Customer Satisfaction Initiatives at IRS's Statistics of Income: Using Surveys To Improve Customer Service

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Introduction

IRS's Statistics of Income (SOI) Division conducts statistical studies on the operations of tax laws and publishes annual reports, including the quarterly *SOI Bulletin*, which includes statistics produced from tax and information returns. SOI's Statistical Information Services (SIS) office responds to thousands of data and information requests annually by providing SOI data along with technical assistance. To ensure that customer needs are being met through the SIS office and through its flagship publication, SOI has been measuring customer satisfaction for both via customer satisfaction surveys. These surveys are part of SOI's commitment to use survey results to improve customer service. This paper will focus on three aspects of these surveys: the process by which we surveyed our customers, the findings from the surveys, and the steps we are taking to use the results to further improve our products and services.

In the first section of the paper, background information on the SOI Division and its SIS office will be presented. The second section will describe the methodology used to survey SIS customers, present selected findings from the past 4 years of surveys, and describe how SOI is using these results to identify areas for improvement. Similarly, the third section will describe the methodology, present a summary of the findings, and briefly discuss some of the steps that SOI staff are taking to improve the *SOI Bulletin*. Finally, next steps to improve SOI products and services in response to survey findings will be discussed.

Background

Congress created the Statistics of Income Division 90 years ago in the Revenue Act of 1916, some 3 years after the enactment of the modern income tax in 1913. Since that time, the Internal Revenue Code has included virtually the same language mandating the preparation of statistics. Section 6108 of the Code currently states that "…the Secretary (of the Treasury) shall prepare and publish not less than annually statistics reasonably available with respect to the operations of the internal revenue laws, including classifications of taxpayers and of income, the amounts claimed or allowed as deductions, exemptions, and credits and other facts deemed pertinent and valuable."

SOI's mission is to collect, analyze, and disseminate information on Federal taxation for the Office of Tax Analysis, Congressional committees, the Internal Revenue Service in its administration of the tax laws, other organizations engaged in economic and financial analysis, and the general public. Its mission is similar to that of other Federal statistical agencies--that is, to collect and process data so that they become useful and meaningful information. However, SOI collects data from tax returns rather than through surveys, as do most other statistical agencies. These data are processed and provided to customers in the form of tabulations or microdata files. Although the IRS uses SOI data, the primary uses for SOI data are outside of IRS, in policy analyses designed to study the effects of new or proposed tax laws and in evaluating the functioning of the U.S. economy.

SOI Products and Services

Throughout its long history, SOI's main emphasis has been individual and corporation income tax information. SOI began publishing data with the 1916 *Statistics of Income*, which reported individual and corporation statistics. Beginning in 1936, for Tax Year 1934, individual and corporation income taxes are each reported separately in annual "complete" reports (*Individual Income Tax Returns* and *Corporation Income Tax Returns*, respectively). The annual *Corporation Source Book* provides detailed balance sheet, income statement, and tax information for major and minor industry sectors by asset size. Over the years, SOI has increased its studies and publications to meet the needs of its customers. Introduced in 1981, the SOI flagship quarterly *Statistics of Income Bulletin* presents the most recent data and related articles on completed studies and a historical section featuring time series data on a variety of tax-related subjects.

SOI also periodically publishes compendiums of research on nonprofit organizations, estate taxation, and personal wealth. Research articles presented at professional conferences, namely the American Statistical Association and the National Tax Association, are published annually or biannually in the methodology report series, *Special Studies in Federal Tax Statistics*. Beginning with the 1998 issue, SOI took over publishing the *IRS Data Book*, a fiscal year report that presents statistical data on the administration of the U.S. tax system.

SOI produces the following microdata files: Individual Public-Use Files; Exempt Organizations Records; and Private Foundations (and Charitable Trusts) records, all of which are available for a fee. Before release of the Individual Public-Use microdata, SOI follows security guidelines and edits the files to protect the confidentiality of individual taxpayers to prevent disclosure of taxpayer information. Tax returns for both the exempt organizations and private foundations are publicly available. Because of their size, these products are available on a CD-ROM or magnetic tape directly from SOI. Exempt organization microdata files have recently been released to the public via the World Wide Web (www.irs.gov/taxstats).

