

March 2005

Quantity Versus Quality – Taking Shortcuts

By Rick Harshman

As jurisdictions grapple with finding the right balance in allocating their limited resources, administrators must carefully consider their choices to ensure they select a sound alternative that does not sacrifice quality and effectiveness for expediency. This article offers one perspective on the impact of reducing inspections to a simple “check” of device accuracy.

Years ago, an Administrator whom I worked for proclaimed all Weights and Measures field officials could be separated into one of two distinct groups, “inspectors and checkers.” He bestowed the title “inspector” upon those individuals he believed demonstrated individual work habits that were necessary to properly satisfy the requirements of the position. “Checkers,” on the other hand, performed below his standards of expected performance for individuals who held the position.

Inspectors were trained professionals who performed thorough inspections and always followed established test procedures. They understood that specification and user requirements were just as important as tolerance requirements and, therefore, enforced them equally. They were not only willing to take the time necessary to make sure that all inspections and tests were completed properly, but also, that device users were operating equipment as required. Their work habits resulted in the disclosure of most violations. They enforced all requirements and took the appropriate action necessary to resolve violations.

Checkers focused their work efforts mainly on verifying, or “checking,” that devices or packages (in the case of package inspections) were accurate. To individuals in this group, completing a high number of examinations was far more important than finding all violations. In their quest for more numbers, they would often take shortcuts, sometimes even developing their own test or inspection procedures to speed the process of getting through an examination so that they could move forward with the next. They often failed to find hidden deficiencies because taking the time to look for them was viewed as a waste of time, since rarely, according to individuals in this group, would those searches actually disclose any problems. For example, a checker might take the time to perform an adequate test on a scale, but neglect to determine whether users are operating the device in accordance with applicable user requirements, such as taking proper tare or starting transactions with the scale on zero. As a result, a scale found to be accurate might receive approval, but its continued use may provide incorrect weights to customers. Checkers preferred to avoid confrontations, which my administrator regarded as a weakness because confrontations were viewed as a natural occurring element of enforcement work.

By describing the work traits of individuals ranked in these two classifications, this particular administrator taught me the personal qualities of a field official that he most favored and the habits that he disliked. It immediately became obvious to me that if I wanted him to regard me as an employee of high esteem, I would need to establish the work habits of an inspector rather than those of a checker.

Whether the field official establishes the work habits of an inspector or a checker-or perhaps some combination of both--ultimately depends upon the actions of management. Management must not only communicate the expectations of the position, they must also demonstrate their commitment to helping individuals achieve what is expected. If the message being sent through management's actions is that quality and quantity of inspection are equally important, employees will adjust their work habits to achieve those expectations. Likewise, if management's message is that quantity is more important than quality of inspection, employees will adjust the level of quality in their work to provide management what is desired.

Amongst weights and measures administrators today, there are opposing views on how much emphasis to place upon the number of examinations completed versus the quality of those examinations. Most would agree, I think, that numbers are important in that they tend to provide an indication of the amount of work produced within a given program. However, numbers are of no real significance if the results of the examinations associated with them are questionable because officials failed to follow correct procedures or neglected to complete all portions of the examinations. Some interesting questions can be raised regarding those who perform these improper examinations and the programs that advocate their use for the purpose of increasing numbers.

- Who actually benefits from these actions?
- What service is being provided to those (the taxpayers) who fund these programs?
- Why should an enforcement program that finds few violations or produces questionable results continue to be funded?

The duties of field officials not only involve the completion of an adequate number of inspections, it also entails following established procedures, searching for hidden deficiencies, and enforcing all applicable requirements. More simply stated--those are the quality work habits associated with the "inspector" classification.

There is no question that with today's diminishing budgets administrators are faced with more difficult decisions regarding how much emphasis to place on "inspection" activities versus "checking" activities. But one thing certain is that, if a weights and measures jurisdiction is to retain its value to the marketplace, it must serve more function than a simple test or "check" to determine if a device/package is accurate.