

***Citizen/Client Surveys:
Dispelling Myths and
Redrawing Maps***

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for the
CITIZEN-CENTRED SERVICE NETWORK
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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a stylized, serif font with a small maple leaf symbol to the right.

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Preface

This paper was undertaken for the Citizen-Centred Service Network (CCSN), which was created in response to a request from the Head of the Public Service to make service improvement a government priority. With the support of the Canadian Centre for Management Development, the members of the Network are committed to working together to improve service to citizens. Network members include over 200 senior officials from all three orders of government, as well as academics with expertise in the field of service delivery.

During its first meeting in July 1997, the Network concluded that despite progress in improving service delivery, a significant gap still exists between citizen expectations for service delivery and the actual service delivery they receive from government. The Network members committed themselves to working together to close this gap, but recognized that any “gap-closure” strategy must be anchored in a better understanding of citizen priorities for service improvement and a coordinated public sector strategy to respond to these priorities. This led to the identification of ten research projects. This paper is the product of Project 1: *A Review of Existing Knowledge on Citizen/Client Expectations of and Satisfaction with Public Sector Services*.

The primary research for this paper was undertaken between November 1997 and March 1998. The purpose of the review was twofold:

- to identify and document what is already known about citizens’ views of government service; and
- to identify gaps in our knowledge which require further research in order for managers to measurably improve service to citizens.

By identifying the gaps in our knowledge, this paper came to provide a solid foundation for much of the Network’s subsequent research. In fact, a number of the knowledge gaps identified in this report have been, or are in the process of being, filled through follow-up research (see Postscript).

This report gained invaluable benefit from the feedback of many public servants and academics. The authors are especially indebted to Ralph Heintzman, Samuel Wex, Faye Schmidt, Ken Kernaghan, Paul Thomas, Don Dickie, Maurice Demers, Bob Denhardt, Paul Reed, Donna Mitchell, Peter Aucoin, and Colin Ewart. Any mistakes or omissions must lie with the authors.

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Executive Summary

This paper seeks to take stock of what is known about the public's perceptions of public sector services. It provides a foundation upon which subsequent research can be undertaken for the purpose of providing managers with the tools and information necessary to improve service to citizens.

The paper identifies an array of factors which, to greater and lesser degrees, drive service satisfaction. These factors include expectations of service delivery, actual service delivery (e.g., timeliness and courtesy), characteristics of the service engaged (e.g., voluntary vs. involuntary), demographics of the service recipient, and public perceptions of trust in politicians and public servants. Next, the distinct natures of public and private sector services are investigated and their implications discussed. The paper then focuses on what emerge as its three key findings.

First, surveys which report that clients and citizens are dissatisfied with public sector services or that private sector services are of a higher quality than public sector services may not be telling an accurate story. In fact, it is inappropriate to compare certain public sector services with private sector services. Simply put, public sector services generally seek different ends (protecting the public interest) through different means (equity and due process) than profit-seeking private sector services. As a result, public sector services, like private sector services, seek to maximize client satisfaction but unlike the private sector this satisfaction must be balanced with protecting the public interest. Maintaining this balance may render some public services inappropriate for comparative purposes.

Despite the above caveat, surveys undertaken by Insight Research in 1992, Ekos Research Associates Inc. in 1996, and the National Quality Institute in 1996 and 1997 compare government services with certain private sector services. Without exception, these surveys found that the public rank the performance of government services significantly below that of private sector services (e.g., banks). The methodology employed by these surveys, however, is questionable. They compare the public's perceptions of the government or public service *in general* to their perceptions of *specific* private sector services. The difficulty with this approach is that questions about clients' or citizens' perceptions of entities as broad as "government" or "the public service" appear to evoke more negative/less positive perceptions (e.g., red tape and bureaucracy) than do questions about specific service experiences. Consistent with this finding, ratings of specific service experiences (especially recent experiences) have proven to be significantly higher than ratings of government or public sector services in general. This suggests that the performance gap which supposedly exists between private and public sector services may be smaller than previously reported, and for some services may be nonexistent.

Second, it is difficult to assign meaning to satisfaction levels in the absence of normative benchmarks. Not only are a variety of survey methodologies used to measure a variety of services, but certain services are predisposed by nature to receiving high or low ratings. Therefore, a given rating may be considered good for one service type (e.g., prisons) but poor for another (e.g., parks). This suggests the need for a standardized tool or methodology to facilitate reliable comparisons between similar services, and thus the development of normative benchmarks. Such comparisons could be made using one of three methods: by converting the scales of different survey instruments, by utilizing a customer satisfaction index, or by using a standardized survey instrument. The last of these three approaches, it is argued, provides the most useful information and the greatest reliability.

Third, surveys are a powerful tool not only for determining citizens' and clients' satisfaction with services, but for developing strategies to improve services. Although underutilized in the past, surveys can help ensure that service improvement strategies focus on those things that will make the most difference to citizens. Put differently, surveys help ensure that service improvements focus on what clients/citizens want as opposed to what decision makers think they want. To this end, the paper investigates how surveys can both inform leaders of citizens'/clients' priorities for improvement and assist in identifying appropriate and relevant standards of service. Surveys can also collect this information from internal clients – public servants who receive services directly from other public servants.

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The paper concludes that in order to measurably improve service to citizens, further research is required to ascertain:

- what drives client and citizen satisfaction;
- what is the relationship between specific service experiences and perceptions of government performance in general, including perceptions of trust and confidence;
- the level of public satisfaction with *specific* public sector services;
- citizens' and clients' priorities for improvement nationally and by province;
- normative performance benchmarks for similar services within and across Canada's governments;
- clients' expectations for generic service standards nationally and by province; and
- information about internal services, including levels of satisfaction, the identification of normative benchmarks and priorities for improvement, and the relationship between internal services and external service satisfaction.

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Introduction

Surveys are anything but new. They remain a constant in governments' toolboxes because of their ability to inform decision makers of citizens'/clients' expectations, perceptions and preferences.¹

Recent citizen/client surveys have gained a particularly high profile for their findings that Canadians place a low level of trust in their government, believe they receive poor service for their tax dollar, and feel they receive better service from the private sector. Indeed, surveys conducted by Insight Research in 1992, Ekos Research Associates Inc. in 1996, and the National Quality Institute in 1996 and 1997 all found that the public ranks the performance of government services significantly below that of private sector services (e.g., banks). But are these and other surveys asking the right questions? Are the stories they are telling accurate? Are they complete? If the importance of these questions is not immediately apparent, consider how survey results can have a dramatic impact on governments' agendas for action, the public's perception of government, and public servants' perception of themselves.

It is hoped that this paper will act as a catalyst for further discussion, debate, and research around the creation and interpretation of citizen surveys. Its purpose is to review recent surveys through the eyes of the user, taking stock of what we know, what we do not know, and what we need to know. This will be accomplished through a more specific investigation of the following:

- the factors which influence citizens' perceptions of services;
- the methodology and validity of surveys which compare public and private sector services;
- the advantages of using a standardized survey instrument;
- the potential for surveys to help identify and rectify gaps between clients' expectations of services and their perceptions of the services they receive, focusing on priorities for improvement, service standards, and internal clients as examples;
- the three key findings of the paper; and
- the need for further research which builds on the findings of this paper.

¹ A broad list of the various applications of citizen surveys is provided in Kenneth Webb and Harry P. Hatry, *Obtaining Citizen Feedback: The Application of Citizen Surveys to Local Government* (Washington: The Urban Institute, 1973).

Methodology

The content of this paper is drawn from a variety of citizen/client surveys, their reports, and academic literature. It focuses on the last ten years, across three levels of government within Canada, and abroad. The core of the research was undertaken between November 1997 and March 1998. Unfortunately, some relevant surveys could not be obtained because they have not been published or distributed beyond the clients for whom they were commissioned, or they are omnibus surveys only available upon subscription. This paper, therefore, should not be considered an exhaustive review of the literature, but rather a first cut at developing a more textured, robust, and accurate understanding of the dynamics behind citizens' and clients' views of public sector services, and of the surveys which document them. As a result, readers are encouraged to contribute to this ongoing work by forwarding relevant materials to the Strategic Research and Planning Group of the Canadian Centre for Management Development. Contact information is located within the front cover of this document.

Subjective vs. Objective Measures of Performance

This paper acknowledges that surveys can only provide “soft,” subjective measures of performance. Some may argue that “hard,” objective measures of performance are more important than subjective measures. In truth, of course, both subjective and objective measures are important elements of performance measurement. However, this paper is not about government performance in general, but *service* performance specifically. It is about measuring service performance through the eyes of citizens/clients, and using the findings to assist in service improvements. Indeed, improving service requires focusing on what citizens/clients want, not what decision makers think they want. That is to say, decision makers must look at services from the citizens' – not departments' – perspective. For these reasons, this paper focuses on interpreting the (albeit subjective) voice of the citizen/client – no insignificant task for any democracy.²

Citizen and Client Surveys: Is There a Difference?

The terms client and citizen have already been used a number of times in this document, but have yet to be defined. In order to provide clarity – or at least avoid confusion – for the purpose of this paper these terms are defined as follows. A *citizen*, as a member of a community (nationally, provincially, and locally), possesses certain rights and entitlements and is bound by certain duties and obligations. A *client*, on the other hand, need not be a citizen but by necessity is a direct recipient of a service.³ This distinction is a critical one, especially in survey work, since only clients of a given service can answer questions about a service experience in an informed manner. As a result, client surveys focus on clients' perceptions of a service as informed by their experiences with it. Citizen surveys, on the other hand, engage constituents within a given jurisdiction and focus more on general governance issues (e.g., program spending and priorities, strategic directions, and resource allocation) which do not necessarily require previous contact with a specific service.⁴

The value of clarifying this distinction is immense. It is not only about understanding *why* one is undertaking a survey and *what* the survey seeks to achieve, but ensuring that the questions being asked are *relevant* for the purpose

² While making some similar points, a more in-depth comparison of objective versus subjective performance measurement is provided in Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 37-46.

