
Closing Gaps in Internal Governmental Responsiveness: The Service Expectation Survey

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The current drive for measuring performance within public agencies is rooted in government's accountability to its citizen-customers in the delivery of quality services. There have been numerous discussions on the importance of taxpayer feedback; but there is a dearth of literature that explores government's response to its internal customer base; that consists of other governmental agencies, contractors, and in the case of human service entities, partner non-profit organizations. Roch and Poister (2006) challenge researchers to investigate the factors that underlie the formation of citizen's or customer's (emphasis mine) expectations for public services. Using an internal instrument, the Service Expectation Survey (SES), the Fulton County Human Services Department surveyed human service grantees to determine what aspects of quality services were most important to them as partners with the county's Human Services Department. Moreover, this study is a report on how a local government seeks to meet the expectations of its internal customers.

The current drive for public performance measurement is rooted in government's accountability to the citizen-customer in the delivery of quality services (Frederickson 1996; Thompson and Riccucci 1998). The Re-inventing Government Movement of the 1990's followed on the heels of the New Public Administration and its predecessors. Organizational restructuring for improved service delivery was the underlining theme of the New Public Administration while Re-invention rode the waves of citizen empowerment. The Fulton County Human Services Department (FCHSD) developed its internal customer surveys against the backdrop of Reinvention.

Despite the growing literature on the use of surveys to ascertain the service perceptions of taxpaying citizens, there is a scarcity of literature that explores government's response to its *internal customer* base of other governmental agencies, private contractors, and in the case of public human service entities, partner, non-profit organizations (Kelton 2006; Miller and Kobayashi 2001). There is much less literature that discusses to any extent citizen expectancy in service satisfaction (Van Ryzin 2004 and 2006).

State governments have led the public sector in addressing the dearth of information about internal customers through the use of organizational 360's (organizational performance reports). Local governments, lacking resources to embark on such a time consuming and costly effort usually rely on patchwork approaches to feedback. This study reports on the efforts of the Fulton County Human Services Department to obtain feedback from its public partner contractors through the use of an internally developed survey, *The Service Expectation Survey* (SES) (See Appendix).

Purpose of the Survey Expectation Survey Instrument

As part of its internal "quality improvement" the Fulton County Human Services Department's (HSD) Office of Planning and Community Partnerships (OPCP), which administers the county's Human Services Grants, conducts a satisfaction study of its grantee partners. The instrument used for this purpose, the Human Services Grants – Satisfaction Survey (HSG-SS) is an annual survey designed to measure grantee satisfaction with each of the ten phases of the grants process. The HSG-SS provides useful information for improving the various phases of the grants process; however, taken alone the HSG-SS is not informative in determining if grantee expectations have been met. The Service Expectation Survey (SES) is designed to gauge the type of services the Human Services Grants Program customers (grantees) think most important in the delivery of generic grant program services. The SES differs from the HSG-SS, in that the Satisfaction Survey asks grantees to provide their perceptions of how well the Human Services Department conducts its grants work, a *performance* measurement. The SES seeks to discover grantee's service *expectations*.

Internal factors and benefits prompted interest in this type of survey. First, the customer satisfaction literature, especially studies of the SERVQUAL model, suggests that customer's ratings of satisfaction may be related to their expectations of service quality, and if the service providers meet those

expectations. *Finally*, armed with information from its customers, the county is better prepared to deliver a quality service. Following an exploration of the customer and SERVQUAL models as applied for this study, the remainder will discuss the Service Expectation Survey and how the results were used to improve service delivery.

Untangling the Literary Web: Universality of Customer Service, Quality, and Satisfaction

Several long-standing debates in the public quality and citizen satisfaction literatures are relevant in this discussion: Is quality synonymous with satisfaction? To what extent are the recipients of government services customers? These issues are important for this discussion as the HSD parent instrument from which the SES was developed measured satisfaction and the SERVQUAL is a model, the basis for the SES, measures quality. Additionally, if non-profits are customers, should we think of their satisfaction and perceptions of quality in the same way as we would for our customers in the private market?

