Session 4

MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

SEMINAR ON STATISTICAL METHODOLOGY IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

Sponsored by:
Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

TITLE of PRESENTATION:

Customer Satisfaction Surveys in the Federal Government

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This presentation focuses on two primary objectives related to customer service surveys: 1) How and Why the NASS established the Customer Service Consultative Working Group (CUSCO Working Group) and 2) What NASS has done as an Agency toward customer satisfaction measurement.

1. CUSCO WORKING GROUP

President Clinton issued Executive Order No. 12862 in September 1993. In this Order, titled "Setting Customer Service Standards,' the President affirmed strong commitment to customer service and putting people first. This Executive Order directed Federal agencies to survey customers and then continually reform our management practices and operations to provide service to the public that matches or exceeds the best service available in the private sector.

At its core, customer service is the act of listening to customers about their needs and satisfaction and then meeting those needs and ensuring a high level of satisfaction. This is as important for those providing government services or programs as it is for those in business delivering goods and service. To provide excellent customer service, we need to take the time to listen to our customers. Our 16th President provided a perfect role model. Even during the Civil War, President Lincoln threw open the doors of his office to the public twice a week. To many of his advisors, this seemed like badly wasted time. Not to Lincoln:

> "No hours of my day are better employed," Lincoln asserted. People moving only in an official circle are apt to become merely official; not to say arbitrary in their ideas. Now this is all wrong. I call these receptions my public opinion polls. Though they may not be pleasant in all their particulars the effect as a whole is renovating and invigorating."

In response to Executive Order 12862, NASS proposed to provide statistical and survey services to other agencies of the USDA to help them identify and survey their customers. In order to provide these services, NASS established a Customer Service Consultative (CUSCO) Team or Working Group.

Background and reasons NASS proposed CUSCO:

The National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is the statistical data collection agency of USDA. It has a staff of statisticians trained in survey, sample, questionnaire design, data collection, and analysis procedures. Additionally, the Service has resources available that could be used in a cost effective way to conduct surveys for USDA agencies. The Service maintains both a geographic area frame and a list frame of farm and ranch operators. NASS has the expertise to select representative samples from these frames. NASS also has an on-going contract with the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA) that provides a core of enumerators who can conduct personal and telephone survey interviews. As part of its on-going operation, the NASS has a staff who design mail, personal, and computerized survey data collection instruments. The Service has a computer processing system designed for analysis and tabulation of statistical data.

The NASS anticipated that several agencies in the Department would identify farmers and ranchers as their customers and would want to conduct surveys of this target population. The Service desires to coordinate any USDA surveys for this population. This effort would minimally provide nonoverlapping sample designs reducing multiple farmer contacts. It would also permit the NASS to lessen the impact of these surveys on its on-going agricultural survey programs. Additionally, where information is desired by several USDA agencies has the same target population and is compatible, NASS could design a single integrated survey that meets multiple objectives. The viability of this approach would depend on the number of cooperating agencies and the scope of the agency--specific questions. A Team USDA questionnaire could include some global service questions common across several USDA agencies. This approach would provide each agency the opportunity to meet its individual needs, but also benefit from the USDA core questions.

The NASS is also prepared to provide survey and statistical consultation services and/or to design and conduct surveys of other customer populations. The NASS has a staff with expertise in all aspects of survey design and operations.

The NASS is prepared to offer survey coordination and statistical consulting services to USDA agencies. This service is available for any target customer population of USDA agencies. However, for surveys of farm and ranch operators, the NASS desires to select nonoverlapping samples and design coordinated surveys to the extent possible. This effort enhances the USDA image by reducing cost, burden, and multiple contacts.

Nass Cusco Plan

- The USDA directed all agencies to survey their customers to establish baseline measures of customer service.
- NASS, functioning as internal consultants, will help USDA'S agencies meet their responsibilities to establish baseline measures of customer service.

- NASS will provide 20 hours of professional consultation to each agency at no charge. Additional services will be available on a reimbursable basis.

- Agencies contact NASS when ready to discuss their customer service plans. At these meetings, NASS discusses and shares information about:

    - How to identify customers.
    - How to identify customer services to be measured.
    - Procedures to be followed to collect data.
    - Resources NASS can provide to support their customer survey effort.
    - Other resources internal and external to USDA that might be available to support the customer survey effort.

- NASS develops and maintains a process to ensure that each customer is not surveyed more than once by anyone in USDA.

- NASS reviews and/or recommends survey methodology to ensure sound statistical procedures.

In addition, NASS, working with USDA, developed a process that dramatically decreased the time in obtaining clearance for survey instruments and packets which must have OMB approval.

