Are You Being Served? Gauging Customer Service

Kristina M. Boone

Robert Furbee

Follow this and additional works at: http://newprairiepress.org/jac

Are You Being Served? Gauging Customer Service

Abstract

Meeting customer demands is a daily task for communications units. Documenting how well demands are met is a measure of accountability, which is a growing concern for educational institutions. At Kansas State University, the Department of Communications was asked to document how internal customers perceived the department's service. Multiple methods are employed in this effort, one of which was a census of on-campus faculty and unclassified staff. Overall, response by these clients indicated that the department was fulfilling its mission, servicing customers well, and responding promptly. The census provided baseline data and helped inform administrators about department operations. Documenting productivity is important to administrators as the need for accountability increases. Productivity for a communications unit often is judged by clients' perceptions of how well the unit meets or services customer needs. Determining how well one is servicing customers provides information for performance documentation as well as improvement and decision making support. Trends or changes in client satisfaction can be identified as well, because baseline data are established.

Are You Being Served? Gauging Customer Service

Kristina M. Boone
Robert Furbee

Abstract

Meeting customer demands is a daily task for communications units. Documenting how well demands are met is a measure of accountability, which is a growing concern for educational institutions. At Kansas State University, the Department of Communications was asked to document how internal customers perceived the department's service. Multiple methods are employed in this effort, one of which was a census of on-campus faculty and unclassified staff. Overall, response by these clients indicated that the department was fulfilling its mission, servicing customers well, and responding promptly. The census provided baseline data and helped inform administrators about department operations. Documenting productivity is important to administrators as the need for accountability increases. Productivity for a communications unit often is judged by clients' perceptions of how well the unit meets or services customer needs. Determining how well one is servicing customers provides information for performance documentation as well as improvement and decision-making support. Trends or changes in client satisfaction can be identified as well, because baseline data are established.

ACE members Kristina M. Boone, assistant professor, and Robert Furbee, associate professor and Head, are located in the Department of Communications at Kansas State University. Funding for this study was provided by the Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station, Journal number 98-255-J. This article is based on a paper presented at the 1997 Agricultural Communicators in Education Annual Meeting, July 1997, Cleveland, Ohio.

Determining opinions of customer service can be thought of as systematically listening to one's clients. Managers get feedback on a daily basis, but this feedback typically takes the form of a problem or situation that needs correcting; managers also hear comments of praise on a sporadic basis. However, this method of nonsolicited ratings of service is neither systematic nor generalizable to the whole group of customers.

Accountability in this article refers to the documentation of performance in relation to allocated resources for defined tasks and services. Accountability is of growing importance in publicly supported educational institutions, and diminishing financial support is becoming aligned more closely with documented results (Chapman-Novakofski, Boeckner, Canton, Clark, Keim, Britten, & McClelland, 1997). Communications units at land-grant universities are not immune to this trend, although no published studies have evaluated performance-based accountability of such units. Much of the performance of these units hinges on their role of providing customer service. Like one of their major funders, the Cooperative Extension Service (Greene, 1995), communications units are challenged to provide timely, useful service, which has become their hallmark.

Extension as a whole is identifying ways to improve customer service. "By understanding and considering those factors that antagonize customers and drive them away, progress can be made toward developing a stronger, more supportive and more appreciative clientele as well as fulfilling our [Extension's] mission," wrote Culp (1997, online).

Based on her plan to improve customer service for the University of California-Extension system, Martin-Milius (1994) recommended building relationships with other service organizations and the business community. One result would be to help create an atmosphere where clients feel they receive value for their time, money, and energy. Another Extension effort in customer service focused on applying Total Quality Management concepts and steps to a soil- testing service (Fredendall & Lippert, 1995).

In addition to accountability, a number of other benefits are associated with tracking customer satisfaction with service:

> Encouraging management to incorporate the customer's voice into decision making.

Revealing customers' service priorities.

Identifying service-improvement priorities to guide resource-allocation decisions.

Allowing company service to be tracked over time.