Satisfaction and Quality: SERVQUAL in the Public Sector

Despite some debate there is little disagreement that quality and satisfaction *are* at least linked (Roch and Poister 2006). Therefore, any distinction between quality and satisfaction may only be best applied when examining consumer ‘purchase’ intentions as “...the concept of ‘service quality’ focuses on many of the same dimensions as consumer satisfaction” (Richard 2000). The question of whether SERVQUAL is measuring satisfaction or quality is not as important for this study as it might be in a situation of tangibility and profit. Accordingly, Iacobucci, Ostrom, and Grayson, (1995) find that consumers do not state a difference between quality and satisfaction except when price is involved. Quality and satisfaction within the human services are not dictated or driven by the profit motive. Public grant recipients are not initiating actors in a “*purchase* activity.” The grants program is a free public service; therefore, grantee customers should not find a distinction between quality and satisfaction. We can, therefore, conclude that the lack of a formal market exchange justifies the use of SERVQUAL in a study of satisfaction or expectation of public services.

Several studies support and illustrate the use of SERVQUAL within the public sector. Most notably, Wisniewski and Donnelly (1996) call for the

use of SERVQUAL within the public sector and demonstrated its benefits for public libraries. Since that time applications of SERVQUAL have been adopted for libraries, (LIBQUAL),¹ and HIV services (HIV-QUAL)² Specific components of SERVQUAL have found a home within the health and human services (Richard 2000; Selber 1998). Recommendations have also been made to combine SERVQUAL with other business performance measures to strengthen all organizational analyses (Hemmasi 1997).

Despite its marketing origins and growing popularity, SERVQUAL is not without its critics. Sureschandar, Rajendran, and Kamalanabhan (2001) criticize the dimensions used in SERVQUAL and suggests that there are actually only two types of service dimensions, the human element and servicescapes. Sureschandar, Rajendran, and Kamalanabhan (2001) further argue that SERVQUAL only concentrates on the human element. Ironically, this insightful critique supports the relevancy of SERVQUAL for the human services. Service quality within the human services is devoted to the intangible human elements of service delivery found in the core SERVQUAL measures of responsiveness, reliability, and competence.

The Public Customer

The public sector “customer” usually does not fit the definitions found in the satisfaction and quality literature. At many levels, citizen-customers are captive and obligated. They do not have the option of self-selecting, or expressing “purchase” intentions aside from moving out of the political jurisdiction or adopting other means of exit. Brown (2007) best identifies three levels of consumption of public services: captives, clients, and customers. Customers enter a public service relationship via free -will; they may choose to use a public recreation facility over a private facility. On the other hand, captives have no choice of the services they consume either because they cannot afford the market price or the public sector is the only available source for the service. Finally, clients are somewhere between captives and customers depending on whether coercion or choice is the dominant instigator of consumption (Brown 2007).

Nonprofits applying for Fulton County Human Services Grants fulfill several roles similar to the roles of private sector customers. The contracted non-profits serve as information resources, and they are co-producers in the delivery of services (Lengnick-Hall 1996). They are also customers in the way Brown defines them. They are not clients or captives; the non-profit customers opt to partner with the county, acting out of choice.

Having justified the application of SERVQUAL, clarified quality and satisfaction in public services, and identified the internal public customer, we will now begin a discussion of the Service Expectation Survey.

Method: The Service Expectation Survey (SES)

The Service Expectation Survey (SES) is a derivative of the Parasuraman, Zeithamal, and Berry (1985) SERVQUAL Model. SERVQUAL is a Likert scale that presents a theoretical break from the pre-1970s quality models developed during the manufacturing-based economy. Through focus groups, Parasuraman, Zeithamal, and Berry found what they believed to be dimensions of service quality and they theorized that customers evaluate all service business operations in ten areas: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication, and understanding of the customer. After further analysis and scale re-development, Parasuraman, Zeithamal, and Berry (1988) combined the ten quality dimensions into five dimensions of service quality. The four dimensions of competence, courtesy, credibility, and security were collapsed into a new dimension called assurance. Access, communication, and understanding combined to form empathy. These dimensions were joined with the original dimensions of tangibles, reliability, and responsiveness to form a modified and current version of SERVQUAL (Zeithamal, Parasuraman, and Berry 1990; Zeithamal and Parasuraman 2004). Table 1 identifies the original dimensions, the current revisions, and descriptions of the new dimensions.

The American Society for Quality recognizes the SERVQUAL dimensions of quality, and through the late 2000's Fulton County, Georgia requires departments to provide quarterly quality reports about their performance in these areas of responsiveness, courtesy, accuracy, and reliability. Fulton County added its original dimension of completeness to the SERVQUAL list and used the dimensions to compare services across programs and departments. SERVQUAL's contribution is that it not only elicits customer perceptions of the quality of the services they receive, but it makes a logical leap into an inquiry that compares the service received with the quality of service that was expected, challenging organizations to close numerical service gaps between received and expected service.

