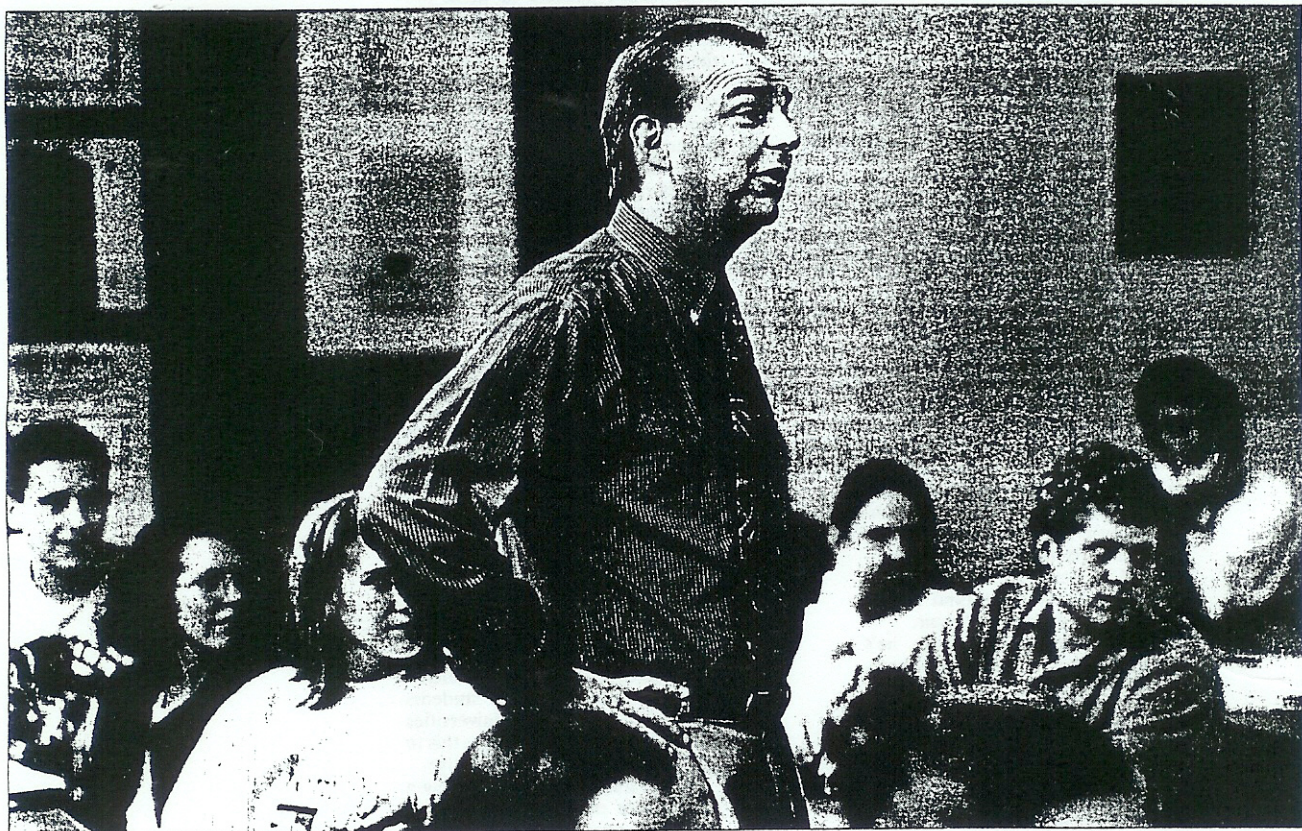




THE *Idaho* SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

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Putting his money where his mouth is



Shawn Jacobson/The Spokesman-Review

University of Idaho business professor Dwayne Gremler asks a student about the quality of service he received from a company offering a beach wedding ceremony in Hawaii.

These profs take a page from industry

Idaho instructors guarantee business class is worth taking

By Andrea Vogt
Staff writer

MOSCOW, Idaho — When University of Idaho students sign up for Dwayne Gremler and Mike McCollough's marketing classes, it's clear these professors mean business.

Just as Federal Express "absolutely, positively" delivers overnight and Hampton Inn leaves a "100 percent satisfaction guarantee" on the night stand, these College of Business and Economics professors offer cash-back guarantees.

"If you are dissatisfied with the instructor's

"If you are dissatisfied with the instructor's performance, you are entitled to receive your money back."

performance, you are entitled to receive your money back," reads the guarantee.

The two assistant professors started offering the rebate in 1996 looking for better ways to teach about service guarantees.

"We felt like perhaps we should practice what

we preach," said Gremler, 40. "What they are getting is a good product, and the service we are providing is indeed something we feel comfortable guaranteeing."

The corporate concept, modeled after a University of Southern California instructor's attempt to guarantee a master's-level class, has sparked a spirited philosophical debate among the faculty — and inquiries from other colleges.

At the start of each semester, Gremler and McCollough define the responsibilities of the students as consumers and the professors as providers of education.

As with any guarantee, however, there's fine print.

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Guarantee: Be sure to read the fine print

Continued from A1

It doesn't apply to students' satisfaction with their final grade, nor is the instructor responsible for student illness, personal emergencies, natural disaster or other circumstances that prevent students from finishing the class.

