

Customer Service

Good Practice Guide

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Government
of South Australia

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This is one of a series of Guides developed by the Government Reform Commission to promote and support good practice in the South Australian public sector.

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Foreword



The Hon Jay Weatherill MP
Minister Assisting the Premier in Cabinet
Business and Public Sector Management

The Rann Government is strongly committed to providing the best possible services to the people of South Australia.

South Australia's Strategic Plan places an obligation on the public sector to measure and improve the community's satisfaction with the wide range of services they receive from Government. The contacts people have with public services shape their view of Government. Often first impressions have a lasting impact.

For too long, services have been designed and delivered to suit the providers. In planning our services we need to put ourselves in the shoes of the people receiving them. This will result in much more respectful, accessible, timely and effective service provision.

We need to listen to people's requirements and give them clear expectations of what they will receive. We need to help them navigate through the maze of services without requiring them to understand the structures and processes of the public sector, but be willing to educate and explain where people are

confused. They should know where to go for help. They shouldn't have to tell their story many times.

Often with public services there is no choice. People should not expect a poorer service as a result. In these cases, as in others, we should have ways of engaging with the community to understand their experiences and to improve these over time. We should always listen to complaints and learn from them. We should also celebrate positive feedback.

We need to be particularly sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community. Often their experiences give us the clearest picture of where we need to improve the individual services and the way they link together to achieve the best outcomes.

I encourage you to use this guide as a reminder of the core principles, values and approaches that should guide us as we take up the challenge of putting customers at the heart of the public sector.

Jay Weatherill

The application of this guide to employees in the public service

This guide outlines key considerations for improving service delivery throughout the South Australian public sector. It also provides information that may assist agencies to meet the new target (1.7) set out in South Australia's Strategic Plan 2007, that is, to:

'increase the satisfaction of South Australians with government services by 10% by 2010, maintaining or exceeding that level thereafter.'

This target is one of three in the Plan that are aimed at improving public sector performance. Other targets relate to timeliness and transparency of decision making. The measurement tool described in this guide may be useful for collecting

information that can be used in compiling reports that detail progress in achieving these targets.

The inclusion of these targets in South Australia's Strategic Plan signals the Government's clear intention to strive for measurable improvements in customer service, and to hold chief executives and agencies accountable for such improvements.

This guide is applicable to all levels of the public sector; however, it is particularly aimed at managers and those responsible for business improvement and customer service delivery. Whilst the focus is on external customers, similar considerations can be applied to improving internal customer service.

Core principles of customer service

A customer may be defined as someone who has a direct relationship with, or is directly affected by, your agency and who receives, or relies on, one or more of your agency's services or products.

Three principles, drawn from the Code of Conduct for South Australian Public Sector Employees, form the basis of our approach to customer service.

These are:

Integrity

Integrity is related to the intent or meaning behind your actions. It requires service delivery that is

impartial and professional, and advice that is frank, apolitical and based on comprehensive research that allows for objective decision making.

Respect

Respect for customers is demonstrated by treating them with dignity, fairness and sensitivity, according to their circumstances and specific needs.

Accountability

Accountability is about fair and consistent decision making, where innovative solutions are sought and issues of confidentiality are respected.

Leading and modelling a culture of customer service

Good customer service depends on leaders who empower their employees to meet the needs of customers through a clear sense of direction and purpose. They instil courage and develop in their staff competencies to act in the public interest.

Public sector leaders and those who influence service delivery and outcomes have a responsibility to the South Australian community to ensure that:

- > the community has confidence and trust in public agencies and services;
- > customer needs are addressed, as these

are directly related to the degree of customer satisfaction with a service;

- > unnecessary barriers to accessing services and information and to doing business are removed;
- > customers feel they are listened to and have a voice in providing feedback on the services they receive;
- > customers are at the heart of planning and policy setting;
- > staff are competent and adequately trained and supported to deliver high-quality services.