Fulton County's Human Services Department's Office of Planning and Community Partnerships (OPCP) administers an internally developed

Table 1. Comparison of Original and Revised SERVQUAL Dimensions

Original Dimensions	Revised Dimensions	Description
Appearance and Communication	Tangibles	Physical appearance of facilities and personnel; communication materials
Dependable and Accurate	Reliability	Ability to perform service
Helpful, Prompt service	Responsiveness	Willingness to help customers; prompt service
Knowledge, Courtesy, Trust, Confidence	Assurance	Knowledge and courtesy; ability to convey trust and confidence
Attention to customer	Empathy	Individualized attention
	Completeness*	

Note: *Completeness is a dimension created by Fulton County and not part of the original dimensions developed by Parasurman, et al.

Source: Adopted from Zeithmal, Parasuraman, and Berry (1990)

customer satisfaction study, (HSG-SS) at the annual meeting of its grantees.³ Due to administrative realities, OPCP has been unable to conduct a true SERVQUAL analysis. However, in early 2006 a second survey, the Service Expectation Survey (SES), was distributed to current and potential grantees that attended the Technical Assistance Workshop, a training session to explain the grants process and provide guidance on completing the grant application. Since the Workshop is open for returning HSD grant applicants and those who have not received a grant in the past year, it provides a unique opportunity to determine if new and returning grantees differ in their service expectations.

The Service Expectation Survey (SES) is an 8-item instrument, developed using the SERVQUAL model and the items found on the HSG-

SS (see Appendix). The SES seeks to gauge the important service qualities HSG program customers expect in the delivery of generic grant program services. It differs from the Human Services Grantee Satisfaction Survey (HSG-SS), in that in the Satisfaction Survey grantees are asked to provide their perceptions of how well the Human Services Department conducts its grants work.

The SES survey items were developed by creating a typology of the grant process points found in the HSG-SS. Grouped process points such as timeliness, staff interactions, etc. were identified and associated with a SERQUAL dimension and an additional dimension of completeness that is used in Fulton County. Service themes common to the various phases of the grant activities were categorized, and respondents were asked to rank the processes (quality dimensions) according to their importance. The SES also includes two open-ended questions. Respondents are asked to answer in the affirmative or negative if they are currently receiving Human Services Grants and if they had applied in the past but are not currently receiving grants—providing important comparative information.

The SES is an unusual mix of a Likert scale and a rank order instrument. Respondents are given a numerical scale limit, as in a regular ranking instrument, but have the option of repeating ranks as one would do in a Likert. For the purposes of analysis, mean scores of the items are determined as one would do for a Likert scale, and therefore, avoiding problems of forced choices. Initially this was a convenience for the respondents, but it was soon discovered that this procedure provided a type of “gap analysis.”⁴

The SES classification schemes were initially completed without the aid of inter-rater reliability.⁵ However, the SES meets the criteria for content and concurrent validity as it was developed from an instrument based on a process map of the HSD grant’s process.⁶ The classification schemes and their quality dimensions are listed in Table 2. Survey respondents were blind to the quality dimensions measured by the statement. Respondents were directed to rank survey items as on a scale from 1 (low) to 8 (high);⁷ granted they did not find any dimension of equal rank. Respondents who did not find an item important at all were asked to provide a zero (0). Others were asked to respond with an N/A (not applicable) for cases where they did not feel qualified to answer the question.⁸

Table 2. Service Expectation Survey Items

The expectation statements listed below were developed from a categorization of 36 customer contact points in a related instrument, The Human Services Grants Satisfaction Survey. Each SES survey item is associated with a relevant quality service dimension developed by Parsuraman et al. (1988).

- _____ Staff guidance/help - *responsiveness**
- _____ Timely notification of deadlines/schedules - *reliability*
- _____ Coordination with my organization's needs - *courtesy**
- _____ Supplied adequate/detailed information - *accuracy*
- _____ Provided clear direction - *competence*
- _____ Ease of total grants process - *completeness*
- _____ Adequate time to respond to inquiries and deadlines - *courtesy**
- _____ 24 hours response time to inquires - *responsiveness**

Note: *Courtesy and Responsiveness both have time and staff-customer interaction dimensions that are considered separately and serve as individual items in the classification scheme.