³ Note, the term service includes regulatory activities. For further information on the distinction between customers, clients, citizens, beneficiaries and stakeholders, see Canada, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Quality Services Guide XII: Who is the Client? – A Discussion Paper* (Ottawa: June 1996), and Canada, Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, *A Strong Foundation: Report of the Study Team on Public Service Values and Ethics* (Ottawa: 1996), p. 39.

⁴ In truth, citizen surveys can be deconstructed further into citizen surveys (those surveys that seek citizen input about such things as pursuing public goods and protecting the public interest) and taxpayer surveys (which seek information about such things as budget allocation and taxation levels). While this is an important distinction, it does not upset the basic citizen-client differentiation identified above and thus will not be expounded upon within the scope of this work.

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sought and *appropriate* for the audience being surveyed. However, as may be suspected, the distinction between these two types of surveys is not always apparent. To illustrate, a survey may ask a random sample of the public about a group of services. In this case, respondents may include people who have never used any of the services, people who have used all of the services, and/or people who have used only some of the services. Furthermore, respondents may answer wearing different “hats.” For example, a person, as a client, may want higher levels of service, but as a citizen realizes that the resources required to do so would be better allocated elsewhere. On balance, while the line between client and citizen surveys may not always be clear, the definitions offered above provide a useful starting point for framing and clarifying this important and complex issue.⁵

⁵ A useful discussion of the distinction between citizen and client surveys is provided in a report for the Citizen-Centred Service Network: Canada, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Manager's Guide*, Faye Schmidt with Teresa Strickland (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, December 1998).

Public and Private Sector Services: Distinct by Design

A number of surveys have compared the service performance of government or the public sector to that of the private sector and concluded that the latter provides better service. These results have received a high profile, especially within the public sector. Comparing the public and private sectors is not necessarily inappropriate, but it must be recognized that the public and private sectors are philosophically and operationally distinct.⁶

In most cases, government limits its involvement to those goods or services that cannot be efficiently produced or consumed in its absence (i.e., market failure), or for which there is a legal, national security or public trust reason for government delivery. The magnitude of the resulting services is almost overwhelming. To illustrate, using the typology provided in the Estimates, the federal government engages in propriety government business (e.g., confidential policy, national security); information services (e.g., scientific research, consultation); transfers (e.g., grants, contributions and subsidies); regulation, inspection and enforcement (e.g., incarceration, policing); adjudicative and judicial services; corporate management, administrative and support services; and other direct services to the public. These manifest themselves in a variety of government activities. Federally, government business ranges from agriculture, parks, natural resources and the environment to health and safety, security and protection, education and training, and employment and labour; from the regulation of utilities, taxation, infrastructure and industrial development to immigration, international trade, foreign affairs, and national defence.

The public service is also distinct in its management of risk and accountability. For instance, an electronics producer may be able to tolerate ten, twenty, or perhaps even fifty consecutive product failures/mistakes out of every one hundred attempts and still remain a vibrant and profitable entity. But in the management of taxpayers' monies one mistake in one hundred can be disastrous, necessitating strict methods of accountability, specialization, and standardization in certain areas of government.⁷

Further distinctions are apparent in the use of the private sector term "customer" and the public sector term "citizen."⁸ Unlike most of their public sector counterparts, private sector businesses must earn a profit to survive. To this end, they provide customers with unique treatment, often putting certain customers above others (e.g., preferred customer or VIP treatment). The public service, on the other hand, neither plays favourites with its citizens nor has as its goal to capture a profit. Instead, it seeks to improve the prosperity and well-being of all Canadians by pursuing and protecting the public interest. This requires that all citizens receive the same level of service to ensure the adherence to democratic values (e.g., accountability, loyalty, the rule of law), to principles of natural justice (fairness, due process, impartiality) and to horizontal equity (equal treatment of people of different groups and regions). Thus, both the means (fairness, due process, and probity) and the ends (guarding the public interest and achieving public goods) of the public sector are distinct from those of the private sector.⁹ It should also be emphasized that unlike customers or clients who are limited to being direct receivers of services, citizens belong to a larger community – the

⁶ A useful and lucid analysis of the scope and operations of government is provided in: Canada, *Report of the Task Force on Service Delivery*, Vol. 4, Part 3, "Review and Analysis of Recent Changes in the Delivery of Government Services," David Wright and David Zussman (Ottawa: Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, May 21, 1996).

⁷ For example, see Peter Aucoin, "The Design of Public Organizations for the 21st Century: Why Bureaucracy Will Survive in Public Management," *Canadian Public Administration* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 290-306.

⁸ For further information on the distinction between customers, clients, citizens, beneficiaries and stakeholders, see Canada, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Quality Services Guide XII: Who is the Client? – A Discussion Paper* (Ottawa: June 1996).

⁹ For further information on the distinction between public and private sector services some suggested readings include, Canada, *Report of the Task Force on Service Delivery*, Vol. 4, Part 3, "Review and Analysis of Recent Changes in the Delivery of Government Services," David Wright and David Zussman (Ottawa: Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, May 21, 1996); Graham T. Allison Jr., "Public and Private Management: Are They Fundamentally Alike in All Unimportant Respects?", Federick S. Lane, ed., *Current Issues in Public Administration*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Henry Mintzberg, "Managing Government, Governing Management," *Harvard Business Review* (May-June 1996), pp. 75-83.

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democracy we call Canada – and as such not only possess certain rights and entitlements, but are bound by certain duties and obligations.¹⁰

Put differently, in the private sector the direct recipient of a service (the customer) receives all the benefits from a given service; the benefits do not flow to others. In the case of many public sector services, however – especially in the areas of regulation and enforcement – a large portion of the benefits flow to citizens at large, not to the direct recipient of the service (the client). Consider services such as food inspection, pollution control, and law enforcement. Here it is citizens, not the direct recipient of the service (the client, or in these cases perhaps more aptly termed the captive or complier), that derive the bulk of the benefits from the service.¹¹ They feel safe that they will not be poisoned by the air they are breathing or the foods they are eating, and will not be victimized on the streets they are walking. Conversely, those being regulated are generally not just direct recipients of services, but citizens receiving a service (thus a citizen as client). Convicts, for example, are not simply clients – direct recipients of correctional services – but citizens. They are living up to their duties and obligations to Canada through the sentence they are serving, whereas the correctional system ensures their rights as citizens are respected. Thus, when a person is both a citizen and client, the former is overarching and can be thought of as providing the context or framework within which the latter exists.

The tension which exists between citizens and clients/customers is aptly described in the Report of the Deputy Ministers' Task Force on Public Service Values and Ethics: "...the true role of public servants is not only to serve 'customers' but also to *balance* the interests and preserve the rights of 'citizens.'¹² The discussion can be extended further to include situations where client and citizen interests are not one and the same; for example, in cases where government's client is a factory whose airborne pollution is regulated by government and the citizens include all those people living "down wind" from the factory (some of whom may be employed by the factory). Clearly, the government cannot act solely in the best interest of the client since the interests of citizens are also directly and indirectly affected by the output of pollution. Here again, the beneficiary of this regulatory and enforcement service is not the client (direct service recipient) but citizens in general. To extend the equation further, consider the interests of stakeholders such as investors, employees, environmental groups and persons selling inputs to the company, all of which must be taken into account. These are all factors which must be balanced in the public sector, but which are generally not issues in the private sector.

It should be clear, therefore, that the public service embraces different principles and values, and must consider and address requirements, constraints and interests different from those of the private sector. These are what make the public sector distinct, and this distinction is important to citizens. Recent evidence suggests that citizens do not want the public service to veer from its role of guardian of the public interest, or, by implication, its focus on equity and due process. When asked to indicate which of the following statements best represents their view, "Governments need to transform themselves to more closely resemble businesses," or "Too much focus on private sector practices will weaken government's ability to protect the public interest," 63 percent of respondents agreed with the latter statement.¹³ Once this distinct public interest mandate is acknowledged, it becomes clear that for government, client satisfaction is only one piece of a larger puzzle.

¹⁰ Unlike clients/customers, citizens share a common purpose with all Canadians and are obliged to comply with and work within the confines of Canada's legal framework. Citizens' rights and entitlements include such things as justice, safety, and the guarantee of a minimal social safety net.

¹¹ There are a variety of terms used to describe persons who receive services or benefits from government. While the term client has been purposefully chosen to denote direct receivers of government services, it is often substituted for other labels depending on the service area. Examples of labels where recipients and beneficiaries of services are the same person include: customer (user pay services), client (a variety of government services), recipients (social services), and users (e.g., IT services). Examples where the beneficiary is not the service recipient but society at large include: compliers and captives (regulation, taxation), defendants, inmates, and offenders (legal services and corrections).

¹² Canada, Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, *A Strong Foundation: Report of the Study Team on Public Service Values and Ethics* (Ottawa: 1996), p. 39. In general, this document provides an excellent analysis of the evolving nature of values and ethics within government. It is also worth noting British Columbia's Parks Department which is unique in that it surveys clients for user and park-specific information, and citizens for their views on management of the park system as a whole.

¹³ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government IV: Summary of Wave One Findings* (December, 1997).

This raises questions about the validity of comparing public sector services with private sector services. Perhaps it is only appropriate to compare government services that are somewhat akin to private sector services, such as the operation of parks or the processing of cheques. That is to say, services for which the benefits flow almost entirely to the client specifically rather than to citizens generally. In contrast, it may be inappropriate to compare private sector services with government services which seek to guard the public interest (e.g., regulation and enforcement) and thus serve compliers and captives rather than customers. It is not only a matter of being sensitive to public and private sector services that are clearly different in kind (comparing apples and oranges) but to differences in degree (comparing Spartans and McIntoshes). As a general rule, if the benefits of a public service flow largely to citizens rather than to the direct recipient of the service, it is unlikely that that service will have a comparable private sector counterpart.