Public awareness of SOI products and easy access to them have gradually increased over the years. The establishment of the Statistical Information Services office that responds to data and information requests has helped raise the visibility of SOI products. With the introduction of the IRS World Wide Web 10 years ago, SOI's products became more widely used. They may be found at: www.irs.gov/taxstats. Tax Stats includes statistics for individuals, businesses, charitable and exempt organizations, IRS operations, budget, compliance, and a variety of other topics. Currently, over 6,000 files reside on Tax Stats, and this number continues to increase.

Statistical Information Services

The Statistical Information Services (SIS) office was established in 1989 as part of efforts to streamline the SOI organization. From the beginning, the SIS mission was straightforward: Provide accurate and timely data along with excellent customer support and technical guidance. Although the number of customers and variety of requests have changed since then, the SIS staff still strives to fulfill this mission after 17 years.

When the SIS office was set up, a telephone, paper reports and publications, index cards with contact information, and a fax machine were its primary tools. Word spread quickly, and, soon, the SIS office was inundated with requests, many of whose answers were readily available from published data. When customer requests involved data unavailable from SOI, the SIS staff made every effort to fulfill requests by providing information or contacts from other sources. In the early years of SIS operations, 4,000 to 5,000 information requests were received annually. Over the years, the tools have been greatly improved, and more data are readily available directly to the public. An electronic management system--the Response Processing System (RPS)--tracks customer information and details of data requests. While the number of information requests has leveled off with the availability of data on Tax Stats, the complexity of information requests has increased significantly. Many of these requests require extensive research, some supported by SOI subject-matter analysts.

Over 2,400 information requests were received in Calendar Year 2005 from a broad range of customers. The customers are as widely varied as the information they request, from a private citizen requesting data on car dealerships to a Congressional request for alternative minimum tax data. Consultants and researchers were the largest group with 23.5 percent of the requests. Academia and the Internal Revenue Service were the second and third largest groups with 13.5 percent and 12.9 percent, respectively. In Calendar Year 2005, most information requests (50.4 percent) were received by phone, followed closely by 48.2 percent received by e-mail. The SIS office also receives information requests via fax, letters, and walk-in customers.

SIS Customer Satisfaction Survey

How is the SIS office meeting its goal of providing accurate and timely data along with excellent customer support and technical guidance? Although the SIS office has received positive feedback from many of its customers over the years, is this the complete picture? What about the many SIS customers, especially one-time customers, who do not provide any feedback? In 2003, at the suggestion of SOI Director Tom Petska, the SIS office administered its first survey to measure customer satisfaction. Prior to the SIS survey, SOI surveyed its primary customers (Treasury's Office of Tax Analysis, the Congressional Joint Committee on Taxation, and the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis). The SIS survey was an expansion of SOI's efforts to measure customer satisfaction and to use customer input to improve service.

Administering the Survey

SOI mathematical statistician Kevin Cecco and, later, Diane Milleville, in close consultation with the SIS staff, designed the SIS surveys. Following the Office of Management and Budget's approval, the first SIS survey was administered in 2003. After assisting the customer with an inquiry, an SIS staff member provided a survey by e-mail or fax and asked for the customer to complete the survey related to the customer's most recent inquiry.

For the first survey in 2003, the survey recipients were selected randomly from the daily roster of calls and e-mails. The SIS office planned to survey one of every four customers from January through July 2003. However, the target number of customers surveyed was not reached in July, and the survey was extended an additional month.

Over the years, changes were made to improve the survey administration process. Diane Milleville and Information Technology Specialist Elizabeth Nelson, who provides RPS technical support, both helped improve the process. Surveys were imbedded in an e-mail, thus eliminating the additional step of downloading the survey file. Every customer was sent a survey, eliminating difficulties with the random selection process. Customers surveyed were tracked in RPS, which eliminated the need for SIS staff to manually track them.

Beginning with the 2004 survey, response options were revised to bring the SIS survey in line with a set of measures used by SOI's parent organization, Research, Analysis, and Statistics (RAS). Known as "balanced measures," these criteria were designed to measure how well RAS meets its goals. To maintain consistent measures throughout all divisions of RAS, including SOI, some SIS survey questions and response options were changed to include these measures.

Findings

Table 1 highlights response rates for the 4 years the SIS survey was administered. Initially, the SIS office's goal was to achieve a response rate of 50 percent. SIS planned to survey approximately 400 customers with the expectation that it would receive 200 responses. Although SIS fell short of distributing 400 surveys by 28 percent, it was quite satisfied with the 49-percent response rate. However, after the first survey in 2003, the response rate dropped 7 percentage points in 2004, but has increased to 44 percent in 2006. The number of Government surveys sent to customers has increased over the years, and this may also contribute to the declining response rate. Although SIS would like to have a higher response rate, it is pleased with its results to date. However, it will continue efforts to improve its survey instrument and its methods for administering it.

