

Citizen-Centred Service

from Research to Results

BY CHARLES VINCENT AND BRIAN MARSON

New national survey shows Canadians' satisfaction with public services is on the rise!

Dedicated readers of *Canadian Government Executive* will know well the innovative and collaborative work that governments across Canada have undertaken in recent years to improve the quality of public-sector service delivery. From *Service Alberta*, to 1-800-O-Canada, to *Access Halton*, Canadian governments at all levels are working to meet the needs and expectations of citizens.

One of the critical success factors behind these accomplishments has been the development of an inter-jurisdictional community of practice in Canada dedicated to building and sharing knowledge about public-sector service quality. As early efforts to work together through the award-winning Citizen-Centred Service Network (CCSN) became institutionalized in the work of the Public Sector Service Delivery Council (PSSDC), this community of practice has been guided by a body of action-oriented research designed to help managers make real and lasting improvements to service quality.

The flagship of this action-oriented research is the *Citizens First* initiative. *Citizens First 3* (available at www.iccs-isac.org) is the third in this series of biennial studies providing fresh insights and comprehensive information on how citizens and clients of the Canadian public sector perceive the services they receive from governments at the municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal

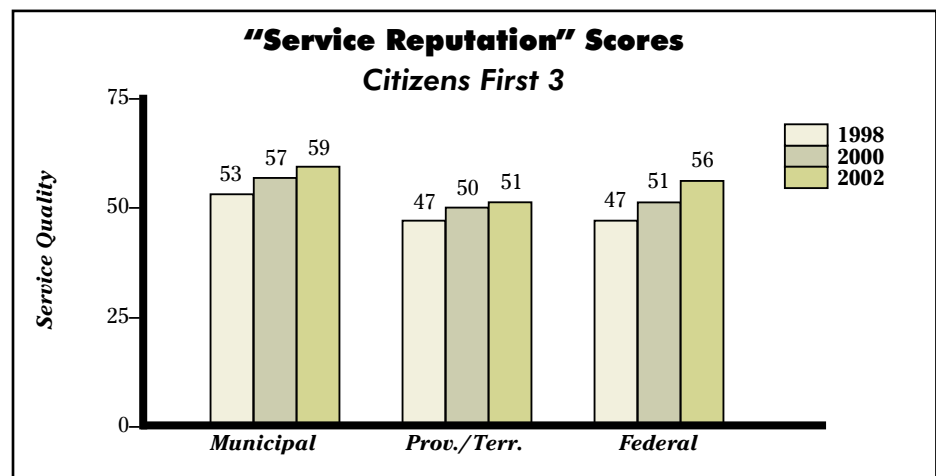
levels. *Citizens First 3* builds on and extends the citizen-centred research agenda that is a cornerstone of the Canadian approach to public service improvement.

Service Quality Ratings on the Rise

The results from *Citizens First 3* suggest that this citizen-centred approach to service quality is bearing fruit. Since the original study in 1998, the service reputation of Canadian governments at all levels has increased (see Figure 1). By way of comparison, the American Customer Satisfaction Index reports no significant increase in satisfaction ratings for U.S. federal government services over the same period. The five drivers of client satisfaction vary by channel, but all five have remained important since the first study: timeliness; knowledge/competence; courteous staff who go the extra mile; fairness; and obtaining the needed outcome. While there is clearly room for improvement in Canada, these results demonstrate the value of using citizen-centred research to guide action.

Access in a Multi-Channel Service Environment

The challenge now is to continue to improve service quality in an increasingly complex service environment where citizens are taking advantage of new electronic service channels such as the Internet, email, and kiosks. While service quality scores have been rising, ratings of "ease of access" have not changed since 1998. *Citizens First 3* highlights that Canadians continue to have dif-



Citizens First 3

Citizens First 3 is an innovative research initiative of the Public Sector Service Delivery Council (PSSDC), that brings together service quality leaders from the federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal governments. Support for this study came from fifteen jurisdictions: the Government of Canada; eight provinces; one territory; and five municipalities. The extent of alliance and cooperation between governments in Canada in undertaking this project speaks to the recognition of service delivery as a critical issue and to the determination of Canadian governments at all levels to address citizens' concerns.

Citizens First 3 was produced by the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service in cooperation with the Institute of Public Administration of Canada. The study was conducted by Dr. George Spears and Ms. Kasia Seydegart of Erin Research Inc. with Dr. Faye Schmidt, and is based on a representative sample of 9,000 Canadians in every province and territory.

difficulty accessing government services. Of particular note is the trouble Canadians have in accessing government services over the telephone. Despite the fact that the telephone remains the preferred service channel for most Canadians, it is also the service channel that causes citizens the most frustration.

Improving access over the telephone will help, but service channels are not isolated from one another. In fact, according to *Citizens First 3*, half of all public-sector service experiences now involve two or more service channels. A citizen may start by downloading a form from the Internet and then put it in the mail. Another citizen may make a tele-

phone call to get information before going into an office. Today Canadians expect to access government services when and where they want. Channel choice is good for citizens, but providing consistent, seamless service across different service channels presents an increasingly complex challenge. Canadian governments need to begin understanding which combinations of service channels are preferred by which citizens when accessing different services.

Linking Service Quality to Confidence in Government

The importance of delivering high quality service is further underscored in *Citizens First 3* by the confirmation that service quality has a direct and measurable impact on confidence in government institutions. Citizens who feel they receive high quality service when accessing public services have more confidence in the performance of the public sector.

Elected officials have always understood the importance of quality service. Their constituents are very quick to let them know when they had to stand in line for two hours at a government office or when their garbage did not get picked up on time. Through *Citizens First 3*, we now have quantitative evidence supporting this anecdotal evidence and highlighting the significant role service quality plays in giving citizens a level of confidence in their democratic institutions. More than any other finding, this analysis may prove to be the lasting legacy of *Citizens First 3*.

New Frontiers in Action Research

Research such as *Citizens First* has proved to be an invaluable resource to public sector managers across Canada precisely because it was designed from the beginning to answer the questions that are facing practitioners. It is in this spirit that members of the PSSDC-PSCIOC Research Committee are beginning to explore several new frontiers.

Understanding Service Needs of the Business Sector

Having documented citizens' service needs and expectations in the *Citizens First* series of national surveys, the PSSDC-PSCIOC community is now working through the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service to launch a parallel survey of the needs of the business community across Canada. This major new study, *Taking Care of Business*, is sponsored by federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal partners and will be fielded in the coming months.

Linking Service Quality and HR Management

The underlying question driving this research initiative is whether there is a measurable link between employee satisfaction and client satisfaction in the public sector. The satisfaction or loyalty of employees has been cited in several studies as an important predictor of client satisfaction. Understanding the nature, direction, and dynamics of this relationship is critical for public-sector managers, both from a service quality perspective, and in terms of human resource management. Given the newly confirmed link between service quality and confidence in government institutions, this research now takes on a new level of importance. ❁

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Institute for Citizen-Centred Service

The Institute for Citizen-Centred Service is an inter-governmental project supported by members of the Public Sector Service Delivery Council (PSSDC) and the Public Sector CIO Council (PSCIOC).

The mission of the Institute for Citizen-Centred Service is to promote high levels of citizen satisfaction with public-sector service delivery. The ICCS achieves its mission by undertaking research to identify citizens' service needs and expectations, and by assisting the public sector in applying innovative solutions that support service quality.