Perceptions of Services

Among the various elements that bear on clients' perceptions of services are an organization's culture, regulations, and management systems, as well as each employee's knowledge, skills, and attitude towards service quality. The unique culture, principles and values of the public sector are also important. Compounding the issue, each client brings different expectations to the service experience. Expectations are informed by clients' past experiences as well as by the information and advertising provided by service organizations. Of course, clients' ratings of services are also influenced by the service experience itself.

Although not always recognized, there are various factors that can influence the ratings of public sector services which are simply nonexistent in the private sector. Consider the reasons why clients engage services. In the private sector individual service providers are almost always engaged as a result of desire, or at least choice, but in the public sector there is little choice as to the provider. In some cases public services are legally required, which means that many of governments' clients are actually involuntary. Examples include clients of fire departments, financial assistance, regulation, registration, law enforcement, corrections, taxation, and hospital services. From the perspective of public servants this means trying to satisfy all clients, including those who, if they had the choice, would not engage the service.

Other elements which may influence perceptions of public sector services include citizens' trust and confidence in the government, politicians, and public servants. In 1989, Goldfarb asked individuals to rate the extent to which they believed integrity and honesty were present in the three levels of government. Combining the two positive categories, a total of 48 percent of respondents believed there was either some or a great deal of integrity and honesty at the federal level, 62 percent shared a similar perspective about the provincial level, whereas at the municipal level 74 percent shared this sentiment.¹⁴ The general pattern, therefore, sees the highest levels of trust accorded to local governments, followed by provincial governments and then the federal government. Providing relevant commentary and possibly a partial explanation, Leslie Seidle notes that "Many Canadians have come to feel more closely associated with, or confident in, their provincial rather than the federal government – a development that can be traced to at least the 1970s. This trend may well colour how Canadians judge the federal public service."¹⁵

Ratings of performance also cascade from high to low across the three levels of government. To illustrate, a 1989 survey conducted by Environics asked respondents whether the taxes they paid to each level of government were worth the services they received in return. For the federal level 57 percent of respondents felt the services they received were not worth the taxes they paid. At the provincial level 45 percent of respondents echoed the same sentiment, as did 35 percent of respondents at the local government level.¹⁶

The 1992 survey *Perspectives Canada* by Insight Canada Research asked respondents to rate services received from eight organizations, spanning the three levels of government. Municipal governments received the highest rating (38 percent rated good/excellent), followed by provincial governments (26 percent) and then the federal government (24 percent).¹⁷ On an overall quality of service scale ranging from 0 to 100 (0 = extremely poor and 100 = extremely good) respondents of the 1992 Ontario survey *Best Value for Tax Dollars* gave a rating of 55 to their municipal government, 45 to the Ontario government, and 36 to the federal government.¹⁸

Disrupting this cascade somewhat, the 1997 Ekos Research Associates Inc. (hereafter Ekos) *Rethinking Government* survey found the performance of the federal government to rate slightly below that of local governments but higher than that of provincial governments. When Ekos asked respondents "How do you rate the overall performance of the federal government," 37 percent of respondents rated the service they received from the federal government as

¹⁴ Goldfarb 1999, as cited in David Zussman, "Government Service to the Public: Public Perceptions," *Optimum* 22, no. 4 (1991-1992), p. 13.

¹⁵ Leslie Seidle, *Rethinking the Delivery of Public Services to Citizens* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1995), p. 79.

¹⁶ As cited in David Zussman, "Government Service to the Public: Public Perceptions," *Optimum* 22, no. 4 (1991-1992), p. 12.

¹⁷ Insight Canada Research, *Perspectives Canada* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1992).

¹⁸ Continuous Improvement Services Inc., and Erin Research Inc. *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), p. 69.

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good, 31 percent rated the performance of their provincial government as good, and 42 percent rated the performance of their local government as good.¹⁹ Still, the general pattern seems to be that local governments receive a significantly higher performance/satisfaction rating than provincial governments, and provincial governments generally receive a higher rating than the federal government. Whether or not this pattern is linked to trust and confidence in government remains uncertain.

When the public's perceptions were tracked on the issue of trust and respect from 1980 to 1990 across a variety of groups (e.g., public servants, politicians, banks, organized religion, doctors and farmers), public servants consistently ranked higher than politicians but below banks, the media, organized religion, doctors, and farmers.²⁰ Most recently, the 1997 *Pollara Public Trust Index* found that only 21 percent of Canadians trust civil servants "a lot," whereas 32 percent trust people who run banks "a lot."²¹

Although trust in government is low, it is not necessarily on the decrease. The 1997 *Rethinking Government* survey conducted by Ekos found that trust and legitimacy in government has been on the rise during the 1990s. When Ekos asked respondents to react to the statement: "I think the ethical standards of our federal government have slipped badly in the past decade" – which unfortunately precludes any distinction between politicians and public servants – 69 percent of respondents agreed with this statement in February 1994 while only 60 percent agreed in January 1997. Similarly, Ekos asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed with the statement: "I get the feeling that governments have lost sight of the needs of average Canadians." In February 1994, 76 percent agreed; in 1997 only 68 percent agreed.²² Whether this increase in trust and confidence represents a blip or a reversal in the trend is as yet unclear. It is worth mentioning, however, that there is substantial evidence to support the argument that a decline in trust in civic institutions is occurring generally, across a number of countries.²³ As part of this shift, people are more interested in politics yet have declining confidence in both traditional government and nongovernmental institutions which tend to limit opportunities for engagement.²⁴

In truth, the variety and extent of the elements that make up the public trust equation have yet to be identified. Providing a starting point, Ekos has concluded that declining trust and confidence can be attributed to "... an aging population, rapid social and technological change, increased pluralism, and poor public finances."²⁵ The emergence of the "information society" also bears mention. It has enabled citizens to access more sources of information in less time than

¹⁹ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government IV: Summary of Wave One Findings* (December, 1997). When the good and neutral categories are combined, a total of 73 percent of January 1997 respondents and 69 percent of November 1997 respondents rated the federal government as performing at a good or neutral (neither good nor bad) level; only 59 percent (January 1997) and 53 percent (November 1997) rated the provincial governments as good or neutral. In January 1997, 74 percent of respondents indicated a rating of good or neutral at the local level, as did 69 percent in November 1997.

²⁰ Paradoxically, in 1989 Decima found that only 7 percent of the public had a great deal of confidence in the banks, whereas 12 percent of the public had a great deal of confidence in the civil service. But when the categories of "only some confidence" and "a great deal of confidence" are aggregated, 83 percent of the public indicated confidence in banks and 75 percent of the public indicated confidence in the civil service. Goldfarb, 1989 as cited in David Zussman, "Government Service to the Public: Public Perceptions," *Optimum* 22, no. 4 (1991-1992), p. 13.

²¹ Pollara, *Public Trust Index*. January 1997.

²² Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government*. Presentation to the Canadian Centre for Management Development, (November 1997).

²³ See for example Robert D. Putnam, *The Decline of Civil Society: How Come? So What?* The 1996 John L. Manion Lecture, (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1991), pp. 5, 6.

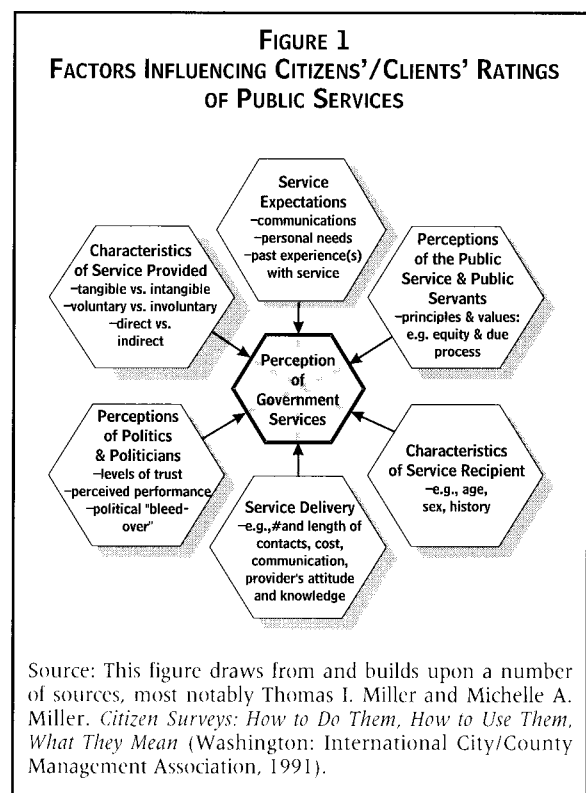
²⁴ Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-National Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996), pp. 55-70, and David Zussman, "Do Citizens Trust Their Governments," *Canadian Public Administration* 40, no. 2 (Summer), pp. 234-254. Evidence for this phenomenon is established by the 1981 and 1990 World Values Survey, *Environics Focus Canada Report* (Toronto: Environics Research Group Ltd., 1996).

²⁵ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government* 1997, Ekos Research Associates Inc. "Canadian Perspectives on Trust," *Insights: Public Sector Management in Canada* 2, no. 2 (August/September 1997), p. 6. In search of answers within an American context, the Kennedy School of Government has initiated a multi-year project that seeks to help identify the right questions, and hopefully identify some of the answers. For more information see Joseph S. Nye, "Visions of Governance in the Twenty-First Century," Kennedy School of Government Spring Symposium, Harvard University, 1996, <http://ksgwww.harvard.edu/visions/agenda.htm>.

previously possible.²⁶ This phenomenon is diminishing governments' monopoly on information and is possibly modifying citizens' expectations for government services, although the extent of this influence remains unknown. Another possible driver of trust and confidence is clients' perceptions of government service quality, although no significant evidence could be found to support this position. Further research is required to determine if such a relationship exists.