Disclosing the impact of service quality initiatives.

Providing performance-based data to reward excellent service and correct poor service.

Providing an avenue for clients' feedback.

Providing data in a format that has credibility with administrators.

The major drawback associated with using a system to determine customer service is the cost of professional time needed to collect, analyze, and report information. Another point that may be negative is that determining levels of customer service can promote some anxiety among staff members.

At Kansas State University, the Department of Communications was asked to document customers' perception of its service. The department produces communications vehicles for the Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station, Cooperative Extension Service, and College of Agriculture. The customer service documentation effort uses multiple methods (Table 1), one of which was a census of on-campus faculty and unclassified staff to determine their opinions about services provided by the department. This article presents the K-State method of systematic listening and the results of the census. While some methods do not produce generalizable data, they are useful in providing specific, event-oriented information that can be used to improve performance. The census, while generalizable, presents a snapshot of opinion at a given time. Those opinions are greatly influenced by recent interactions.

Procedures

The objective of this study was to document the opinions of on-campus faculty regarding the services provided by the Department of Communications at Kansas State University

[1] Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1985.
[2] Krueger, 1994.

Table 1. Customer Service Methods and Descriptions for K-State Model

Method/Description	Purpose	Strengths	Limitations	Frequency
Surveys/censuses of clients	Track attitudes; measure perception of quality of service; identify obstacles	Can be generalized to entire population if done correctly	Frequently poor methodology is used; only provides snapshot of service[1]	Once/two years
Focus groups with 8-10 people	Provide a forum for group discussion of service improvements and feedback on issues	Fast method to collect data and useful for issues; rich data source[2]	Not generalizable; socially unacceptable answers may not be divulged; skillful moderator is critical[2]	As needed
Visits to county offices	Identify expectations of service; face-to-face meeting with county personnel	Allow staff to see county office situation; personalize service staff	Time consuming; expensive; not generalizable	Semiannually
Feedback cards tracking customer complaints/kudos	Identify common types of episodic service failures	Clearly identify corrective action; provide feedback mechanism to all personnel	Not generalizable; only works if complaints/kudos are sent to department	Continuous
Employee field reporting	Capture and share what employees hear and see when in the field	Allow many employees to participate in evaluation; continuous data collection; no added expense	Some employees are better data collectors than others; may be unwilling to share negative information	Continuous

and to help the department determine ways to improve those services. A census was conducted of all on-campus faculty and other unclassified personnel affiliated with the Agricultural Experiment Station, Cooperative Extension Service and academic programs in the College of Agriculture.

A written, single-sheet questionnaire was developed. It was designed to serve as a self-mailer for return through campus mail. Questions were developed to solicit opinions on overall performance in meeting needs, and performance of units within the department in meeting needs. In addition, the questionnaire provided the department's mission statement and asked how well the department was fulfilling the mission. Quantitative questions in these areas were followed by qualitative or open-ended questions to help explain the numeric ratings from the quantitative items. Questions were written to address accountability from the standpoints of administrators and mission-driven performance. A copy of the actual instrument used may be obtained from the authors.

A validity check by a panel of experts strengthened the questionnaire. One change made in the questionnaire based on the validity check was listing former and current names of departmental units. Because the department had been formed only four years earlier, some confusion regarding the names of the units within the department was apparent.

The questionnaire was mailed to 426 faculty members on May 20, 1996, accompanied by a letter from the dean encouraging a prompt reply. The letters were not individually addressed or signed. A brochure also was included with the mailing to provide further description of the department. Inclusion of the brochure was another suggestion from the validity check.

Data collection continued through the end of June. The initial mailing was followed by a postcard mailed seven working days later to nonrespondents. A second mailing, including another letter from the dean, the questionnaire, and the brochure, was sent to nonrespondents. This mailing was followed seven days later by another postcard reminder. Calls then were made to nonrespondents to collect data over the phone and to encourage response.

