Consumer Satisfaction with Public Services

By Dr. Jaime S. Ong

Corporations use multiple listening tools to track customer satisfaction. They hold focus group discussions; establish consumer hotlines; survey current, potential and lost customers.

They do all this because they are determined to stay ahead of the competition. World-class companies not only measure customer satisfaction regularly; their measuring instruments grow more comprehensive and sophisticated.

Not all business firms operate by this principle. Companies that enjoy a near monopolistic advantage, or what might seem to be an insurmountable market dominance, tend to act complacent and cavalierly about customer sentiment.

Government offices tend to behave like monopolistic services. After all, if you're not happy with your banker or barber, you can always switch to another bank or barber shop; but if you're unsatisfied with your fire department, you can't report your burning home to the next city.

Still, in a democracy, governments are accountable to the governed, and constituent satisfaction should be as vital a concern to public officials as it is to entrepreneurs. Hence the Development Academy of the Philippines is to be commended for developing measures of constituent satisfaction for the specific use of government agencies.

One such effort was initiated by the DAP Productivity and Development Center at a 1999 workshop attended by representatives of government corporations, local government units and national line agencies. Due to the heterogeneity of their service offerings, the workshop used a generic instrument, a questionnaire known to service marketers as SERVQUAL, first developed at the Marketing Science Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The SERVQUAL questionnaire consists of 22 statements measuring five dimensions of service quality: reliability, or the dependable performance of service; assurance, or ability to inspire trust; tangibles, or physical facilities and equipment; empathy, or individualized attention; and responsiveness, or helpfulness and promptness of service. The service provider's "score" is measured by the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of service actually received.

Since the SERVQUAL is generic -- reliability, assurance, empathy and so on are sought in all service situations -- it doesn't measure variables specific to a particular industry. Prompt service, for instance, is less important in a census office than in a fire department. The DAP
workshop pinpointed another drawback: SERVQUAL, designed for use in private enterprise, doesn't measure integrity, because service providers do not usually demand bribes before attending to customers.

So the questionnaire that emerged from the DAP-PDC workshop added three statements on integrity, exemplified as not seeking or accepting personal favors in return for providing service; not giving unfair advantage during transactions; and disciplining workers who violate the rules.

A second and more recent DAP measuring instrument is the Report Card Survey, initiated by its Center for Governance, and first developed by the Public Affairs Centre of India. This questionnaire zeroes in on services provided by local government units, and won't work for, say, the Department of Education or the Bureau of Customs. But it is uniquely adapted to evaluating five core services provided by towns and cities: garbage collection, traffic management, neighborhood safety, public market management, and permit issuance/licensing. The core questionnaire covers such details as regularity of garbage collection, cleanness of public market restrooms, access to weighing scales, ventilation, functioning traffic lights, street signs and traffic enforcers, clarity of instructions for obtaining permits. Like the DAP-modified SERVQUAL, the RCS is well aware of graft in public service, and asks respondents if they have had to pay extra or give bribes for basic services.

DAP's report on its pilot Report Card Survey notes that while some local government officials recognize the value of using survey results in their planning and budgeting exercises, other officials find it difficult to understand the RCS's utility; "there is a common perception that results of the survey can be used against them."

True enough; but that is precisely what happens in the private sector: if you displease your customers, you suffer the consequences. Results from the SERVQUAL or Report Card Surveys represent taxpayer opinions on their experience with government service. Public servants who balk at being so evaluated should be reminded that they are not royalty, and that the divine right of kings is passe.

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