The Office of Information and Resource Management (OIRM)(now renamed Policy and Analysis Coordination Center) serves as the liaison between USDA and OMB. Using a form developed by OIRM and NASS, customer service survey information requests from USDA agencies are sent to OIRM via NASS and forwarded to OMB. NASS indicates on the form if plans have been discussed and if it is a customer service survey. OMB response could be expected within approximately five (5) days.

The following tables show some of the agencies and projects which NASS assisted with customer service surveys. In some cases NASS provided consultative services, while in others the agencies contracted to NASS to conduct the entire survey. Attachments 1, 2, and 3 are types of aids used in obtaining information, initiating discussions, or answering questions.

AGENCIES AND CUSTOMER SERVICE SURVEYS WHICH NASS PROVIDED ASSISTANCE

AGENCY	PROJECT	CUSTOMER
APHIS	Quality of laboratory services including billing procedures. New APHIS unit refining its mission.	State and University Labs, Animal importers and exporters. Researchers/practitioners and heads of organizations with roles in biological control.
FS	Reinvention of Forest Service.	General public. Telephoned 5,000 respondents to obtain 500 responses.
CFSA	Measure customer satisfaction for six ASCS farm programs.	Individuals currently participating in the six ASCS farm programs.
INFOSHARE	Field Office of the Future	Focus groups among the general public.
FmHA	Quality Assurance Survey Counter Card Survey	FmHA/RDA large borrower groups (farmers, municipalities, waste treatment plants). Applicants and borrowers at 1,680 county and 250 district offices.
MAP-OD	Organizational Performance Assessment Survey. Focus Groups.	Federal employees grouped by grade levels.
OC	Readership Survey	1,100 broadcast newsletter subscribers.
FNS	NASS review of RFP responses	
ES	Employee Perception Survey Climate Survey	Program leaders at Land Grant Universities ES Employees

AGENCY	PROJECT	CUSTOMER
FAS/ICD	Customer Service Survey Survey to develop leads for exporting U.S. products. This project on hold.	A census of domestic and foreign customers.
USGS	User Needs Survey of USGS's primary data users.	Professional organizations, associations, magazine and newsletter subscribers.
FCIC	Survey to determine why some farmers are using their products and others are not. This project on hold.	
NAL	Survey to obtain information for setting standards for customer service. This project on hold.	
NASS	Press Service Survey	Press Service

Problems Encountered

After providing numerous hours of consultative discussions with many different agencies, it is interesting to note how the same problems and difficulties dealing with customer service are so similar.

The major difficulties agencies had and the areas where most help is needed are:

- Identifying their customers,
- knowing what they want to find out from customers,
- how to get representative responses, and
- the importance of having an **UPDATED** list of the population to be surveyed.

I will expand on the first problem, identifying the customer since this appears to cause the most disagreements within the different agencies.

Defining the Customer

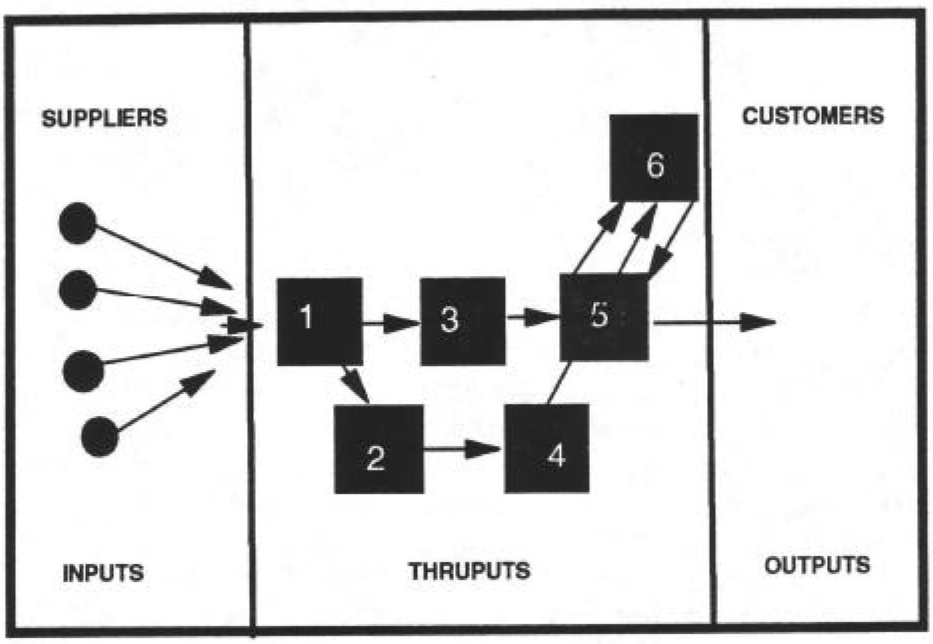
This is the topic that seems to perplex agencies more than any other. Usually during the consultative session, the discussion starts with the question "who is the customer and what business are you in?" The answers most often given are: "we have multiple customers, " or " The U.S. citizen is our customer. Usually Federal agencies do not have multiple customers but usually do have multiple players and multiple layers of interaction required to satisfy their customers. This statement cannot be used as a cop out for not defining your target. Also, saying that the U.S. citizen or the American public is your customer is simply too broad. The key is to establish a clear chain of events performed throughout the organization which satisfies the customer. In other words, before trying to determine who the customer is, look at the core process your agency performs. Once the core processes are identified, then determine who the recipients, i.e. customers, are. A "customer" is one who receives the results of the process.