It is possible that sentiments about politicians and political events, largely informed by the media, "bleed-over" into the public's perceptions of the public service and its service delivery. That is to say, the distinction between politics, government, and the public service may seem blurred and ultimately indistinguishable in the eyes of many citizens. The 1990 document *Service to the Public: Task Force Report* suggests that the public do indeed have trouble distinguishing the public service from the political sphere.²⁷ Six years later the Deputy Minister Task Force on Service Delivery reported that "...while not immune to the broad resentment to government, the greatest anger and alienation from government is directed to politicians and the entire institution of government."²⁸ In the 1989 Decima survey respondents were asked if they were thinking about politicians, civil servants or both when rating their confidence in government. A total of 67 percent indicated they were thinking primarily about politicians, 16 percent said civil servants, and 17 percent said both.²⁹ Assuming, therefore, that there is some seepage between the public's trust in politicians and public servants, this raises the question: Do citizens separate their views of trust in politicians specifically, and government generally, from their ratings of service performance? The answer to this question has not been conclusively determined, but as a result of his study of public perceptions of services, David Zussman concluded that, in fact, "The public's perceptions of honesty and integrity in their governments affect their assessment of the services they receive from these institutions."³⁰

Of special note are the media. The 1997 Ekos *Rethinking Government VI* survey found the media to be very important in shaping people's opinions about government. Specifically, 83 percent of respondents indicated that newspapers are somewhat influential or very influential in helping them form their opinions about political and governmental issues, as did 83 percent in rating the influence of television, and 75 percent in rating the influence of news magazines (such as Macleans).³¹ This is an important finding. As Joseph Nye points out, media portraits of government "...have become notably more negative during the last generation." The "bureaucratic horror stories" presented in the media are not designed to be representative, but to be attention getters.³² As a result, as Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson note, while the media are probably not the sole or primary cause of negative attitudes towards



²⁶ For further information on the information society see Steven Rosell et al, *Governing in an Information Society* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1992).

²⁷ Canada, *Service to the Public: Task Force Report*, (Ottawa: 1990), p. 6.

²⁸ Canada, *Report of the Task Force on Service Delivery*, Vol. 4, Part 2. "Perceptions of Government Service Delivery," (Ottawa: Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, May 21, 1996), p. viii.

²⁹ David Zussman, "Government Service to the Public: Public Perceptions," *Optimum* 22, no. 4 (1991-1992), p. 15.

³⁰ David Zussman, "Government Service to the Public: Public Perceptions," *Optimum* 22, no. 4 (1991-1992), p. 13.

³¹ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government IV: Summary of Wave One Findings* (December, 1997).

³² Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*, 3rd ed., (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 9-10.

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government, their “... data show – in ways that could only be suggested by previous commentators – that the way in which the new media frame political events stimulates cynicism.”³³

Recognizing the complexities involved, Figure 1 is offered as a first attempt at conceptually visualizing the many factors which influence citizens’ and clients’ ratings of government services.³⁴

³³ As noted in Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Media and Declining Confidence in Government,” *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2, no. 4 (August 1997), pp. 5-7.

³⁴ Of potential interest for future research are the pairs of interacting factors apparent in Figure 1: expectations of service delivery is paired with actual service delivery, perceptions of politics and politicians is paired with perceptions of the public service and public servants, and characteristics of the service utilized is paired with characteristics of the service recipients.

Comparing Public and Private Sector Services: Apples and Oranges?

As noted earlier, the public and private sectors, both philosophically and operationally, are largely distinct. Thus the comparability of services between sectors is somewhat questionable. Nevertheless, such comparisons are commonly made and without exception, the quality of services provided by the public sector/government (depending on the wording chosen) have been found to rate lower than those provided by the private sector. The 1992 survey *Perspectives Canada* by Insight Canada Research asked citizens to rate the service they received from their local civil service, provincial civil service, federal civil service, grocery stores, banks, department stores, airlines and property-casualty insurance companies. The findings? Respondents ranked the service they received from the federal public service the lowest.

In later *Perspectives Canada* surveys, the public were asked to rate their impressions of public institutions on a scale from 1 (not at all favourable) to 10 (favourable).³⁵ The fall of 1996 found the federal civil service (5.1) ranking above home/car insurance companies (4.9) and cable TV companies (4.7), but below brand name pharmaceutical companies (5.4), banks (5.3), respondents' own local telephone company (6.0), and local telephone companies in general (6.1).³⁶ In the most recent survey, the public rated their impressions of the federal civil service (4.9) above cable TV companies (4.6) and home/car insurance companies (4.8), but below banks (5.1), and respondents' own local telephone company (6.5).³⁷

The 1996 *Rethinking Government* survey by Ekos has perhaps received the greatest attention in the last few years. It asked respondents, "How would you rate the performance of government service/your bank for each of these criteria [the criteria being generic elements of service such as courtesy and promptness]." On all criteria citizens ranked their experiences with *banks* higher than their experience with *government*.³⁸ Similarly, in the National Quality Institute's 1996 and 1997 surveys, various industry sectors (e.g., pharmacies, airlines, banks, etc.) were ranked on a variety of measures, including overall service quality, prompt service delivery, level of courtesy, and after-sales services. In all these areas, respondents ranked government the lowest.³⁹

As a result of this mass of evidence, it has understandably been concluded in many quarters that the private sector simply provides better service than the public sector. In concert with the bureaucrat bashing and the various reforms and the downsizing public servants have endured, these findings may well contribute to the low level of morale found in the public service and may exacerbate the misperception held by 80 percent of federal public servants that the public thinks of them as "lazy and uncaring," when in fact less than 20 percent of the public actually hold this view.⁴⁰

But is service provided by the public service really of such low quality? Does this profession – supposedly committed to serving the public – really provide poorer service than its profit-seeking counterparts? The evidence provided to date suggests the answer is "yes"; this answer, however, may be premature and perhaps less than entirely accurate.

³⁵ These findings should be read cautiously, as "impressions" is a very broad term which is likely to include some combination of satisfaction, confidence, legitimacy, etc.

³⁶ Pollara, *Perspectives Canada* V, no. 4 (1996).

³⁷ Pollara, *Perspectives Canada* V, no. 2 (1997).

³⁸ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government*. Presentation to the Canadian Centre for Management Development (November 1997).

³⁹ National Quality Institute, *National Consumer Survey on Quality Industry Rankings* (October 1997), and National Quality Institute, *1996 Canadian Consumer Quality Survey – Government Services*.

⁴⁰ Canada, Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, *Report of the Deputy Ministers' Task Force on Service Delivery Models*, Volumes I and IV. (Ottawa: October 1996), p. 29 and Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government*. Presentation to the Canadian Centre for Management Development (November 1997).

Comparing Apples and Apples?

Irrespective of the distinct natures of the public and private sectors, much can be learned when the services compared are similar in kind and scope. Unfortunately, in most instances this criterion has not been met. Instead, citizens' views of relatively specific private sector services have been compared to their views of the public sector or government services in general. For example, the 1997 National Quality Institute survey compares specific private sector services to "government" – without any qualifier as to country, level, or type of public sector service. But research suggests such comparisons are of questionable validity. Indeed, research by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center concludes that "...generalized attitudes toward bureaucracy are based not so much on concrete experiences as 'the cumulative impact of the mass media and the accepted beliefs in the culture.'"⁴¹

As the 1992 Ontario survey *Best Value for Tax Dollars* points out, "Overall quality of service, when applied to an organization as large and diverse as the Ontario Government, is vague and nonspecific, and may evoke a stereotyped image of 'big government,' while mention of a specific service area may recall a personal experience."⁴² Following the same logic, if respondents were asked to rate the performance of the private sector in general their responses might evoke stereotypical images of insensitive corporations willing to exploit individuals and the environment for the sole purpose of expanding their bottom line. For example, the Ekos 1996 *Rethinking Government* survey found that the performance of bank services ranked higher than that of government services. But when focus groups compared the services provided by the *federal government* against those provided by the *private sector*, "participants were more or less divided about who provided better service."⁴³

It remains unknown why public sector or government services are often compared with specific private sector services. If citizens can clearly discern between the levels of service they have received from banks and cable companies, can they not then differentiate between various public sector services? A meta-analysis of 261 citizen surveys from the local government level found that residents can distinguish good services from bad, and in fact do rate disparate services differently.⁴⁴ For all these reasons, it is argued here that asymmetrical comparisons (comparing a sector to a specific service) may well evoke biased responses, rendering such findings suspect.

The 1992 Ontario survey, *Best Value for Tax Dollars*, represents a more sophisticated and symmetrical analysis. It rates the performance of the Ontario public service in general, then four categories of direct public services (registration, information, financial assistance, and enforcement), and finally a specific service experience (such as getting a birth certificate or registering a company name) in relation to 17 service quality elements. The public service received a rating of 45 out of 100, as compared to 62 for the respondents' department store, 71 for their supermarket and 72 for their trust company. This suggests that the performance of the Ontario public sector is far below that of specific private sector services. However, in support of this paper's proposition, the survey report concludes that when rating quality of service, the more specific the service experience, the higher the rating. Thus, whereas the overall public service received a rating of 45 out of 100, the four service categories received an average of 59 out of 100, and the specific service experiences based on 17 service elements received a rating of 64 out of 100 (see Figure 2).⁴⁵ Viewed in this light, the performance of specific public sector services is in line with that of specific private sector services. Supporting this finding, the 1997 *Survey of Albertans and Employees* found that when respondents rated the

⁴¹ Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*, 3rd ed., (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 10-37. In general, Goodsell provides copious evidence to support his argument that American governments perform better than is commonly perceived. As part of his argument he explores the effect of specific vs. general survey questions on citizens' ratings of government services. He concludes that when asked about their specific/concrete experiences, most citizens perceive their experiences with government in a positive light.

⁴² Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), p. 78.

⁴³ Canada, Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, *Report of the Deputy Ministers' Task Force on Service Delivery Models*, Volume I (Ottawa: October 1996), p. 12.

