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MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

A SHORT INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

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This guide is based on my original Dutch-language booklet *Handleiding klantentevredenheidsmetingen voor de publieke sector*. Brussel & Leuven: Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap & Instituut voor de Overheid (2006). It is work in progress, and updated versions will become available in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

This introductory guide is written for people working in the public sector with little or no prior experience with customer satisfaction surveying. The focus of this guide is on the traditional satisfaction survey, but it also introduces other methods for measuring customer satisfaction. The guide presents a step-by-step approach to designing your own survey and interpreting it.

The central message of this guide is that measuring satisfaction is important for public sector organisations, but that applying advanced techniques and methods is useless if they do not ultimately lead to service improvement.

Much of this guide is based on a similar one written in Dutch for the Flemish Government (Belgium) in 2005-6. Some of the examples in this guide are based on my experience in Flanders and the UK, but there is no reason why they should not also be relevant for public services elsewhere.

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1 THE RIGHT INSTRUMENT FOR THE RIGHT OCCASION

The focus of this guide is on the traditional customer satisfaction survey, but it is not limited to just surveys. There are many alternatives to the traditional survey for consulting users. In some circumstances, these alternatives are better and more economical than the traditional survey. While traditional surveys are popular, they also tend to be rather expensive and they require considerable investments in people and time. Sometimes, instruments other than traditional surveys offer a much better alternative for consulting customers. This is especially the case for smaller organisations, where staff, time, and specific expertise are not always available. Choosing the right instrument for the right occasion is of central importance.

We subsequently introduce *mystery shopping*, whereby an anonymous person tests the service delivery process; *focus groups* where a group of customers or stakeholders participate in an in-depth discussion about the service; analysis of *customer complaints*, whereby a systematic analysis of complaints and suggestions reveals trends and weaknesses; *staff surveys*, whereby information about service delivery is collected by interviewing staff; and *process analysis*, whereby the analysis of process- and performance indicators reveals quality deficits, and hence likely causes for customer dissatisfaction.

The choice of an instrument depends on a wide range of considerations. Apart from practical considerations, the most important factors determining choice relate to what your organisation hopes to achieve by consulting customers. Below, we list a number of basic questions that need to be answered before starting *any* consultation.

1.1 CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING AN INSTRUMENT

I. Aim of the consultation: a representative image or identifying concrete opportunities for improvement?

When the main aim of a customer consultation is to identify possibilities for concrete and specific improvement, *any* information is useful. Every single complaint or suggestion may lead to an improvement. A single complaint, however, does not tell us how many customers consider this aspect as problematic. We give a simple example: A customer complains and wants services to be opened after 6pm, because this allows the customer to deal with his business after returning from work. It is of course possible that this customer's preference is an isolated one, and that most customers would prefer a Saturday morning opening to a late evening opening. To uncover the relative weight of both preferences, relying on complaints is insufficient, because the threshold and cost for complaining about opening hours is actually rather high for customers. A representative customer survey would obviously be a better option in this case.

For an organisation with little experience and tradition in quality management and user consultation, a representative customer consultation is probably not the best first step onto the quality ladder. A light-version consultation instrument for uncovering a number of smaller specific improvements is then recommended.

II. Absolute and relative cost

Budgetary factors are a relevant consideration when selecting a customer consultation method. A general survey of a large group of users is much more expensive than focus groups with just a limited number of participants. But it is not only absolute cost that matters, but also the proportion between the cost of the satisfaction measurement and the organisation's overall budget. Spending £10,000 is easier to justify for a larger organisation than it is for a smaller one. Potential benefit of the customer consultation should prevail. If it is expected that the consultation will unleash a great potential for improvement, a higher cost is justified. When however the consultation is just organised to complement a series of indicators, costs quickly become excessive.

III. Time

Timing is another important factor. Organising a customer satisfaction survey from design to reporting may take months. It is therefore not the best instrument in a situation where urgent measures are required to improve service delivery. Also when things are not urgent, don't expect customers to fill out your survey when *you* want it. Quite some time may elapse between mailing out questionnaires and receiving the last answers. Finally, don't underestimate the time required for analysis and reporting.

IV. Expertise in the organisation

Using certain methods requires certain specialist skills. To organise a survey, organisations need expertise for drafting a questionnaire or for statistical analysis. Focus groups require a skilled neutral facilitator, who can smooth the progress of the conversations and summarise them. The sophistication of a method determines the level of expertise needed. An analysis of process- or complaints data can be very basic, but can also become quite sophisticated. A staff- or customer survey can be done very simply by talking to a number of staff or customers, but it could also mean a large-scale survey has to be organised. When such expertise is not available in the organisation, seeking external support is likely to increase the overall cost of the project, and absence of internal expertise also impedes the possibility to control the quality of the work delivered by the external contractor. This may ultimately lead to a strong dependence on an external company.

V. Information already available in the organisation

The information available or not available in the organisation limits the range of useful consultation methods. For customer surveys, you need a complete and correct database of customers, and you need to be able to actually easily contact your customers. To be able to analyse complaints, there of course have to be complaints. The selection of an instrument does not only depend on the availability of information, but it should also be influenced by an optimal use of existing information.

VI. Relations with customers

Organisations that have strong links with their customers will have fewer problems in obtaining a high response rate in a customer survey. The customer consultation in itself may also be used to strengthen links with customers, rather than just to collect information about service delivery. Some organisations and local governments, for instance, have opted for giving all users or all inhabitants a chance to participate in the survey.

Special efforts are needed to reach customers in a dependent situation. For them, expressing their real opinion about quality-related problems in the organisation, or complaining about staff they frequently interact with, is potentially threatening, because they will continue to use the service in the future. Sometimes, a close relationship between customer and the person delivering the service leads to specific challenges for surveying customers.

Finally, a satisfaction survey creates expectations of reform, and failure to improve service delivery after the survey may put future relations with customers at risk.

VII. Service and customer characteristics

Certain customer groups are less inclined to spontaneously offer suggestions or to file complaints. Absence of formal complaints therefore does not mean there are no complaints. An analysis of complaints is then not a very suitable instrument to map service quality deficits. Some customers are easy to convince to participate in a focus group, while for others doing so is impossible to combine with their busy professional and private life. Organisations with many lower educated or illiterate customers obviously cannot rely on mail surveys. It may also be clear that it doesn't make much sense to use mystery shoppers in organisations with few clients and where front-line staff therefore personally know each and every customer.

VIII. Relevant experience with customer consultation and quality management

A final important consideration when choosing an instrument for consulting your customers is relevant prior experience. Many methods require at least some experience, and experience in total quality management is cumulative. An organisation that has no experience whatsoever in consulting customers should not suddenly want to organise an elaborate customer satisfaction survey. A gradual build-up leads to a much better consultation, and allows the organisation to internalise experience with consultation methods. When instruments and methods change too fast, an organisation tends to become dependent on external support, and the organisation does not accumulate and internalise methodological skills. Customer consultations, in whatever form, do not only generate information about customers' views, but they also introduce the organisation's staff to new methods and policy skills.

1.2 INSTRUMENTS

I. Focus groups

Focus groups do not always get the consideration they deserve. Focus groups bring a number of customers together to discuss several aspects of service delivery. These meetings can be repeated with different types of customers (elderly, young, immigrant …). This method requires an experienced moderator, but these moderator skills are rather easy to develop in certain people. Focus groups are a necessary preparation for customer satisfaction surveys. By organising a focus group, the risk that certain elements are simply forgotten in the design of the questionnaire is reduced. The survey then helps to measure the dispersion and representativity of certain complaints heard in the focus groups.

Focus group allow for an in-depth understanding of the reasons why people are dissatisfied with service delivery, and what their wishes are for future service delivery. In addition, they are relatively easy and cheap to organise. All what is needed is a neutral person to facilitate and lead the discussion, who can stimulate all people to have their say, yet someone who does not interfere. The results of focus group meetings are not necessarily representative for the entire group of customers. When communicating about the findings, it is important to reflect all views and opinions in an unbiased way. Focus group results are qualitative results, and can therefore not be summarised into a number of statistics. This sometimes makes the method appear less attractive to policy makers.

II. Mystery shopping

In mystery shopping, a trained, anonymous mystery shopper visits an organisation or uses a service following a certain scenario. This person acts as a customer and reports about his experience. The best known example of mystery shopping must be the Michelin-guide restaurant inspectors, but also in the public sector, we see more and more applications. The technique is also popular with consumer organisations. The method is especially useful to evaluate very concrete and tangible aspects of service delivery, and to test processes. By using impressions and snapshots, mystery shopping allows for a fast identification of quick fixes. A disadvantage is that the method does not help us to reveal customers' wishes or needs. An injudicious use of the method may leave staff feeling betrayed and spied upon.

III. Analysis of complaints

Customer complaints are free feedback for an organisation. They should therefore be cherished. Analysing complaints allows the organisation to detect trends and trouble spots: Who is complaining? About what? Are complaints about staff, processes, forms, legislation? Complaints are valuable for detecting opportunities for concrete improvements, and trends in complaints show whether changes in service delivery have lead to the desired result. A good registration of complaints is therefore necessary.

The analysis of complaints should not remain limited to formal complaints. Verbal complaints at the counter or complaints that reach your organisation through politicians or the media are at least as informative. Another source of information consists of ombudsman reports. It is also very helpful to hear about complaints in similar organisations, because they allow you to pre-actively discover potential problems in your organisation. An analysis made by a similar organisation may tell you a lot about problems in you own organisation.

The most important challenge with complaints is to convince your customers to actually complain. Complaints are generally not representative for the entire group of customers, because not everyone complains, even when confronted with similar problems. One complaint about an aspect of service delivery generally conceals a number of other latent complaints. An organisation receiving fewer complaints is not necessarily a better-functioning organisation, but may simply be an organisation that is not open for complaints, or that even unconsciously discourages customers from complaining. Most customers do not complain spontaneously, but need to be facilitated in doing so. Formal and mental thresholds should therefore be removed to the degree possible.

The location of the complaints manager in the organisation determines how complaints will be dealt with: is he just someone who follows up individual complaints and who collects information for the quality department, or does he play a prominent role in wider quality improvement initiatives?

IV. Staff survey

Your own staff is often the most valuable source of information about the service delivery. Especially front-line staff is rather well-aware about customers' opinions and about problems in delivery. They are the ones who are confronted with complaints every day. This information is of course not complete, because staff develops ways of dealing with this information, which could make it rather selective. They interpret certain comments as valuable information, while in other cases the customer is considered being a difficult person. Front-line officials develop their own routines for dealing with customers (Lipsky, 1980).

Staff surveys can be very informal but they can also become a recurrent and formalised procedure. Focus groups can be organised with different types of staff rather than with customers. A key precondition is to create an open atmosphere where staff is stimulated to comment on how the organisation is functioning, and where staff is actively involved in improvement initiatives.