Defining the Process

A process is a series of interrelated activities or work tasks that transforms an input and add value to it to create a product or service that fulfills a customer's need.

DEFINING A PROCESS

- ***A group of interrelated actiivities that begins with an input, adds value (transformation), and results in an output.***



A process starts with a customer need and is completed when the customer is satisfied.

Other Lessons Learned

- A factor in determining whether they are a customer depends on the relationship. They could be partner one time and a customer the next.
- A customer is at the end of the chain and helps accomplish the mission
- We usually measure what we are good at and then keep measuring it because it makes us look good.
- If you don't measure it, then you can't improve it.
- Increasing costs seldom increases quality. But, increasing quality often reduces cost.
- Make employees part of the solution.
- We do many wrong things right.

2. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION MEASUREMENT PROCESS

NASS focuses its current customer satisfaction review efforts on seven types of customers. These are: (a) individuals who contact NASS through its 1-800 customer hotline, (b) individuals who contact State Statistical Offices (SSO's) by mail or telephone for information, (c) individuals who contact the Agency through electronic mail, (d) data analysts who are often described as "power users" of the Agency's data series, (e) news organizations that participate in the immediate release of NASS statistical reports, (f) farm organizations, private companies, and government agencies which arrange to have visitors participate in briefings on lockup security and release procedures for major reports, and (g) State commissioners and directors of agriculture. Many of these efforts were already taking place prior to the National Performance Review[1]

For categories (a) and (b) above, prototype questions were designed for small scale tests. A formal survey has not been conducted for category (c), since we already get direct feedback. Much of the category (d) input was received from a data users meeting, plus other telephone and personal contact during the year. For categories (e), (f), and (g) customer responses come from on-going meetings and communications.

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[1]Rich Allen: Implementing Customer-Drive Quality in Federal Statistical Agencies Panel, ASA Winter meetings, January 8, 1994

One unique feature of NASS is that it operates under cooperative agreements with State Departments of Agriculture and land grant universities or both in every State. NASS is both the Federal and State statistical organization for agriculture in each State. NASS State Statisticians work very closely with customers in carrying out their State responsibilities.

Definition of Customer

NASS places an emphasis on strengthening communications among **internal** customers to improve delivery and quality of products. These communication efforts have particularly been successful in expanding capabilities for analysis of survey data and survey factors which may have affected indication levels. Those efforts improve quality as they lead to the need for fewer subsequent revisions and more consistent data series.

NASS serves a wide variety of **external** customers--from the legislative branch of government to individual farmers. Among the most active data users are general farm organizations, producer and marketing associations, farmer advisory services, farm and general purpose media, State government offices, agribusinesses, public interest groups, university and other researchers, and other Federal Government agencies.

Contacts with Customers

NASS is in contact with customers every day through mail, telephone, and personal interview surveys and through a variety of written and telephoned requests for data or clarification of estimates. These data contacts occasionally plant a seed for changes in data products or services, but most improvements have come about from more specialized contacts.

Data Users Meetings - Over the past 8 years, NASS has conducted annual meetings with data users around the country. NASS takes the lead in organizing and scheduling but the other "economic" agencies of USDA, the Economic Research Service and the World Agricultural Outlook Board, also take part and the Agricultural Marketing Service of USDA is often included.

Before 1985, NASS held "listening" meetings where data users were invited to come to a location to comment on economic and statistical reports and on data needs. Those meetings often exposed considerable confusion about which agencies conducted what surveys, what reports were issued by specific agencies, and methods and procedures used by statistical agencies. The fact that some of the input received at these meetings was misguided, led to the concept of data users meetings which are instructional in nature.

Headquarters Briefings - NASS hosts groups of visitors in conjunction with the release of major reports nearly every month. The monthly Crop Production report for which extra security procedures are used which include securing the staff working on the report in a lockup area until its signing by the Secretary of Agriculture and release at 3:00 p.m., is extremely popular with visitors. The visitors receive briefings on NASS sampling, survey, and estimation procedures in the morning and have the opportunity after lunch to witness the security procedures first hand and to receive a detailed briefing on the procedures and specifics of the reports being issued that day.