Fundamental elements of effective customer service

The following elements are helpful to consider when thinking about or reviewing the customer's experience:

- 1 Identify and understand your customers
- 2 Build a customer service strategy
- 3 Recruit and manage the right people
- 4 Develop customer service charters and/or service standards
- 5 Shape policy and practice with the help of your customers

1 Identify and understand your customers

Seek direct feedback from your customers by asking them what they need, want and expect, so that you can obtain an understanding of their priorities. You will also gain insights into what they value from the service/product; this will enable more effective allocation of resources and services. This process of determining

customer expectations will identify things that are both realistic and unrealistic for the public sector to provide. After identifying service improvements that can be reasonably provided, ensure they are in line with customer expectations. Expectations should be openly discussed and managed.

2 Build a customer service strategy

An effective customer service strategy puts the customer at the centre of the business and its corporate-planning process. A customer service strategy consists of a vision, an action plan, an implementation plan and the measurement of improvement. These steps are detailed below.

Vision

The first step is to define the customer service vision. The customer service vision takes the agency's mission and views it from the customer's perspective. A successful vision should clearly indicate the particular services the agency will offer its customers. The vision should be communicated and endorsed across the agency for it to be shared and realised.

Action plan

The second step is to develop an action plan with a series of objectives that will assist in achieving the vision. The SMART approach is a straightforward way of developing objectives. Objectives should be:



For each objective, a series of actions will be identified that gradually build the action plan so that it delivers on the objectives in the customer service strategy. In the action plan, you might also like to identify required resources (human, financial and material) and consider key performance indicators (KPIs). The action plan is the guiding document for the implementation phase of the customer service strategy.

Implementation plan

The third step in this process is to implement the action plan. A commitment to quality service and improving service delivery requires accountability, responsibility, allocation of appropriate resources, clear time frames, measurement, effective communication, and reward and recognition for achievements. These elements of the implementation plan are essential to the overall success of the strategy.

Measure for improvement

The fourth step is to measure for improvement. In order to improve service delivery it is important to understand how people rate your product/levels of service and to be aware of what they believe needs improvement. Appendix A provides guidance on how to measure customer satisfaction.

3 Recruit and manage the right people

It is important to select employees who have the values and capabilities to meet customer standards. Clear, accurate job and person descriptions and thorough selection and induction processes that include assessment of values can assist in ensuring a good organisational fit.

Using rewards and acknowledging staff for good

quality service goes a long way toward improving service delivery and customer satisfaction.

Where staff members lack experience and/or competencies in customer service practices and delivery, provision should be made for training, mentoring or coaching.

4 Develop customer service charters and/or service standards

It is worthwhile considering the development of customer service charters and/or service standards.

Customer service charter

A customer service charter provides an opportunity to publicly document and pledge your agency's commitment to being a customer-focussed organisation. This statement is a form of mission, dedicated to customers. Your charter may also state your agency's fundamental service principles, values, standards and feedback mechanisms. Refer to Appendix B for guidelines on how to develop a customer service charter.

Service standards

Service standards clearly outline the level of service

a customer can expect when dealing with an agency or service provider. They are measurable indicators or levels that are agreed upon to ensure that products or services are of the desired quality. Standards may measure the outcome of the service or the process of giving the service. A good approach is to allow your customers to provide input on what their expectations are with regard to service standards. For example, a customer may expect that a voicemail will be returned within 24 hours - in this case, it is not necessary to commit to a service standard of returning a message within four hours. Service standards should be communicated to internal and external customers.

5 Shape policy and practice with the help of your customers

Public sector policies and practices should be developed through consultation with our many community and stakeholder groups. The expertise and opinion of our customers, commercial enterprises and the not-for-profit sector is to be valued and should not be ignored.

Effective community engagement requires specialist

skills, careful planning and coordination at local and state levels.

The challenge for agencies is to develop partnerships that will allow communities to be heard and their expectations met. This will give us the opportunity to inform and inspire the future direction of the public service.

Conclusion

In order to put customers at the heart of the public sector, it is essential to understand their needs and to measure their satisfaction levels. Basic customer service consists of understanding what your customer needs, and delivering it.

Both the personal and practical sides of customer service are important, and customers

expect both to be carried out effectively.