V. Process analysis

In a process analysis, every single step in the process of delivering a service is being mapped. This allows for identifying bottle-necks, redundant steps, and possibilities for merging different transactions into one single transaction. In a process analysis, processes are also evaluated by looking at objective performance indicators: how long does delivering the service take, how long are waiting times, how many files need to be reopened due to mistakes etc.

Depending on the information already available in the organisation, and the way how this information is being stored and used, process analysis can be a very easy or a very demanding exercise. Process analysis should in any case be the first step of any quality improvement or customer consultation initiative: when your organisation does not know how a service transaction is actually organised, it makes no sense to organise focus groups or customer surveys.

1.3 CONCLUSION: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The table summarises strengths and weaknesses of the customer consultation methods we have dealt with and compares them to the traditional customer satisfaction survey. A minus indicates that the instrument is scoring rather weak on a criterion; a plus indicates a good match.

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages of a number of consultation and quality instruments

	Uncovering concrete improvements	Knowing customer desires and preferences	Representativity	User participation	Price
Customer survey	+/-	+	+	+	--
Mystery shopping	++	-	-	-	+
Focus group	+	++	+/-	+/-	+
Complaint analysis	++	+/-	-	+/-	+
Staff survey	+	+	-	-	+/-
Process analysis	+/-	-	-	-	+/-

Surveys are not always the best alternative to consult customers and identify opportunities for improvement. Surveys are an expensive way for gathering information about customers' attitudes towards a specific public service. Their popularity can in part be explained by number fetishism, or the desire to summarise attitudes into a single score. Surveys do allow for constructing a detailed and representative map of the service user, but in practice reporting is often limited to a number of one-dimensional tables without further analysis. This is of course an effective way for communication with hierarchical levels, politicians, and stakeholders. But does it in the end contribute to what customer consultation is all about, the improvement of services? Not necessarily. When customer surveys are the first step in the quality process of an organisation, then something is wrong. There are instruments that are better suited at this stage.

As they are depicted in the table, these instruments work cumulatively: generally, it doesn't make sense to move to a higher or more sophisticated level if more basic instruments have not first been used to map reasons for dissatisfaction with the service. Implementing a general customer satisfaction survey does not make sense when an organisation does not have a functioning system for dealing with complaints, or when even the most basic process- or performance indicators are not available.

Consecutive use of the instruments leads to an increasingly higher proficiency in using customer consultation methods. Questionnaires will be better and more focused when questionnaire construction is preceded by e.g., a survey of front-line staff or a number of focus groups. By gradually working towards a customer survey, the risk of omitting important aspects of service delivery becomes smaller. If in a series of focus groups none of the participants complained about the decoration of the waiting room, odds are that a question on this in the survey will not add much value. Customer consultation methods are used in a cumulative process aimed at improving service delivery. Every consultation should ultimately lead to initiatives to improve service delivery. It does therefore not make sense to organise a new consultation when the recommendations of the previous one have not yet been acted upon. It is also our opinion that measuring customer satisfaction does not make sense when satisfaction scores will only be used as a monitoring instrument. This leads to ritualised consultations rather than action-oriented consultations aimed at improving service.

Depending on what an organisation wants to do with the information, one instrument is better than another: the right instrument at the right place. The wide range of available instruments and methods shows that there is actually no excuse *not* to consult customers. Customer consultation should happen systematically, and this does not necessarily require expensive instruments. It is not terribly labour- and time-intensive for a (quality)manager to sit down with a customer and a cup of coffee every now and then, or to randomly call a customer to check how he or she would evaluate the service. It does not require a great deal, but it should happen. This kind of initiatives should therefore be planned. If not, they are easily postponed or forgotten, because they are not seen as a priority. Nothing is as detrimental to service quality as the manager or front-line worker who does not make 'time' to deal with this kind of 'details'.

Looking at what other organisations are doing is essential. We can learn a lot from other organisations, especially when they offer similar services. Two similar organisations are likely to be faced with similar problems. It is therefore important to look at the strengths and weaknesses of other organisations to learn about one's own problems. This does not require extensive customer surveys.

2 A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH TO THE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

In this chapter, we will focus on a number of more practical issues when organising a customer satisfaction survey. The chapter is written as a step-by-step approach, where issues are being dealt with in the order you will normally encounter them when organising a survey. The step-by-step approach deals with the following aspects:

1. The 'why?' question
2. Building commitment
3. Delineating the research and preparation
4. Designing the questionnaire
5. Data collection
6. Analysis and interpretation
7. Improvement strategy and communication

2.1 THE 'WHY?' QUESTION

"Why do we want to do this" should be the central question when an organisation starts thinking about a customer satisfaction survey. What do we hope to attain? Is what we are doing necessary, or are there alternatives?

I. Different reasons for organising a customer survey

There are different reasons why an organisation would want to organise a customer survey (1-4). The precise reason for organising the survey will influence the final research design. The 'why?' question defines to a large extent how the final survey will look like. Possible reasons to organise a survey are listed below:

1. *Detecting potential for improvement*.
   - *Aim*: The measurement is used to collect information about concrete aspects of service delivery that go wrong or can be improved. The measurement makes critical elements in service delivery visible. Through the customer survey, customers can transfer their suggestions to the organisation
   - *Relevant considerations in the design of the survey*: The threshold for making specific suggestions should be sufficiently low. A fully standardised survey instrument with closed questions does not stimulate customers to give concrete suggestions. Some suggestions can be

used immediately, but sometimes the organisation needs to check how much support suggestions have. An improvement for one group of customers may be seen as a step back for other customers.

2. *Detecting reasons and causes for satisfaction and dissatisfaction.*
   - *Aim:* A customer survey gives a detailed picture of the customers' opinion. Even when the survey does not deliver tangible suggestions for improvement, multivariate analysis allows for establishing the contribution of different factors to satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and hence the likely effect of changes in service delivery.
   - *Relevant considerations in the design of the survey*: The sample needs to be sufficiently large to allow for analysis. Naturally, the analysis cannot uncover causal factors that have not been included in the questionnaire. It is therefore important to use a quite extensive questionnaire covering a wide range of issues.

3. *Benchmarking, collecting data for comparing satisfaction.*
   - *Aim:* Customer satisfaction surveys allow for a quantification of customer attitudes. This makes it possible for an organisation to compare satisfaction scores to those obtained in similar organisations. Repeated measurement in time allows for assessing the effect of earlier quality improvement initiatives.
   - *Relevant considerations in the design of the survey:* The customer satisfaction survey needs a great deal of standardisation. Even minor changes in the questionnaire may have an impact on satisfaction scores. Comparing satisfaction across organisations and in time is not as obvious as it looks, because satisfaction scores are not just influenced by experienced service quality. Certain types of services will always get higher satisfaction scores than others.

4. *Participation, strengthening ties with the customers and users.*
   - *Aim:* A customer survey may help to stimulate customer participation and strengthen customers' attachment to the organisation. The consultation of users may in itself already contribute to higher satisfaction.
   - *Relevant considerations in the design of the survey:* How are respondents being selected: Which groups will receive a questionnaire and which won't? Will we survey the entire (customer) population, or just a sample? Organising a survey leads to expectations with regard to future quality of service delivery. How will we deal with this?

II. Other reasons for organising a satisfaction survey

Apart from the official reasons for organising a satisfaction survey, we see that organisations also have non-official reasons for doing so. Satisfaction surveys are quite fashionable, so organising one may give an organisation a modern managerial image: everyone is doing it, so we should do it as well or else others will see us as old-fashioned. Ritualism is a tendency to organise or repeat customer satisfaction surveys just because they have become a yearly habit or because they happen elsewhere as well, and not because they are necessary. Number fetishism exists in different types, and means that organisations are only interested in the final satisfaction score, and are not interested in reasons for this satisfaction or dissatisfaction or in possible improvements that may follow from the customer survey. The satisfaction survey is then only used to fill in some gaps in the performance information system, for the annual report, or for political reasons and external marketing.

The results of a satisfaction survey may be useful in budgetary negotiations. Low satisfaction scores are a reason to ask for more money to organise quality improvement initiatives, and high satisfaction scores may help to demonstrate that extra budgets will certainly not be wasted in the organisation.

A more recent abuse of customer satisfaction surveys is related to the use of models for self-evaluation (e.g. the Common Assessment Framework –CAF) or quality models such as EFQM. CAF for instance contains a section on ‘customer/citizen oriented results’, and ‘impact on society’. Certain organisations interpret this as an obligation to organise a full customer satisfaction survey in order to comply with the rules of the self-evaluation. The surveys are thus used to tick a box, or to comply with central government demands, rather than to improve services. Customer satisfaction surveys are also popular to measure the effect of a policy or a subsidy, because they are seen as an easy way to comply with ex-post evaluation requirements.

III. Is the survey necessary?

Once the ‘why?’ question is answered, a second one becomes important: do we need the customer satisfaction survey? All too often, that a survey is necessary is taken as a fact. Yet, sometimes it is not necessary to organise a survey, because the information is already available in another way, or because there are better ways to obtain the information.

1. Has the research already been done?

Surveys organised in similar organisations offering similar services is an often neglected source of information for designing quality improvement strategies. Within one’s own organisation, much useful information can also often be found. Has something been done with this information already?

2. Is there a better way of obtaining the information?

Even though this guide explicitly deals with customer satisfaction surveys, customer surveys are not always the best way to collect information about the quality of the service and the satisfaction of customers. Organising surveys requires expertise, time and a lot of money, while a lot of information is often already available in the organisation, be it sometimes in less apparent ways. Additionally, traditional surveys are not always the best way to reach certain specific customer groups. In the previous chapter we have already dealt with alternative instruments given the context and the aims of the satisfaction research.

IV. A checklist

As we have already indicated, an organisation should know why it wants to organise a customer satisfaction survey. In addition to the issues we have already dealt with, organisations need to screen their organisational and political context to be well-prepared to organise the survey. The questions in the box may be helpful for this purpose. They are based on a document developed by the ministry of the Flemish Community intended to determine whether a customer satisfaction survey initiative should be funded by the ministry. It helps organisations to think about certain risks and opportunities related to surveying customers and stimulates them to develop a strategic vision about consulting customers.

1. What do I hope to achieve by organising this survey?
2. What are, given the mission of our organisation, the potential benefits of a customer satisfaction survey?
3. Are there within the organisation other departments that are involved in delivering this service and that should be involved in the customer satisfaction survey process?
4. Are there any other departments or organisations that would best be involved in this customer satisfaction survey process?
5. What are the potential risks of organising this customer satisfaction survey?
6. What resources (staff, budget) are available for this survey?
   - For the preparatory phase
   - For the survey
   - For the improvement initiatives afterwards
7. What kind of follow-up is planned? How will the results be used for improving services?