These briefings have been well received by data users such as farm organizations, agribusinesses, farm publication reporters, and analysts. They also provide an on-going series of contacts for the Headquarters staff and monthly questions about procedures and reports. While fewer suggestions for changes are received during the briefings than at the data users meetings, ideas are occasionally raised that can be acted upon.

Commodity Organization Meetings - Many organizations of the producers of specific commodities have statistics committees within their structure. NASS meets regularly with some of these organizations and has scheduled meetings with a variety of other organizations when the opportunity presented itself.

Statistics committees often have very specific questions about data series, timing, and data definitions. Changes made in response to these meetings with commodity organizations are highlighted below under discussion of format and timing changes.

Other Communication Efforts - Another major communications effort with customers involves attendance at national farm and commodity group meetings. Displays of NASS products and specifically prepared information brochures open discussions with data users and providers. NASS also participates in various types of outlook meetings where analysts discuss current production issues and share their forecasts on upcoming trends. NASS data form much of the underpinnings for their analyses and the analysts often offer suggestions for improving data series.

New Distribution Procedures Case Study

One of the best illustrations of NASS working with customers for unique solutions comes from its reports distribution contract. When government agencies went to a pay-for-publication policy many subscribers were disappointed with service and choices available through the Government Printing Office (GPO). NASS had about 40 individual subscription choices in order to allow customers to select only those reports they desired. However, under GPO regulations, each series required a separate payment each year unless the organization did a large volume of GPO business and set up a drawing account (which still required considerable paperwork).

The main topic at listening meetings at that time was criticism of the GPO arrangement and suggestions of needed features. NASS, working with the Economic Research Service and the Assistant Secretary for Economics of USDA, was able to get specific legislation included in the next farm bill to allow NASS to distribute reports and keep the proceeds. An outside contract was issued for a vendor to handle reports of the economic agencies. This ERS-NASS service allows subscriptions of up to 3 years and many different titles can be ordered with one payment. The service has a 1-800 telephone number for convenience and it now handles historic electronic products and facsimile transmissions. Reports are still printed by GPO, but ERS-NASS distributes them the same day or next day when printed.

Two different survey approaches were tested for direct followup customers. The Kansas SSO performed a test using short mail questionnaires. Telephone followup was used for customers who requested data through the Headquarters 1-800 hotline. In both cases, the focus was on communication as well as whether the person's data needs were answered. Since the State office test would not have human interaction, it was designed as seven questions to be rated on a 5 point (poor to excellent) scale. The telephone followup had three questions with a similar scale, other "yes, no" questions, and a request for additional narrative comments.

In the Kansas test, about 80 individuals were chosen both in January and in April who had recently received information. The response rate was about 50 percent which was very encouraging for a mailout-mailback approach. The sample size for the Headquarters specific 1-800 hotline was 50 people who had called the previous month. This sample was in addition to making a few follow-up calls on a regular basis, particularly to callers who were transferred to other agencies.

In the case of data analysts, a formal Data Users meeting was held in October 1995. The meeting specifically involved discussion of a proposed new Agency estimation program which would change timing and content of a number of reports.

During the year, NASS implemented and finalized new reporter access procedures for major reports. Two meetings were held with all participating news organizations. (All 15 news services participate in one release each month and most participate at least weekly.) Considerable informal feedback was also received during the year and some changes in procedures were made because of those questions and suggestions.

Written responses were received from a number of organizations which participated in lockup briefings. NASS did not send a specific inquiry but one organization polls its members with an evaluation form after each visit.

Input on our service to State commissioners and directors is received throughout the year by NASS State Statisticians. In addition, the managers of our Field Operations Division and the Agency Administrator receive feedback through a series of national and regional meetings conducted each year by the National Association of Departments of Agriculture.

NASS customer service responses to the Kansas and Headquarters inquiries were very encouraging. In Kansas, using a 5-point scale, with 5 a excellent and 3 as good, all seven questions received at least a 4.4 average. The highest average numeric reading of 4.9 was received for both courtesy and willingness to respond to questions.

In the Headquarters followups, which use a 4-point scale, almost all responses were good to excellent to the three rating questions. In fact, the only ratings below "good" were from individuals who objected to the fact that we took time to ask for their name and address so that we could conduct the follow-up survey. They felt their question was so simple that a follow-up would not be necessary. Almost all answers were "excellent" to the "was your contact pleasant" question.

One sidelight to the telephone hotline was that many callers objected to our telephone system's intermittent beeping sound when they were placed on hold while the operator verified that a commodity specialist was available. Arrangements were made to connect a radio playing classical music instead, which makes the waiting time seem shorter.

We also learned there are people who desire quicker access to our data who do not currently have access to Internet. To address these needs, we recently installed an Autofax system to activate another means of timely information delivery to the public.