Table 1--Response Rates for SIS Survey, 2003-2006

Year	Surveys distributed	Number of respondents	Response rate
2003	288	142	49%
2004	425	181	43%
2005	300	125	42%
2006	271	119	44%

Table 2 presents the respondents by job function for each of the 4 years the survey was administered. For 2003, 2004, and 2006, the top 4 categories – consultant/research, State/local government, academic, and IRS employee (excluding those classified as "other") accounted for over 57 percent of survey respondents. For 2005, some 3 of the top 4 categories were the same; Federal Government replaced State/local government as the fourth category. Collectively, these accounted for 53.2 percent of survey respondents. In an effort to improve the SIS customer job function categories, some changes were made during the 4 years the survey was administered. In 2004, the nonprofit category was added. In 2006, the library, marketing, and realtor categories were substituted for the corporation category which was eliminated.

There were some differences noted between job functions reported by SIS survey respondents and the general population of SIS customers. SIS compared responses for job function reported by survey respondents and recorded by SIS staff in the Response Processing System (RPS) during the time period in which the SIS surveys were administered. Overall, the differences were generally small for most job categories. An exception was the private citizen category, which ranged from 12 to 2 percentage points higher (for 2003 and 2006, respectively) in RPS than in survey responses. These differences may be a function of respondents' self-classification versus classification by an SIS staff member.

Table 2--Percentage Distribution of SIS Survey Respondents by Job Function, 2003-2006

Job function	Year			
	2003	2004	2005	2006
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Consultant/Research	19.4	17.8	15.3	17.1
State/Local Government	14.4	13.9	8.1	10.1
Academic	13.7	13.3	13.7	15.1
IRS employee	10.1	12.8	12.9	14.2
Media	7.9	5.6	5.7	5.0
Corporation	7.2	8.3	10.5	n.a.
Federal Government	5.8	7.2	11.3	7.5
Private citizen	4.3	6.7	2.4	3.4
Tax Preparation/ Accounting firm	2.9	1.7	3.2	5.0
Association/Society	2.2	0.6	1.6	0.0
Congress	0.7	1.1	0.8	2.6
Law firm	--	2.8	0.8	1.7
Nonprofit	n.a.	4.4	4.8	5.9
Library	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	5.9
Marketing	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	1.7
Realtor	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	1.7
Other	11.5	3.9	8.9	2.5

n.a. -- not available

The first survey was designed with 17 questions in 2003. Over the 4 years, some questions were removed, while others were added. Overall, the number of questions decreased to a total of 12 for the 2006 survey (see Appendix). Survey questions focusing on 3 issues are discussed below.

Table 3 presents the customer's expectation of timeliness for receiving a response to an information request in the 2003 survey and actual timeliness in response to questions for the 2004-2006 surveys. Note that the 2003 question is different from the question included in the 2004-2006 surveys. The 2003 question asks when the customer *expected to receive* a response, but the 2004-2006 question asks when a response *was received*. Response options for all 4 years are the same. By changing the wording of the question, SIS was able to obtain more useful information from its customers. The expected response time (in the 2003 survey) was significantly greater than the actual response time (in the 2004 survey.) Some 36 percent expected a response on the same business day in the 2003 survey. However, over 70 percent actually received their responses on the same business day (in the 2004 survey). For 2004 through 2006, a response was received in 3 business days or less 93 percent to 96 percent of the time.

SIS compared the response time for survey respondents to the response time recorded in RPS by SIS staff using the time period that SIS surveys were administered in 2004-2006. Response time of 1 day or less reported by survey respondents ranged from 74.2 percent to 62.3 percent (for 2005 and 2006 respectively). In contrast, the response time of 1 day or less reported in RPS was 93.8 percent or higher for 2004-2006. The SIS staff generally responds to customers within 1 business day as indicated in RPS. However, a completed request including additional research may take 2-3 days. This is indicated by 26.1 percent to 30.7 percent of survey respondents reporting a response time of 2-3 business days. The response time gap between survey responses and RPS may be the difference between making an initial contact and delivering the completed information to the customer.

Table 3--Response Timeliness for SIS, 2003-2006

Percentage of respondents indicating . . .