(Based on: Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Administratie Personeelsontwikkeling, Argumentatiestramien voor projecten klantenbevraging).

2.2 BUILDING COMMITMENT

Customer surveys should never be the first step in an organisation's efforts to improve service delivery. A broad survey only makes sense when an organisation is already permeated by the ideas of total quality management and customer-focusedness. The success of a customer survey depends on the support from various stakeholders. These stakeholders should not only support the customer survey as such, but also the improvement initiatives that will undoubtedly follow from it.

I. Political support

By definition, public services function in a public and hence political context. Even where political attention for public services is normally limited, customer surveys will lead to increased political nervousness. No matter whether results are being interpreted right or wrong, customer surveys have a symbolical value in the political arena. Bad results reflect on those politically responsible, while good ones are invaluable in political communication. Once customer survey results enter the political arena, they become part of a game that is no longer played within the boundaries of bureaucratic and technical rationality.

Even though customer surveys are not intended to evaluate policy, it is hard to avoid that certain aspects of policy will be scrutinised using the survey results. Because of the external dimension of customer surveys, it is vital to inform political actors about the survey and about communication initiatives. Because customer survey results can also be bad, it may be essential for an organisation to have guarantees about political support. This does however not mean that political actors should be involved in the technical development of the survey.

II. Hierarchical support

It is evident that the organisational hierarchy should support the customer survey. The external dimension of surveys that is important to politicians is also important to the organisation's management. Bad results, no matter for what reason and under what kind of circumstances they were obtained, can be a potential time-bomb under the organisation. Management should therefore not only be informed about the required resources for the survey, but also about potential opportunities and threats the survey may bring.

Surveys cost money and time, and require staff. The organisers of a survey should not only make sure they have resources to organise the survey, but also that they have hierarchical support for follow-up initiatives and improvements. A good customer survey leads to concrete suggestions for improvement. Sometimes, it may be necessary to convince the hierarchy of the need for these improvements. Managers that were sceptical about the customer survey in the first place are also likely to be sceptical about suggestions based on the survey results. Politicians, managers and street-level officials often think they are well-informed about customers' views about the service delivery, but research has shown that these groups' views of customers' wishes may be very different.

III. Staff support

Some of an organisation's staff has direct contact with customers. They are the ones who hear complaints, and who experience problems with existing procedures. At the same time, the short distance to the customer may also lead to own interpretations of the organisation's mission. In any case, front-line staff is very well informed about customers' views, and it makes no sense to organise a customer survey without first listening to one's own front-line staff.

Staff may interpret a customer survey as a threat. Staff may feel that management is not satisfied with service delivery when a customer survey is being organised. Staff may also be afraid of the results of the survey and fear that customers will judge them in an unfair or very negative way. For a survey to be organised effectively, management needs to guarantee that no individual measures will be taken based on the survey results. On a reassuring note, research has frequently shown that customers' opinions about the service are often quite similar to those staff itself hold about the service, and that customers' opinions are generally rather balanced.

IV. Support from customers

For the customer survey to succeed, customers need to support it to be successful. Participating in a survey is not always evident. When customers have reservations about the survey, the survey is bound to fail or to return skewed results, for instance because not all groups of customers have participated in the survey.

Stimulating participation

People are frequently asked to participate in surveys: reader surveys in magazines, telephone surveys for marketing purposes, web surveys about the quality of a website etc. People will therefore not always be very positive about participating in a customer survey, even when they are frequent customers of a service. Participation needs to be stimulated. Communication about the survey is therefore crucial. Customers need to be reminded about the importance of their participation. Just mailing people a questionnaire is unlikely to lead to a very high response rate. Organising a survey requires frequent letters or reminders and a communication campaign. In section 2.5 we give some tips for increasing participation. Public services have the advantage and the disadvantage of being public services. Being a public service gives a questionnaire an official character that may stimulate people to participate. On the other hand, citizens may consider surveys organised by government as an unwanted intrusion into their private lives.

Reducing fears

A customer survey creates a number of threats. Customers are asked to give an opinion about people they have recently contacted or about services they depend upon. Very often, customers will use the services again after the survey. In order not to jeopardise good relations, some customers may be inclined to alter their opinion. This is especially relevant for services with socially weaker customers who are heavily dependent on the service, and for services with institutional customers, who are dependent on the service for their finances or certification and are often easily identified (even when the survey is anonymous). Customers thus need to be convinced that the service welcomes comments and is open for critical comments. Guarantees for confidentiality and anonymous processing of questionnaires may contribute to putting customers at ease.

A customer survey creates expectations

Finally, we need to mention that customer surveys create expectations. When customers are asked to participate in a survey, they expect that something will be done with the results, and that something will be done about the things they have complained about. If a customer for instance complains about the difficulties in reaching a service by telephone, he or she expects that something will change as a result of the survey. Surveys that are not followed by improvement initiatives risk creating dissatisfaction. If your organisation is only interested in the customer survey as a means for collecting indicators, and does not intend to use the results of a survey for improvements, then we advise not to organise a survey. Failure to follow-up the survey with improvement initiatives endangers the success of later surveys, or surveys organised by other organisations. External communication about the results and about improvement initiatives that are set up as a result of the survey are thus an essential element of every customer survey.

2.3 DELIMITING THE INITIATIVE AND PREPARATORY RESEARCH

Satisfaction research can be very broad. The survey may deal with all possible aspects of service delivery in an organisation. It may, apart from satisfaction, also measure needs and many other things. A selection needs to be made. The core question is: 'How relevant is it to know something about this?' A first step when preparing satisfaction research is to map service delivery: who are the customers, what kind of services are delivered; at what stage of the service delivery do customers interact with our organisation? This mapping exercise can be facilitated by consulting staff, by organising brainstorm sessions, or by organising in-depth interviews and focus groups. The quality of the final survey questionnaire will be dramatically improved if this preparatory research is taken seriously.

Mapping service delivery and subsequently designing the satisfaction research may follow two different logics: one is by focusing on certain processes; the other is by focusing on certain quality elements (speed, accuracy…).

	Quality element 1	Quality element 2	Quality element n
Process 1			
Process 1			
Process n			

Based on the preparatory research, a list of all processes and quality elements to include in the survey may be drafted. Subsequently, a selection is made. This selection should be made by people who know the service, and who know something about surveys. We advise not to involve too many people in this stage, because involving many people will lead to a very diverse range of interests and demands, and could result in a very incoherent survey when too many unrelated issues have to be included. While the political level can be involved in the preparatory stages, it is advised to limit political interference at this stage. Once the broad themes of the customer survey are decided, the development of the final questionnaire is done by methodological experts aided by some people with in-depth knowledge about the service.

2.4 DESIGNING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

I. How to design a good questionnaire?

To start, we simply quote some basic rules for drafting questionnaires from a textbook (Billiet & Waege, 2003).

1. Focus on your research questions when designing your questionnaire
2. When designing a questionnaire, use the work and experience of other researchers
3. Questions should be simple, understandable and clear
4. Questions should be written in good language, yet they should not necessarily follow the conventions of written language
5. In general, questions should be short, but there are exceptions
6. Questions should be simple and one-dimensional: questions should contain just one attitudinal object
7. Avoid double negations
8. Present all answer categories to the respondent in a clear way
9. A question should not be based on unrealistic suppositions about the level of knowledge of the respondent
10. When drafting a questionnaire, make sure to distinguish between questions about facts and opinions
11. Give a precise and acceptable definition of the central concepts used in the questions
12. Consider question order carefully

13. Provide a general introduction to the questionnaire, and smaller introductions to each part
14. Take care of the layout

Taken, translated and adapted from Billiet & Waege (ed.), 2003

II. A good design stimulates participation and helps reducing mistakes

When the layout of a questionnaire is attractive, people get stimulated to participate in a customer survey. Boring or excessively long questionnaires jeopardise people's willingness to participate and may result in lower response or even half-completed questionnaires. It is therefore important to bring variation into the questionnaire. Long questionnaires with pages and pages of very similar questions are very boring, and it is not unlikely for respondents to give up half-way. Variation also makes sure the respondent remains concentrated. Difficult and easy questions should be alternated, to keep the respondent motivated.

Questionnaires should be tested extensively, both for technical and for content-related errors. These tests should be done using people with very different profiles: older and younger people, higher and lower educated people etc. This should reveal the main problems related to comprehensibility and interpretation of questions. Referrals should be avoided in written questionnaires wherever possible, because this tends to lead to frequent problems[1]. Referrals should be thoroughly checked in the case of CATI or CAPI surveys[2]. Also when the fieldwork is being outsourced, it is wise to be present during the test phase, e.g. by listening to taped test-interviews, or by listening in during telephone surveys.

Answers to a question are entered into a database as a number. The speed and accuracy of this data-entry is increased by a good design of the questionnaire. Unless you rely on the scanning of questionnaires, it is helpful to add precoded numbers to the questions. Every question in the questionnaire should also get a logical number. Consider the following question:

Staff of <this service> is generally friendly

Graphically, there are several possibilities to put such a question into a paper questionnaire:

[1] E.g.: 'If you don't have children, continue with question 8'

[2] CAPI: computer-assisted personal interviewing; CATI: computer-assisted telephone interviewing. These are variations of traditional surveys whereby the respondents' answers are immediately inserted in the computers, and whereby the questionnaire only exists on the computer screen. This allows for a faster availability of data, a reduction of mistakes, and it is possible to build in automatic referrals into the questionnaire.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree, nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
q.1. Staff of <this service> is generally friendly	1	2	3	4	5

q.1. Staff of <this service> is generally friendly

Strongly disagree	O (1)
Disagree	O (2)
Neither agree, nor disagree	O (3)
Agree	O (4)
Strongly agree	O (5)

III. Question order

The order of the questions may have an impact on how they will be answered, and even on *whether* they will be answered.

Context

Putting the same question in different places in the questionnaire, may lead to different answers, because the context within which respondents formulate their answers has changed. A series of specific questions will have an influence on a subsequent question, because they build a certain context. We find a very good example in the 'Communication Canada' surveys[3]: Near the beginning of the survey, the following question was included: '*Generally speaking, how would you rate the performance of the government of Canada'*. Later, when respondents had answered a series of questions on the performance of government on a number of domains, the question was repeated: '*Now that you have had an opportunity to think about the Government of Canada's priorities and performance in more detail I'd like to ask you again- generally speaking, how would you rate the performance of the Government of Canada?'* The second time, the number of respondents that rated the performance of government in a positive way had increased from 29% to 40%. In the course of the survey, respondents' framework of reference gradually shifted towards the elements contained in the series of specific questions. Mind that none of these two scores is the 'right' one. This example shows how important context is when interpreting survey results. A question on ethnic diversity will lead to

[3] Now 'Public Works and Government Services Canada'

different answers when preceded by a series of questions about culture, than when it would be preceded by questions on terrorism and crime. There is no correct question order. Being consequent is what matters. When questionnaires constantly change, it becomes impossible to make comparisons, even when the same questions are used.

