



How Are We Doing? Using Citizen Surveys To Improve Government Management

by Michael H. Walker

Citizen Surveys

Over the last decade, private sector managers have learned that success in an increasingly competitive marketplace means getting closer to customers, understanding their needs and ensuring that products and services meet those needs. By monitoring sales trends and customers' buying habits, private-sector managers receive almost continuous feedback on how well they're doing.

A better understanding of customer needs is also a key to improving government performance. But public-sector managers don't have the luxury of market mechanisms as a gauge of their success. What little customer feedback they receive typically comes from interest groups and squeaky wheels. Feedback from the bulk of their customers – the silent majority, if you will – comes only at election time and provides little guidance to career government managers who actually manage the day-to-day delivery of public services.

To close this feedback gap, some government managers have begun using community needs assessments and other survey techniques to gauge the effectiveness of their operations, identify unmet public needs and improve service delivery. Berkshire Advisors consultants conducted a survey of almost 350 local government officials nationwide. 98 percent of the respondents who had used these techniques found them helpful in setting priorities and managing costs. This article identifies some ways that government managers can use citizen surveys to improve service delivery.

Resource Allocation

Setting priorities and allocating resources where they are most needed has become increasingly important in recent years as fiscal pressures on governments have increased. Government managers are beginning to realize that commonly used approaches to balancing budgets – such as cutting all department budgets by the same percentage – may seem equitable, but in practice can shortchange citizens. Such approaches are based on the incorrect assumption that citizens value all government services equally and are equally satisfied with them. Although survey results suggest that citizens place a high value on most local government services, they do value some services more

than others. And they are more satisfied with some series than with others.

When government managers compare statistics on the importance of various government services to statistics on service satisfaction, they can create a powerful tool for making resource allocation decisions. (See Exhibit A). They can use the resulting satisfaction/importance matrices as a basis for reallocating resources from services that citizens rank low in importance to those they rank higher.

Exhibit A

Sample Satisfaction/Importance Matix

Satisfaction Score Scale
5 – Very Satisfied
4 – Satisfied
3 – Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied
2 – Dissatisfied
1 – Very dissatisfied

Importance Score Scale
5 – Very Important
4 – Important
3 – Neither Important nor Unimportant
2 – Unimportant
1 – Very Unimportant