Considerable input was received from electronic data users through the comment feature on the NASS Home Page, other electronic mail responses, and telephone inquiries. A number of changes have already been made based on feedback. Some customers said it was confusing to determine how to order products, so a "hot button" approach is being added for the next Home Page update. Customers also indicated that, because of the nearly 400 reports per year, it took time to get to the report they need. A separate "Today's Reports" feature is now being added to our Home Page. We made improvements for our current CD-Rom of *Agricultural Statistics* to make it easier to download individual data tables but some people wanted to download an entire chapter so we made the necessary changes.

Internal Customer Measurement

Climate Survey

The 1,330 employees at NASS as of November 1, 1993, (1,094 of them Federal and 236 State employees) were given a self-administered, anonymous survey. To encourage employees to complete the survey, its cover memorandum was signed by the Agency Administrator. It asked employees to "provide an honest appraisal of the present working climate." It also stressed that results would help in identifying problem areas in the Agency. One copy of the survey form was distributed to each employee (including State employees). Individual employees who reported a lost or misplaced copy of the survey questionnaire received replacement copies. Reminders to respond appeared in the Agency's monthly Staff Letter, and cc:Mail bulletin board messages.

Employees returned 835 questionnaires (63 percent of the 1,330 distributed). Exluding State employees, who may have been less inclined to respond, this rate was 739 of 1,094, or 68 percent. (The 1990 rates were 66 percent overall and 70 percent, excluding State employees,) Survey repondents generally were similar to all NASS Headquarters and SSO employees, based on their job series, work location (Headquarters or SSO), and number of years at NASS.

Informal Customer Service Feedback

NASS uses its survey-specific evaluation forms to help measure how well Headquarters delivered service to the field office statisticians and to the enumerator staff. The survey evaluation forms are designed to provide an overview of survey operations. Included are comments on response rates, counts of quality control contacts, and survey comments and recommendations relating to specific subjects. These forms help describe any problems with survey materials, including quantity received, sampling concerns, edit limits and other pertinent information. The feedback from NASS field office statisticians and enumerator staff are circulated to each Headquarters Branch and Section responsible for the subject. These suggestions and recommendations for changes to any aspect of the survey are given full consideration and are a very important tool that NASS uses to improve quality and service.

Technical Reviews

NASS appoints Technical Review Teams (TRT) for technical review of the 45 State Statistical Offices (SSO's) and Headquarters (Washington, D.C.) activities. This team examines the methods and procedures used to carry out theAgency's statistical programs. The Agency's goal is to review all SSO's within a 5-year period. This review provides for a way to obtain feedback, recommendations and suggestions on technical procedures and methods which only NASS employees could provide. It also allows for ideas and improved methods to be shared and passed on to other employees.

Customer Service Stories

Our favorite story of the year is the hearing aid call. It demonstrates positive success, it truly helped an individual, and it illustrated how we want our employees to pursue difficult questions. We received a 1-800 hotline call from an individual who said his father, who farms, needed a hearing aid and he understood that USDA had a program which could help. That was not familiar to our person staffing the telephone (nor would any of our trained staff members have known the answer--then). Our person took the caller's name and telephone number and started on a search within USDA. She had no success with the first agencies she contacted, and even got "you must be wrong" type responses. However, she then found someone who had an inkling of some special Extension Service Programs. That was the right answer; there is a program to help farmers with disabilities obtain appropriate accommodations. We were able to inform the caller about the program within 3 hours.

Lessons Learned

We have learned we are on the right track both with efforts such as our 1-800 hotline and with the training program established for staff members who take those calls.

We have also learned that people calling for information do not want to take extra time to give their name and telephone number--if we can give them an answer while they are on the telephone. One reason might be that people may have been bounced from one agency to another without getting answers and are skeptical.

Another conclusion is that we need to do any followup contacts soon after we have helped a customer. Calling people back even a month later meant that some people did not remember they had called us. (We assume that means we did such a good job that the contact seemed natural and didn't leave a lasting impression.) We also need to shorten the number of questions on follow-up telephone calls. Even very satisfied customers did not want to take much time. More questions can be asked on a mail out, fax out, or e-mail out questionnaire since the respondent can see the whole survey at one time.

We were reminded that the wording can mean different things to different individuals. We improved our annual *Agricultural Statistics* publication so much with more current data that we named it 1995-96 rather than 1995. We recently heard from a data user who incorrectly assumed that meant we will now only issue it every 2 years.

The final lesson was to realize that efforts to provide good service of one type can cause problems elsewhere. One example of this comes from working with reporters who have advance access to reports in lockup so that they can be prepared when telephone are turned on at release time. We provide copies of the relevant NASS reports, the World Agricultural Outlook Board (WAOB) report, and electronic diskettes. We felt having one diskette with all the reports would be the best customer service. However, that added one extra last minute step and created stress between NASS and WAOB in accomplishing the goal. The two agencies worked together and found the best solution was for each agency to distribute diskettes containing their report(s).