Survey question	Response options	In 2003
When did you expect to receive a response?	Same day	36.0
	2-3 business days	52.5
	4-5 business days	8.6
	6 or more business days	2.9

Percentage of respondents indicating . . .

Survey question	Response options	In		
		2004	2005	2006
When did you receive a response?	Same day	70.6	74.2	62.3
	2-3 business days	26.1	23.4	30.7
	4-5 business days	1.7	2.4	3.5
	6 or more business days	1.7	--	3.5

Table 4 presents the issue of meeting customer needs. In 2004, the question and the response options were changed to reflect the RAS balanced measures. The 2003 question asked if SOI's product(s)/data satisfied customer needs. The 2004-2006 question asks if the product(s) or services(s) provided met customer needs. The major difference between the 2003 question and the 2004-2006 question is the response options. In the 2003 survey, there is no option for a "middle ground" between the "disagree options" and the "agree options." Instead, a "not applicable" option is listed at the end after "strongly agree." Beginning with the 2004 survey, a "not sure/neither" option is available between the "disagree options" and the "agree options." During the 4 years of the surveys, the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that their needs were met ranged from 76.5 percent in 2004 to 82.5 percent in 2005.

Table 4--SIS Met Customer Needs, 2003-2006

Survey question	Response options	Percentage of respondents indicating . . . In 2003
SOI's product(s)/data satisfied your needs.	Strongly disagree	5.1
	Disagree	8.0
	Agree	30.4
	Strongly agree	51.4
	Not applicable	5.1

Survey question	Response options	Percentage of respondents indicating . . . In 2004	2005	2006
The product(s) or service(s) provided met your needs.	Strongly disagree	6.9	5.0	5.3
	Disagree	6.9	5.0	3.5
	Not sure/neither	9.7	7.5	12.3
	Agree	33.1	29.2	33.3
	Strongly agree	43.4	53.3	45.6

Table 5 presents customers' overall satisfaction with the most recent response they received from SIS. For all 4 years, the question was the same, but, beginning with the 2004 survey, the response options were changed to reflect RAS balanced measures. Therefore, responses are not comparable between 2003 and the 2004-2006 responses. However, for all 4 years, the satisfaction rate remained high. Respondents who were satisfied or very satisfied ranged from 85.9 percent in 2004 to 91.6 percent in 2005.

The surveys each year also included open-ended questions asking for further explanations, recommendations, and suggestions for improving service to SIS customers. The information gleaned from responses to these open-ended questions has been exceptionally useful. Several respondents suggested adding the missing years in SOI historical tables, published in the *Statistics of Income Bulletin* and also released on Tax Stats. In these historical tables, the most current 5 years were shown, and, for earlier years, only every fifth year was shown. Data classified by locality are SIS's most frequently requested products. SOI, in conjunction with the Census Bureau, produces county-to-county and State-to-State migration data, along with county income data. SOI also produces Zip Code data. Not surprisingly, respondents requested more locality data. Some respondents, for example, requested earned income tax credit and alternative minimum tax data by county or Zip Code and migration data classified by occupation. Respondents also requested that locality data or the *Corporation Source Book* be made available on Tax Stats. These products have been available on a reimbursable basis from SOI.

Table 5--Overall Satisfaction With SIS, 2003-2006

Survey question	Response options	Percentage of respondents indicating . . . In 2003
Rate your overall satisfaction with your most recent data request.	Very low	0.7
	Low	1.4
	Average	10.1
	High	34.8
	Very high	52.9

Survey question	Response options	Percentage of respondents indicating . . . In 2004	2005	2006
Rate your overall satisfaction with your most recent data request.	Totally dissatisfied	0.6	3.4	1.7
	Dissatisfied	3.5	0.8	2.6
	Neither	9.9	4.2	7.8
	Satisfied	41.5	41.2	33.9
	Totally satisfied	44.4	50.4	53.9

Changes Planned or Implemented

Based on the input received from SIS customers, the SIS office has made some changes over the past 3 years. The SIS office conducted a benchmarking trip to the SIS's counterpart at the U.S. Department of Transportation and is looking into other fact-finding trips. After the first survey was conducted, the SIS office worked with an Information Technology Specialist to more effectively track customer requests and information about its customers.