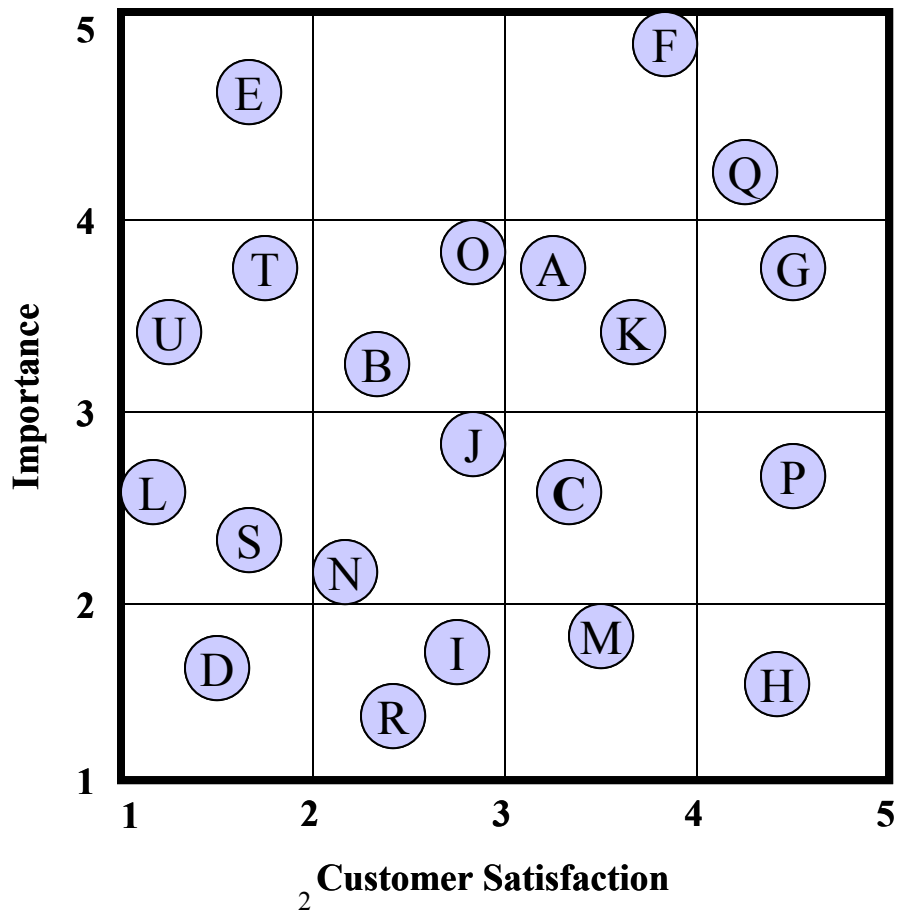


Exhibit B summarizes how satisfaction/importance matrices can be used to support planning and resource allocation decisions. As this exhibit shows, managers should focus particular attention on services that get high marks for importance but low marks for satisfaction. In addition, services with high satisfaction marks should be evaluated to determine whether resource commitments can be reduced without affecting satisfaction.

Exhibit B

Satisfaction/Importance Matrices Are a Powerful Planning Tool

Importance	High	IMPROVE (Focus effort and resources on improving citizen satisfaction)	SUSTAIN (Maintain quality position while, if possible, reducing costs)
	Medium	MONITOR (Assess whether perceptions of importance change; strive to improve satisfaction without increasing costs)	EVALUATE (Evaluate whether resource commitments are appropriate)
	Low	Low	High
		Customer Satisfaction	

Service Improvement

Citizens give consistently high importance scores for many government services – especially those provided by the same government department. For example, in a recent survey of residents in a large southeastern city, the average importance rating for parks and recreation and public works services was 7 or higher (on a scale where 1 is low and 10 is high importance) for

61 of 65 service attributes. The average rating for almost 70 percent of the attributes was 8 or higher; 44 percent of the attributes had an average rating of 9 or higher. Residents gave high importance scores and low satisfaction scores to several services, including street maintenance, vacant lot maintenance and heavy trash removal, so those are the areas on which city managers developed strategies to improve performance.

Satisfaction with street maintenance services was low primarily because the city had not adequately invested in street maintenance for a number of years. To address this deficiency, the city is seeking approval for a bond issue to support increased investments in its infrastructure. In addition, the city is improving the efficiency of street maintenance operations so residents will receive the maximum return from this increased investment.

Similarly, study results revealed that the resources the city was devoting to vacant lot cleaning were woefully inadequate. Unlike street maintenance, where additional funding is needed to improve performance, lot cleaning services are being upgraded by improving the efficiency of another function – residential refuse collection – and using the resources freed up by efficiency gains for enhanced lot cleaning. To improve heavy trash collection, the city is making fundamental changes in the way the service is provided. By using more appropriate equipment and reducing crew sizes, the city will be able to provide more reliable and frequent service while reducing costs.

Determining Service Levels

In addition to supporting resource allocation decisions and focusing management attention on unsatisfactory services, citizen surveys can be used to assess the levels of service governments should provide. While the cost of doing so for all government services would be prohibitive, managers can focus on key areas that are important to citizens and whose cost is heavily influenced by level of service. By making such investments, a government can ensure that it is not over- or under-providing the service and can more closely match level of service to citizen demands.

Surveys can be particularly useful in determining the optimal level of service for police departments. How quickly the police respond to calls greatly affects citizen perceptions of quality, but the less time it takes the police to answer a call, the higher the costs. Although surveys cannot be used to determine the precise level of response that should be provided, they can provide valuable information on overall service expectations.

For example, surveys can help police departments determine the extent to which differential patrol response strategies should be implemented. In general, police departments that use differential response rank the types of calls they receive and assign response

times for each category. This allows police to respond quickly to high-priority calls and less quickly to low-priority calls. Many departments do not respond immediately to low-priority calls as a matter of policy, even if a patrol officer is available.

Differential response reflects a police perspective about what calls are important, but citizen priorities may be different. A recent survey of residents of a large northeastern city suggests that many citizens would like a fast response to some calls that usually have a low police priority. For example, most police departments assign a low priority to burglaries if the perpetrators are no longer at the scene, and police officers may not respond for 30 minutes or more. In their view, a fast response is unnecessary because it will not affect the department's ability to solve the crime. Survey respondents, however, said they wanted a much faster response time to "cold" burglaries. Almost half indicated that they expect a response of five minutes or less and more than two-thirds expect a response in less than ten minutes.

