

An affordable citizen survey now available for small cities

With the increasing diversity, mobility, and hectic schedules of people today, elected officials, even in small cities, have a tougher time knowing whether the majority of citizens approve of what they're doing. Typically, a small, vocal minority makes their wishes and opinions known at meetings or hearings but do they represent the citizenry as a whole? Most experts say no. **Tom Miller**, president of the National Research Center (NRC) in Boulder, Co. points out that "motivated, intelligent, healthy, confident" people are who elected officials hear from, not the "busy, shy, or unwell" citizens. In fact, in the surveys Miller's company has done, they find that 85 percent of the respondents have never attended a public hearing or gone to a council meeting!

For those elected officials who want to get a more accurate reading of what the citizens of their community think about city government, a scientific, mail-out or telephone survey is the only answer. The problem is that can be quite expensive. A private consulting firm can run as high as \$20,000; a university somewhat less but that's because it's a learning experience for students, and both require quite a lot of work and planning on the part of the local government staff.

With those issues in mind, The International City County Managers Association (ICMA) last fall introduced The National Citizen Survey (NCS), described as a turnkey service that brings professional survey methods to local governments at an affordable price.

"We've found that there is a lot of confusion about the science of surveying," says **Christine Ulrich**, ICMA senior manager. "Plus, it's very pricey and can be too much for small and medium-sized governments." While the survey is a stand-alone product, the organization also is planning to offer the NCS as part of The Center for Performance Measurement (CPM) since the ultimate goal of the communities that are participating in CPM is to know whether improved internal performance results in more satisfied citizen-customers. In fact, the pilot communities that tested the survey last year are members of CPM. One of those is Watertown, N. Y.,

(pop. 27,000), whose manager says he was particularly attracted to the "one-stop shopping" aspect of the survey.

"In the past, I've been resistant to surveys," admits **Jerry Hiller**, city manager. "The cost has been prohibitive with private consultants so I've used the local community college to help us. But they aren't cheap either and it's time consuming." Hiller notes that when the city worked with the college on a community policing survey, he and his staff had to figure out who they wanted to survey and what questions they wanted answered. That required several sessions to outline the scope and numerous draft reviews of the survey. Even then, the final product inevitably missed the mark in some areas.

"Afterwards, you realize the results don't tell you everything you wanted to know and the answer is 'you didn't tell us to ask that question,'" he recalls. "We did three rounds on the community policing survey and finally got it right."

How NCS works

Miller's assessment of the surveys that many jurisdictions conduct confirms Hiller's experience. He has found that flaws range from inadequacies in the selection of the sample and a failure to control for a non-response bias to poor wording of questions and unclear directions.

"For example, not everyone responds so how do you feel confident that those who do respond represent your jurisdiction as a whole?" he explains. "What is said to the potential respondent has implications about whether they will participate. All of those things are very important pieces because a flawed survey can mislead officials about what the real perceptions of their community are."

To address those issues, the NCS is designed to provide accurate information through a streamlined and affordable process. In this first year, classes are starting up every other month, which simply means that a group of communities are receiving the worksheet packet at the same time and that printings and mailings, ideally, will be done at the same time. The packet includes everything necessary for the community to customize the survey as well as worksheets to fill out with zip codes and carrier routes for the actual mailing as well as demographic informa-

tion such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, renter or owner, and housing unit type, which is used to weight the returned data.

A community chooses from a core set of questions, some with many parts, which cover all of the services that most jurisdictions would offer, resulting in a final 35 questions per survey. In addition, a city can ask three “policy” questions that are unique to the jurisdiction. Using the city’s logo and local signatures, NRC prints up the questionnaire and works with a mail house to send out three mailings to a scientific selection of 1,200 residents, which typically results in about 400 responses and a plus/minus 5 percent error rate. A household will get an introductory postcard, and two mailings of the survey and cover letter over the course of three weeks. The five-page survey will take someone about 10 minutes to fill out and there’s a simple procedure for the household to decide who should fill it out. All responses are anonymous.