Order-effects

There is one major exception to what we just said. Sometimes, answers are being rotated to avoid so-called order effects. When respondents are e.g. asked to choose 3 quality improvement measures from a list of 10, then it is very plausible that the first ones in the list (and indeed also the very last ones in a long list) will be picked more often, because not everyone bothers to read the list till the end, and just pick the first options that make sense to them. This kind of effects can be mitigated by having different versions of the same questionnaire with a different order of possible answers.

Threatening questions

A questionnaire starting with questions on family income or sexual preferences are likely to encounter much resistance. Sensitive and personal questions should thus not be at the beginning of the questionnaire. Instead, the questionnaire should start with some pleasant, non-threatening questions, and gradually introduce more sensitive questions.

IV. The introduction to the questionnaire

A questionnaire starts with a good introduction. It should provide the respondent with sufficient information about the satisfaction research. This information should be written in an engaging way in order to stimulate people to participate in the survey. While respondents retain the option to refrain from participating, a number of thresholds and stimuli can be built into the design. The contact person mentioned on correspondence should be trained to convince people, and should know how to counteract common arguments against participation. No longer receiving reminders should require some effort by respondents. Respondents can be stimulated by promising some presents or vouchers.

What should be in the introduction?

- Who is organising the survey?
- Why is it organised?
- Who is being surveyed?
- Why is it important for respondents to participate?
- Where can respondents get more information?
- What will happen with the results?
- What could the respondent reasonable expect from the survey?
- How is privacy being protected?

V. What scale do I use?

The choice of a measurement scale needs to be done very carefully. Results obtained using one scale cannot just be transferred to another scale afterwards, and a proliferation of scales makes customer satisfaction surveys more complex. Every scale has its advantages and disadvantages. What matters is that you make a choice and stick to it. There are some elements to consider:

- Pick a scale that corresponds to the general practice in your organisational or policy-environment, in order to facilitate comparison and benchmarking
- The scale should be wide enough to cover a wide range of opinions and details, but narrow enough to have a sufficient number of observations in each category. This depends on your sample size
- The scale should be symmetric, so that negative and positive answers have equal chance to be picked
- Ideally, the scale allows to capture both direction and strength of an opinion
- You are able to interpret every point on the scale

In Table 2, we give some examples of how a 5-point scale may look like. When relevant, a 'does not apply' category may be added.

Table 2: Examples of a 5-point scale

	Satisfaction	**Agree/disagree**	**Quality**	**Graphic I**	**Graphic II**
	How satisfied are you with…	*Do you agree or disagree…*	*How do you rate…*		
1	Very dissatisfied	Disagree strongly	Very poor	--	☹☹
2	Fairly dissatisfied	Disagree	Fairly poor	-	☹
3	Neither satisfied not dissatisfied	Neither agree nor disagree	Neither good, nor poor	+/-	😐
4	Fairly satisfied	Agree	Fairly good	+	☺
5	Very satisfied	Agree strongly	Very good	++	☺☺
When relevant	Does not apply	Does not apply	Does not apply	Does not apply	Does not apply

VI. Do I give respondents a possibility to opt for a 'don't know' answer?

There are several reasons why people choose not to answer a question: the question is too difficult, they do not have an opinion about the issue, they think they are not knowledgeable enough to answer, the question is of a threatening nature (e.g., questions about income or sexual preferences, or knowledge questions). When the respondent has the possibility to mark the 'no answer' or 'no opinion' category, we are in fact giving him or her an easy and fast escape route, and do not stimulate him or her to sit back and think about a possible answer. Without these categories, respondents unable or unwilling to answer a question still have the option to just skip the question, or to use a neutral answer (e.g., the category in the middle of a scale).

A certain degree of item non-response should not be problematic: It is a reality that some people just do not have an opinion on certain issues. It is unlikely that all people will have strong opinions on all issues included in a survey. Finally, we need to remember that there will be situations were certain people will be unable to answer a question, because it simply does not apply to them. Therefore, sometimes a 'does not apply' answer category may be provided.

VII. Open-ended questions

Most examples thus far were about closed questions: a well defined question with a limited number of well-defined possible answers. Open-ended questions are questions without pre-defined answers. They allow respondents to elaborate on aspects that have not been included in the questionnaire, or to explain certain attitudes. They allow for guessing the respondent's general mood, and often lead to very concrete suggestions for service improvement.

Quotes from open questions can be very effective to illustrate quantitative results in a satisfaction survey report. This should be done with care, however, because these comments do not always reflect that what is in the numbers, and it is difficult to judge their representativity. The selection of quotes from specific respondents may have an important impact on the overall interpretation of the satisfaction survey report.

A questionnaire designer has a considerable degree of freedom in dealing with open questions. An open question can be inserted after each broad theme in the survey; it can be inserted at the beginning and at the end of questionnaires etc. Some examples are below.

The previous questions dealt with how our department is communicating with you. Do you have additional comments about our communication?... ……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Now that you have answered all these questions, what would you change in our service delivery: .. ……………………………………………………………………………………………………..

Or just:

Use the space below to add some final thoughts: …………………………………………………… ……..

Comments: …………………………………………………………………………………...……… ……..

These advantages come with a major disadvantage: open-ended questions are very hard to analyse. The quantitative treatment of closed questions allows for fast processing of large amounts of data, but open-ended questions result in very diverse answers, often accumulating to dozens of pages. Analysing open-ended questions requires that they are first coded and summarised. Using a coding scheme, every comment gets a code depending on the topic of the comment, on whether the comment is a positive or a negative one etc. These codes can then be quantitatively analysed (e.g., 10% of comments dealt with waiting times). Coding answers, and deciding in what category a comment should end up is a very delicate job. A possibility for avoiding personal judgment or prejudice is to have two people do the job independently, and then to compare their decisions (double-blind coding).

2.5 DATA COLLECTION

Collecting data is a time-consuming process. While an organisation can sometimes still organise the data collection for mail surveys, this becomes difficult for face-to-face or telephone surveys. Because data collection itself is generally being outsourced, we will not deal with it in detail. It is important, however, that even when data collection is outsourced, an organisation knows how the process and quality control procedures work, in order to control the work of the external contractor and the data quality. It is not because data collection is being outsourced, that there is no more work to do for your organisation: an almost daily feedback about the fieldwork considerably improves data quality.

I. How much does it cost?

Telling how much a survey costs is not really possible, because many factors, including a diversity of data collection methods, lead to considerable variation. The cost of the survey does not only depend on the fieldwork or data collection, but also on the amount of preparatory and follow-up work that is required. Several factors contribute to an increase in cost:

- Difficulty or ease to reach the customers. Surveying hard-to-interview-groups increases cost, because interviewers need to be trained better, or need to pay more house visits before an interview is granted. When using mail surveys, more reminders need to be sent.
- Differentiation of the questionnaire. When the customer survey involves several service processes, more than one questionnaire is required, and costs increase.
- The scope of preparatory and follow-up work. The usefulness of a survey increases when preparation has been more intensive, or when the design of improvement trajectories is included in the consultancy. Before the drafting of a questionnaire and data collection can start, service delivery processes need to be mapped or focus groups organised, and afterwards, communication about the results is required. This of course adds to the cost.
- The method of data collection. Having interviewers visit respondents at home is obviously more expensive than just sending a questionnaire by mail. Even within a single method, there can be considerable variation: How many reminders do we send? Do we give respondents a present?

Because it is hard to compare methods and prices, calls for tender need to be very specific about what is required, otherwise comparing tenders becomes impossible. This implies that you need to know what you want before looking for a partner. All too often, organisations engage consultants or polling companies without really knowing what they want from them

II. Who to survey?

Practical considerations

To survey your customers, you of course first need to know who your customers are. In many cases, there exists a list or database of customers, and organisations then know exactly how many customers they have, and how to reach them. In other cases, such a listing is not available, e.g. in the case of swimming pool or park users. In the case of exit surveys (where customers are surveyed immediately after using the service), this is of course not a problem.

Depending on national legislation, there are several possibilities to obtain address lists of citizens. Commercial companies also sometimes sell such lists, and can segment these based on several characteristics. No source of addresses is perfect. People move or die; there can be other mistakes in the address lists. Some people even don't feature in address lists at all. For certain special groups, such as illegal immigrants, there does of course not exist a reliable overview. If you should decide to buy addresses, make sure to check how people come to be inserted in these listings, how often these addresses are updated, how the database in general is constructed in terms of certain socio-demographic characteristics etc. It's not because a database is very elaborate and contains many addresses that it is also a representative or otherwise good database.

Surveying a sample or the entire customer population?

In most cases, only a sample of the customers is asked to participate in a survey, mainly for practical and budgetary reasons. When this sampling is done correctly, and response is not distorted, this leads to a result that is representative for the entire customer population. But there are cases where the entire population participates in the survey, e.g. when the customer population is rather small.

Giving all customers a chance to participate in a survey may increase future support for improvements, because it creates a bond between organisation and customer. Sometimes, customers are disgruntled when they see that others have received a questionnaire while they haven't. This is especially the case with citizen surveys in more politicised environments, where the fact that one had not been given a chance to participate in the survey is easily interpreted as an attempt at manipulation. Our experience has shown that it is generally hard to explain the concept of 'representative survey' to the average citizen.

Should a survey be representative?

In a representative survey, the answers of respondents reflect the opinion of the population in general. Checking whether a survey is a representative one is generally done by controlling for a number of socio-demographic and socio-economic variables: is the proportion of men to women in the sample similar to that we find in the customer population as a whole? Do we find the same proportion of lower educated people in the sample and in the population? Do we find the same age distribution?

Representativity is an important concern when you want to communicate about the survey using one single score, e.g. '65% of customers is satisfied'. When certain groups in the survey are over- or underrepresented, you cannot report about 'the' satisfaction of 'the customers'. Over- or under representation of certain groups occurs frequently, because it is well-established that certain groups of people are less inclined to participate in a survey than others.

Representativity is less of an issue when do you not want to summarise the survey results into one single satisfaction score. When the principal aim of the survey is to identify very specific opportunities for service improvement, representativity is less important, because every single comment may contain valuable information. Yet, caution is required in order not to give too much weight to the opinion of one single customer.