Evaluating Performance

Evaluating the success of private-sector organizations is relatively easy. A quick look at a firm's financial bottom line shows whether it had a good year. Evaluating the performance of public-sector organizations is much more difficult. No single financial indicator can be used to distinguish high-performing governments from low-performing governments.

When evaluating performance, public sector managers tend to focus on the volume of resources used and activities performed. For example, they may use the number of potholes filled and the number of miles of road resurfaced to evaluate the performance of street maintenance units, but not take into consideration the overall condition of the road system. Likewise, measures such as the number of programs offered and the number of citizens served are often used to evaluate recreation department performance, but not the extent to which programs meet residents' needs.

Incorporating the results of a citizen survey into the performance evaluation process can present a broader, more accurate view of government services delivery. It can also simplify the evaluation process. Just as private-sector managers may need to take a number of complementary steps to improve their unit's financial performance, government managers may need to take several actions to improve citizen satisfaction or to reduce costs without reducing satisfaction levels. Focusing on bottom-line results eliminates the need for a performance evaluation system to monitor each of these actions. Performance against the bottom line – citizen satisfaction – is all that managers need to track.

Providing Management Information

Survey results can also provide managers with information on aspects of a unit's performance that are difficult to quantify. A survey conducted by Berkshire Advisory consultants for a Purchasing department of a large county government illustrates how that can be done.

Overall customer satisfaction was the key factor used to evaluate the purchasing department's performance. (The department's customers were defined as other county departments.) However, managers needed additional information to evaluate the effectiveness of performance improvement strategies. While some key performance characteristics such as the time required to issue a purchase order were relatively easy to track, others were more difficult to quantify. For example, determining whether goods purchased had a low life-cycle cost – a performance characteristic important to user departments – should have required extensive analysis of acquisition costs, repair costs and the useful life of the item. The purchasing department did not have the resources to gather and analyze that information. Instead the department surveyed users about their degree of satisfaction with the department's performance in this area.

User surveys can also provide feedback on other performance characteristics that are difficult to quantify, such as whether equipment and services are suitable for the intended use.

Setting User Fee Levels

As fiscal pressures on local government escalate, government managers are increasingly looking to user fees as untapped sources of revenue. By establishing user fees for some services, managers can free additional resources from the general fund to finance other services. Where to apply user fees and how much to charge do not have obvious answers, however. Many governments, in their zeal to increase revenues, have no rationale for setting user fees. Where rationales have been established, they often conflict, leaving government officials open to significant criticism.

A rational approach is to set user fees so that the level at which the general fund supports a service corresponds with the percentage of the population that benefits from it. For example, fees for plan reviews, which primarily support real estate development, might be set at 100 percent of costs. On the other hand, police services, which benefit all residents, would be fully supported by the general fund. Other services such as public parks and swimming pools might also be fully supported by the general fund because all residents benefit by having access to these services (whether or not they actually use them), or simply because policy makers decide that there is value in providing those services free of charge.

Citizen surveys can also determine the level at which general fund resources should subsidize services from which many, but not all, residents benefit. For some services, appropriate subsidy levels may be determined simply by counting the number of citizens who receive the service – for example, the number of people who use municipal golf courses – and dividing by the total population. For many services, however, this method may understate the overall demand. Many residents may want certain services provided – recreation programs for youth or the elderly, for example – even though they themselves do not directly benefit from them. Citizen surveys can be extremely useful in determining the overall level of demand for such services and the extent to which they should be supported by general fund revenues.

Limitations

Although surveys can be a powerful tool for improving local government management, they cannot provide reliable answers to some questions. Surveys should not be used to try to determine acceptable response times for fire departments, for example. Most citizens, if asked what response time to a fire emergency is acceptable, will respond with the lowest answer listed. Unless citizens are forced to factor in the costs of providing different levels of service, the information provided by such surveys will be of limited use. Similarly, since most residents never use fire department services, they cannot comment on their satisfaction with them. (In general, surveys should be structured to distinguish responses from citizens who have directly received services from those who have not.)

The Bottom Line

When government officials have good information on citizen service expectations and satisfaction, they have the potential to substantially improve government management. They will be able to make more informed resource allocation decisions and will be better able to match levels of service to citizen needs. In addition, they will be able to establish an objective basis for evaluating performance. In the private sector, failing to provide managers with information on their bottom-line performance is almost unthinkable. For governments that are serious about “reinventing” themselves, failing to provide managers with information on citizen satisfaction should be equally unthinkable.

