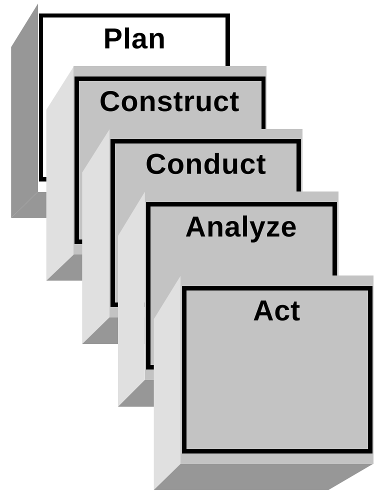
PLAN THE CUSTOMER FEEDBACK PROJECT



WHO SHOULD CONDUCT A CUSTOMER FEEDBACK INITIATIVE?

Customer feedback is valuable for everyone, and everyone can easily ask his or her customer for direct feedback about their needs and how things are going. In fact, EPA staff and managers have many opportunities to interact with customers. Among the most common are face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, public meetings and other events, and written correspondence. You can find perspectives containing feedback in newsletters and other informational materials, videos, Web site messages or electronic mail, newspapers, and interactive radio and television talk shows and news. Many customer interactions provide an immediate opportunity to hear from customers how well EPA is satisfying their needs.

For EPA offices that wish to track and analyze customer feedback over time, organizing your efforts is important. A critical question to ask yourself is whether you, as the initiator of a customer measurement project, have the ability to act on the data yourself, or whether others (potentially States, tribes, or local agencies with delegated programs; other external partners; or other offices and regions) will be critical to the process. For an EPA unit or branch to seek feedback, the decision to proceed may be made within the group. For larger, more complex, more resource-intensive customer studies that have broader impact, more coordination may be needed at the Division, Office, or even regional or assistant administrator level.

If other EPA staff or managers will be involved or affected, you should include them in the planning stages as early as possible. It is important that all interested or potentially affected individuals support the decision to obtain feedback and are

Establish the purposes of customer feedback

Define the feedback objectives

- What do I want to accomplish with this feedback?
- Why am I conducting this feedback activity?

Determine how the findings will be used

- What will we do with the findings?
- Will they be used
  - As a key business performance indicator?
  - To revise, correct, or improve a process?
  - To identify customer needs and expectations?
  - As a management tool for customer relationships?
  - To inform planning, decision making, and resource allocation?
  - To reward, recognize, or compensate employees?
  - To help validate standards, specifications, and measures?

Determine who will use the findings

- Who else is interested in the findings?
- How much time are they able to give to learning about the findings?
- How would they prefer to learn about the findings–in briefings, written reports, graphics, action plans?

willing and able to act on the feedback they receive. They may have their own very constructive ideas about what the research objectives and methodology might need to be. So that you can be responsive and act on the feedback you get, work things out early. Front-end coordination can avoid potential roadblocks such as fear of extra work that may develop from customer suggestions, fear of possible negative management reactions or reprisals based on customer criticisms, politically incorrect results, or unrealistic customer expectations about EPA capabilities.

HOW READY IS YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR CUSTOMER FEEDBACK?

Do staff members understand why the organization needs customer feedback? As you begin to plan customer feedback activities, consider how ready your organization is for customer feedback by asking these questions:

- Do staff members and managers sincerely intend to pay attention to customer feedback and act on it?
- Are key managers committed to taking action based on customers' input?
- Have staff members directly participated in defining the need for customer feedback and in identifying the approaches to use for obtaining customer feedback?
- Have managers, employees, and other users of customer feedback information expressed their needs, issues, concerns, and objectives?
- Is there managerial and employee buy-in and ownership?
- Are there any possible barriers—such as concerns about change, extra work, and adverse findings—to using customer feedback successfully?
- If there are barriers, are there identified methods to overcome them?

If you answered these questions "yes," your organization is clearly ready for customer feedback. If you answered "no" to some questions, you might consider what you can do to prepare your organization to obtain and use customer feedback. Simply put, the more ready your organization is for customer feedback, the more meaningful and successful the activity will be, which in turn means that EPA will be more responsive to customers' needs and preferences.