Of the 426 persons in this population, 315 representing 40 departments and administrative units and five colleges responded to the census (74% response rate) with 312 usable questionnaires. Quantitative data were analyzed in the Department of Communications using the personal computer version of SPSS/PC+. Data from qualitative questions were coded and then sorted and analyzed using clustered summary tables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data collected from nonrespondents over the phone were compared to data from respondents using t-tests to determine whether nonresponse error was evident. Differences were not significant, indicating that the findings were valid and generalizable to the entire population.

Findings

Participants were asked to rate the overall performance of the department in meeting their individual needs. Potential answers included Never Meets My Needs, Rarely Meets My Needs, Seldom Meets My Needs, Occasionally Meets My Needs, Frequently Meets My Needs, Always Meets My Needs, and No Opinion. Fifteen people did not respond to the question, and 90 indicated no opinion.

The majority of responses to this question were Frequently Meets My Needs. Two hundred of the 207 responses were in the categories of Occasionally Meets My Needs, Frequently Meets My Needs, and Always Meets My Needs. No one responded with Never Meets My Needs.

Although the responses demonstrate that the department has room to improve, the prevailing opinion is that the department is responding appropriately to faculty needs. Almost one third of the respondents did not express an opinion, with several noting that they had limited exposure to the department or felt that they could not rate the department as a whole. Figure 1 presents these data.
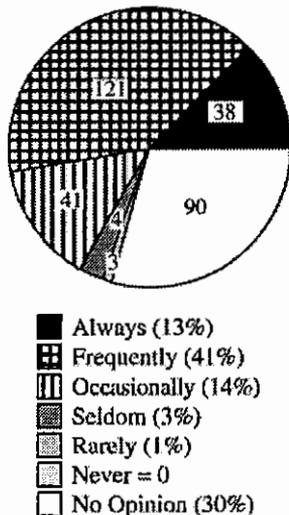
The questionnaire provided the mission statement for the department. [1]Respondents were asked to rate how well the department was fulfilling its mission according to the following categories: Very Poorly, Poorly, Marginally, Somewhat, Well, Very Well, and No Opinion. Six people did not respond to the question, and 105 indicated no opinion.

The most common response was that the department was

fulfilling its mission well, but almost as many respondents indicated that they did not have an opinion on this question. Many respondents who selected No Opinion indicated that they had worked with only a few units or had limited work experience with some units and did not feel that they could base an opinion on their narrow exposure. No respondents selected Very Poorly, and few selected Poorly and Marginally. Ninety-two percent of the respondents selected Somewhat, Well, or Very Well.

Again, the department has room for improvement but overall seems to be perceived as fulfilling its mission to a degree. Figure 2 presents these data.

Figure 1. Frequency that Department Meets Clients' Needs [2]

■ Always (13%)
⊞ Frequently (41%)
▥ Occasionally (14%)
▨ Seldom (3%)
▦ Rarely (1%)
▢ Never = 0
☐ No Opinion (30%)

N=297
s.d. = .59
Mode = Frequently Meets My Needs

[2]Clients for this article are defined as unclassified faculty and staff employed by K-State Research and Extension and the College of Agriculture.

Figure 2. Frequencies for Department's Performance in Fulfilling Mission

Very Well (9%)
Well (36%)
Somewhat (15%)
Marginally (5%)
Poorly (1%)
Very Poorly = 0
No Opinion (30%)
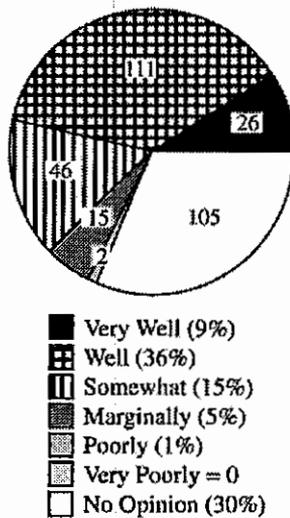
N=305
s.d. = .67
Mode = Well

A follow-up qualitative question asked respondents in what ways the department was fulfilling its mission. Most of the 180 who answered this question responded in terms of their inter-actions with the units and, in some cases, individuals. Of those commenting on the department as a whole, they com-monly noted that the department was fulfilling its mission by distributing research-based information to the public, main-taining a service orientation with its clients, and by responding to needs in a timely manner. Several respondents noted that they had not had enough exposure to the department to answer this question. Example comments include the following statements:

> "Good job — activities published and getting them out. Also getting research out to the producers."