⁴⁴ Thomas I. Miller and Michelle A. Miller. *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*. (Washington: International City/County Management Association), p. 15.

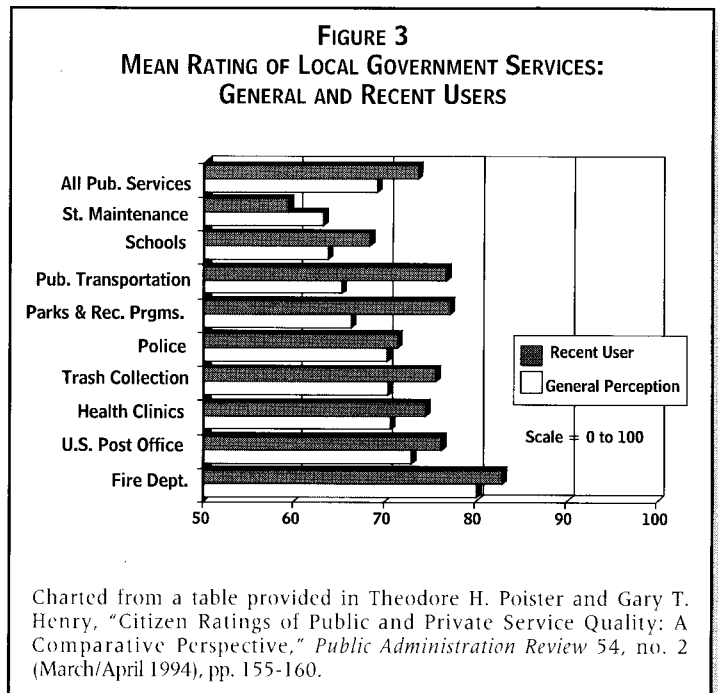
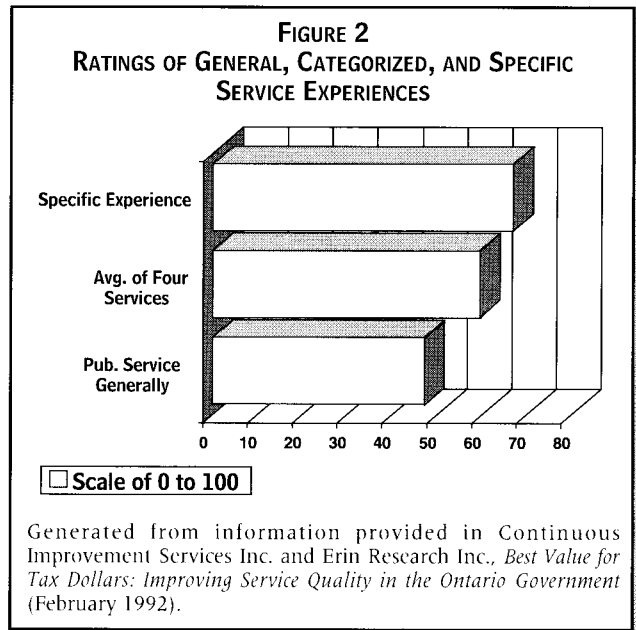
⁴⁵ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), pp. 11, 78. A note of caution: since registration, information, financial assistance, and enforcement are service lines as compared to a department store, bank or trust company, and supermarket which are service entities, it is questionable how conclusively one can interpret these findings.

quality of service provided by public servants based on their last service contact, as opposed to rating service from public servants in general, scores increased an average of about 11 percent.⁴⁶

A further element to consider is how recently the respondent has used the service. In their analysis of the Georgia State Poll, Poister and Henry found that ratings of services by “recent users” (those using a service within the last six months) tended to be somewhat more favourable than the general public sample (see Figure 3).⁴⁷ Similarly, the 1993 Citizen Charter Customer Survey conducted in mainland Britain found that respondents who had actually used the identified service rated it higher than those who had not.⁴⁸ To summarize, this suggests that asking respondents about their perceptions of government or public sector services generally elicits a lower rating than asking them to recall a specific – especially recent – service experience.

Interestingly, the 1997 Ekos survey *Rethinking Government IV* found that 62 percent of respondents had not had a direct service experience with the federal government in the last three months.⁴⁹ This finding suggests the need for tighter methodological controls when surveying perceptions of public sector service delivery. Yet, stringent scope and time parameters were rarely used in the surveys reviewed. For example, the 1996 Ekos survey was limited to those respondents who had contact with a federal government department, “...in-person, by telephone, by mail, through the INTERNET or kiosks, as long it took place in the *last two years* [italics added].”⁵⁰ Assuming citizens have relatively constant contact with banks, this two-year parameter seems questionable for comparative purposes.

A further methodological difficulty relates to the ability of citizens and clients to distinguish between public and private sector services. The 1997 *Survey of Albertans and Employees* found that 17 percent of Albertans thought they had



⁴⁶ TAG Research, *City of Calgary Corporate Customer Satisfaction Survey* (July 1997).

⁴⁷ Theodore H. Poister and Gary T. Henry, “Citizen Ratings of Public and Private Service Quality: A Comparative Perspective,” *Public Administration Review* 54, no. 2 (March/April 1994), p. 158.

⁴⁸ ICM Research, *Citizen’s Charter Customer Survey: Research Report* (March-April 1993).

⁴⁹ Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government IV: Summary of Wave One Findings* (December 1997).

⁵⁰ Canada, Privy Council Office/Canadian Centre for Management Development, *Report of the Deputy Ministers’ Task Force on Service Delivery Models*, Volume IV, Part D (Ottawa: October 1996), p. 8.

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received services from the Government of Alberta when in fact they had received the service from a private sector organization.⁵¹

All this suggests the need for further research using strict methodological controls. It may be that the much-reported performance gap between the public and private sectors is smaller than previously indicated, or does not exist at all. Indeed, in their survey of a total of 18 specific public and private services, Poister and Henry found no systematic difference in the ratings of service quality between the public (local government) and private sectors. On a scale of 0 to 100, the mean rating of the nine private sector services was 67.5, whereas the mean rating of the public sector services was 69. When recent service experiences were rated the private sector obtained a mean rating of 73 and the public sector services 73.5 (see Appendix 1).⁵² Another research study undertaken in the United States, the 1987 Roper poll, found that postal service rated second among eleven other nonpublic services such as those provided by supermarkets, doctors and banks.⁵³

Obtaining similar results, the Citizen's *Charter Customer Survey* found recent users of both public and private sector services rate them fairly evenly across a spectrum. It is also worth noting that whereas the *Rethinking Government* and *Perspectives Canada* surveys found banks to rate above the *federal civil service* or *government*, in this survey of twenty-eight public services the public rated postal services, primary schools, refuse collection, customs, National Health Service hospitals and the police all higher than banks⁵⁴ (see Appendix 2).

⁵¹ Alberta, Government of Alberta, Core Human Resources Measures Project, *1997 Survey of Albertans and Employees*, (Fall 1997).

⁵² Theodore H. Poister and Gary T. Henry, "Citizen Ratings of Public and Private Service Quality: A Comparative Perspective," *Public Administration Review* 54, no. 2 (March/April 1994), p. 158.

⁵³ As reviewed in Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*, 3rd ed., (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1994), pp. 35, 36.

⁵⁴ ICM Research, *Citizen's Charter Customer Survey: Research Report* (March-April 1993), p. 16.

How Good is “Good”?

Various surveys have been undertaken over the last decade to determine client/citizen satisfaction with public services. Essentially, there are two ways overall client satisfaction can be tracked: over time and against others. Consistently measuring oneself over time is a fundamental requirement for continuous improvement. Measuring against others is also an important concept, but when it comes to obtaining valid and reliable data, it is much more difficult. Yet without this information it can be very difficult to determine how good a rating of “good” (or bad a rating of “bad”) actually is. Is a rating of 60, 70 or 80 good, fair, or bad, and to what degree? The fact is, in the absence of a fixed reference point against which to make comparisons it is difficult to assign any real meaning to these findings.

Miller and Miller help elucidate this conundrum using a particularly instructive analogy:

It's the kind of problem a school administrator might face if, after teachers give a social studies test to all their third graders, they find that most kids get 80 percent of the questions right. That outcome certainly doesn't look bad, but maybe the questions are easy. In which case, 80 percent isn't so good. Or what if the questions are very hard? Then 80 percent is a terrific score. The difficulty of the test is not a matter for the test maker or principal to decide – anymore than local government staff or policymakers should conclude that 70 percent “excellent or good” is an adequate rating for police. Knowing whether a test is easy or hard requires us to know how lots of kids would do on it. So school officials use standardized tests that place the third graders' social studies achievement scores in the context of other third graders' performance on this social studies test.⁵⁵

Just as the grades of school children are compared with other children's grades from across the country, it would be beneficial if public services could be compared against like services across the country, across countries, and over time. Indeed, this is perhaps the most effective way to attribute meaning to survey results. Consider, for example, the findings of the 1997 Angus Reid Group survey, *Canada and the World*. When respondents were asked, “Thinking of the national government of ..., would you say you are...[very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied] with their overall performance?” slightly more than 50 percent of Canadian respondents indicated that they were very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their performance. How good a rating is this? At first glance, it does not look too good. But when compared to the other 13 countries surveyed, it becomes apparent that the performance of the federal government was given a fairly high rating. In fact, more Canadians indicated they were very or somewhat satisfied with their national government than did respondents in any other country, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan.⁵⁶

In an evaluation of surveys from at least 60 communities, Miller and Miller found that certain services consistently rate high, while other services consistently rate low. They found that on a scale of 0-100: “The best rated services were fire, library, and trash collection (75-80 average rating); the services receiving the worst evaluations were animal control, street repair, and planning (55-60 average rating)” (see Appendix 3).⁵⁷ Again, if survey results are relative in their interpretation and certain services are predisposed to receiving higher ratings than others, how does one know how good a rating of “good” actually is? A satisfaction rating of 65 may be outstanding for street repair but terrible for libraries.