Discussion

A total of 135 attendees to the Technical Assistance Workshop completed the Service Expectation Survey (SES). Sixty-nine percent, or 92 respondents, were current grantee partners and 29 percent, or 39 respondents, were planning to apply as new grant applicants.⁹ Table 3 lists the mean score by rank from highest (most important means 7 or 8) to lowest (least important means 4 and 5). There were no statically significant differences between the mean rankings of current and potential grantees; however, there were a few differences in the order of the rankings.

Table 3. Service Expectation Rankings by Human Services Grants Recipient Status

Rank	CURRENT RECIPIENT				NOT CURRENT RECIPIENT				Mean Score
	Indicator	Dimension	Mean Score	Rank	Indicator	Dimension	Mean Score	Rank	
1	timely notification	reliability	7.04	1	detailed information	accuracy	7.07		
2	detailed information	accuracy	6.58	2	timely notification	reliability	6.82		
2	clear direction	competency	6.58	3	clear direction	competency	6.68		
3	adequate time to respond	courtesy/time	6.40	4	guidance/help	responsiveness/personal	6.51		
4	trouble-free process	completeness	5.57	5	adequate time to respond	courtesy/time	6.30		
5	guidance/help	responsiveness/personal	5.50	6	24 hr. response time	responsiveness/time	5.82		
6	24 hr. response time	responsiveness/time	5.40	7	trouble-free process	completeness	5.80		
7	coordinate activities	courtesy/personal	4.65	8	coordinate activities	courtesy/personal	5.15		

Source: Fulton County Human Services Department, *Service Expectation Survey*, administered January 2006. See Appendix.

Mean scores from the SES were ranked in order from least important (1) to most important (7 or 8). Respondents who were not currently receiving grants ranked having guidance and help from staff as being 4th in importance, and current grantees ranked the same variable as 5th in importance. At least 69 percent of those who were not currently receiving grants ranked having staff/guidance and help at 7 (very important). Only 41.3 percent of the respondents that were receiving grants gave a rank of 7 or 8 for this statement. Organizations that were not receiving grants had slightly higher overall expectations for the responsiveness of staff than organizations currently receiving grants, suggesting that new grantees would expect more assistance from staff in moving through the grants process.

To avoid conceptual overlap, Zeithamal, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) collapsed their original ten dimensions or categories of quality service into five broader dimensions, as in the combining of reliability and accuracy. Their research demonstrates that customers ranked the dimension of reliability as the most critical in their assessment of service quality. Results from the SES confirm the importance of these quality dimensions as both current and potential grantees ranked either *reliability* or accuracy as most important.

The SES was designed to determine what dimensions of quality service are important to non-profits applying for grants through the Fulton County Human Services Grants Program. In this way, the Office of Planning and Community Partnerships (OPCP), the administrative office for the program, could continue to deliver higher quality services and satisfy the needs of its internal customers. Accordingly, by using information from the SES and other relevant sources OPCP has been able to make the following program adjustments.

Comparison of Current and Potential Grantees

One of the purposes of the Technical Assistance Workshop is to help potential grantees develop stronger applications by arming them with information necessary to complete the grant application process. Stronger applicants will lead to better programs from the grant partners, which translates into improved services for citizens.

The results from the SES demonstrated that current and potential human services grantees have different expectations concerning the levels of support from HSD staff necessary for them to move through the grant process, thus providing evidence to support additional Technical Assistance Workshop

resources. If new grantees receive additional attention, they may be better equipped to help the county expand its human services programming. In response to the evidence from the SES, OPCP now conducts two sets of workshops, one for returning grant applicants and a newly developed workshop for new potential grantees. The workshop for new grantees provides a stronger introduction to the grants program and more detailed information about completing the application.

Timely Notification of Grants Related Information

SES respondents identified having adequate time to respond to grant related issues such as the availability of the application and reporting deadlines as quality dimensions that are 3rd and 4th in importance. In response, OPCP has discussed adjusting the date for the initial announcement of grant funds so as not to conflict with the end-of-the-year obligations of the non-profit partners. Providing adequate time for completing grant applications increases the odds of receiving quality applications.

Reliability and Accuracy

Reliability and accuracy relate to the ability to provide satisfactory service that meets the expectations of customers. For governments, reliability and accuracy also address the issues of accountability and transparency, providing a fair and open service. Reliability and accuracy were highly rated as important dimensions of quality in the SERVQUAL studies and were also highly ranked in the SES. One way that OPCP is addressing reliability and accuracy is to provide additional, detailed information about the grant funding processes. Additional decision-making processes that yield reliable results have been added into the grants review and funding decision-making processes. This includes providing timely, detailed information concerning what is expected and acceptable in completing a qualified grants application, as well as step-by-step guidance through the various grant application review phases. As a result of these combined changes nearly a quarter of the most recent grantees are new providers that have never received HSG funding, providing an opportunity for expanded services.