Conditions of the guarantee require the student to be "a good customer and not abuse the product." In other words, show up for class prepared, read the texts, be attentive and don't cheat, goof off or otherwise abuse a teacher's efforts.

The professors, meanwhile, must keep students advised of their progress, keep office hours, hand back work promptly, instruct knowledgeably. . . . and do it all with a smile.

Given those restrictions, if students still feel unfulfilled at semester's end, they can write a request to the instructor for the refund of about \$320.

When surveyed, some students said even if they wanted to, they would hesitate to invoke the guarantee because they would have to face the professors in other classes. Gremler and McCollough now allow students to request the refund anonymously to the department chair.

"At first we thought, 'yeah, he's just saying that,'" recalled 24-year-old John Bell, who took Gremler's class last year and now does marketing for the Tacoma Saber Cats hockey team.

"Now that I know him as a professor and how much he believes in marketing customer service, he definitely meant it. I think he was a good enough instructor that we received our money's worth."

In three years, not one student, out of nearly 200, has asked for their money back, much to the relief of the department chair, dean and provost.

The cash-back offer gives students a personal example of how service guarantees work. At the same time, it creates an implicit contract of what's expected on both sides of the lectern.

The concept, however, has drawn some criticism. At the heart of the debate is whether students should be treated as customers or products of education.

Considering that tuition is only about one-third of the cost of a college education, treating students as customers panders to them too much, critics contend. While K-12 education is a state-guaranteed right, the opportunity for higher education in a particular academic field should sell itself, maintains Joe Geiger, UI professor of management and corporate finance.

"In the context of college being an 'earned right,' I as a professor would instinctively do the best job I could and the students should be expected to respond in kind," Geiger said.

Gremler and McCollough say their guarantee works more to break down traditional adversarial relationships between professors and students, by creating mutual trust and respect.

By guaranteeing their services, professors can also quiet critics who claim they don't care about teaching or are more concerned with research and publishing.

Yet they acknowledge the guarantee isn't for every professor. They are blessed with small classes, filled with junior- and senior-level students.

"In academe, the instructor is master of the classroom," said McCollough, 42. "So I absolutely, under no circumstances, would want to see this imposed on other faculty."

But as competition for students and dollars increases, universities may be more open to ideas like this to make their product more attractive.

And as students continue to pay a larger share of the cost of higher education, universities will face increasing pressure to respond to them as consumers.

"They are paying for a larger piece of the pie and therefore we pay a lot more attention to what they are saying," McCollough said. "That's marketplaces in action, and it is a higher education marketplace."

Satisfaction guaranteed.

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Obituaries

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NORTHWEST

Professors guarantee their work

Associated Press

MOSCOW — To University of Idaho business professors Dwayne Gremler and Mike McCollough, students aren't merely warm bodies to be taught and graded.

They are customers deserving of a return on their tuition investments.

To underscore that belief and teach students a lesson about good service, Gremler and McCollough offer their marketing students cash-back guarantees.

"If you are dissatisfied with the instructor's performance, you are entitled to receive your money back," reads the guarantee.

The two assistant professors in the College of Business and Economics began offering the rebate in 1996 after learning of another instructor's similar guarantee at the University of Southern California.

"We felt like perhaps we should practice what we preach," said Gremler, 40. "What they are getting is a good product, and the service we are providing is indeed something we feel comfortable guaranteeing."

As each semester begins, Gremler and McCollough define students' responsibilities as consumers and

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Guarantee

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professors' obligations as education providers.

As with any guarantee, there is fine print.

Students cannot win a refund if they're simply dissatisfied with their final grade. The professors also aren't responsible for student illnesses, personal emergencies, natural disasters or other circumstances that could prevent students from finishing the class.

The guarantee also requires each student to be "a good customer and not abuse the product" — in other words, show up for class prepared, read the texts, pay attention, and don't cheat or goof off.

The professors, meanwhile, must keep students advised of their progress, maintain office hours, hand back work promptly, instruct knowledgeably, and do it all with a smile.

If students still feel unfulfilled at semester's end, they can write a request to the instructor for a refund of about \$320.

Some students say they would hesitate to invoke the guarantee because they might face Gremler and McCollough in other classes. So the professors now allow students to request the refund anonymously to the department chair.

Some students initially were skeptical of the guarantee.

"At first we thought, 'Yeah, he's

just saying that,'" recalled John Bell, who took Gremler's class last year and now helps market the Tacoma Saber Cats hockey team.

"Now that I know him as a professor and how much he believes in marketing customer service, he definitely meant it. I think he was a good enough instructor that we received our money's worth."

In three years, not one student out of 200 has asked for a refund.

The offer has sparked debate as to whether students should be treated as customers or products of education.

Critics note that tuition at the state university covers only about a third of the cost of a college education. Treating students as customers panders to them, critics argue.

Gremler and McCollough say their guarantee helps break down adversarial relations between professors and students by fostering trust and respect.

The refund also is an attempt to treat students more as consumers in light of rising tuition.

"They are paying for a larger piece of the pie, and therefore we pay a lot more attention to what they are saying," McCollough said. "That's the marketplace in action, and it is a higher education marketplace."