Service improvement is possible only with ongoing commitment to listening to customers and allowing them to guide your service improvement initiatives. This will also provide supporting evidence for how your agency is meeting the new customer satisfaction target in South Australia's Strategic Plan.

Appendix A: A practical guide for measuring customer satisfaction

Introduction

This section will assist you to measure customer satisfaction in line with the new target (1.7) in South Australia's Strategic Plan and with the household survey that has been given in-principle agreement by the Executive Committee of Cabinet (ExComm). Chief executives will need to set the parameters for customer satisfaction measurement, that is, which agencies/services should be measured and reported upon and how often these measurements should occur.

The tool included in this guide, the Common Measurement Tool (CMT), has been adapted from the Canadian public service model and is flexible enough to be used alone or in components to support your existing customer satisfaction

methodologies and measures. Within the CMT you will find core questions; these questions are based on research into what drives satisfaction with public sector service delivery. By using these questions, you will be better able to determine and assess levels of satisfaction and priorities for service improvement. The CMT question bank also includes an additional 150 questions that can be used across different service delivery channels and types of service. The CMT is based on public sector best practice and is highly recommended.

By identifying areas that require improved customer service, you can take positive steps to move your agency and the public service closer to the target.

What is customer satisfaction?

Customer satisfaction refers to how satisfied customers are with the products or services they receive from your agency. This satisfaction is determined by the quality and type of customer experience and by their expectations.

Regardless of the type of public service provided, there are some common 'drivers' that influence levels of customer satisfaction. Drivers are those elements of service that account for a large proportion of

satisfaction. Not only is it possible to measure these and other drivers, but also such measurements can be instrumental in assessing and improving overall levels of satisfaction. There are a number of drivers that influence customer satisfaction, but Canadian research has identified the following five drivers as being of key importance for customers. These are: timeliness, outcome, knowledge, extra mile and fairness. The eight core questions outlined in step three, below, measure these drivers.

Measuring customer satisfaction

A new model

Canada has been identified as a world leader in citizen-centred public sector service delivery. Part of Canada's success can be attributed to its development and utilisation of the Common Measurement Tool (CMT). For more detailed information on the Canadian approach or the CMT, please visit <http://www.iccs-isac.org/>.

The South Australian Government has purchased a licence for the CMT and has adapted it to the local context to help improve customer satisfaction and service delivery in the public sector. At a minimum, agencies are strongly encouraged to assess customer satisfaction against the eight core questions/statements. Agencies are further encouraged to use those additional CMT questions that may be applicable and relevant.

Five key steps to measuring customer satisfaction

Step 1 Develop a plan

Step 2 Determine the best approach for assessing customer satisfaction

Step 3 Ask for feedback – what to include

Step 4 Turn customer feedback into useful information

Step 5 Present the results and improve customer service

Step 1 Develop a plan

Planning is a critical stage in the measurement of customer satisfaction.

Why measure customer satisfaction?

It is important to be clear about why you are measuring customer satisfaction: what purpose does the measurement serve, which customers do you want to survey, what information are you seeking and what outcome is your agency anticipating?

Are you doing it to:

- > identify customer needs and expectations;
- > revise, correct or improve a process;
- > guide planning, decision making, and resource allocation;
- > report against the customer satisfaction target in South Australia's Strategic Plan, in conjunction with your department;

> reward and recognise employees?

What will you do with the results? Will they be:

- > provided as feedback to your customers (including information about how their feedback is contributing to service improvement plans and priorities);
- > presented to the executive management group and/or staff;
- > provided as information for service delivery improvements;
- > used in future business planning;
- > used in reports to ExComm?

Be mindful of not overburdening customers with frequent requests for feedback and inconveniencing them with lengthy measurement methods. Be sure to explain to customers what will happen with the results.

Step 2 Determine the best approach for assessing customer satisfaction

There is no one best approach for assessing customer satisfaction. Your success will depend on a combination of factors related to your agency and the answers to the questions explored in your planning phase. Considerations include: customer segmentation, data collection approach and method, whether to use qualitative or quantitative data, and the survey sample size.