SOI has also made improvements to its products and services by eliminating breaks in time series data for many of its tables. In selected *SOI Bulletin* historical tables, data for sequential years are published as space allows. On Tax Stats where no space limitation exists, SOI is looking into adding more years of historical data by inserting data for missing years. SOI has also begun adding more data to Tax Stats. This year, SOI added the 2000-2003 issues of the *Corporation Source Book.*

SOI Bulletin Survey

The SOI Division's long history of publishing stems from its original mandate in 1916. Over the years, the number of publications and the amount of time and effort to publish them have grown, but considerably less time has been spent evaluating the content, frequency, and dissemination of the publications. Three years ago, these tasks were the charge for a new workgroup that involved senior SOI staff and 3 members of SOI's Advisory Panel [1]. Initially, this group undertook to review the content and frequency of all SOI publications; examine how it could make them more useful; look at methods of advertising and disseminating; and look at what it is not publishing that perhaps it should.

Ultimately, the workgroup's efforts turned to improving the quality of SOI's most visible publication--the quarterly *SOI Bulletin*--and the efficiency of the *Bulletin* production process. Two methods were used--focus groups and a customer satisfaction survey. The focus groups were conducted to learn how authors and reviewers perceive the writing and review process, and to solicit ideas for changes in the writing and review process. The customer satisfaction survey was administered to better understand how SOI customers use the *Bulletin*, how satisfied they are with the contents, how useful the various features of the *Bulletin* are to them, and how it should be improved. The remainder of this section of the paper will be devoted to the *Bulletin* itself, describing the survey process, summarizing the key findings, and, finally, telling how SOI is using the survey results to improve the publication.

About the *SOI Bulletin*

Twenty-five years ago, in the summer of 1981, the first issue of the *Statistics of Income Bulletin* was published. It was initially created as the vehicle for disseminating more limited data on topics formerly covered by separate reports, as well as to provide the results of the growing number of special projects. The first *SOI Bulletin* was 46 pages and included just 3 articles--on individual income tax returns, sole proprietorship returns, and partnership returns. Recently, SOI Division published the 100th *Bulletin* (Spring 2006, Volume 25, Number 4), which included 6 articles; 23 selected historical and other data tables; sections on sampling methodology, projects and contacts, and products and services; and an index of selected previously published articles. SOI is currently working on the first issue of its 26th year (Summer 2006, Volume 26, Number 1). The average size of the report for 2005 was 310 pages.

Today's *Bulletin* is issued quarterly, in March, June, September, and December and provides the earliest published annual financial statistics obtained from the various types of tax and information returns filed, as well as information from periodic or special analytical studies of particular interest to students of the U.S. tax system, tax policymakers, and tax administrators. It also includes personal income and tax data by State and historical data for selected types of taxpayers, in addition to data on tax collections and refunds and on other tax-related items. Much work goes into producing each issue of the *Bulletin*, but it was not clear whether it was meeting customers' needs. Thus, a survey was designed to collect critical information on how customers felt about the *Bulletin*.

Administering the Survey

Once again, SOI Division mathematical statisticians Kevin Cecco and Diane Milleville were called upon to assist in developing the survey. The result was a relatively brief and visually engaging, 15-question customer survey, which was subsequently cleared for use by the Office of Management and Budget. Following OMB's approval, the survey was then administered to *SOI Bulletin* customers in several ways.

The survey was sent directly via e-mail to SOI's main customers at the Department of Treasury's Office of Tax Analysis, the Congress's Joint Committee on Taxation, and the Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis, as well as to all members of SOI's Advisory Panel. The survey was also included in the Summer 2004 and Fall 2004 issues of the *SOI Bulletin* for customers to remove, fill out, and either e-mail or fax back to SOI. As a further outreach to potential *SOI Bulletin* customers, an SOI Advisory Panel member facilitated the dissemination of the survey via the Federation of Tax Administrators (FTA) list serve in January 2005.

Following a reasonable amount of time after publishing the Fall 2004 *Bulletin* and time allowed for FTA members to reply, the responses were compiled and analyzed. In all, 52 surveys were returned. The majority of respondents were from the groups SOI targeted outside of the printed publication. Only 9 respondents filled out the survey from the *Bulletin* itself. To put these numbers in perspective, it should be noted that, for the Fall and Summer issues that year, approximately 2,000 copies of each were printed. Of these, about 400 copies were sent to internal IRS and Treasury Department offices, about 1,250 copies were provided to the Government Printing Office (GPO) for subscribers and the Federal Depository Libraries, and about 350 copies were for the SOI Division for internal purposes. Because just 52 responses were received, a major concern was that responses might not be representative of all users, meaning this information should probably not be the basis for any final decision concerning the *Bulletin*. Also, it was not possible to conduct a nonresponse analysis, because the majority of the *Bulletin* copies are distributed by the GPO, and SOI does not know who the customers are. In addition, SOI decided not to continue to include the survey in subsequent issues of the *Bulletin* for several reasons--1) the responses were likely to be low again; 2) the OMB approval process was required for each issue of the *Bulletin*, and, with a low response rate, it would be more difficult to justify including it in the report; and 3) the OMB approval process had just become much longer, taking about 5 weeks instead of 2 weeks. Nevertheless, SOI did have the results from 52 surveys to evaluate, and, after consulting with the mathematical statisticians advising us on this effort, they recommended that SOI work with the results it has and use another vehicle to focus on a particular part of the *Bulletin*, e.g., another focus group, should SOI decide to solicit additional customer feedback. The findings are presented below.