> "Provides avenue for research and teaching to reach public."

> "Unable to comment — insufficient experience with department."

8

Responses were more diverse to the question of how the department could improve its performance. The 139 respondents answering this question identified numerous and varied areas for improvement. Some of the more commonly expressed opinions are summarized here: the timeliness of responses and of the production process from concept to finished project could be improved; better coordination is needed in the department to streamline production and provide easy access to information regarding projects and inventory; better coordination is needed externally with clients to transfer documents and with the university for development of electronically accessible information; the department needs to explain its functions more clearly to faculty through faculty meetings and other venues; units need to communicate clearly that they are part of the department; maintaining and hiring more high quality, enthusiastic staff are important; and maintaining and improving service orientation and customer focus is critical and needed in all areas and functions of the department. Also, the response of "No Suggestions" was common. Sample comments are below:

> "Try to communicate with other department faculty members, researchers, teachers. Establish links with every department."

> "Become totally, 100% customer focused. The quality of the product is excellent but predicting costs and timeliness is really unstable. We have customers across the state and at times it's hard to explain that we can't get KSU to help us meet our goals."

Participants also were asked to indicate with which units within the department they had interacted. Units in the department include Academic Programs, Information and Educational Technology, KKSU-580 AM, News, Publications, Production Services (Distribution and Duplicating), Special Projects, Television, and the Weather Data Library. They also were asked to rate that interaction according to their satisfaction with the units with which they had interacted. The response categories were Dissatisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Satisfied, Very Satisfied, and No Opinion.

For each unit, more respondents were satisfied than dissatisfied, with more of the comments falling into the satisfied and very satisfied categories. Units demonstrating strong response

in the very satisfied category include KKSU-AM 580, Publications, the Weather Data Library, and Television. Figure 3 presents summarized data. A large majority of responses indicated satisfaction with the units.

Figure 3. Frequencies for Satisfaction with Units in Department
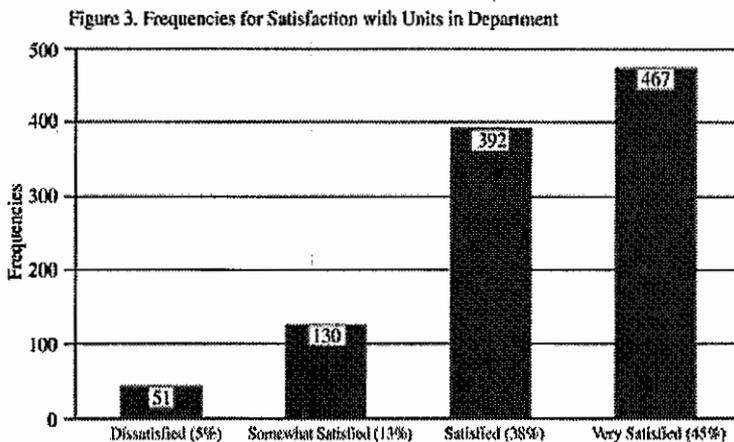
Total responses = 1040

Another set of qualitative questions asked participants to describe positive and negative experiences with the department. Again, some respondents noted they had not had contact with the department or considered their contact so limited that they could not answer these questions. Also, most respondents left these questions blank. In describing their positive experiences, most of those responding focused their comments on specific units and individuals. Those commenting on the department as a whole noted its service:

> "IET (Information and Educational Technology) and publications editor have been very helpful to assist with my needs."

> "Putting together a video on short notice; any interview done with (person)."