Surveying specific target groups

Depending on the objectives of the survey, it may be relevant to survey certain customer groups more intensively than others. Organisations are often not just interested in the opinion of the average customer, but in the opinion of specific groups, such as the elderly or recent immigrants. Because certain specific groups are often but a small group in the overall customer population, you can over-sample these groups. This means they become better represented in the overall sample, allowing distilling very specific results about these groups from the survey. Don't forget to weigh the sample when you then again want to report about the satisfaction of the average customer, because the sample is now no longer representative. Another option is of course just to limit the survey to one specific group, and not to survey other customers. Certain groups are hard to reach, or require specific methods to obtain high response rates.

Users and non-users

Organisations often only survey their customers. Surveying people who are not a customer, or who have been customers, is an often-neglected valuable source of information. It shows for instance why a person does not use trains, or why he did not apply for a certain benefit. It also shows why a person did not go to the ombudsman with a complaint, and what thresholds were to blame for this. Of special importance is a survey of former customers. It shows why a person stopped using a service. This can be due to dissatisfaction with service delivery.

Surveying non-users leads to a number of specific problems, one of which is the fact that organisations generally do not have a list of non-users, making it difficult to define and reach this group.

How many customers to survey?

Determining how many people exactly you need to interview is not possible. The size of your sample depends on a number of factors:

- Main aim of the survey: obtaining a representative image of what your customers think or a quick detection of possible areas for improvement?
- Desired accuracy
- Desired reliability of your results
- Diversity in the customer population
- Desired detail and segmentation in the analysis
- Budget

The general rule is of course that the more people you interview, the more detailed your results will be, and the more accurate your results. Confidence intervals indicate how accurate results are, and how results need to be interpreted. They can be calculated. Table 1 shows the 95% confidence intervals for a number of sample sizes and proportions (95% is the most frequently used level of confidence). You read the table as follows. When you find in a sample of 1,000 people that 40% of users are satisfied, this means that there will be 95% chance that the real proportion of satisfied customers in your population will be between 37% and 43% (40 plus or minus three, see the highlighted cell in the table). There is thus only a very minor chance that the real number of satisfied customers will be higher than 43% or lower than 37%. When the sample is smaller, this interval broadens. When you survey only 100 people out of a very large population, the real number of satisfied customers will be, with a 95% chance, between 30.4% and 49.6% (40 plus or minus 9.6, the highlighted cell in the table). Mind that it is sample size that matters, not population size.

Table 3: 95% confidence intervals given proportion and sample sizes

1	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**10**	**15**	**20**	**25**	**30**	**35**	***40***	**45**	**50**
%	**99**	**98**	**97**	**96**	**95**	**90**	**85**	**80**	**75**	**70**	**65**	***60***	**55**	**50**
n↓														
20	4,4	6,1	7,5	8,6	9,6	13,1	15,6	17,5	19	20,1	20,9	21,5	21,8	21,9
30	3,6	5	6,1	7	7,8	10,7	12,8	14,3	15,5	16,4	17,1	17,5	17,8	17,9
40	3,1	4,3	5,3	6,1	6,8	9,3	11,1	12,4	13,4	14,2	14,8	15,2	15,4	15,5
50	2,8	3,9	4,7	5,4	6	8,3	9,9	11,1	12	12,7	13,2	13,6	13,8	13,9
60	2,5	3,5	4,3	5	5,5	7,6	9	10,1	11	11,6	12,1	12,4	12,6	12,7
70	2,3	3,3	4	4,6	5,1	7	8,4	9,4	10,1	10,7	11,2	11,5	11,7	11,7
80	2,2	3,1	3,7	4,3	4,8	6,6	7,8	8,8	9,5	10	10,5	10,7	10,9	11
90	2,1	2,9	3,5	4	4,5	6,2	7,4	8,3	8,9	9,5	9,9	10,1	10,3	10,3
100	2	2,7	3,3	3,8	4,3	5,9	7	7,8	8,5	9	9,3	9,6	9,8	9,8
125	1,7	2,5	3	3,4	3,8	5,3	6,3	7	7,6	8	8,4	8,6	8,7	8,8
150	1,6	2,2	2,7	3,1	3,5	4,8	5,7	6,4	6,9	7,3	7,6	7,8	8	8
175	1,5	2,1	2,5	2,9	3,2	4,4	5,3	5,9	6,4	6,8	7,1	7,3	7,4	7,4
200	1,4	1,9	2,4	2,7	3	4,2	4,9	5,5	6	6,4	6,6	6,8	6,9	6,9
225	1,3	1,8	2,2	2,6	2,8	3,9	4,7	5,2	5,7	6	6,2	6,4	6,5	6,5
250	1,2	1,7	2,1	2,4	2,7	3,7	4,4	5	5,4	5,7	5,9	6,1	6,2	6,2
300	1,1	1,6	1,9	2,2	2,5	3,4	4	4,5	4,9	5,2	5,4	5,5	5,6	5,7
350	1	1,5	1,8	2,1	2,3	3,1	3,7	4,2	4,5	4,8	5	5,1	5,2	5,2
400	1	1,4	1,7	1,9	2,1	2,9	3,5	3,9	4,2	4,5	4,7	4,8	4,9	4,9
450	0,9	1,3	1,6	1,8	2	2,8	3,3	3,7	4	4,2	4,4	4,5	4,6	4,6
500	0,9	1,2	1,5	1,7	1,9	2,6	3,1	3,5	3,8	4	4,2	4,3	4,4	4,4
600	0,8	1,1	1,4	1,6	1,7	2,4	2,9	3,2	3,5	3,7	3,8	3,9	4	4
700	0,7	1	1,3	1,5	1,6	2,2	2,6	3	3,2	3,4	3,5	3,6	3,7	3,7
800	0,7	1	1,2	1,4	1,5	2,1	2,5	2,8	3	3,2	3,3	3,4	3,4	3,5
900	0,7	0,9	1,1	1,3	1,4	2	2,3	2,6	2,8	3	3,1	3,2	3,3	3,3
1000	0,6	0,9	1,1	1,2	1,4	1,9	2,2	2,5	2,7	2,8	3	3	3,1	3,1
1500	0,5	0,7	0,9	1	1,1	1,5	1,8	2	2,2	2,3	2,4	2,5	2,5	2,5
2000	0,4	0,6	0,7	0,9	1	1,3	1,6	1,8	1,9	2	2,1	2,1	2,2	2,2
2500	0,4	0,5	0,7	0,8	0,9	1,2	1,4	1,6	1,7	1,8	1,9	1,9	2	2
3000	0,4	0,5	0,6	0,7	0,8	1,1	1,3	1,4	1,5	1,6	1,7	1,8	1,8	1,8
5000	0,3	0,4	0,5	0,5	0,6	0,8	1	1,1	1,2	1,3	1,3	1,4	1,4	1,4

This table is only useful when your population of customers is rather large. There are many organisations with a smaller customer population. This means that it will sometimes not be necessary to sample, but that every customer can be sent a questionnaire.
When the sample is segmented for different segments in your customer population (e.g. rural vs., urban customers), then every group should be sufficiently large to obtain meaningful results.
Your budget is of course also an important factor in determining sample size. We also repeat that sample sizes matter when you want to obtain representative results, but they matter less when your main aim is to identify some very specific points for improvement.

III. How to draw a sample?

In many cases, you cannot survey every customer, and you rely on a sample. There are different types of samples. We only illustrate the random sample. Suppose you want to select 10 people from a list of 180. You could do this by repeatedly counting to 18, and selecting each 18th address (systematic sample). There are of course variations, but it is crucial to determine how you will select people before actually starting the sampling procedure, in order to avoid a bias. You also need to check whether your basic address list is built using a certain system or not, because this could distort the sample. An easy way to sample is by using an Excel spreadsheet, and having it add a random number to each address.
There are different types of samples. Samples can be entirely random or they can be drawn using a system (e.g. each 5th person on the list gets a questionnaire). Samples can also be multistage (you e.g. first select 20 schools, and then 100 pupils in each school). We hope this sufficiently illustrates the general principle, and we will not describe advantages and disadvantages of each method, or variations in sampling procedures.
After you have drawn your sample, you need to check whether it is representative for the entire population. It is possible that, by coincidence, your sampling procedure only returned female users, or only young people. Even when working with random numbers, there is very small possibility that this may be the case.
The quality of the sample of course also depends on the original database or list it is drawn from. If your organisation has a complete list of customers, chances that there are problems with the sample are limited. If however you have to rely on external sources, such as commercial address lists or telephone guides, the risk that the sample becomes skewed becomes higher. Certain groups are less likely to be included in samples, because they cannot be found in many existing address files, e.g. people with unlisted telephone numbers, or prepaid cell phones. Random digit dialling[4] does not solve

[4] Method whereby the computer is randomly composing and dialing telephone numbers, and where there is no prior list of telephone numbers.

this problem because it increases the odds for certain people to be included in the sample (e.g. those with a landline ánd cell phone, ánd a business number).

IV. How high should response rates be?

Organising surveys has become very popular in the last decade, and people are sometimes tired of participating in them. There are however important differences between countries, with the United Kingdom being a country where response is generally somewhat lower.

When the principal aim of the survey is to identify concrete areas for improvement, high response rates are less of a problem, because every comment is potentially valuable. When you want a representative survey, high response rates are essential. Low response rates are especially problematic when this response is skewed, e.g. when only customers with a very specific profile have participated, as it often the case. The consequences of such a survey are that service improvement initiatives are based on the suggestions made by this small and unrepresentative group, which may in some cases lead to dissatisfaction among other customers.

Low response is a problem when …	▪ certain groups are over- or underrepresented ▪ when you want the survey to return a representative image of the customers' views
Low response is less of a problem when …	▪ you are looking for some very concrete suggestions for the improvement of service delivery ▪ when the response is not skewed towards certain groups

What does a high or low response now mean in practice? In sociological surveys, a 60 to 70% response rate is often seen as the target for face-to-face surveys, yet experience differs between countries. These face-to-face surveys are a quite expensive way of collecting data, because potential respondents are being contacted several times. Interviewers are trained in conversion-techniques to convince people to participate, even when they refuse at first. This makes it an expensive yet rather effective method. Obtaining high-response rates is however often difficult in big cities and areas with many apartment blocks. For mail surveys, 30 to 35% is often mentioned as a good response rate. In the case of public sector customer surveys, customers often have a certain relation to the service, which may increase response. It is not exceptional to have a response of 55 to 60%. In commercial surveys, response rates tend to be lower. High response is possible when techniques are used to stimulate people to participate, or when you are dealing with customers who use a service on a daily basis.

Comparing response rates is difficult, because different calculation methods are used. Sometimes, non-response only refers to people who have actively refused to participate, while in other cases it also includes people who could not be reached due to wrong addresses or long holidays abroad. Customers who are too old or too sick to participate are sometimes included in the calculation of response rates, but not always. A good non-response report includes all of these categories separately. Even though some commercial polling companies tend to neglect this, a satisfaction report should clearly indicate how sampling was done, and how response rates have been calculated.