Findings

<u>Type of respondents</u>. Over one-third of the respondents (36 percent) were affiliated with State and local governments. Another 18 percent indicated a Federal Government affiliation, while 17 percent had a Congressional affiliation. Nearly one-third of all responses came from members of the FTA list serve.

<u>Use of other SOI products</u>. The three most heavily used SOI products other than the *SOI Bulletin* were the *Corporation Source Book*, the *IRS Data Book*, and the Individual complete report--used by 40 percent-50 percent of all respondents. A

little over one-third of respondents also indicated they used the Corporation complete report. About one-fourth of all respondents use *Special Studies in Federal Tax Statistics*, public-use microdata files, and special tabulations. Twenty percent or less said they use other SOI products.

How respondents receive the *Bulletin*. Half of all respondents receive the *Bulletin* through a subscription. Another 20 percent receive it directly from the SOI Division.

Frequency of use. Of the 49 who responded to how frequently they use the *Bulletin*, 37 (about 76 percent) use it 4 times a year. Only 8 percent use it once a year.

Overall satisfaction. Of the 49 who responded, 86 percent were satisfied or totally satisfied with the *SOI Bulletin;* only 2 respondents were dissatisfied, while 5 were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Use of specific features. Of the 8 features listed (from the Bulletin Board column in the front of the report through the index on the inside back cover), and checking all that apply, the Selected Historical and Other Data section was by far the most frequently used--90 percent of survey respondents, compared to 67 percent who said they use the featured articles and 38 percent who use the data releases. An equal number (about 25 percent of respondents) use each of the remaining features, except for the Bulletin Board, which less than 8 percent indicated they use.

Suggestions for change. When asked to check boxes regarding possible changes to the *Bulletin*, nearly half of all respondents indicated they would like to see more articles on topics of current interest. They also indicated an interest in shorter articles focused on key findings (nearly 37 percent). About one-fourth of respondents said they would like more details on methodologies and samples. For the response “Other,” 8 survey respondents offered varied suggestions, such as adding links to data and explanatory material on the Web, including more longitudinal data, and reporting medians as well as averages and measures of variability.

How to publish sections: print, Web, or both. This question dealt with the component parts of an article or data release and asked respondents whether they preferred the parts to be provided in print only, posted to the Web only, or to be available in both places. About two-thirds of respondents preferred that the tables be provided in both mediums; nearly half or more than half of respondents indicated that they preferred most parts of an article to be published in print and on the Web.

Use of Selected Historical and Other Data section. When asked if they used the Selected Historical and Other Data section, some 90 percent said yes. Of those who said yes, over 93 percent said the tables are useful, and over 84 percent said the footnotes were useful. Of the 2 respondents who answered no to this question, 1 provided additional comments, indicating that publishing the historical tables in every issue was not necessary.

Where to publish historical tables. Nearly 70 percent of those who use the historical tables felt that they should be published in both print and on the Web. And of 19 respondents who answered the question about how often to publish the historical tables, 11 (or about 58 percent) felt that the historical section should appear in all *SOI Bulletin* issues.

Verbatims

The survey also included the following open-ended questions in order to gain additional information about how the information in the *Bulletin* is being used and to seek recommendations and suggestions for improvements. The following summarizes the responses SOI received to the open-ended questions from the survey:

- What is your primary use of the *SOI Bulletin*?

  About 60 percent of respondents chose to reply. Verbatim responses covered a number of areas of uses. A few respondents stated that they use the *Bulletin* for “quick look-up of tabulations” or to look up the most recent data on a topic. One respondent identified him/herself as a “scholar and educator with deep interest in the Federal tax system” who reads the *Bulletin* for “keeping up” responsibilities. Another uses the *Bulletin* as a resource for responding to media inquiries. The most recurring themes centered around the *Bulletin* as a source of data for research and for the historical series data. About a third of the answers indicated that the statistics were used for research, revenue estimation, or tax modeling purposes. Another 20 percent were mainly interested specifically in the historical data series that is included in each issue.