If your organization is not fully ready for customer feedback, you should not necessarily halt your customer feedback activities. Instead, just understand that you will probably face some challenges in getting the work done, getting managers to pay attention to findings, and assuring customers that your organization is committed to implementing the changes they may want. You may need to start slowly, collecting and documenting unsolicited feedback and informal opportunities to gather customer input. You can make some positive changes based on that feedback, and build a case for performing broader and more formal information collections to verify and expand the anecdotal information you gathered.

WHAT KINDS OF CUSTOMER FEEDBACK ARE ALREADY OCCURRING?

Before proceeding with a new customer feedback activity, check with EPA's Customer Program in the Office of Policy to see what recent work has been conducted. You should also check with delegated program representatives (for certain customer feedback functions). This will enable you to see if anyone else has collected the same or similar information that you can use, possibly avoiding unnecessary duplication, saving time and money, and making best use of previously gathered data.

WHAT ARE THE CORE QUESTIONS TO ASK FOR CUSTOMER FEEDBACK?

It is important to have some core questions that are always used by those doing customer feedback. Core questions represent broad levels of understanding and impressions about expectations, EPA responsiveness, and customer satisfaction. By using core questions, EPA can compare and aggregate customer feedback information, both across the agency and over time. When using the questions provided below, individual programs, regions or labs may find it useful to substitute their own organization's name for "EPA." For example, one question might be, "How courteously did the Hotline staff treat you?"

The following are core questions that customer feedback should incorporate:

Overall, how satisfied are you with the services and products you have received from EPA?

1 2 3 4 5 6 Don't know/Not Applicable
Very dissatisfied *Satisfied*

How courteously did EPA staff treat you?

1 2 3 4 5 6 Don't know/Not Applicable
Very dissatisfied *Satisfied*

How satisfied are you with the communications you have received from EPA?

1 2 3 4 5 6 Don't know/Not Applicable
Very dissatisfied *Satisfied*

How fully did EPA respond to your needs?

1 2 3 4 5 6 Don't know/Not Applicable
Very dissatisfied *Satisfied*

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE ASK CUSTOMERS FOR FEEDBACK?

Many organizations find it useful to contact their customers once a year to get an overall measure of satisfaction. Other types of feedback, such as follow-up telephone calls or comment cards, provide immediate information at the point of contact with customers. When organizations need targeted customer information, most find it useful to conduct multiple studies each year.

As a rule, EPA does not want to overburden our customers, so take care to

- Avoid feedback activities that duplicate work already conducted
- Organize customer feedback projects to avoid contacting the same customer repeatedly
- Seek consent from customers to participate in feedback projects, especially those that are lengthy or where customers have been contacted previously.

So, there is no standard answer to the question about how often to ask for feedback. The frequency of customer feedback will depend on several factors:

- Were the findings of previous customer feedback studies positive or negative? If EPA took action in response to concerns customers raised, has there been enough time to see whether those actions have been effective in improving customer satisfaction?

- Considering the issue(s) involved in the feedback activity, how often does it make sense to ask customers' opinions?

- Can we distinguish annual versus ongoing information needs and obtain feedback accordingly?

- Is there a way to match feedback with EPA-to-customer transactions? Can we ask customers at the end of a call if the information provided was useful? Is there any follow-up with them later to see if they used the product provided?

- Has some critical event occurred for which customer feedback would be important? (e.g., was the office reorganized to speed customer service or product delivery?)

- Are any changes in programs anticipated that call for surveying customers both before and after the change?

HOW LONG SHOULD FEEDBACK ACTIVITY TAKE?

Obviously, many variables can affect the time it takes to complete a feedback effort. A few of these variables might include the type and method of feedback selected, the number of respondents, and the extent to which those responsible for the survey project are prepared to plan and act on the results. It is likely that many individuals, including the customer, will have expectations about how long the effort will last, and when results may become available. Therefore, it is important to carefully plan the schedule of a feedback effort. On the following page is an example of the timetable of one feedback survey.