The reason for these disparate ratings has yet to be clarified, although some theories have been suggested. Perhaps providing a piece of the puzzle, research at the municipal level suggests that homogeneous services – where all citizens expect essentially the same level of service (there is no market segmentation) – such as garbage collection and police services receive higher satisfaction ratings. For services which are heterogeneous (the market is segmented),

⁵⁵ Thomas I. Miller and Michelle A. Miller, *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*. (Washington: International City/County Management Association), p. 105.

⁵⁶ As cited in “How Do We Compare,” *Insights: Public Sector Management in Canada* 2, no. 2 (August/September 1997), p. 6.

⁵⁷ Thomas I. Miller and Michelle A. Miller, *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*. (Washington: International City/County Management Association), p. 114. The reason for this phenomenon is uncertain; however, in a December 15, 1997 presentation to the Canadian Centre for Management Development, George Spears of Erin Research Inc. speculated that consistently highly rated services provide direct benefits to the client, whereas consistently low rating services do not and may even be viewed as a potential threat or nuisance.

such as tourism and recreational services, it is more difficult to please the various client segments. Indeed, the resources required to please everyone may simply not be available.⁵⁸

Whatever the reasons citizens have for rating certain services higher than others, the fact is they do and in order to generate valid benchmarks, like organizations must be compared with like organizations (e.g., libraries with libraries). Unfortunately, there are still further difficulties as organizations do not ask the same questions or use a common scale. Thus, one organization may ask about service quality while another asks about service performance or satisfaction. One organization may use a four-point scale, another a ten-point scale. Consequently, problems of comparability persist.

In order to overcome these difficulties it is necessary to find a way to validly and reliably compare survey results against other organizations and over time. Three methodologies appear to meet this need to varying degrees: 1) a standard customer satisfaction index, such as the American Customer Satisfaction Index; 2) conversion of surveys of similar services to a common metric; and, 3) utilization of a standard survey instrument. Highlights of the strengths and weaknesses of these three approaches are dealt with below.

The Customer Satisfaction Index

At present, Canada does not possess a customer satisfaction index; however, this approach has been adopted by a number of countries. Essentially, a customer satisfaction index acts as a national economic indicator for all industries. It assesses customer satisfaction at the organization level and then weights these findings to determine industry, sector, and national measures of quality.⁵⁹ This approach appears to provide a number of benefits, not the least of which is determining if quality is improving or deteriorating nationally, by sector, and by industry. But when the goal is improving service to citizens, certain questions must be raised about the utility of customer satisfaction indexes. The following highlights the potential drawbacks to this approach, using the model which exists in the United States as a point of reference:⁶⁰

The customer satisfaction index is limited in its ability to guide service improvement plans.

- A national satisfaction index would inform public sector organizations of service satisfaction allowing inter-organizational comparisons, comparisons with the government/public administration average, and comparisons over time. But this extensive and resource-intensive undertaking would not inform decision makers on how clients rate the importance of particular services or their priorities for improvement. It would not uncover what internal clients perceive to be barriers to improvement, or help guide the development of service standards. In short, it will not tell managers what they need to do to improve service to their clients. As will be discussed later, this type of information is critical if resources are to be allocated efficiently and effectively.

The applicability of the model to the public sector is uncertain.

- According to the model, customer satisfaction is seen to have three antecedents: 1) “perceived quality/ performance” which is broken down into two components of the consumption experience: customization and reliability; 2) “perceived level of product quality relative to the price paid;” and, 3) the “served market’s expectations.”⁶¹ With respect to the first antecedent, there is an assumption that customization to meet customers’ needs is good; in the public sector, however, this is not necessarily the case. Since the public sector is based on principles of due process and equity, it is generally resistant to the idea of customization; that is, treating government clients inequitably by providing them with different levels of the same service. As to the second antecedent (quality

⁵⁸ See Hari Das, Mallika Das and Francis McKenzie, “Assessing the ‘Will of the People’: An Investigation into Town Service Delivery Satisfaction,” *Canadian Public Administration*, Vol. 38, no. 1 (Spring 1995), p. 79.

⁵⁹ See for example, Claes Fornell, et al. “The American Customer Satisfaction Index: Nature, Purpose, and Findings,” *American Customer Satisfaction Index*, 60 (October 1996), pp. 7-18.

⁶⁰ These and other potential shortcomings of the adoption of a system like the American Customer Satisfaction Index, such as resource intensiveness, were provided by Faye Schmidt, Director, Organizational Support Division, Public Service Employee Relations Commission, Government of British Columbia, meeting, December 11, 1997.

⁶¹ Claes Fornell, et al. “The American Customer Satisfaction Index: Nature, Purpose, and Findings,” *American Customer Satisfaction Index*, 60 (October 1996), p. 9.

relative to price), most of governments’ services are funded through taxation. That is to say, because most pricing information is unknown to the public – cost is hidden in the form of general taxation – it is almost impossible for clients to compare quality to price. The last antecedent (served market’s expectations) is based on both past consumption experiences and organizations’ ability to satisfy the consumer in the future. However, since many public services have stakeholders but not clearly definable end consumers, the model does not apply to public organizations in agriculture, fishing or forestry. Providing additional complications, certain government services seek to prevent the increased use of their services. Since this goal is somewhat contradictory to the market philosophy, it is unclear how public services such as social assistance or search and rescue would fit into this model.

- The model also operates on the premise that the consequences of increased satisfaction are decreased complaints and increased loyalty. In fact, “Loyalty is the ultimate dependent variable in the model because of its value as a proxy for profitability.”⁶² Clients of government, however, have very few if any alternatives to government services. The application of loyalty seems particularly perverse with respect to involuntary or undesired services such as corrections, welfare, and unemployment insurance. As a result, the extent to which the concept of loyalty applies to the public sector is unclear.

Scale Conversion Methodologies: The Percent to Maximum Scale

The second approach for comparing performance involves the utilization of scale conversion methodologies. Providing a specific example, Miller and Miller developed the “Percent to Maximum”(PTM) scale. Using their methodology, responses indicated on scales of different sizes and wording are calculated for their mean and then converted to a standard scale ranging from 0 (representing the lowest rating) to 100 (representing the highest rating).

In their work, Miller and Miller converted services from 261 citizen surveys administered in 40 states to the PTM scale. The surveys utilized were diverse in design, based on two, three, four or five point scales; some were positively biased (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor) while others were symmetrical (Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied). Because these variances affected the PTM conversion, controls were developed from multiple regression analysis to compensate. While the conversion could not account for all differences, it nevertheless proved robust in their testings. Perhaps at issue is not so much the conversion of results from one scale to another, but the extent to which question wording can negatively or positively bias answers.

The real value of Miller and Miller’s work is that it allows one to move beyond guessing how good a 66 percent or 4.5 out of 5 satisfaction rating actually is. It allows for disparate scores based on disparate scales to be converted into a common scale and then compared with like services on a percentile basis. This enables service providers to determine where they rank in comparison to similar service providers in other locations. For example, a given service may rank in the top or bottom 10 percent of such services within Ontario, Canada, or even North America. By comparing on a percentile basis much more meaning can be assigned to scores and organizations can identify, and, if they choose, benchmark against, the best in their field.

Standardized Survey Instruments

The final method of comparison involves the use of a standard survey instrument. Not unlike Miller and Miller’s methodology and the customer satisfaction index, organizations can use standard instruments to generate normative data and thus benchmark against similar service providers. If the survey is conducted on a regular basis, as is recommended here, organizations can track their progress in relation to themselves and others over time. On balance, this approach maintains the key benefits of the two other approaches while overcoming many of their difficulties. In short, standardized survey instruments provide the best balance between collecting operationally useful and often situationally specific information at a variety of levels (organizational, program, and service element) on the one

⁶² Claes Fornell, et al. “The American Customer Satisfaction Index: Nature, Purpose, and Findings,” *American Customer Satisfaction Index*, 60 (October 1996), p. 9.

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hand, and ensuring comparable measures on the other. The drawback with this approach is that few standardized instruments exist in government. Of course, the flip side of this observation is that there is an opportunity for governments to develop a standardized instrument so as to facilitate comparisons. Once the initial investment of developing a standardized instrument has been made, comparisons would be resource-efficient undertakings. This is the route Parks Canada adopted in 1996 to simplify resource requirements as well as visitor/respondent input. It uses its standardized instrument to measure a combination of satisfaction, heritage presentation, mandate support, and other issues at its national park entrances, campgrounds, interpretive programs, historic site entrances, and canal areas. This has enabled Parks Canada to compare performance and develop normative benchmarks for its facilities across the country.

Using Surveys Purposefully

The purpose of conducting surveys is not just to track levels of satisfaction, but to develop strategies to close the gap between what citizens/clients want and what they perceive they get. This approach is congruent with and supportive of the “four box” service improvement model (see Appendix 4) developed by the Canadian Centre for Management Development and the Citizen Centred Service Network. In essence, the model seeks to close the gap which exists between citizens’ expectations of public sector services on the one hand, and their satisfaction with the services they receive on the other. This is accomplished by using performance measurement information (e.g., surveys) to identify, among other things, what citizens consider to be the most important areas for improvement. On the basis of this kind of information, resources can be allocated – in some cases reallocated – to areas where they will have the greatest impact. It must be emphasized that there is often a disconnect between what we think clients want and what they actually want, and we cannot know if this is the case unless we ask. To illustrate, intuition might suggest that for campgrounds the elements of most importance would include the upkeep of park roads, the provision of park information, signage, the condition of facilities and trails, and ease of registration. But in 1996, when BC Parks surveyed the clients at one of its parks, none of these elements was even one-fifth as important as the cleanliness of rest rooms or visitors’ sense of security in the park.⁶³ The point is, you can guess what your clients want, but you cannot know if you do not ask!