- If you use the Selected Historical and Other Data section of the *SOI Bulletin*, which tables do you use, do you find them useful, do you find the accompanying footnotes useful, and how would you improve this section?

  About half of the 90 percent of survey respondents who indicated that they use the historical data also told which tables they use of the 23-table section. The majority of those use 7 or more tables in the section, and some specifically stated that they use the annual State data, a 53-page table titled “Table 2--Individual Income and Tax Data by State and Size of Adjusted Gross Income.” About 20 percent of those who use the historical data also answered the question about whether they find the tables useful. Several stated they found them useful as a quick reference, while others stated they were difficult to find on the Web. Only 1 person responded to the question about the footnotes, finding them marginally useful because of the limited number of years available. Suggested improvements ranged from only publishing the series once a year to adding more details on the State table, to including many more years of data, to more detailed data by State.

- If you could change one thing about the *SOI Bulletin*, what would it be?
  Nearly one-third of respondents chose to weigh in on this question, and the responses offered a few themes for SOI to consider--namely, a more detailed index in

order to locate earlier, related articles; more topical, interesting articles as some are rather dull; providing links to related, technical documentation on the Web; and making *Bulletin* tables electronically useable on the Web.

- Please provide any additional comments and/or suggestions you may have concerning the *SOI Bulletin.*

  Ten responses were received to this question, about 20 percent of those who responded to the survey. No 2 comments were the same, but 1 area for improvement suggested in several responses was in length of articles. There appears to be more interest in the figures, graphs, and tables. Some asked SOI to consider producing a leaner *Bulletin*, with more interesting writing.

Next Steps

Although the number of responses to the *SOI Bulletin Survey* was less than had been hoped for, SOI feels that the results are a strong indication that it is doing a good job of producing the *SOI Bulletin.* It is a useful resource for looking up data on a specific tax-related topic. The historical data are very useful and an important reason why people use the *Bulletin*. However, it is also clear that there is room for improvement in a number of areas--in improving the writing, e.g., preparing shorter articles focused on key findings and preparing more articles on topics of current interest. Many customers are also interested in more details on methodologies and samples. And another message that came through is an interest in more consecutive years of historical data.

These results, along with the results from focus groups with *Bulletin* authors and technical reviewers, are being used to focus SOI efforts on specific areas of improvement. Recently, SOI has been working with some of the members of SOI's Web Modernization Team with the goal of improving the process of producing and posting tables to the Tax Stats Web site, which should also improve the process of producing *Bulletin* articles. One outcome in streamlining this part of the *Bulletin* production process is that we are making data available earlier on Tax Stats. The Tax Stats Web Team is also working with a contractor on a dynamic tables prototype that will allow users to make their own tables from previously tabulated SOI data. Currently, this is a prototype that allows users to make tables from 2 years of *Corporation Source Book* data. The prototype will run for 4 months, after which SOI will evaluate feedback, costs, etc., to determine how this will fit into SOI's data dissemination strategy.

SOI also plans to address *Bulletin* content issues. Working more closely with managers, authors might want to refresh their articles by shortening them, by becoming more familiar with relevant tax and economic literature, by soliciting ideas from senior staff from Treasury's Office of Tax Analysis and other customers, and by co-authoring articles with senior staff or outside experts. SOI will seek to assist authors in accessing the tax and economic literature by establishing an electronic index of the SOI library and arranging a briefing on electronic research from a sister organization in IRS. SOI will also assemble a collection of examples of good *Bulletin* articles and other descriptive papers to aid newer authors.

SOI will continue to work on improvements to the *Bulletin*, as evidenced by current efforts to get consensus from our senior managers on a plan to improve the *Bulletin* production process, followed by incremental improvements in content and quality of the articles and tables. In so doing, SOI is committed to responding to the recommendations and suggestions of customers.