Conclusion

As part of its on-going efforts in performance measurement, the Fulton County Human Services Department surveys its non-profit grantee partners

(internal customers) to gauge their satisfaction with the current levels of services. The administration of the Service Expectation Survey (SES) was an extension of this effort. Unlike previous surveys related to the grants program, such as the Human Services Grants – Satisfaction Survey (HSG-SS), the SES measures what grantees are expecting in terms of quality services. The Office of Planning and Community Partnerships that administers the HSG- Grants program used the results of the SES to make adjustments in the Fulton County Human Services Grants program. While not as broadly distributed as an organizational 360, internal surveys such as the SES provide a window into the needs of internal customers. However governments, especially where human services are concerned, should not end the exploration with internal customers. The quality of the services provided directly to citizens through the same internal customers such as non-profit partners is also a reflection of government's work. Roch and Van Slyke (2004) note that citizens often do not associate high quality social services with their government funders. Government's direct assessment of services they fund through providers coupled with an examination of how well government serves the providers could provide the tools which can greatly enhance government's image.

Roch and Poister (2006) note that citizens' variations in satisfaction may represent differences in expectations rather than variations in service quality. Several years ago, Scott and Shieff (1993) suggested that various groups of citizens might differ in their perceptions of satisfaction depending on economic status. The current study, although conducted with non-profit partners, suggests that an examination of internal customers would be an effective use of both time and money, as partners may also have slightly different expectations. Efforts such as the SES further support Roch and Poister's (2006) conclusions in that the expectations of customers must be taken into account when reviewing satisfaction surveys and subsequently deciding on policy actions (organizational or political) based on the results of the survey. This study has demonstrated how, by including customer's expectations, Fulton County's Human Services Department continues to improve its services to its grantee customers, who in turn provide good service to the citizens.

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Appendix



**Fulton County Human Services Department
Office of Planning and Community Partnerships
Service Expectation Survey**

The Human Services Department, Office of Planning and Community Partnerships wants to know what our grant partners think about our Human Services Grants Program and what is needed to ensure a quality experience throughout the grant process. We are committed to providing quality customer service and want your input. We have developed the survey below to assist us in this process. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and help us to serve you better.

Directions: From a “customer” perspective, please read each of the eight terms below. Rank them in terms of how important they are in assuring a satisfactory grant experience. Each item should be ranked in order of importance and recorded on the line to the left (“1” represents “least important” and “8” represents “most important”). If you find it necessary, you may rank more than one item with the same score if they are equally important. If you do not find the item important at all please give that item a score of zero (0). Leave blank any item you do not feel qualified to answer.

“It is important that my organization:”

- _____ Receives staff guidance/help
- _____ Receives timely notification of deadlines/schedules
- _____ Is involved with the coordination of grant related activities
- _____ Receives adequate/detailed information
- _____ Receives clear direction
- _____ Experiences a trouble-free grant process
- _____ Is given adequate time to respond to inquiries and deadlines
- _____ Receives a response to inquiries within 24 hours

Please add below any other important activities not mentioned above that may impact your ability to have a satisfactory grantee experience.

Please circle the appropriate response.

Are you currently receiving grants from the Fulton County Human Services Department?
yes no

Have you applied but not received grants from the Human Services Department in the past?
yes no

Notes

¹ For more information, see www.libqual.org.

² For more information, see www.hivqual.org; National HIVQUAL Project, HIVQUAL Update, Fall 2005.

³ The HSG-SS has been administered every fall since 2005. The current analysis is based on the 2005 administration of the HSG-SS and the 2006 administration of the SES.

⁴ The true gap analysis was not completed for the first administration as eight items were ranked for the SES while the HSG-SS employed a five-point Likert scale. The SES contained additional “rankings” to accommodate the inter-personal and organizational interactions that were possible with the process points that reflected responsiveness or courtesy. See Sullivan and Estes (2006 and 2007) for an explanation.

⁵ Inter-rater reliability has since been conducted for subsequent administration of both the HSG-SS and the SES.

⁶ The SES survey items were developed from a process map of customer-related activities within the grants process.

⁷ Items with larger mean scores were ranked as more important.

⁸ No variables were ranked as N/A. The variables of coordination, ease, and 24-hour response each received one 0.

⁹ Three respondents did not state if they were receiving grants or if they were new applicants.

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