The surveys then are processed and analyzed with a final report and normative comparisons from across the country. In developing the NCS, Miller’s company collected over 300 surveys with results from 100,000 respondents representing 30 million Americans in cities, counties, townships, and villages from around the country. By conducting what’s called a “meta-analysis,” a database of survey results was created that provides norms to which other communities can compare themselves.

The whole process takes about 18 weeks, which includes time to get feedback from council and department heads on the selection of questions, including the development of the three policy questions, to the final report. The total cost for the basic package is \$7,500 although there are seven add-on services that cost extra, including for example, increasing sample size, adding a Spanish version, and comparison to prior years.

Watertown’s results

Hiller says he was pleased with the results and the process itself. By outsourcing, there was minimal staff time required.

The only delay in the process was from the city’s side because the council couldn’t decide on the three extra questions to ask. Ultimately, the results from the optional questions have provided support for deci-

sions in three new areas. One question asked about re-instituting bulk furniture collection with 60 percent not in favor of it. Historic preservation downtown received overwhelming support in a community without an organized preservation movement. And there was also support for developing the river through downtown as a tourist and recreation area. Otherwise, Hiller says the city scored low where he thought it would because of budgetary considerations and high where he thought it would.

“We know we aren’t spending enough on our infrastructure,” say Hiller. “This will probably influence our capital budgeting process as we look at whether to build swimming pools and tennis courts or roads and water and sewer lines. It helps us make some hard political decisions.” In the meantime, department heads are using the feedback as a basis for their work plans and budgets while the surprising satisfaction with customer service is cause for celebration, given that city employees haven’t had customer service training.

Hiller adds that the normative database is key to the usefulness of the survey in that if the local fire department gets an 85 percent approval rating, it doesn’t mean as much unless other cities typically have a higher or lower rating. And now that there is a baseline, Watertown will do another survey in a couple of years.

As a result of the pilots, Miller says the company has made several refinements, noting that there is a public relations piece of the survey as well as a planning and management piece.

“The pilots convinced us it made sense to have two separate reports, one on how your citizens rated you and a separate report on how your rating compares to other jurisdictions,” he explains. “Having those two documents gives a jurisdiction the choice of emphasizing one or the other or both. It won’t be all good news so two reports gives flexibility in emphasizing what you want to.” ■

Resources:

For more information on The National Citizen Survey, send an e-mail to ncs@icma.org

Worksheet #4 - Frequency of Community Participation

Jurisdiction Name _____

Question #9 on The NCSTM asks citizens how many times they or other household members have participated in various activities in your jurisdiction (see example at bottom of page). While there are certain basic types of activities that are relevant for most communities, these may differ in level of importance among jurisdictions. This worksheet allows you to select from a list of activities, and therefore choose the most important for your jurisdiction.

Please select up to 13 of the following 13 activities by placing a check mark in the box next to each activity you wish to include on your survey.

- _____ Used ABC public libraries or their services
- _____ Used ABC recreation centers
- _____ Participated in a recreation program or activity
- _____ Visited a neighborhood or ABC park
- _____ Ridden a local bus within ABC
- _____ Attended a meeting of local officials or other local public meeting
- _____ Watched a meeting of local officials or other local public meeting on cable television
- _____ Recycled used paper, cans or bottles from your home
- _____ Volunteered your time to some group/activity in ABC
- _____ Read ABC Newsletter
- _____ Used the Internet for anything
- _____ Used the Internet to conduct business within ABC
- _____ Purchased an item over the Internet

_____ Total number of checked activities selected (no more than 13 total)

Example from Frequency of Community Participation questions:

In the last 12 months, about how many times, if ever, have you or other household members participated in the following activities in ABC?

	never	once or twice	3 to 12 times	13 to 26 times	more than 26 times
Visited a neighborhood or ABC park.....	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •

Fax or send packet of completed worksheets to:

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