Attachments

ATTACHMENT 1

CUSTOMER SERVICE ASSESSMENT and INFORMATION COLLECTION PLANS

Agency ______________________________ Date ________________

Division/Unit ____

Contact person(s)________________ Phone____________ FAX____________

________________ Phone____________ FAX____________

CUSTOMER SERVICE NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

Please answer the following questions. Be specific.

1. What are you Agency's products or Services? ________________

   ____

2. Who are the customers of your Agency? ________________

   ____

3. Has your Agency developed a customer service plan? ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. When do you expect to begin collecting baseline information of the services your Agency offers? ________________

INFORMATION COLLECTION PLANS TO EVALUATE CUSTOMER SERVICE:

5. Do you have specific survey plans at this time? .... ☐ Yes........ ☐ No

   a) Which of your Agency's products or services are to be addressed in this survey?

   ____

   ____

   b) In this survey, do you want to know about: (check one)

   ☐ your entire customer base?

   ☐ selected subgroups only? (Specify: ________________)

   c) What exactly do you want to know from this survey?________________

   ____

   ____

   d) How do you expect to measure it? ________________

   ____

   e) How will this information be used in your program or activity to improve customer satisfaction?

   ____

   ____

INFORMATION COLLECTION RESOURCE MANAGEMENT:

What types of descriptive or identifying information do your records contain about your customer? (Check all that apply)

☐ Name (person)	☐ Telephone number	☐ Organization Name
☐ Address	☐ Social Security No.	☐ County

☐ Other (specify: ______________________________)

a) Where are your customer records maintained? (Check all that apply)

☐ Headquarters ☐ Local Offices

b) Are these records: (Check all that apply)

☐ Stored on mainframe?

☐ Stored on PC, microcomputer, or LAN?

☐ Not stored in machine media?

7. In what areas would you want NASS to assist you? (Check all that apply)

	Advice, consultation, and/or review	Conducting the task
Sampling	☐	☐
Questionnaire design	☐	☐
Data cleaning and processing	☐	☐
Estimation and summary	☐	☐
Data analysis	☐	☐
Other (Specify: ____________________)	☐	☐

Please return this form to Sam Rives at USDA-NASS, Room 4162 South Building, or call at 720-2248 or FAX to 720-6396.

Thank you.

ATTACHMENT 2

The Steps in a Customer Survey

Step 1	Determining the Scope of the Survey Measurement Program
Step 2	Identifying the Factors and Characteristics that Underlie Customer Satisfaction
Step 3	Identifying the Target Customer Population for the Survey
Step 4	Developing a Sampling Frame of the Target Customers
Step 5	Choosing a Data Collection Method Best Suited to Your Customer Survey
Step 6	Choosing Who Will Collect the Survey Data from Customers
Step 7	Developing and Pretesting the Survey Questionnaire
Step 8	Constructing the Statistical Design of the Sample of Customers
Step 9	Designing Procedures to Achieve High Response Rates in the Customer Survey
Step 10	Ensuring Quality While the Survey Data are being Collected
Step 11	Processing the Survey Data and Preparing them for Analysis
Step 12	Analyzing the Data, Summarizing the Results, and Pretesting the Findings

DATA COLLECTION COSTS RULES OF THUMB

Following are estimated cost ranges per attempted contact for the different modes of data collection. Also listed, are some factors that could vary considerably and will impact the overall survey costs.

Mode	Cost per Contact	Factors to Consider
Mail	$1 - $5	◆ Postage (rates vary by class) ◆ Size of envelope & weight ◆ Address correction requested ◆ Number & type of reminders ◆ Non-response follow-up ◆ Pre-survey Notification Letter
Telephone	$8 - $15	◆ Length of Questionnaire ◆ Salary Rates (Interviewers & Supervisors ◆ Long Distance vs. Local call charges ◆ Time of day calls are made ◆ Quality of phone numbers ◆ Target Respondent ◆ Training ◆ Quality Control ◆ Pre-Survey Notification Letter ◆ Number of Call Backs ◆ Call Management System ◆ Auto Dialing Capability
Face-to-Face	$25 plus	◆ Salary Rates (Interviewers & Supervisors ◆ Mileage & Per Diem ◆ Training ◆ Interview Length/Length of Questionnaire ◆ Call Back Plan/Scheduling ◆ Distribution of sample relative to interviewers ◆ Quality Control ◆ Field Data Purview ◆ Field Supervison ◆ Time of Day Visit Made ◆ Sample Size per Interviewer ◆ Target Respondent ◆ Quality of Addresses ◆ Pre-Survey Notification Letter

Measuring Customer Satisfaction with Census Bureau Products

Presented by
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for the
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Since 1993 the Census Bureau has conducted 11 surveys to measure customer satisfaction with specific products and product lines. Our purpose in doing so is to continually upgrade and improve our products, find out more about how customers are using these products, and to develop ongoing measures of customer satisfaction.