Conducting a customer satisfaction exercise is a major project and should be designed and analysed by people with statistical expertise. Further information for statistical experts on the best approach for assessing customer satisfaction, including determining the appropriate sample size, can be found at http://www.iccs-isac.org/eng/pubs/ICCS_CustSurveyManual.pdf.

Step 3 Ask for feedback - what to include

As a general rule when measuring customer satisfaction, the following should be considered:

Introduction

Sets out the purpose of the feedback and guides the customer through the questions. This is important, as it is your opportunity to explain to your customers the purpose and scope of the feedback being sought. You may also wish to include information on what will happen with the information being collated.

Measurement

Asks customers to describe their experience, needs and desires (often on a scaling system). These are the fundamental questions within the survey, providing information on client experiences, expectations and needs.

Customer information

Gathers data that will be used to classify respondents, for example, age, gender, occupation, etc. This demographic information may be used to provide further detail on clients, or to provide analytical information on links between responses and demographic groupings (for example, learning about the satisfaction of the elderly with government websites).

Always be conscious of the amount of time that will be required by the customer to complete the feedback – a time limit of 10–15 minutes is common practice. Beyond this, people may feel that too much

time is required.

Finally, you should also consider how you would incorporate the eight core questions (opposite) into your feedback approach in order to enable your agency to assess customer satisfaction and report to ExComm. Widespread use of these eight core questions will also allow for benchmarking and learning from public sector best practices.

What are the eight core questions/statements to include?

To simplify and align customer satisfaction measurement practices across the public sector, a set of eight questions and statements (referred to as the core questions) has been developed. These core questions aim to measure the key drivers of customer satisfaction. Use of these eight questions will create consistency and enable direct and comparative measurement of customer satisfaction across agencies. All agencies are strongly encouraged to use these to assess customer satisfaction.

The eight core questions follow. They are made up of three summary questions and five other questions that measure the key drivers of customer satisfaction.

The suggested rating scale should also be used to allow for easy benchmarking with other departments and agencies. You will note that the rating scale changes according to the context of the questions.

The eight core questions to measure customer satisfaction

Summary Questions

| Drivers | Questions/Statements | Satisfaction | | | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------|---|---|---|----------------|
| | | Very dissatisfied | | | | Very satisfied |
| 1 Overall Satisfaction | How satisfied were you with the overall quality of service delivery? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 Accessibility | Overall, how satisfied were you with the accessibility of the service/product? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 Timeliness | Overall, how satisfied were you with the amount of time it took to get the service? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Other Core Questions

| Drivers | Questions/Statements | Agreement | | | | | Importance | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|-------------------|---|---|---|----------------|----------------------|---|---|---|----------------|---|----|
| | | Strongly disagree | | | | Strongly agree | Not at all important | | | | Very important | | |
| 4 Fairness | I was treated fairly | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA |
| 5 Information | I was informed of everything I had to do to get the service/product | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA |
| 6 Knowledge / Competence | Staff were knowledgeable and competent | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA |
| 7 Extra mile / Courtesy | Staff went the extra mile to make sure I got what I needed | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | NA |

| Drivers | Questions/Statement | Satisfaction | | |
|-----------|--|--------------|----|-----------------------------|
| 8 Outcome | In the end, did you get what you needed? | Yes | No | I got part of what I needed |

Measurement and surveying, however, are not limited to these eight questions. We also encourage agencies to tailor measurement methodologies by

including additional questions available from the CMT question bank, which can be found at www.grc.sa.gov.au.

Step 4 Turn customer feedback into useful information

Preparing feedback

Preparing and storing feedback (data) is important for effective analysis and review. It should be entered and stored in a repository, such as a database or Excel spreadsheet.

Analysing feedback

The analysis of feedback must be undertaken by a skilled statistical analysis practitioner. Some departments have internal experts that can undertake this analysis, while others enlist the assistance of experts to provide this service. By analysing customer feedback (data), you should be able to identify the things that most heavily influence a customer's satisfaction. It is important to analyse and interpret the data to ensure that suggestions for meaningful improvements can be made.