V. How to increase participation in the survey?

There are different ways to increase participation in a survey. Core concerns are that the method that is being used is not inhibiting: it should keep all possible costs (material and psychological) as low as possible for potential participants. In the end, the cost-benefit ratio should be beneficial for the respondent. This can be done in a number of ways, as we will show below.

Method

Response rates will be higher when the data collection method fits the type of service and customer, and when the method is not seen as a burden by the respondent. This often depends on a number of minor elements: the questionnaire should be easy and pleasant to read; questions should not be too difficult and not impose too hard a burden on the respondent's memory; telephone surveys should not be organised at a time when most people are preparing supper; return envelopes should be postage paid, etc.

Just sending people a questionnaire will generally not lead to a high response rate. We distinguish between a number of steps:

- Announcement & introduction letter
- Mailing with the questionnaire
- Reminder and thank-you note

In the case of a telephone survey, response may be increased by sending respondents an introductory letter prior to the contact by telephone. In some cases, respondents can be promised a present by entering their name in a lottery. Keep this limited, because it creates an expectation for future surveys, and forces other organisations to do the same in the future. Where giving presents has become a frequent practice, it has become more difficult to organise surveys without promising them. Presents should be small, and should not be considered a payment for participation.

Relationship to the organisation

Customers who feel connected with the organisation are easier to convince to participate in a survey. This connection can be stimulated by a professional communication campaign about the satisfaction survey. You can also appeal to the respondent's civic duty by convincing him or her that participation is necessary to improve the service delivery.

Lowering resistance to surveys

To stimulate people to participate in a survey, their fears and reluctance should be lowered. This can be done by preparing scenarios to counter common objections, such as:

- I don't know anything about this
- It makes no sense, nothing will be done with the results anyway
- If you selected me randomly, why can't you take someone else?
- I don't trust this. What about my anonymity?
- I don't have time

Relations with dependent and institutional users

The dependence of customers of a service on this service is a very sensitive issue when organising surveys. Frequent users know that they will use the service again after they have participated in the survey. For this reason, they may be inclined not to give their real opinion, because they fear reprisal or don't want to jeopardise their good relationship with the staff in that service, even when they have received guarantees about anonymity. Some examples are the relationship between a social worker and his or her customer, or that between a government department and a company that constantly needs the services of this department. Despite anonymity, there are cases where it is rather easy to find out where certain comments originate.

VI. Choosing the methods: mail, telephone, internet, face-to-face?

There is no single best method of data collection. The choice of a data collection method depends on the profile of respondents, the available budget and time, the required detail in the survey etc. Data collection methods each have a series of characteristics, advantages and disadvantages. When data collection involves the use of interviewers (the traditional face-to-face survey, exit surveys, telephone surveys), the presence of an interviewer may have an impact on the answers. Interviewers thus need to remain neutral and be properly trained. The literature often warns against mail surveys, because they tend to have low response rates. In reality, however, response rates can often be high for mail surveys as well. There are methods, such as Dillman's 'Total Design Method', to increase response rates by sending a series of reminders and by providing certain stimuli to return the questionnaire. In the case of public sector surveys, the 'official' character of surveys may lead to a higher response rate as compared to commercial surveys, yet the opposite effect may also occur. The cost of surveys differs substantially. Mail surveys are cheaper than face-to-face surveys, because no interviewer is involved. In the case of mail surveys, organisations can organise part of the data collection process themselves, while an external company is generally required when interviewers will be used. Internet-based surveys combine a very low cost per survey with a low response rate, and a strong bias in response. This makes them really only useful for surveying certain groups (access to internet, computer literacy), or when used in combination with other methods (e.g. by inviting an institutional customer to go online and fill out the survey). In the table, we summarise some of the main advantages and disadvantages of different data-collection methods.

Table 4: Some advantages and disadvantages of data collection methods

	Advantages	**Disadvantages**
Mail	Relatively cheap, and possible to organise without external help; respondent can fill out questionnaire when he wants; allows for lengthy questionnaires; no interviewer effects; high response rate when well-organised	Not useful for all customer groups (illiterate, problems with reading, or bad knowledge of English); respondents can't ask the interviewer for help; no control on who exactly filled out the questionnaire; easy for respondent to skip questions, or not to participate at all.
Internet	Fast processing of data; cheap, especially for large surveys due to high initial cost but low cost thereafter	Not everyone is using the internet, digital divide; easy to refuse participation; in fact only really useful when there is a strong relationship with customers, or when it concerns a survey on electronic services
Telephone	Relatively cheap; data collection can go very fast if needed; questionnaire can easily be adapted during the fieldwork if necessary	Only suitable for short surveys; you need to have your customers' telephone number; refusal to participate is relatively easy; presence of interviewer may lead to desirability bias in answers
Face-to-face	High response rate; good data quality; use of long questionnaires and supporting material (response cards, drawings, pictures) is possible	Often difficult in large cities; expensive; possible social desirability bias in answers due to presence of interviewer; fieldwork may take a long time
Face-to-face – exit survey	Directly relates to experienced service	Not possible for all types of services; respondents may be in a hurry
In-depth interviews	Gives very detailed picture of service experience	Time-consuming; hard to interpret and summarise the result; less representative due to small sample?

VII. In-house vs. outsourcing

The decision whether or not to outsource a customer satisfaction survey should be based on a consideration of advantages and disadvantages, and should not just be seen as an easy way to move ahead. Every organisation has its own mix of in-house expertise, and skills that are not available in the organisation. There are good and bad reasons for hiring an external company to run the survey. Having a limited budget is no reason not to outsource, because running the survey in house is no guarantee for a lower cost. On the contrary. When you are faced with limited budgets, consider other methods to consult your customers. Lack of time is not a reason to opt for outsourcing, because a good follow-up of the contract is also time-consuming, yet often overlooked. Expertise is a good reason to hire external help: Polling and market-research companies are well-placed to organise large-scale data-collection, -input and –analysis. An additional reason for outsourcing is objectivity: Customers and citizens tend to be sceptical about the objectivity of organisations running their own show. The external company can then act as a third, neutral, partner.

It is essential to stay in command of the management of the project yourself. A lack of time and expertise often lands an organisation in a situation where it is very dependent on the market research company, leading to a lack of control on budget and quality. Methodological rigour can be safeguarded by appointing an oversight committee consisting of methodological experts and colleagues from other organisations with prior experience.

VIII. The ethics of customer surveying

Every organisation organising surveys is responsible for helping to maintain public confidence in the method. It should thus refrain from taking actions that could jeopardise this confidence, thereby making it more difficult for other organisations to organise surveys in the future. Unethical behaviour affects citizens' willingness to participate in surveys.

Confidentiality should always be guaranteed. This of course implies that answers never give rise to reprisals towards customers or towards specific members of staff. There is, however, a difference between confidentiality and the anonymous treatment of data.

Transparency is a core value. This implies that results should always be made public, but also that all other documents are available for consultation (questionnaire, fieldwork reports, response rates...)

Identification of the commissioner of the survey: Every satisfaction survey should be clear about who has commissioned the survey, and for what purpose.

Data abuse: The results of a satisfaction survey should only be used for the purposes as mentioned during data collection. Satisfaction survey data should in no case be used to scrutinise individual customers' files, because this undermines support for all future customer consultations.

IX. Data management

Principles of data management

Data is always stored at the lowest, or the most disaggregated possible level. Joining or categorising data can only be done while retaining the original data. In this way, the data is still useful should you later decide to start using new categories or change definitions. We give the example of age. You can simply ask a respondent about his or her age. Better is to ask for the year of birth, because it minimizes mistakes and social desirability effects. When the respondent says he or she was born in 1965, the number 1965 is stored in the dataset. When analysing results, this '1965' can be recoded to age, and then categorised. Suppose now that two organisations have used different categories, as shown below:

Organisation A	Organisation B
1. 18-19	1. < 21
2. 20-24	2. 21-30
3. 25-29	3. 31-40
4. 30-34	4. 41-50
5. 35-39	5. 51-60
6. 40-44	6. 61-70
7. 45-49	7. 71-80
8. 50-54	8. > 80
9. 55-59	
10. 60-64	
11. 65-69	
12. 70-74	
13. 75-79	
14. 80+	

The result of this difference is that a direct comparison becomes impossible. When however the original data was kept, it is fairly easy to apply a new coding scheme to the data.

Building a dataset

A dataset contains:

- Horizontally: the respondents
- Vertically: the variables

For every respondent, a new line is started. Every respondent receives a unique identification number (ID), which is also indicated on the questionnaire. Every question has a unique identification. Question 1 (Staff of <this service> is generally friendly, see 2.4) here received variable name 'q.1'. We can read from the data that respondent number 1 answered 'neither agree, nor disagree' (coded as '3').

	ID	q.1	q.2	q.3	q.4	q.5
1	1	3	4	2	4	2
2	2	5	4	5	5	2
3	3	3	2	3	3	3

Cleaning and checking data

Before starting the analysis, the dataset needs to be thoroughly cleaned. This is a rather labour-intensive task. Time invested in data-cleaning leads to huge time savings when analysing data and increases the quality of the analysis.

The first type of data checks searches for impossible data or impossible combinations.

- *Impossible data*: When a five-point scale is used, it is impossible to have a 6 in the dataset; Respondents with improbable high or low ages should raise eyebrows. A fast way of checking data is to run frequency tables for all variables in the dataset.
- *Impossible combinations*: a 14-year old cannot have a university degree; a ‘very satisfied’ answer on one question and a ‘very dissatisfied’ one on a similar one is an unlikely combination. Using the questionnaire, a number of unlikely combinations can be identified and used for developing data control routines.

When you find such impossible data or combinations, you can go back to the original questionnaire to check whether it concerns a data collection or a data entry error. If the mistake cannot be corrected, this data, and in some case even all answers by that respondent, need to be deleted. Failure to do so will lead to mistakes in the analyses. Elaborate data control routines also allow for detecting interviewer fraud.

Subsequently, data can be checked for ‘strange’ patterns in answers. Examples are cases where respondents give the same answer to every question, or list-order effects whereby the respondent always picks one of the first options in a list.

Outsourcing and datasets

When data collection and analysis, or indeed the entire customer satisfaction survey has been outsourced, the contract with the private company needs to clearly state that the entire dataset needs to be transferred to the commissioning organisation. Sometimes, contracts only stipulate the requirement to draft a report. This leaves the commissioner of the research entirely dependent on the private partner should it want to perform in-depth research or use the results later to evaluate changes over time.