Through these surveys we've done we've learned a lot about taking customer surveys, as well as customer likes and dislikes. We've gathered some market intelligence, and we've been able to monitor trends in data access and user preferences.

Some Background

We usually focus on a particular product or product line and survey identified customers of that product. Our universe ranges from several hundred to several thousand customers. In addition to paying customers, we generally include all our state data center lead agencies and a sample of affiliates. We also include a sample of federal depository libraries--usually 1 in 10-- so that no one library or State data center affiliate has to answer a questionnaire more than once every three or four years. We have benefitted from having a customer data base and good working relations with the Government Printing Office. We have not attempted to reach any additional end users that would not be covered directly through the survey, although we found that users share copies of Census Bureau reports with, on average, 10 colleagues.

We try to keep the questionnaires simple with no more than 4 pages, but often just 2, focusing on issues that are specific to the product. However, we have a standard set of questions that are asked on all surveys and that include overall product satisfaction and future media preferences. We have been able to construct a satisfaction matrix and to track acceptance of the Internet as a data dissemination vehicle. Occasionally we've also included questions of a marketing nature, such as how did users find out about particular reports or products. We always leave blank space for write in responses and dry run questionnaires with selected data users beforehand.

We have received a generic clearance from the OMB for customer surveys, as I'm sure many of you have. Basically, we send the questionnaire and a letter to the OMB, specifying our intention to conduct a customer survey. The letter describes the survey, the customer universe and response burden hours anticipated. If OMB doesn't respond within a week, we proceed with the survey operations.

Our response rates range between 25 and 30 percent. I understand from professionals in the private sector world that anything over 10 percent is considered excellent. On several occasions we tried to increase our response rate with telephone follow-up and through remailing the questionnaire with some success. But the limited number of additional returned questionnaires may not be worth the additional efforts, costs and time required to carry out the follow up.

We prepare a fairly lengthy analysis of the survey for the program area. We also do a short 2-page *Marketing Brief* which provides some of the highlights of the survey. We send the brief to survey respondents so that we close the loop and customers can see that something was done with the information they provided. We also distribute the brief throughout the Bureau. An important feature of the document is identifying the product changes that will take place as a result of our customers' input.

Some Specifics

We have surveyed our Internet customers each spring for the last three years. We conducted our most recent survey entirely electronically and surveyed persons who e-mailed us during the month of April or who downloaded files and for whom we could determine an e-mail address. From this survey we discovered that about 20 percent of our Internet users access our site once a week or more. Thirty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they found our site through a search mechanism. And 14 percent indicated that they had purchased a Census Bureau product as a result of finding out about it on the Internet.

Since we began surveying customers about 4 years ago, we've asked a question on future media preferences. In our first survey, in the pre-Internet days of 1993, only 5 percent of respondents indicated any preference for online dissemination. We've seen that percentage grow and in 2 surveys this spring we saw preferences for Internet surpass CD-ROM as the data dissemination media of choice. In our recent Internet survey --a high tech, Internet-friendly universe-- 74 percent said Internet was the preferred media for accessing Census Bureau information.

We also discovered through two surveys this spring --one of a print product and one of a CD-ROM product--that at least 4 out of 5 respondents had access to the Internet, but only half of these had actually accessed the corresponding files on the Census Bureau Internet site.

We have also asked a question on general satisfaction and satisfaction with various aspects (such as timeliness, reliability and value) of our products and have constructed a user satisfaction matrix. Overall satisfaction has run from 72 percent on the first *Statistical Abstract* on CD-ROM to 94 percent for users of our *Current Population Reports*. (The satisfaction rating for subsequent *Statistical Abstracts* on CD-ROM has gone to 77 percent.)

Some Practical Results

It does little good to solicit customer opinions unless you do something with the information. The program areas at the Census Bureau have been very accepting of user suggestions and have instituted product changes and enhancements as a result.

A couple of examples:

- Users did not like the software we had originally included on the *1993 Statistical Abstract* on CD-ROM. We added Adobe Acrobat -readable files to later versions.

- Users wanted more timely delivery of our foreign trade data. We offered expedited order fulfillment with pick-up on the same day as the press release.

- Users of our printed *Current Population Reports* told us they were unaware of similar information on the Internet. We will be adding references to Internet addresses in the printed reports and press releases.

- Users of our Economic Census data told us that they used information from the various economic sectors, rather than just one sector. With the 1997 Censuses, we will introduce a new report series with cross-sector data.

