PREFACE

Serving the public, stakeholders, and partners is nothing new to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Communicating with them and listening to their ideas is part of the way that everyone at the agency does the job of protecting public health and the natural environment. What is new to many is the term "customer." But when you think about it, we all have customers, including one another.

Our customer base is very large and varied, so it is necessary for us to use many ways and every opportunity we recognize to hear the voices of our customers. We have forums, workshops, conferences, training sessions, and meetings of all sizes (from one-on-one interviews with CEOs, mayors, tribal leaders, governors, etc., to Federal Advisory Committee Act group sessions and communitywide exchanges around a Superfund problem or an environmental protection opportunity). We use informal sessions, focus groups, surveys, comment cards, Internet feedback screens, and more to hear what customers think of our services. Speakers answer questions and listen to comments following speeches, and officials use interactive media opportunities such as radio and television talk shows to reach the public. Hotlines, dockets, visitor centers, and libraries seek customer comments. We work with partners in pollution prevention and our coregulators in State, tribal, local, and other Federal agencies collaboratively to plan activities. We actively seek input to our rules, regulations, and decisions. Top officials meet regularly with industry sector, environmental, and other constituency groups.

What is different since President Clinton signed Executive Order 12682 in September 1993 is that we hold ourselves accountable for providing service that rivals the best in the private sector. We have a set of standards against which we measure ourselves, the Six Principles of Customer Service:

1. Be helpful! Listen to your customers.
2. Respond to all phone calls by the end of the next business day.
3. Respond to all correspondence within 10 business days.
4. Make clear, timely, accurate information accessible.
5. Work collaboratively with partners to improve all products and services.
6. Involve customers and use their ideas and input.

They apply to the work of anyone at the EPA, whether a manager making billion-dollar decisions or a brand-new summer hire. We also have sets of process standards for permitting; pesticides regulation; partnership programs; public access; State, tribal, and local grants; enforcement inspections and compliance assistance; research grants; and rule making. Cross-agency groups under the national Customer Service Program (CSP) developed all of the standards.

Hearing the Voice of the Customer is designed to help individuals and organizations decide whether and how to gather customer feedback. All of us have a need to hear that we are doing

the right things right, and we also need constructive criticism so we can do an even better job. We need to learn from customers what their expectations are and how well we are satisfying them (meeting or exceeding those expectations). Formal and informal feedback from our customers can also provide some sound ideas for transforming an organization.

Gathering feedback may take only a minute or two of listening to an unsolicited comment, or it may require an extensive nationwide survey. This document is not a cookbook on how to do feedback and customer satisfaction measurement, but it does provide an array of techniques to help you to effectively seek and then use what you hear from your customers. The process and tools presented in this document will help to bring the voice of the customer further into EPA's work, enabling us to improve processes, products, and services in ways that customer will recognize and value.

To simplify the processes required of Federal agencies for doing voluntary customer feedback activities and formal surveys, the CSP obtained a generic Information Collection Request (ICR) from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). A Factsheet to help you navigate the process is part of the Guidelines. The CSP also has software to assist those who wish to construct questionnaires and analyze results from respondents.

To further enhance everyone's ability at EPA to provide outstanding customer service, the Customer Service Program, with help from many regional and headquarters staff members and a contractor, has developed an introductory customer service workshop called Forging the Links. Its purpose is to clarify the links between providing great service and achieving our mission, and the links between those of us who are direct service providers and our external customers. The workshop also underscores the important links between people within the agency as customers and suppliers for each other. A series of highly interactive followup skills courses are also available through a network of EPA trainers, and the CSP also has video programs to lend.

In trying to find better ways to provide world-class customer service, the CSP has benchmarked with other Federal agencies and with several corporations. Findings have been helpful in developing and implementing the overall CSP. Benchmarking against the best in the Federal Government and listening to the voice of the customer were a large part of the EPA's first National Customer Service Conference, hosted by Region 6 from April 14 through 16, 1998. Proceedings of the event are available from the Customer Service Program and on the program website at www.epa.gov/customerservice/conference.htm.

This Guidelines document is an important piece of the new picture that is being drawn each day as EPA gets prepared for the next century. Using the suggestions and steps outlined in this document will help you to hear the voice of the customer and work to implement the kinds of changes in products, processes and services that will enable EPA to be an agency that provides world-class customer service.

> Don't assume you know....continuously ask what your customers want. Skip this step and you'll get it wrong.
>
> Al Gore