

Using Citizen Feedback to Improve City Operations

City of Atlanta, Georgia

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- **Stephan Jaskulak, Deputy Chief Financial Officer**
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Jurisdiction: City of Atlanta, Georgia

- **Category: Organizational Design**
- **Considered for Innovation Award: No**
- **Considered for Rapid Fire Session: Yes**

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SYNOPSIS

This case study tested customer surveys as a cost effective actionable external performance measure at the local government level. Local governments run surveys but rarely consistently over time, offered widely, designed both for rating and for process improvement, and administered independently. The study tested use of surveys in the public sector for:

- Delivery of actionable information
- Matching the survey response to the service provided (public sector satisfaction surveys often ask people about services they have not experienced)
- Immediacy; feedback while an interaction is fresh in the citizen's mind
- Accountability
- Cost effective on-going metrics

Citizens' satisfaction with their government is a critical. However, local governments use many internal performance measures, but few external measures that encourage use of citizen feedback. Further, surveys as external performance measures often lack credibility due to issues of validity.

Atlanta, working with Georgia Tech, tested customer feedback as a public sector external performance measure in its Department of Finance Business License Division. The study showed that external performance measures can be relevant and cost effective.

Costs

Cost is cited as a major obstacle to the use of external performance measures. This study demonstrated that cost is no longer an obstacle to using customer surveys. Due to widespread Internet access and improved technology for distribution and compilation, on-going surveys can be offered to all customers with email at minimal expense and results can be more relevant than traditional surveys.

Costs for a Public Sector Customer Survey for a Department Serving 15,000 Over 10 Months		
Survey software	\$ 278	Qualtrics cost \$0.50 or \$1 per response; other software costs less but does less
Data processing & analytical software	\$ -	Included in survey software or Microsoft Office
Survey distribution	\$ -	Distributed by email and returned via Web
Customer lists	\$ -	City owned database
FTP software	\$ -	Free online service
Printing	\$ 20	Most reports produced in PDF format
Presentation	\$ -	Presented in Powerpoint
Staff presentation materials	\$ 168	Printing posters for wall mounting
Total	\$ 466	
Analyst time	Hours	
Survey development & testing	10	
Meetings and presentations	11	
Analysis (non-academic)	12	
Interim report preparation	14	
Total	47	

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The study ran for 10 months and the survey was offered to all customers with email addresses. The Business License Office had 15,096 customers during the study period of which 6,406 provided non-duplicate email addresses and were offered the opportunity to provide feedback; 10% responded.

Savings, if any

The study was designed to improve service and motivate employees at a nominal cost. It was also designed to identify potential process improvements. It demonstrated that this tool could be effective for these purposes. It identified areas in which the department could operate more cost effectively.

Identify innovative characteristics and how they improved the organization

The study took advantage of new technology. Distribution and compilation was automated, dramatically reducing traditional survey costs. Survey software eliminated duplicates and targeted questions to customers based on services used. Customer data from the City's database was tied to the survey providing key cross-tabs without querying the respondent. Questions were also served based on the customers responses. In addition to rating questions, the survey asked open ended questions both about service agents and about processes. As a result the survey showed respect for the customer by asking a short set of relevant questions, but delivered detail on individual performance and on system sticking points from the customer's perspective.

- *External performance measures:* Currently the City evaluates and compares departments using internal performance measures. However, since citizen/customers ultimately determine the City's success or failure, their feedback is critical to effective performance measurement.
- *Actionable feedback about service:* Customer feedback matched to the people and teams who help citizens through the bureaucracy and meet their daily needs enables both management and line level staff to gauge their performance. This also generates customer recognition of public employees who make a difference.
- *System diagnostics:* Sticking points for customers in City processes become background noise over time for management. Customer feedback matched to specific processes consistently and independently highlights sticking points, or red tape, that can then be tracked and resolved.

Obstacles, if any

There was initial uneasiness about the project from department staff and management. As the study progressed, trust improved and management and staff members became more open to the results.

Outcomes – cost savings, for citizens, any performance measures information, etc.

Graphs, charts and outcomes will be presented in detail in the case study presentation.

Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

This pilot study demonstrated that customer feedback is a viable tool for application in the public sector. Considerations to make effective use of customer feedback include the following lessons from the study.

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1. **Independence:** An independent provider added credibility and confidentiality internally and externally, as well as survey questions that were unbiased.
2. **Interpretation:** Analyzing written comments involved separating phrases that expressed anger from phrases that provided actionable information and was best handled by an independent party.
3. **Training:** In the case study, the staff was presented with passive charts. In exit interviews for the study the staff indicated that orientation to the data and active discussion of the results would have improved its effectiveness.
4. **Comparison and Competition:** The pilot was a one-time study and therefore did not have benchmarks or targets nor did it have comparisons across departments. Benchmarks and comparisons would add relevance and performance incentive to the use of customer feedback.
5. **Custom and Standard Questions:** Survey questions rating service (courtesy, professionalism, promptness, information accuracy, completeness) apply to most customer interactions and can be standardized and compared across departments and to targets. Process questions are specific to a department and these questions and use of the results would vary by department.
6. **Targets and Consequences:** When customer feedback was introduced in other sectors, such as the hotel industry, managers made little use of the results. However, when the hotel chains set performance (QA) standards using customer surveys and there were consequences for meeting or missing the standards, managers responded and service improved. Similarly in the public sector feedback will be most effective if senior management set targets and consequences using customer feedback results.
7. **Sample Size:** At about 30 responses, survey graphs, charts and statistics become meaningful. In the pilot study, about half of customers provided an email address and about 10% of those emailed chose to provide feedback. This suggests that a department or group with about 600 customer interactions per month is the minimum for monthly customer feedback reporting.
8. **Dashboard:** Management suggested a dashboard in addition to the study graphs to show results over time using a few traceable numbers. A dashboard would be a critical reporting piece.

CONSULTANT

The project was proposed and carried out as a graduate thesis for Peggy Berg, a Masters candidate in the School of Public Policy at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She will participate in the presentation and demonstration.

PRESENTATION STYLE

The presentation will use Powerpoint with slides available for download to interested attendees. The physical charts used for staff motivation will be mounted at the presentation.

If Internet service is available, the presentation will include a real-time on-line demonstration of survey flow, piping and other tools used.