questions they receive are mostly related to teaching content. The system is the same as the Student Desk — a digital knowledge bank called Ask TiSEM and contains a comprehensive range of questions and answers. If students still have a query, they submit it using a Web form, which is also sent to the education desk.

Vision

Mol would like to see more departments transferred to KANA. She frequently gives demos to faculty and informs people on the benefits of working with the system.

"I do this not because I really want everyone to work with KANA, but because I have a vision of service provision. I think you should provide information as accessibly and as practically as possible," Mol said. "Students are simply customers: they want quick answers, a friendly approach and expert advice. The current system contributes to this. The knowledge bank is filled with expert information that is clearly presented, so that staff have more time for personal contact with students who have specific questions."

Moment of truth

Currently, discussions on switching to the system are also taking place with other departments, including the Tilburg Law School. It wants to see the results before investing its time and money. Results within other customer contact groups should help the Law School make a decision.

“In the meantime, I would like to see a university-wide vision of front-office service defined,” said Mol.

This summer is an important period for her. The months preceding the new academic year are always the busiest. It is the first summer that TiSEM will be working with the new customer contact system. And the entire university will be watching.

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