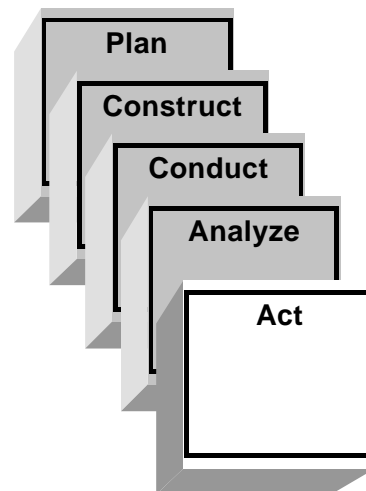


US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

ACT ON THE RESULTS

IS THIS THE BEGINNING OR THE END OF THE PROCESS?

When the efforts to collect customer data appear to be coming to a close, your real work may just be starting! If this is the first time your organization has collected and analyzed customer data in a systematic way, you are probably discovering a whole new world of information. Depending on the feedback method you have chosen, you have probably created a *baseline* of information that characterizes how your customers evaluate your products and services. You may wish to repeat the same process again in a year, or in whatever period of time makes sense in your situation.



Customers who respond to you expect for you not only to act on their feedback, but also to tell them what you have done. Whenever possible, you should build in some way to let them know. To be cost-effective, the EPA program that did the feedback activity wants to make best use of the information. Therefore, this next stage of the process is vitally important to the success of the final phase—action planning and implementation.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH THE FEEDBACK YOU RECEIVE?

Once you receive and analyze the feedback, most people will be anxious to know the results. *How did we do? What's the bottom line?* Work hard to avoid giving answers that oversimplify the feedback you have received. Depending on the methodology you have used, you may have an average score or rating to report, but chances are that you will have far more information that can provide a wealth of insights about how your customers view the products and services they have received from your organization.

HOW GOOD IS GOOD ENOUGH?

That is a very hard question to answer. In fact, the only real way to answer it is to say that it depends. For example, is an average score of 4.9 on a 6-point scale a good score? If last year's average score was 2.5, indeed you may have reason to celebrate—and for more than one reason! For one thing, your score nearly doubled. Even better, it leaped from the dissatisfied range to the middle of the satisfied range. However, you may want to look deeper: How does the customer rate other service providers who provide similar services? Is that organization getting ratings above or below the 4.9? And what about the distribution of ratings—are some customers still rating you below a 3.0 while some are rating you above a 5.5? If so, are the more positive ratings obscuring the negative ones? If so, you still may have customers out there who are sharply critical of the products and services you provide.

Setting acceptable goals for customer satisfaction ratings is a decision that each EPA organization must make for itself. Keep in mind, however, that leading service organizations tend to

- Target overall satisfaction scores at the upper end of the scale. On a 6 point scale, that should be a 5.0, and in very competitive situations it may even be at the 5.5 level or higher.
- View any less-than-satisfied ratings as being unacceptable because they indicate an opportunity for dissatisfied customers to quickly convey their dissatisfaction to others by word of mouth. In the long run, that can undermine your efforts to achieve a reputation for service and product excellence.

HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT TO WORK ON FIRST?

Many organizations are overwhelmed with the amount of information they receive from customers. This is especially true if a survey instrument is lengthy, or if there is a large volume of open-ended comments and ideas. Decision makers, particularly at senior executive levels, are likely to ask these questions: What do we do first? What improvements will yield the best improvement in overall customer satisfaction? What improvement or enhancement investments are worth making?

During the planning phase, you, your colleagues, and managers will have identified potential methods and procedures for acting on the results of customer feedback activities. The following are some ideas to consider.

Recover. Be prepared to hear from customers who report a negative experience with EPA. Set up a quick alert and response mechanism to respond in any case such as this. (That may require a special question that asks if the respondent is willing to be identified and contacted for follow up). A quick response is a very positive way to convert a negative impression into a positive one for the customer.

Report. Even if the primary means for action is an oral briefing, having written documentation for others to read and refer to is a good idea. It also creates a historical record for tracking changes over time.

Most people who will review information about customer feedback want to see graphics and summary tables. Reports may include an executive summary, a description of the study objectives and data collection methods, a comprehensive investigation of findings (illustrated with graphs and tables), and conclusions and recommendations. To keep the report a reasonable length, supplementary material can be presented in appendices.

Brief. Action planning workshops get management's attention. Gather decision makers together and go over the findings with a verbal presentation. Software graphics packages can help make the briefing interesting and informative. Conducting a dry run before your presentation helps with

timing, pacing, and finding out how well you can verbally communicate your written findings. Hard-copy handouts give participants a tangible reminder of the information conveyed.

Prioritize. It is likely that customer feedback will provide a wealth of information. Try to package the information so that it leads the audience or reader to a series of practical action steps that fit logically together. Acting on results may be more successful if several smaller action plans are developed that contain three to five next steps, rather than one large plan that may appear overwhelming.

Communicate. In addition to briefing management, it is a good idea to communicate results to others. Sending a thank-you letter to focus group participants and customers who completed the survey is important. The letter should note what EPA learned and what will be done with the findings. EPA employees are often eager to learn what customers have said, so results should be summarized and distributed widely.

Improve. There is no reason to elicit customer feedback unless you will use the information to improve EPA's processes, services, or products. Recognize that some employees may be excited about possible changes, but others may feel threatened and be highly resistant. The best way to use customer feedback may be to develop and define action plans. Action plans are most likely to be successful when owners of each issue

- Are identified and included
- Help assess their activities and customers' feedback
- Participate in review and strategy sessions
- Have an opportunity to discuss concerns and shortcomings in a nonthreatening, nonconfrontational environment.

Enhance. Sometimes, customers are satisfied, but want the agency to expand or further improve what it offers. This is an opportunity to enhance products or services.

Reward. Conducting customer feedback activities can be exciting and worthwhile; the process can also be exhausting and threatening. Be certain that you recognize the efforts of staff and customers who made the activity possible and reward them for their involvement. Rewards can take the form of public acknowledgment, mention in performance reviews, and attention to findings.

Plan. Use the immediacy of the customer feedback activity to see what worked well and what could be improved for the next similar activity. Identify aspects that facilitated or impeded achieving the project's objectives, including features of processes followed for planning, data collection, analysis, and development of findings.

Feed results into the strategic plan and GPRA goals and planning activities. In addition to EPA's performance metrics, recent management initiatives, including the President's directives on strategic planning, reinvention, and customer service improvement, and the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), suggest that customer data be included in performance data. To address these needs, quantitative data from surveys and trend data accumulated from ongoing feedback mechanisms may be most useful. Focus group and other qualitative data can be used to clarify customers' views.

As Government agencies go about reinventing programs to meet customers' needs and expectations and to comply with the requirements of GPRA, managers will need to develop customer-based performance goals and indicators to assess progress. The basic way to do this is to get input directly from customers.

Act ✓ Checklist

- Recover
- Report
- Brief
- Prioritize
- Communicate conclusions and recommendations
- Improve
- Enhance
- Reward
- Plan
- Feed results into the Strategic Plan, GPRA goals and annual planning activities

"It ain't so much the things we don't know that gets us in trouble. It's the things we know that ain't so."

Artemus Ward