Because surveys can inform service improvement decisions, as opposed to simply commenting on current conditions, they provide a valuable and effective means of illuminating the next steps for service improvements. By asking the right questions, organizations can determine *where* they sit and thus *why* adjustments are necessary, *what* things need to be adjusted, and *how* adjustments can most effectively be made.⁶⁴ Of course survey responses will differ depending on the order of government, the specific service being investigated, and the region of the country. Once this has been taken into account, the overarching principle to remember is that surveys should ask questions specific enough to generate information that will tell managers what they have to do in order to improve service.

To be clear, surveys can be used to improve service in all areas of government, including regulatory services. Indeed, the 1996 survey *Responsible & Responsive Regulation for Ontario* addresses priorities for regulatory reform and identifies problems with regulations (e.g., duplication and delay), priorities for solutions, and themes for reform within different ministries.⁶⁵ If acted upon, these findings will make it easier for clients to comply with government regulations, likely improving efficiency and relations in the process. Another good example is the Peel Regional Police’s 1994 and subsequent 1996 *Survey of Attitudes and Opinions*. Citizens were asked about a range of issues, including factors influencing neighbourhood safety, their reasons for being satisfied/dissatisfied with the police, how police could better address community problems and how the police and citizens could work together better.⁶⁶ The point being made here is that regardless of the specific nature of the service, citizen/client satisfaction can be improved and surveys can help in this task if the right questions are asked. But while surveys are often used to measure citizen or client satisfaction, their ability to guide service improvements is often overlooked. In particular, the potential for surveys to help develop strategies has been neglected in four areas: 1) identifying drivers of satisfaction/dissatisfaction; 2) determining citizens’ and clients’ *priorities for improvement*; 3) developing *service standards*; and, 4) consulting *internal clients*.

⁶³ British Columbia, British Columbia Parks, 1996 *Campground Satisfaction Survey: Haynes Point* (Victoria, 1996).

⁶⁴ In recognition of the need for research and analysis in research for reforms to fit specific organizational contexts, Kenneth Kernaghan and Mohamed Charih have developed the W5 question: “What works well, where, and why?” in Kenneth Kernaghan and Mohamed Charih, “Emerging Issues in Contemporary Public Administration,” *Canadian Public Administration* 40, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 219-233. Of course, if service is to be improved in the short term and maintained in the long term, an organization’s systems, structure, culture and incentives (e.g., human resource management, training and development, and leadership) must be aligned to support the service improvement initiative.

⁶⁵ Carr-Gordon Limited and Erin Research Inc., *Responsible & Responsive Regulation for Ontario: A Report to the Red Tape Review Commission* (May 1996).

⁶⁶ Peel Regional Police, *Survey of Attitudes and Opinions* (March 1994 and November 1996).

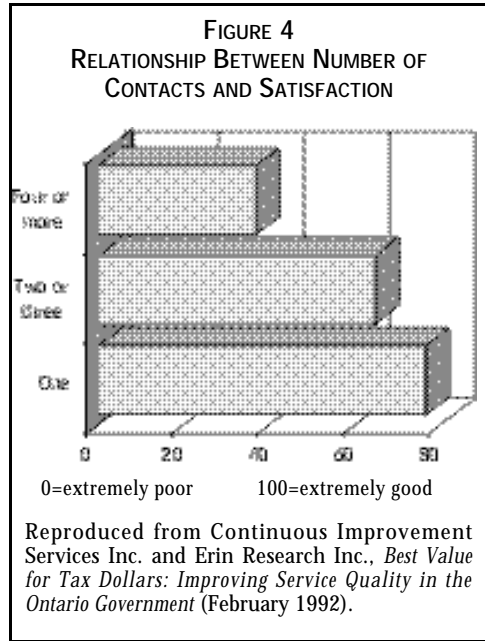
Identifying Drivers of Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction

Drivers of satisfaction are those factors that explain the variance in ratings of service satisfaction. Key drivers, therefore, are those top three to five variables that explain why people do or do not find their service experience satisfactory. By identifying key drivers, managers can then focus their efforts on leveraging those elements that will make the most difference in the eyes of their clients. Drivers may include variables such as timeliness, courtesy, etc. In Australia, for example, it was found that prompt service, the ability to speak to the right person, and getting what

was wanted were the three primary reasons people gave for being treated well or very well. Conversely, not getting what was wanted, slow service, and being unable to speak to the right person were the three primary reasons people reported for being treated poorly or very poorly.⁶⁷

The 1992 survey *Best Value for Tax Dollars* identifies five categories of elements as being central to quality of service: timeliness, accessibility, reliability, responsiveness, and cost. Perhaps most notable, however, are its findings about two specific factors:

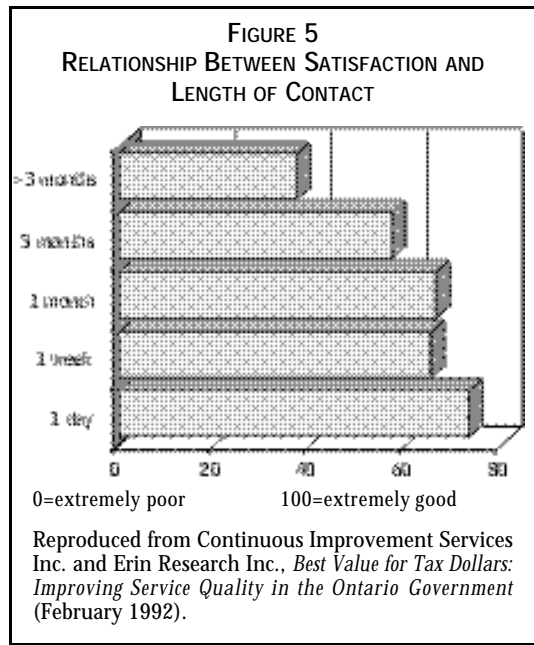
The number of contacts and the time required to complete the service are the two factors that profoundly affect Public assessment of performance... When service was completed in less than one day or with only one contact, evaluations of OPS [Ontario Public Service] performance were significantly higher and compared very favourably with private sector service providers such as banks and supermarkets. Those who wait for long periods of time or who require many contacts to get service, tend to rate performance very low⁶⁸ (see Figures 4 and 5).



Priorities for Improvement

Again, providing citizens with what they want as opposed to what decision makers think they want is a key concept in citizen-centred service delivery. Yet in some cases, public sector organizations are using tools from the new public management toolkit (e.g., alternative service delivery, reengineering, service quality) in the belief that they will improve services, but are failing to consult with clients to verify that these changes are priorities for them. This is unfortunate since there is limited value in focusing resources on an initiative that rates tenth or twentieth – as opposed to first or second – on clients’ lists of priorities for improvement. Granted, there are times when governments must move beyond what are currently viewed as priorities to anticipate future demands and requirements, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

At the time of writing this paper, few Canadian surveys could be located at the local, provincial or federal levels which address citizens’ priorities for service improvement at a level specific enough to be operationally informative. The exceptions include the 1992 Ontario *Best Value for Tax Dollars* survey which



⁶⁷ Australia, Commonwealth Government’s Advisory Board, *The Australian Public Service Reformed: An Evaluation of a Decade of Management Reform* (Canberra, 1992), pp. 399, 420.

⁶⁸ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government*, (February 1992), pp. 13, 14.

asked respondents what they believed would make service better in their community,⁶⁹ and the 1996 survey *Responsible & Responsive Regulation for Ontario* which asked clients their priorities for regulatory reform and their priorities for solutions.⁷⁰ As another example, Western Economic Diversification (WD) surveyed one of its partners (Community Futures Development Corporations, or CFDCs) to determine how it could best support them. The survey addressed the major operational challenges facing CFDCs, how WD could be most helpful in overcoming them, the importance of each area of support, and the aspects of WD support in need of improvement.⁷¹

Considering the recent emphasis on clustering services from a citizen/client perspective (i.e., single-window services and one-stop services), it is particularly notable that we are aware of only two surveys that ask citizens what their priorities for action are in this area. The first is the question commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Management Development as part of Wave One of Ekos's *Rethinking Government VI* survey (1997). Its findings indicate that the highest priorities for single-window delivery are the unemployed (37 percent), children and youth (27 percent), the elderly (18 percent) and business (12 percent).⁷² Of course, these findings will require further research to determine exactly what aspects of unemployment services people would like to access, how they would like to access them, when they would like to access them, etc. The question was also limited in the sense that it only provided preset categories of services from which respondents could choose, as opposed to the preferred approach of allowing citizens to self-identify those departments they have had to contact around a single event or issue in their lives. The second survey is the 1993 *Evaluation of Service New Brunswick*, conducted by Baseline Market Research Ltd., which focuses on the two one-stop Service New Brunswick Pilot Centres. Among other things, this survey asked respondents about problems with service delivery, what improvements they would like to see in the Centres, how many times they would like to be able to access the Centres, and what other services they would like to see offered.⁷³

A word of caution: what people say they want and what they are willing to pay for are often two different things. For example, the Winnipeg Water and Waste Department received anecdotal evidence suggesting their customers wanted to be billed monthly instead of the present quarterly billing. To acquire more definitive information a survey was conducted. The survey found that approximately 1 in 3 customers would rather be billed monthly than quarterly. However, when the survey informed respondents of the increased costs monthly billing would engender, support dropped to 1 in 5. In a similar case, the Town of Selkirk asked citizens if they would be willing to pay more taxes to increase levels of service in any one of ten areas. In the end citizens were willing to pay more taxes for only one area: road and street improvements.⁷⁴ The lesson, therefore, is this: people want smaller line-ups, more convenient service and improved service quality. Who doesn't! But in an environment of fiscal constraint, improving services often means investing additional resources which must either be transferred from other areas or charged to the clients (e.g., user charges) or citizens (e.g., increased property taxes). As a result, in cases where additional resources would be required to improve services, it is important to include the element of cost, if possible, in the survey. By introducing this component citizens can weigh the costs and benefits involved and the trade-offs required.

