

A Case Study in Creative Approaches to Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Background

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (the Commission or WSSC) is a bi-county agency in Maryland established to provide water supply and wastewater treatment services for approximately 1.7 million people in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties. WSSC has a service area of almost 1,000 square miles, and serves about 430,000 accounts.

Ascellon's work on this project was guided by three critical objectives that are tied to our customer's strategic initiatives:

1. To stay attuned to what customers truly value, their desired services and service levels;
2. To provide those services in a world-class manner; and
3. To improve relations with the customer base.

Identifying and Segmenting the Population:

Ascellon identified the various segments of stakeholders for WSSC, namely: the elected officials and regulating agencies (stakeholders) WSSC must be accountable to; and the 1.6 million consumers of WSSC's end products: drinking water and sewer service. The second segment was further divide into three sub-segments: Residential Rate Payers, Commercial Rate Payers, and Service Receivers. By identifying unique segments of our population early in the process, we were able to use the information to design unique survey instruments and sampling plan to improve the reliability of the entire survey.



A second, equally important benefit of knowing the audience well is the ability to uniquely identify segments of the survey population during the data collection phase. That level of identification is important for meaningful analysis and recommendations for future improvements.

Customer's Objectives

The primary objective of the Customer Satisfaction Survey is to identify perceptions and concerns of the served population, and use these to refine

strategies for providing superior water and sewer services. WSSC identified five key areas as the focus of the customer satisfaction survey:

- Water Quality—Odor, taste, clarity, confidence, etc.
- WSSC Brand Awareness—Corporate image in the community
- Core Service—Responsive, friendly, quality maintenance, expeditious, etc.
- Communications—Outreach efforts, information dissemination, agency reputation
- Billing Concerns—Accuracy, clarity, payment options

Survey Methods

Rate payers consist of residential and commercial water users; service receivers consist largely of developers, construction companies, local government entities, and plumbers. Rate payers reside within the bi-county area served by the Commission; service receivers, although doing business in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, are headquartered largely outside the service area, in Virginia, the District of Columbia, and other counties of Maryland.

Survey Instrument Design: Ascellon designed and tested survey instruments targeted at each unique segment and that insured enough responses to allow for meaningful analysis of the data collected.

Although both questionnaires included identical items relating to WSSC brand awareness and communications with the served public: the core of rate payer satisfaction focused on purity and quality of water; the service receivers' survey focused on the promptness and professionalism of WSSC representatives.

Segmentation and Sampling: Our sample design took into consideration the proportion of each segment within the population, considering first the

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desired level of confidence (or confidence interval) of the data collection and analysis; then the type of customer, geographic location, and other specific survey objectives. The sampling design was tested and validated through various analysis models during the survey period to determine if an adjustment in the sample size would be required.

Analysis

Planning the Analysis: Ascellon designed an Analysis Plan at the beginning of the project to simulate the actual results. Each of the five measures identified yielded several indicators for the analysis. During the data collection phase Ascellon updated the analysis tables in real-time, using our proprietary AutoSurvey™ and AutoAnalytics™ software for real-time analysis. This allowed us to provide a day-by-day tracking of the results coming in from the data collection effort.

Conducting the Analysis: At the conclusion of the data collection phase, Ascellon implemented the Analysis Plan by completing all the analysis tables, recording significant observations, trend, outliers, etc. We not only provided data and information, we provided an interpretation of the analysis in plain language, along with recommendations.

Innovation in Analysis: Ascellon incorporated industry best practices into our approach for conducting this project. We did not perform the analysis in a vacuum. Our analysts conducted additional research on water safety trends, media reports, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) publications, and previous work completed by the Gallup Organization on water safety surveys. In the end, the superior analytical product delivered to our customer has enabled them to understand their customers better and to implement meaningful improvements in customer service.

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