Summary and Conclusion

As discussed, the Statistics of Income Division is using surveys to improve the methods of conducting business, with the emphasis on providing top-quality service to its customers. The SIS Survey questions dealt with communication, characteristics of staff, opinions of products, and overall satisfaction. When surveying *SOI Bulletin* customers, questions dealt with characteristics of the customer and their use of this publication, content issues, suggestions for improvement, and overall satisfaction. Administering surveys and examining the findings over the past several years have shown SOI how well it is doing in improving products and services and have helped guide efforts to make improvements in these areas. For both the *SOI Bulletin* and SIS surveys, specific suggestions included in *verbatims* related to SOI current products have been particularly useful. The Statistical Information Services office has definitely benefited from the surveys over the past 3 years. The SIS survey has helped maintain focus on the SIS goal of outstanding customer service. To continue to improve its service, the SIS made a benchmarking trip and is looking into other fact-finding trips. The SIS office also made enhancements to its electronic tracking system (RPS) to more effectively track requests as well as information about its customers. Overall, the responses received from the *SOI Bulletin* Survey have been useful in helping direct current efforts to improve the *Bulletin*. For example, it is clear that SOI customers want to continue to have Historical and other data tables available in both the printed publication and on SOI's Tax Stats Web site. SOI staff are currently working on guidelines for making tables more usable for customers who intend to download and work with the data SOI provides. In addition, SOI is working on improving the publication process itself as well as desktop publishing tools to improve the layout process. It also intends to work with subject-matter experts and mathematical statisticians on content issues, e.g., including more articles on topics of current interest and more information about the statistical significance of reported trends, especially when the reported changes are small in magnitude.

Measuring customer satisfaction will continue to be a major priority for SOI. A commitment to collecting and evaluating customer satisfaction data will ensure that SOI does not lose its focus on critical issues that impact its customers. An emphasis on collecting customer satisfaction data will reinforce the SOI culture of providing outstanding service to customers. As is evident from the data presented in this paper, SOI has done a good job of exceeding the expectations of its customers. However, SOI should not rest on its successes, but rather work even harder to ensure that it meets or exceeds customer expectations.

Reference

[1] "Recent Efforts To Maximize Benefits From the Statistics of Income Advisory Panel," by Tom Petska and Beth Kilss, *Special Studies in Federal Tax Statistics: 2003*, Internal Revenue Service, pp. 87-93, 2004.

Appendix -- SIS Survey Questions, 2003-2006

Survey question	Year question included in SIS survey			
	2003	2004	2005	2006
Which of the following best describes your function?	X	X	X	X
How did you initially learn about the SOI SIS office?	X			
How did you initially learn about the SIS office?		X	X	X
How often do you contact our office?	X			
How often do you contact the SIS office?		X	X	X
How did you contact us?				X
Was the first contact with SIS with a (1) person; (2) voice message				X
Was the voice message (1) informative; (2) user-friendly; (3) okay as is; (4) needs improvement by ________ .				X
Did we satisfy your data request? (If only partially or not at all, please explain why in the space provided below.)	X			
Did the SIS satisfy your data request?		X	X	
Did the SIS satisfy your data request? (If only partially or not at all, please explain why in the space provided below.)				X
When did you expect to receive a response from us?	X			
When did you receive a response?		X	X	
When did you receive a response regarding your most recent data request?				X
How did we respond to your data request?				X
Our staff was focused on determining and satisfying your needs.	X			
The SIS staff was focused on determining and satisfying your needs.		X	X	
SOI's product(s)/data satisfied your needs.	X			
The product(s) or services (s) provided met your needs.		X	X	X
SOI's product(s)/data was received timely.	X			
How often do you retrieve data from the SOI Tax Stats Web site?	X	X	X	
The SOI Tax Stats Web site is user-friendly.	X			
The SOI Tax Stats Web site is user-friendly. Why or why not?		X	X	
The Tax Stats Web site would be more useful if SOI considered the following (1) adding more data; (2) deleting data; (3) adding links to other data; (4) having a sophisticated search engine; (5) allowing "create your own" tables; (6) adding more viewable tables; (7) other.	X			
The information from the SOI Tax Stats Web site met your needs.		X	X	
If you could change one thing about the SOI Tax Stats Web site, what would it be?		X	X	
How would you prefer to receive products/files from SOI?	X			
If given the opportunity, would you be interested in receiving notice of future data/product releases from SOI?	X			
What types of new products/data releases would you be most interested in receiving?	X	X	X	X
Please rate your overall satisfaction with your most recent data request.	X	X	X	X
If you could change one thing about your experience with the SIS office, what would it be?				X
Please list any other Web sites that you use to gather statistical information.	X			
Please provide comments and/or suggestions on ways we may better serve your data needs.	X	X	X	X