Customer Feedback Survey—project timetable

Deliverable	Time frame
Project Planning and Design	Weeks 1–2 (2–3 meetings)
Design Survey Instrument - Focus groups - Internal draft of questionnaire - 1st draft to survey team - Markup meeting - 2nd draft to survey team - Revised draft sent to field - Final version sent for approval - Final approval from agency	 Weeks 4–5 Week 6 Week 7 Week 7 Week 8 Week 9 Week 10 Week 12

Deliverable	Time frame
Data Collection - Field testing - Revisions (if necessary) - Phoning	 Week 13 Week 14 Weeks 14–16
Analysis and Report - Analysis - Report - Briefing charts	 Weeks 17–21 Week 21 Week 23
Process Improvement Workshops - Coordinating committee - Executive board - Notes to coordinating committee - Notes to executive board	 Week 23 Week 24 Week 25 Week 26
Performance Standards and Process Improvement Implementation - Action teams	 Week 29

WHO ARE OUR CUSTOMERS AND WITH WHAT SERVICES AND PRODUCTS DO WE SUPPLY THEM?

A *customer* is someone who directly relies on a provider for a product or service. Customers are defined based on the service or product they receive. Customers

- Have a *direct relationship* with EPA, including through interactions through a contractor that represents the agency.
- Receive one or more *services or products* from EPA.
- *Rely* on EPA for a work product or for specialized expertise.
- Are *directly affected* by the actions of EPA.
- May receive *financial assistance*, such as grants.
- Include those for whom we carry out a *mandate* or *mission*, such as Congress and the Office of Management and Budget.
- Include EPA employees as *internal customers* of each other. Relationships and transactions among EPA staff are essential for delivering consistent, excellent service to external customers.

Customer service and permitting

While identifying many customer groups interested in the permitting process is possible, there are only two major groups: interested and impacted parties, and permit applicants. Interested and impacted parties are those individuals, interest groups, communities, States, or tribes that raise a concern or have comments regarding the permit action. Permit applicants are the entities that are seeking approval from EPA or a delegated authority to conduct a regulated activity. In addition, relationships between the governmental entities involved in the permitting process (EPA Headquarters, Regional Offices, and delegated authorities) are also important.

In permitting programs, receiving and effectively using feedback from customers results in actions that are more acceptable and supported by interested and impacted parties, permit applicants, and regulators. Interested and impacted parties are individuals or groups that raise a concern or have comments regarding a permit action. When the permitting authority effectively listens and responds, the interested and impacted parties and permit applicants generally feel better served by Government. Also, through the information from the feedback, permitting agencies can more effectively plan and allocate resources to address issues that, in turn, more directly relate to customer concerns. Experience has shown that permitting actions often benefit from customer input, particularly about site-specific conditions that technical staff alone cannot provide. Effective customer service in the long run saves resources by promoting more efficient permitting decisions.

The Customer Service in Permitting (CSiP) Workgroup is a continuation of the agency's efforts to improve the permitting processes. Early efforts in customer service focused on setting standards and developing surveys to obtain feedback from permitting customers. CSiP members recognized that since most permitting occurring at State, tribal and local levels, efforts to encourage customer service at those levels are also needed. The CSiP provides an opportunity for Headquarters and Regional staff to work with State representatives in developing the necessary tools to receive effective feedback and to deliver customer service in permitting. The CSiP's mission is to promote high quality customer service in EPA permitting. This includes permits issued by EPA or by delegated authorities at State, tribal, and local levels. To accomplish this mission, the Workgroup uses customer feedback to improve permitting activities by using the feedback to:

- Measure standards of customer service
- Increase the skills and abilities of individuals involved in the permitting process
- Create a culture that values customer service.

- *Stakeholders* are individuals whose primary relationship with EPA is characterized by having an interest in our work and policies; someone who may interact with the agency for another person or group; or someone who influences our future direction (including financial resources). *Clients* are individuals and organizations with a dependent relationship to the agency.

Feedback from stakeholders and clients is also necessary and valuable for specific activities of the organization. However, it is important to know when the individual who is giving feedback is trying to influence your decisions or is very dependent upon you and maintaining goodwill in your relationship.

Before beginning a customer measurement project, it is important to be clear about which customers and which products and services are the focus.

OARM

The Office the Administration and Resources Management (OARM) is responsible for providing a wide range of services to internal EPA customers. Just a few of these many services include telephone, voice mail, and e-mail services; personnel transactions and retirement counseling; contracts and grants management; shuttle bus and parking services; printing and mail delivery; office moves; and safety and health services.

Improving customer service is one OARM's highest priorities. Senior managers and all of OARM staff members are charged with improving the quality and timeliness of services and service delivery so EPA employees can accomplish the business of the agency efficiently and effectively.