> "I have had extremely positive experiences with radio/ TV personnel! My job requires media outcomes and I couldn't have been successful without these folks!"

> "Rapid response on Weather Data; Excellent work by (person)."

> "Very willing to help faculty."

10

Comments concerning negative encounters again focused on units. Very few comments noted specific incidents and fewer presented possible resolutions, although respondents were asked to do so. The most common concern was timeliness, in terms of producing materials and response to calls. Service orientation and customer orientation also were mentioned commonly, as were appearing organized and the number of errors in jobs. Comments on the department as a whole identified weaknesses such as policies that serve internal functions but are not client oriented or are restrictive. Other department-wide weaknesses were timeliness of responses and production. Many noted that they had no or few negative encounters.

Conclusions

In general, the department and its units were rated positively. Faculty and other unclassified personnel on campus indicated that the department meets their needs in most cases and generally is fulfilling its mission. Faculty were satisfied with their interaction with the units within the department for the most part. Also, many positive and negative encounters with the department were described. The moderate numbers of respondents who selected "No Opinion" were not predicted but not surprising because of the diversity and large number of clientele in the target audience. Most of the "No Opinion" respondents had not accessed services by the department.

Administrators for K-State Research and Extension appreciated this method and considered the findings a valid reflection of opinions of all on-campus faculty and unclassified personnel. The qualitative data proved to be useful in explaining the numeric data more fully. Several staff members within the department were apprehensive about the findings and the method. Concern centered on the responses to open-ended questions. Very few direct quotes from survey comments were published or discussed with personnel in the department. However, the essence of these comments was discussed in detail with the units, as was the importance for confidentiality.

To enhance awareness and understanding of its services, the department plans to make presentations on its services and structure at K-State Research and Extension administrative and departmental meetings. In addition to the current brochure explaining the department's services and contacts, a

Web-based and printed version of a departmental handbook also will be developed. Staff members will look for ways to integrate our services in messages in organizational newsletters and other correspondence with clients.

While enhancing understanding of the department is important, there is concern about repercussions. With staff members already busy and fully-employed, concern has been voiced about creating more work and consequently adding more stress and possibly reducing quality of service.

Culp (1997) identified several factors of customer service that were relevant to Extension. Some of those that apply to the findings of this study include the following points: availability of help, timeliness of responses to customer queries, and accessible information. These and other issues will be revisited by the Department of Communications in order to enhance customer service, which will remain a component of accountability. Further study is planned, not only with this population but with other internal and external audiences who are clients of the department as well.

References

Ary, D., Jacobs, L.C., & Razavieh, A. (1985). *Introduction to research in education.* Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Chapman-Novakofski, K., Boeckner, L.S., Canton, R., Clark, C.D., Keim, K., Britten, P., & McClelland, J. (1997). Evaluating evaluation — What we've learned. *Journal of Extension* [Online], *35*(1). Available: http://www.joe.org/joe/1997february/rb2.txt

Culp III, K. (1997). Major customer turnoffs: Implications for Extension. *Journal of Extension* [Online], *35*(3). Available: http://www.joe.org/joe/1997june/iw3.txt

Fredendall, L.D. & Lippert, R.M. (1995). Applying total quality management in Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension* [Online], *33*(3).

Available: http://www.joe.org/joe/1995june/a1.txt

Greene, S.S. (1995). Cooperative Extension: The service challenge. *Journal of Extension* [Online], *33*(6). Available: http://www.joe.org/joe/1995december/comm1.txt

12

Krueger, R.A. (1994). *Focus groups.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Martin-Milius, T. (1994). University to community and back: Creating a customer focused process. Paper presented at the *Fifth Annual Conference on TQM in Colleges and Universities: Reengineering the University,* Chicago, IL.

Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

---

[1]The mission of the Department of Communications is to "support our land-grant university by providing practical, research-based information that addresses issues facing the citizens of Kansas; by providing information technology, communications services, and consultation services to administrators, faculty and staff; by conducting communications research; and by offering an academic major in agricultural journalism."