Privacy in datasets

Even though a dataset contains information about individual customers’ opinions, it should be impossible to link the information in the dataset back to a specific person. This is both an ethical and a legal issue. When a dataset therefore e.g. contains the following variables:

- postcode

- house number
- data of birth

then it becomes rather easy to identify respondents. Information that allows identifying respondents is therefore to be deleted as soon as the fieldwork allows you to do so, and access to personal data is to be limited to those who need access to it. Deleting all personal information is generally not necessary, because it does not lead to identification and it is needed for analysis (e.g. age, level of education). Deleting personal information is not always an option, for instance when you plan to interview the same people again in a year's time and analyse evolutions in their opinion, or when you still want to send some respondents a thank-you present.

The solution is to work with two different files, one with the survey data, and one with all personal information (name, address), and to use a unique identifier to link these. Respondent 'John Smith' will then be known in the dataset only as number 'A0001246'. Even then, personal identification data should only be kept when necessary, and destroyed afterwards. Access to this data needs to be restricted to those who manage the fieldwork, and stored on a safe computer.

Archiving data

Organising and analysing a customer satisfaction survey requires time and money. When you want to analyse evolutions in satisfaction, then you need to have a good storage plan for older surveys, reports and datasets. There are many cases where organisations are unable to recover older datasets or even reports just years after the survey. The dataset needs to be stored in a way that allows people to easily read it in 10 years without the need for then-outdated software, elaborate manuals to interpret the data, or phone calls to the by then retired official who ran the survey. All too often, valuable material just disappears or becomes inaccessible after a staff member retires, or an organisation moves to another building.

For every survey, you need to compile an information package containing information on methods, sampling, communication etc. This helps to save costs when other satisfaction surveys will be organised (especially when the staff members involved in the original one have moved on to a new job), and it may be of help to other organisations organising their surveys.

X. Data-analysis

We can write a separate manual on data-analysis. Most people are able to make a frequency- or cross table, but for more advanced analysis, external expertise is often required. We will not deal with data-analysis in detail in this guide. There are several software packages on the market for analysing surveys, with SPSS, SAS and Statistica as the best known[5].

While advanced multivariate analysis (=an analysis testing for the simultaneous impact of several variables) gives an in-depth picture of reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction, they also make communication about survey results more complicated. Many officials and policy makers do not know how to read regressions or factor analyses. Without sufficient guidance, these analyses should not be in policy reports, unless they are in an appendix. These analyses are nevertheless potential goldmines for examining customer satisfaction.

2.6 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

I. Checking for representativity

A satisfaction survey can be considered as representative when the profile of those who have participated in the survey corresponds to that of your users in general. This means that the findings of the survey can be generalised. Before starting the data-analysis, you first need to check whether the survey is a representative one. Checking for representativity of course requires that you have certain information about your users and about the participants in the survey. Certain groups (Elderly, young, men, women ...) can be over- or underrepresented in the sample, which can lead to wrong conclusions. If it turns out that the demographic profile of participants in the survey is fundamentally different from that of your average customer, then the satisfaction survey only allows you to say something about this specific group and not about your customers in general.

II. 65% of my customers are satisfied: is this good or should I worry?

Benchmarks and targets

When confronted with the first results of a satisfaction survey, officials and policy makers often want to know: "is this good or bad?" Should a certain satisfaction score be seen as a worrying sign, or should it instead be interpreted as a sign that customers are indeed very satisfied? All depends on the targets your organisation has set, and on the exact composition of the satisfaction score. Results can be compared to explicit or implicit targets in policy documents or in the organisation's overall mission and strategy. Often, however, such a clear target is not available. Another option is to benchmark one's organisation to other organisations or to compare the satisfaction score to another survey that

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[5] MS Excel can also be used for analysis (Tools- Data analysis). This function first has to be activated (Tools-Add-Ins-Analysis ToolPak). Pivot Tables are another useful function in this application.

had been organised earlier. In this case, satisfaction is high enough when it is similar or better than satisfaction scores in a similar organisation or when there has been a positive trend when compared to earlier measurements.

The relativity of absolute satisfaction scores

In 1991, Miller and Miller analysed 261 citizen surveys at the local level in the US. They found that certain public services almost always got better ratings in these surveys than others: citizens almost always evaluated fire departments, garbage collection and libraries much more positively than e.g., road repair services. Other findings confirm this. Charles Vincent from the Canadian Institute for Citizen-Centred Service compared absolute satisfaction scores for a number of public services in Canada, the US and the UK. We added some results from a survey we organised in Flanders in 2003 ('Werken aan de Overheid' – Working on government). What the table clearly illustrates is that certain services consistently receive better ratings than others. It shows that you cannot directly compare satisfaction with a fire department to satisfaction with a road repair service.

Table 5: The relativity of absolute satisfaction

% satisfaction	Citizens First, Canada (2000)	People's Panel, UK, (2000)	American Customer Satisfaction Index (2000)	Miller & Miller, USA (1991)	Working on Government, Belgium, Flanders (2003)
Fire services	80	77		81	83
Libraries	77	83		79	76
Garbage disposal	74	79	74	78	69
Social insurance (benefits)	71	69	84		
Parks	71	75	73	72	
Passport services	65	72	73		
Police	64	67	62	71	47
Tax administration	55	64	51		33
Child support services	55	47		56	43 (day care
Road maintenance	47	46		58	58 (road cleaning)

Source: Table taken and adapted from Vincent (2005)

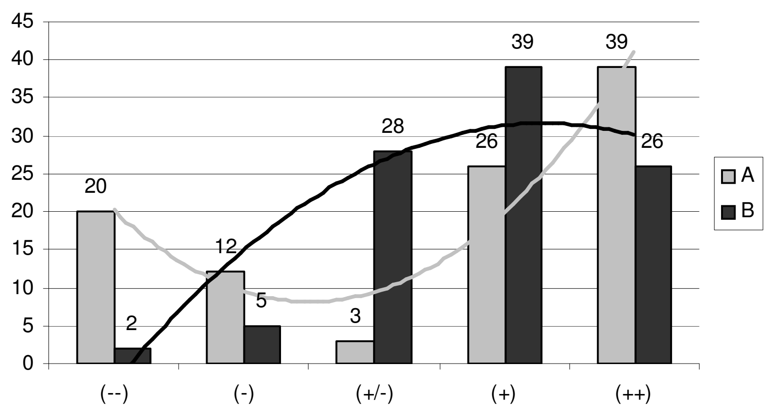
A possible explanation for this phenomenon relates to the reasons citizens may have to evaluate service delivery negatively. Many citizens do not or have never used the fire department. Their opinion is therefore not based on direct personal experience with the fire department's service delivery. Satisfaction with the fire department is thus likely to be influenced by confidence that the fire department will actually turn up when called, or by a positive identification with the mission of fire departments. Dissatisfaction with road repair services on the other hand is likely to be influenced by personal experience with a range of service deficiencies; large or small potholes, dirt, absent or faded road markings etc. There are just many more elements to anchor one's opinion. This is confirmed by other research showing that heterogeneous user demands lead to lower overall satisfaction and that there is less variation in satisfaction scores for services most citizens only have an indirect contact with.

Despite the popularity of rankings of best or worse performing services, I hope to have shown that rankings of general satisfaction ratings are pretty useless. Overall satisfaction ratings tell us very little about actual satisfaction and about reasons and consequences of (dis)satisfaction, as I will demonstrate in the next paragraphs.

General satisfaction and variation in satisfaction

It is not only important to know how many customers are satisfied, but also how the satisfied relate to the dissatisfied. The figure shows two hypothetical distributions. Both in survey A and survey B, 65% of customers is satisfied (% of those stating to be satisfied (+) or very satisfied (++)). Yet, an entirely different picture emerges.

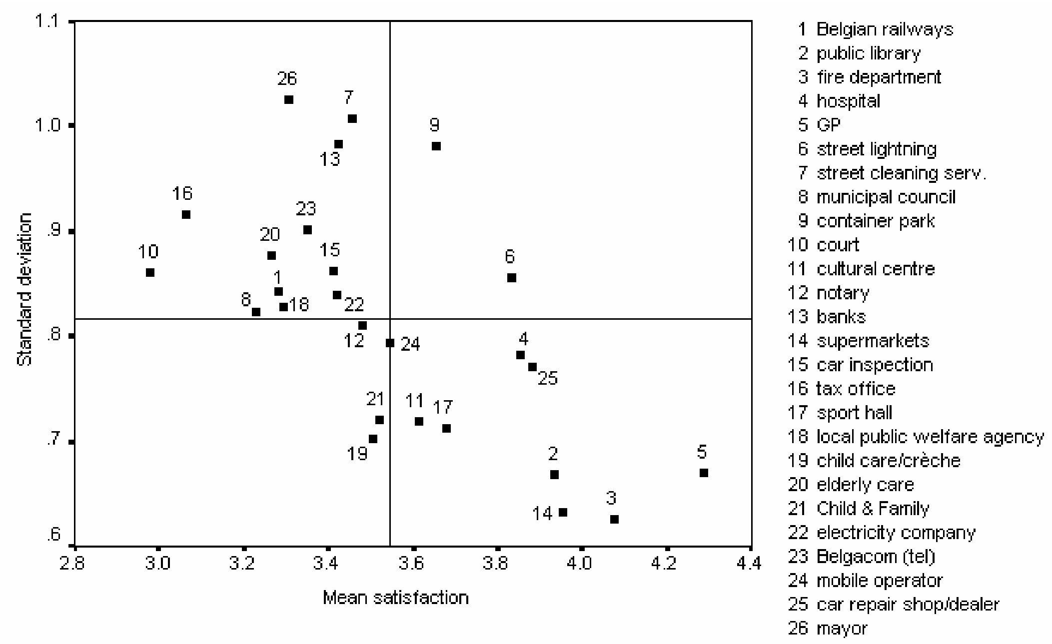
Figure 1: Distribution of satisfaction



In survey A, we see two groups emerge from the data: one group of customers is very satisfied; the other group is very dissatisfied. In survey B, most users are more or less satisfied. Organisation A has, despite its 65% satisfaction rate, a problem, while organisation B is doing quite well with a similar overall satisfaction score.

The example shows it is wise not just to look at mean or overall satisfaction, but also at the distribution of satisfaction. Below is an example of a survey we organised in Flanders, Belgium in 2003. We measured satisfaction with a number of public and private services and facilities, on a scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). When we only look at mean satisfaction scores, then we see that mean satisfaction with road cleaning services is quite similar to that with nursery homes. The standard deviation (a measure showing how the satisfaction scores are distributed over the respondents), however, is entirely different between both services. The high standard deviation for road cleaning services suggests that there are groups that are satisfied and groups that are dissatisfied. The low standard deviation for nursery homes on the other hand shows that most respondents have quite similar opinions about nursery homes.