Some Plans for the Future

We plan to continue to survey users of specific products or product lines with three targeted customer groups this coming year. We also plan to survey Internet users in the spring of 1997.

An interdivisional team is currently reviewing our customer service standards. Once approved and publicized, we will gather some benchmark data through an independent customer survey on how we're measuring up to these standards.

We are also in the planning stage of developing a bureau-wide customer comments data base so that write-in comments, letters, and other feedback from our customers can be recorded, characterized, and communicated back to the divisions that produce the data and throughout the Bureau.

Some Lessons

Here are a few observations, based on our work, that can help you with your customer surveys.

- Keep it simple. Keep it focused. Sure it would be interesting to know some things about your users, but if you can't use the information for product improvement or marketing, don't ask it.

- Beta test your questionnaire with persons outside the organization. What seems obvious to someone inside your organization may not be so clear to users on the outside. And outside beta testers may identify issues that you hadn't even considered.

- Don't send unsolicited questionnaires through the Internet unless you let potential respondents know beforehand that the questionnaire is coming.

- Ask the same questions on different surveys and at different times. This will enable you to compare across products and measure improvements.

- Give feedback to the rest of your organization and to respondents. Customers who know that their suggestions and opinions are taken seriously are more likely to respond to future inquiries.

In Summary

We've made substantial progress at the Census Bureau in last several years in knowing something about our customers. We have good information on how they find out about Census Bureau products, how they access Census Bureau data currently and how they would like to do so in the future.

We have used the customer survey process to measure customer satisfaction with specific products and to make changes to those products to better meet the needs of our customers.

We will continue to use this process, as well as other mechanisms, to gather customer input, so that the Census Bureau can provide products and services that are of value to our users.

WHEN TO LISTEN AND WHEN TO MEASURE

comments by Jerry Coffey

These two papers have a lot to say about the learning process most agencies have been through in the last year or two. Sam Rives' paper emphasized the importance of accurate measurement, while John Kavaliunas mentioned a number of activities with response rates so low they couldn't measure much of anything. I should point out that statisticians don't have a copyright on the term "response rate" -- those "professionals" who bragged about a 10% response rate were undoubtedly professional marketers. Many years ago, at the U. S. Postal Service, I got a lot of exposure to the mail marketing community, and they define "response rate" as the number of sales divided by the size of the mailing.

"Customer Surveys" include a wide range of activities from the rigorous measurement processes that Sam described to simple feedback processes where "response rate" is not a consideration. When the Office of Management and Budget released its "Resource Manual for Customer Surveys" in 1993, one of the things we emphasized to agencies trying to improve customer service was that "listening to your customers" does not necessarily mean sitting at your desk drafting questionnaires.

Statistical agencies have useful experience to offer in all of these activities. Meetings with data users and other forms of communication developed by statistical agencies have become effective tools for listening to customers. This kind of feedback provides critical insights into those attributes of your products or services that customers value. At that point, the statistical agency's methodological expertise can be effectively applied to measure the right things and measure them accurately.

To use this experience and expertise effectively, the statistician must first understand the task and then match the method to that task.

WHO IS THE CUSTOMER <u>FOR</u> YOUR CUSTOMER SURVEY?

1) Suppose the information collected is exclusively for the use of front-line manager or employees.

> Such a survey may be nothing more than a simple feedback device, a tool to enhance communications, one of the many ways to "listen to customers." The object of such an exercise is usually to make it easier for customers to communicate their complaints, suggestions or other ideas to those who immediately serve them. Such tools do not *measure* anything, and thus need not be designed to support a measurement process.

2) Back away one step and suppose that the "customer" for the survey needs data collection that supports some sort of comparative measurements.

> Now we are supposing a real measurement process that must be repeatable (measure the same thing at different times and for different groups of respondents) and reasonably complete (does not miss significant bodies of opinion or activity). The "customer" for these kind of results is typically a manager trying to *track the performance* of his own organization or subordinates (who may themselves be managers of other units within the organization). These more stringent requirements demand more *control of the data collection process* (e.g., a rigorously designed and implemented sampling process). If comparison over time is the only need, then there is still flexibility in choosing the measurement method (it only needs to be consistent over time). If comparisons *across* units are needed, then there is another constraint -- comparable measurement methods must be used in all the units to be compared.

3) Back away one more step and suppose that the "customer" is outside the agency bureaucracy.

> This kind of use is implied by the Government Performance and Results Act and by some parts of the Customer Service Executive Order. The "customer" here is generally the Executive Office of the President (e.g., OMB) or top agency management or the Congress, who must have measures that support comparability across Departments or agencies. This case requires all the rigor of the second category above plus the use of measures that are consistent across all the units that are to be compared -- leaving very little room for flexibility sought in the first category.

Matching Methods to the Task