



What would your customers say about you?

Sparsefield Borough Council is not a four star council – but it does have ambitions in that respect. Knowing the importance of quality customer service in driving up resident satisfaction and perception, it has set demanding customer service standards in areas such as response times to enquiries, waiting times in customer service areas, numbers of staff needed to resolve an enquiry, and so on.

Just one problem – Sparsefield consistently fails to meet these demanding targets, and therefore regularly reports underperformance on key customer service targets – which is not good news for members, nor convincing for inspectors. It also makes it difficult for the authority to give feedback to customers on service performance. Customers, though, tell Sparsefield that they are generally satisfied with the service they receive – the problem is that targets have been set way beyond customer expectations.

Contrast this with the experience of Freeton Borough Council, which has set customer service targets low, and consistently exceeds them. It regularly reports what looks like exceptional performance figures – but customers aren't satisfied, and are increasingly cynical about the mismatch between what the Council says about its service and the level of service they actually receive.

Clearly the problem for both councils (they do exist, but their names have been changed to protect the innocent) is that their published service standards are out of step with customer expectations. Against a background of pressure on costs, how can a council respond to this dilemma? And how can a Council move customers from expensive access channels to more cost-effective ones whilst maintaining standards of service at the required level?

We think the answer lies in a comprehensive understanding of customer needs, such as can be derived from a well-designed programme of consultation. Our approach includes

- Quantitative research that asks a random sample of customers about their experience of access using different channels, and that explores their potential to move channels, and that also seeks out non-customers and asks them why they don't use the facilities on offer. Past research also suggested that there are seven reasons why people don't use a particular service, and only one of those is "I don't need it" – so that a large proportion of non-customers are actually potential users, if the service can be tailored to their needs.
- This is supplemented by group discussion with customers and non-customers, exploring in more depth the experience of contacting the council, the levels of service that are desired, and the obstacles to channel migration. This approach allows us to challenge the knee-jerk responses demanding five star service at



no extra cost, and uncover reasonable, acceptable levels of service that allow enhancement without unnecessary spend. We've also found it useful to ask frontline staff what they need to be able to improve their service levels – their suggestions are usually very constructive and practical, as well as challenging to other parts of the organisation.

- But we also find that an objective appraisal is essential to be able to set this information in context. We achieve this using an approach known as “mystery shopping”, where researchers take the part of customers and complete typical transactions with the council, recording their experience and the level of service received. The impact of this is hugely increased when we record the transactions – both audio and video, using covert filming – and can play back to managers and elected members what it's actually like to be your customer, giving you a chance to see things as you rarely see them – through the eyes and ears of your customers themselves.

This approach has been a huge success. We've run this programme, in different forms, in several councils now, and in each case it's been transformational – showing what needs to be done to improve service, and at the same time ensuring that scarce resources are deployed where they can have the most impact.

So why not find out, without obligation, what our research programme can do for you? We can help you transform your understanding of your customers and their experience.

To find out more please contact us:

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