Figure 2: Satisfaction and variation in satisfaction with public services



Source: Werken aan de Overheid survey, 2003, n=3168.

In one case, a certain satisfaction score should give rise to worries, while it doesn't in another, at first sight similar, case.

Policy makers' obsession with overall satisfaction scores (e.g. 65% of users are satisfied) also shows how important it is always to use the same answer scales in satisfaction research. It is not uncommon to see comparisons between satisfaction scores for different services, even when a 4-point scale was - used in one, and a 5-point scale in the other satisfaction survey. Yet, in the first case, a perfect distribution over the 4 categories results in categories containing 25% of respondents each, while this is just 20% in the case of a 5-point scale.

External factors

As we have already demonstrated, citizens' satisfaction with a public service is not only influenced by the quality of service delivery, but also by external or environmental factors. If the service has just been through a public crisis, or when media attention for the service is high, satisfaction scores are likely to be influenced by it. Economic factors may also influence the behaviour of participants in a customer survey.

Declining levels of satisfaction can also be the result of a real decline in service quality due to external factors. An example illustrates this. When levels of unemployment increase, demand for job training programmes is likely to increase as well, resulting in longer waiting lists and a possible decline in satisfaction scores. Without this necessary background information (increasing unemployment), declining satisfaction scores are likely to be interpreted differently. Also, in a period of higher unemployment, the profile of customers, and hence of those participating in customer surveys, is likely to become different. When making comparisons, the group of comparison should remain equal, otherwise changes in satisfaction scores do not reflect changes in service quality, but just changes in the group of participants in the survey. This is especially crucial when dissatisfied customers stop using the service, and are no longer included in the customer survey sample, resulting in an artificial increase in satisfaction.

III. Specific questions give other results than general ones

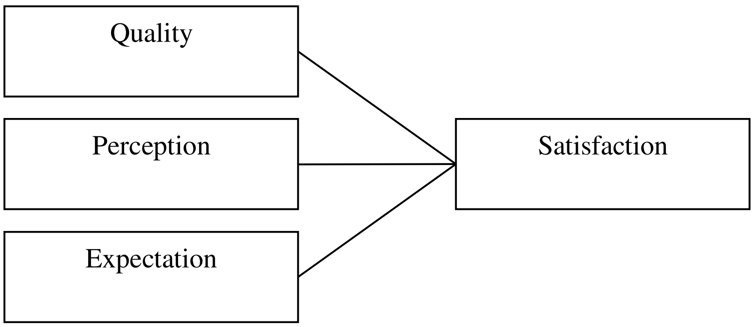
Academic research on citizen attitudes about public services has consistently generated one important finding: more generally phrased questions lead to lower satisfaction scores than more specific ones. One and the same person can have a very negative image about public services, yet be very satisfied with many concrete public services. A person considering officials as lazy and incompetent may at the same time have a very positive image of his postman, or the local council employee. This opinion should not even be internally consistent: citizens have no problem in seeing officials as too powerful and at the same time as lazy and incompetent.

The more general a question is phrased, the broader the array of possible points for anchoring and expressing one's opinion. A general question about local services allows participants not only to think about the local public services, but also about how the municipality is run politically, or even about stereotypes about bureaucrats. Specific questions about very specific interactions with a public service limit the available reference frameworks for the customer, and thus exclude many external factors, resulting in opinions that are closer to the 'truth'.

IV. Satisfaction and expectations

Customer satisfaction does not directly depend on service quality. Service quality is being perceived in a certain way, and this perception does not necessarily reflect reality. Additionally, customer expectations also determine the extent of satisfaction. For these reasons, high satisfaction does not necessarily mean that a service is functioning well. Satisfaction may just as well result from low prior expectations. How a public service communicates about its services is just one factor determining these expectations.

Figure 3: Satisfaction as a combination of quality, perceptions and expectations



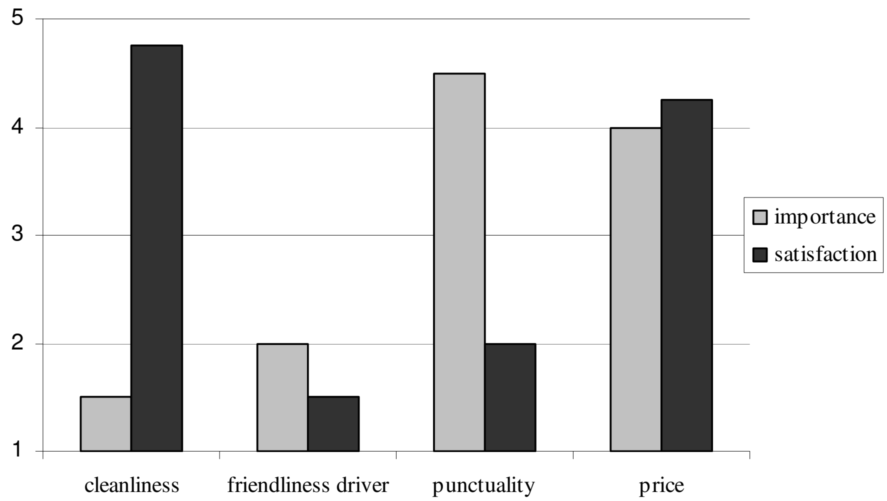
Source: Bouckaert & Vandeweyer, 1999

V. Importance vs. satisfaction

A final consideration when interpreting customer survey results is to look at the importance certain aspects of service delivery have for the customer. If a customer is dissatisfied about something he or she considers as very important, then there is a problem. If however the same customer is also dissatisfied with an element he or she considers as unimportant, then this is not an urgent problem for an organisation.

We illustrate this with a fictional example. The figure shows satisfaction scores for public transport users, as well as the importance every aspect has for them, scored on a 1 to 5 scale. The figure shows that customers consider timeliness and ticket prices very important, while cleanliness of buses and the friendliness of drivers are considered much less important. Satisfaction scores for each of these elements are very different. Customers are very satisfied with the height of ticket prices, which is an aspect they consider as very important. They are also satisfied with the cleanliness of buses, something they nevertheless don't consider as an important element. Satisfaction is however low with timeliness of buses and the friendliness of drivers. Customers consider the first aspect very important, but not the second. Combining importance and satisfaction scores clearly reveals what the quality improvement priorities for the bus company should be.

Figure 4: Importance of quality aspects and satisfaction



Different groups of customers may consider different aspects as important. The interpretation of satisfaction scores should therefore distinguish between these different groups.

2.7 IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION

I. Determining priorities

Comparing satisfaction scores to the importance certain quality elements and services have for customers allows an organisation to rank its quality improvement priorities. Elements or services that are important to customers, and with which they are not satisfied, should be the first priority. Elements which citizens do not really see as very important, and where satisfaction is high could temporarily get less attention if resources are scarce. It is however important to check whether all customers groups think about a public service in the same way, or whether there is considerable disagreement. The table shows the different combinations and resulting priorities for organisations, with critical factors in the top left corner.

Table 6: Priorities for quality improvement

Importance	High	Critical factor: first priority for improvement	Strength of the organisation
	Low	Secondary focus for improvement	Not problematic, but could indicate wrong priorities
		Low	High
		Satisfaction	

II. Reporting and feedback

Even though the result of a customer survey often reflects what the organisers of the survey had expected it to show, customer surveys sometimes show findings that are not popular. A golden rule for customer surveys in the public sector is that all results, no matter how bad, are made public. This transparency should not just be passive. Results should be made public in an active way, especially for those who have participated in the survey. Discussions on whether and how to communicate results should take place even before data collection starts, and not, as is often the case, as a result of the confrontation with the first results.

Communicating results is an integrative part of a customer survey. Customer surveys create expectations, and dealing with the results of the survey, no matter how good or bad they are, in a transparent way, gives an organisation a trustworthy image. The communication strategy about customer survey results should be decided already at the preparatory stages of the survey. Apart from a detailed report for policy makers, the organisation should also prepare a summary. Those who have participated in the survey as respondents are a core target group for communication initiatives. They have a right to this information, and expect to get some feedback. Another important target group for communication is the staff of the organisation: it is the staff's performance that has been evaluated in the survey, and they are the ones who will have to implement the improvements. Many organisations organise a mini-road show where the customer survey results are presented to staff groups in different departments of the organisation.

Managers and policy makers are sometimes reticent to communicate about bad results. A good strategy is to communicate the survey results together with the action plan for improvement. In this way, the negative result can contribute to a positive image for the organisation.

3 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This document is intended to be an introductory guide to customer satisfaction surveying for officials without prior experience. Rather than just being a technical handbook, the focus was also on some broader issues that need to be considered when an organisation decides to consult its customers. Rather than summarising, we conclude with four basic rules that apply to every organisation with plans to consult its customers.

1. Think, then act

Organisations often think that collecting data is the most important aspect of a customer satisfaction survey. What happens before and after data collection is at least as important, and often even more important: collecting already available information, mapping processes, making choices, communicating, negotiating, designing and implementing improvements etc. When you consider organising a customer survey, first answer these two questions, and keep them in mind during the entire process: Why do we want to do this, and what do we hope to achieve by doing this?

2. Specific, not general measurement

Citizens' general opinions about public services and the public sector tend to be different from opinions about more specific services and concrete bureaucratic encounters. It does not make sense to organise a general customer satisfaction survey for all possible services and processes in your organisation. A better approach is to focus on one single service or process, to analyse this in detail, to design improvements, and only then to move to the next specific service.

3. The right instrument at the right place

Elaborate customer satisfaction surveys are very popular, but that doesn't always make them the best instrument to consult customers and to improve services. There are many other methods as well. Each of these methods and instruments has advantages and disadvantages, and contextual factors determine which instrument is most suitable for which organisation at which moment.

4. Do not reinvent the wheel

No matter what your plans are to consult your users, odds are that it has been tried before by another organisation. So do not reinvent the wheel, but look around and learn from other organisations' experiences. Maybe another organisation has done exactly the same thing, making it possible to borrow their expertise or even their questionnaires. Maybe another organisation was faced with very similar problems and has found a way around them. By looking at what other organisations do or have done, everyone saves money and time. When you are planning to consult your customers, communicate about it when among peers, and provide them with some information. When you have just finished a customer satisfaction survey, document it, because it may help other organisations in your sector to avoid mistakes and save resources.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. SOME HANDBOOKS

For those wanting further information, there are several handbooks and guides available. Many books deal with customer satisfaction in general, while others focus on the public sector. Some are real handbooks, while others often valuable background information. The following books and documents may be worth consulting:

- Audit Commission. (2003). *Trust in the public sector. Public sector briefing*.

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APPENDIX 2. LIST OF FIGURES

APPENDIX 3. LIST OF TABLES

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