To measure progress in improving service, OARM began measuring customer satisfaction through service-specific transaction surveys and through an annual OARM-wide customer satisfaction survey. Results of these surveys provide managers with current and detailed information on how well OARM is meeting customer needs, what is most important to customers, and where making changes and improvements is most critical. Feedback enables OARM to respond directly to customer needs and suggestions when "quick fixes" are possible, to target long-range improvements through Customer Service Improvement Plans, and to track customer satisfaction over time.

WHY ESTABLISH QUALITY CONTROL PROCEDURES IN CUSTOMER FEEDBACK ACTIVITIES?

Developing and applying good internal control procedures is a sound business practice and helps assure the quality, reliability, and integrity of information used for decision making. The standards and techniques of quality control should apply to data collection, administration of data collection activities, analysis, and reporting of results from customer feedback.

"If you don't care where you're going, then it does not matter which way you go."

Lewis Carroll

or

"If you don't know where you're going, you won't know when you get there."

Yogi Berra

Controls vary and may be as simple as merely limiting access to raw, customer-specific data; separating the data collection, administrative, and presentation duties from the affected action officials; or as thorough as performing independent quality assurance reviews. The purpose of internal controls is to provide reasonable assurance that the objectives of customer feedback will be accomplished in a reliable and cost-effective way. For a description of specific control standards and techniques, see **Factsheet IX**.

"Before we start talking, let us decide what we are talking about."

Socrates

OIG—Serving many customers

Customers of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) cut across EPA programs and their customers. The OIG is unique by its statutory mandate (the Inspector General Act of 1978) requiring it to be organizationally independent to ensure its objectivity, impartiality, and to prevent interference in the conduct of its work. The President appoints the Inspector General, without regard to political affiliation, and the Inspector General reports directly to Congress.

To prevent and detect possible fraud, waste, and mismanagement and to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in EPA's programs and operations, the OIG conducts audits and investigations. The OIG also performs evaluative, consulting and advisory services to reduce risks, improve accountability, and ensure financial integrity. Although organizationally independent, the OIG is part of the EPA management team, dedicated to the agency's environmental mission.

While the OIG is the agency's fiscal and operational watchdog, it is also the agency's consulting partner for collaborative problem solving and recommending sound business practices. The OIG is in the management and enforcement service business, but this role creates unique customer relationships, often with disparate expectations from a variety of customers with frequently different points of view.

The OIG is both independent and collaborative, part of the EPA team, yet independently reports to Congress. So how does the OIG know how well it is serving its customers when different customers value different things? By working very hard to improve modes and means of communications.

The OIG maintains frequent two-way communications through personal contact and correspondence with both key agency managers and key staff members of Congressional Committees. The OIG also works directly with other Federal, State, and public auditing and law enforcement organizations.

We understand that while the critical nature of our work may provoke other than positive responses, we want our customers to realize that ultimately we share the same objectives that they do. We act as agents of change and strive for constructive solutions. Our challenge is to use customer surveys to tell us what is important to our customers in the context of our mission, and measure how well we are achieving the attributes of our mission. Hearing the Voice of the Customer will give us the process to obtain the most relevant information possible that can influence the OIG success as valued agents of change.

Specifically, we will begin seeking customer feedback from several sources following each major audit, investigation, and assistance project. We will be measuring attributes of OIG products/services and staff. Agency officials may not like all of our findings, but they can still strongly agree that our work is relevant and accurate, and that our staff is professional and encourages constructive

Develop a written plan for the customer survey ✔ checklist

___Purposes of the activity

___Quality control procedures

___Ways findings will be used

___Identify the target group

___Methods of data collection

___Timing for data collection

___Analysis plan

___Tools for carrying out feedback activity
- Discussion topics
- Survey instrument
- Database

_Anticipated products
- Tables and graphs
- Text that interprets findings
- Slides
- Specific conclusions
- Recommended actions

Plan ✔ *checklist*

___Get ready

___See what feedback you already have

___Decide which core questions to ask

___Decide frequency for customer feedback

___Define the target customer population

___Identify services supplied to customers

___Establish purposes of customer feedback (see next checklist)

___Decide whether to do the activity or contract out

___Develop written plan

___Determine resources needed

___Obtain agreement to proceed (if needed)