Developing recommendations to improve service delivery

Priority areas for improvement are those that

have the most direct effect on overall customer satisfaction – these are the elements that will deliver the greatest impact for your customers. In decision making, ask yourself: what do we do first, what action/s will provide the best improvement in overall customer satisfaction, what improvement or enhancements are worth making, what can we feasibly do with current resources?

Most importantly, it is essential to *do something* with the results of your customer surveys. Even relatively small improvements can significantly and positively impact on overall client satisfaction. In addition, each effort at service improvement that is based on the feedback provided by your customers will serve to strengthen overall customer relationships; the level of trust and confidence will begin to build as they witness the impact of their feedback on service delivery.

Step 5 Present the results and improve customer service

It is advisable that the results of measurement processes be reported to executive, senior management and staff, so that all are aware of the current level of customer satisfaction within your agency. With executive endorsement, this will encourage a collective responsibility to implement the service improvement actions. The customers involved would also value receipt and recognition of the results, as well as the action to be taken.

Presentation methods should be tailored for the audience; these could include formal written and statistical reports (where your customer base is

heavily involved or deeply connected), executive summaries, personal presentations, brochures, newsletter articles, and intranet and Internet postings.

Simple, graphic presentations of data are a powerful way to display findings and are generally easy to understand. Other methods include: describing trends, showing percentages, comparing groups and their responses, and using diagrams.

While it is great to have made the effort to collect customer feedback, the critical work is in the implementation of actions to improve your customer service. This is an ongoing need, not a one-off event.



Appendix B: How to develop a customer service charter

A customer service charter seeks to communicate in plain language an agency's policy and commitment to customer service. There are many ways to develop a charter. A suggested approach is to follow these steps:



Step 1 Develop a commitment to service

A customer service charter provides an opportunity to publicly document and pledge your agency's commitment to being a customer-focussed organisation. This statement is a form of mission,

dedicated to customers. Your charter may also state your agency's fundamental service principles or values.

Step 2 Identify your customers

In order to deliver services that are relevant for customers, it is necessary to identify and understand your customers, both internal and external to your

agency. Whilst the charter is a commitment to the customers of South Australia, it is also a commitment to good internal customer relationships.

Step 3 Make a list of services

It is helpful for customers to have ready access to relevant information on the services that agencies offer. Develop a list of the broad services that your agency provides and research and implement appropriate forms of communication and marketing. This communication and marketing should be

targeted at increasing awareness of, and accessibility to, these services for the customer. For example, listing services that use government acronyms or terminology that is specific to government will not help customers in understanding the range and scope of services being offered.

Step 4 Consult with customers

To evaluate the services you provide, it is beneficial to consult your customers and ask their opinions. There are many ways that feedback can be sought. It is important to select appropriate methodologies

(refer Appendix A). Regular consultation can lead to meaningful improvements and more accurate meeting of customer needs.

Step 5 Set service standards

Service standards are measurable indicators or levels that are agreed upon to ensure that products or services are of the desired quality. Standards may measure the outcome of the service or the

process of giving the service. A good approach is to allow your customers to provide input on what their expectations are with regard to service standards.

Step 6 Analyse complaints and other feedback

Sometimes, even with the best intentions, things go wrong. Information for customers on a complaints or grievance process, and to whom they should register their concern, will enable customers to have their complaints dealt with fairly and quickly and, if necessary, enable steps to be put in place to

rectify any further problems. Remember, a complaint resolved to the customer's satisfaction can lead to increased customer confidence and trust. Customers may also want to provide positive feedback and/or suggestions about services and would need to understand how they can do this.

Step 7 Publish a charter

Charters, made readily available to customers and displayed prominently in public areas within your agency, reinforce messages. A charter tells

customers what they can expect and what your agency and its employees have made a commitment to.

Step 8 Monitor performance

To successfully determine performance against the service standards outlined in your charter, it is necessary to establish a measurement system and regularly monitor your service against these

standards. The monitoring system should be clearly linked to your customer service measurement, as outlined in Appendix A.



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