A word about methodology. Often services receiving low satisfaction ratings are identified as priorities for improvement, but this can be misleading. Low satisfaction does not necessarily equate to a high priority for improvement. Making the point well, the Citizen's Charter survey conducted in mainland Britain found that while

⁶⁹ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), pp. 97-106.

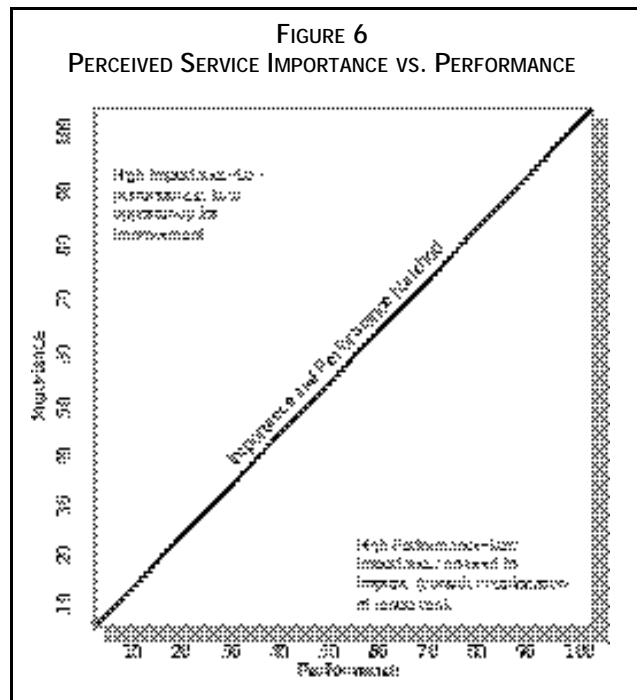
⁷⁰ Carr-Gordon Limited and Erin Research Inc., *Responsible & Responsive Regulation for Ontario: A Report to the Red Tape Review Commission* (May 1996).

⁷¹ Canada, Western Economic Diversification, *1998 Community Futures Development Corporation Questionnaire* (1996). Other surveys which address priorities for improvement include *Focus Oakville: Benchmark Quality of Service Analysis*, Ekos *Rethinking Government Surveys*, Washington Performance Partnership survey entitled *Citizen Satisfaction: Results From a Telephone Survey of Washington Households About State Services*, *Public Attitudes Toward B.C. Hydro*, British Columbia's Parks Division, and some recent survey questions commissioned by the Canadian Centre for Management Development (CCMD) in Wave One of *Rethinking Government IV* (1997). Outside Canada, the 1993 *Citizen's Charter Customer Survey* asked respondents which three services they wanted to see improved the most.

⁷² Ekos Research Associates Inc., *Rethinking Government IV: Summary of Wave One Findings* (December 1997).

⁷³ Baseline Market Research Ltd., *Evaluation of Service New Brunswick: Final Report* (December 1993).

⁷⁴ Selkirk, *Town of Selkirk Citizens Survey* (1998), p. 33.



77 percent of respondents rated hospitals as performing “fairly well” or “very well,” 37 percent of respondents wanted improvements in the service. Indeed, this made hospitals the highest priority for improvement. Conversely, motorways were rated as performing “fairly well” or “very well” by only 53 percent of respondents, yet a mere 8 percent of respondents wanted to see improvements in this service.⁷⁵

One approach to identifying priorities is to survey clients’ and citizens’ perceptions of the importance and performance of a service, and then graph the findings on an importance-performance grid. This process is illustrated in Figure 6.⁷⁶ When importance and performance match, no gap exists. This outcome would be located somewhere along the diagonal line. If located at the upper right end of the diagonal line, service provision is effective and meeting clients’ needs, although further efficiencies may be possible. If located at the bottom left end of the diagonal line, services are meeting clients’ needs, but it may be useful to reallocate some resources to areas of higher importance. If located within the bottom right quadrant of the grid, perfor-

mance is exceeding importance which suggests the need to reallocate resources to higher value uses. Finally, if located within the upper left quadrant of the grid, importance is exceeding performance. This quadrant represents the highest priority and the best opportunity for performance improvement. As a rule, the higher the importance rating and the lower the performance rating the greater the performance gap and thus the higher the priority for improvement.

From these findings, more specific surveys can be administered to focus on specific elements of service. For example, a survey may find “simplifying forms and reducing red tape” to be the most important priority. This is insufficient information to make operational decisions. But it can direct further research (e.g., focus groups) to clarify what forms are being referred to and what is meant by red tape. From such information specific and effective strategies for improving services can be developed.

It is worth noting, however, that some surveys, such as the Ekos 1996 *Rethinking Government* survey for the Deputy Minister Task Force, ask respondents to rate the importance of certain criteria or elements (e.g., ability to cut through red tape, and promptness) against the performance of government delivery. Once again, the evidence suggests that asking about the performance of government in general could elicit stereotypical images of a large, rigid and inefficient entity, thus lowering performance ratings as compared to importance ratings and potentially overemphasizing importance-performance gaps.

Service Standards

In the 1994 federal budget, a pledge was made to develop service standards for each government department.⁷⁷ In his 1996 Report, the Auditor General noted, “...the government’s progress in implementing service standards has

⁷⁵ ICM Research, *Citizen’s Charter Customer Survey: Research Report* (March-April 1993), p. 15.

⁷⁶ The importance-performance grid is explained well in Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), p. vii.

⁷⁷ Information on the development of service standards can be found in Canada, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Service Standards: A Guide to the Initiative* (Ottawa: February 1995), and Canada, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Quality Services Guide VII: Service Standards* (Ottawa: October 1996).

been slow and its achievement uneven.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the push for service standards continues in recognition of their potential benefits: communicating available services, managing client expectations, informing clients of complaint and redress mechanisms, and providing criteria against which performance can be measured.

Some public servants may believe that clients ultimately want unrealistically high levels of service, providing little incentive to consult them. But evidence suggests this is not the case. The 1992 Ontario survey found that public servants, on average, were 5 percent to 48 percent more demanding than the public as to what constitutes acceptable service along various service dimensions.⁷⁹ Whatever the reasons for avoiding consultation, the result, rather ironically, is that standards are set for clients in the absence of client input. Under these conditions standards may be set at levels that management and staff believe are reasonable levels of service. They may even be “stretched” to provide incentives to staff and improve organizational performance. But in the absence of client input these standards could be set for elements of service that are unimportant to clients, or for relevant elements but at levels above or below what clients would consider acceptable levels of service. On the one hand, this could mean intensified efforts and resources being aimed at meeting standards set above what is required to satisfy clients, unnecessarily tying up resources when they could be reallocated to higher value uses. On the other hand, standards could be set below an acceptable level, trapping the organization in a situation where it is consistently meeting a standard that its clients consider unsatisfactory or irrelevant. Service standards, however, must be not only relevant but appropriate. For this reason setting standards is not as simple as consulting with clients, but by definition involves finding a balance between client preferences on the one hand, and cost constraints, budget limits, and legislative restrictions, etc., on the other.

The 1992 Ontario survey, *Best Value for Tax Dollars*, provides an excellent illustration of the potential for using surveys to gather information for the development of service standards. As noted in Figures 4 and 5, it found that clients’ ratings of service satisfaction dropped below 40 percent if the service experience involved more than three contacts or lasted more than three months in duration. This suggests that setting standards at more than three contacts or for longer than three months to complete a transaction would be tantamount to promising consistently unsatisfactory service for the majority of clients. The survey also measured what would be required to achieve “acceptable service” for three generic areas: telephone service, over-the-counter service, and office appointments. In the case of telephone services, three of the seven elements necessary to satisfy 90 percent of clients were answering calls within three rings, with no busy signals, and without being placed on hold.⁸⁰

In fact, a number of the federal government call centres have set targets for accessibility and wait time. For example, in 1996 Revenue Canada’s call centre target was set at 70 percent of callers gaining access to the system (not necessarily reaching a person) on the first attempt, with a subsequent hold time of no more than 180 seconds.⁸¹ Interestingly, if the findings of the Ontario survey are indicative of citizens’ expectations for telephone services in general, even if Revenue Canada met these targets 100 percent of the time, most of their clients would not consider it to be “acceptable service.”

Providing a different example, British Columbia’s Parks Division uses clients’ expectations to guide the development of province-wide service standards. Called “management standards,” these benchmarks are set to equal the highest satisfaction score achieved on its surveys between 1988 and the present.⁸² For example, the current standard for restroom cleanliness is a 78 percent satisfaction level. By using a standard survey instrument in all its parks, results from a variety of locations can be compared.

⁷⁸ Canada, Auditor General, *Report of the Auditor General*, Chapter 14 (Ottawa: September 1996).

⁷⁹ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), pp. 21, 29.

⁸⁰ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), p. 29.

⁸¹ Canada, Auditor General, *Report of the Auditor General*, Chapter 14 (Ottawa: September 1996).

⁸² British Columbia, British Columbia Parks, 1996 *Campground Satisfaction Survey: Haynes Point* (Victoria: 1996), p. 8.

Internal Clients

All the surveys reviewed in this paper (with the exception of the *Best Value for Tax Dollars Ontario* survey, the *Focus Oakville* survey, and the 1990 *Survey of Public Perceptions of Service to the Public*) focus on external clients at the expense of internal clients.⁸³ Yet, most public servants are either internal producers or internal clients, and in most cases are both. Internal producers include a wide range of service providers, including Treasury Board Secretariat, the Public Service Commission, the Department of Finance, and the Privy Council Office, as well as internal support services such as printing services, legal services, human resources, information technology, pay and benefits, purchasing, and accommodations. Ironically, while all organizations use internal support services there is a paucity of data on internal service performance.

The fact that poor quality internal services may undermine employee morale and engender an inharmonious work environment suggests the need to take internal service quality seriously. Perhaps even more important is the recognition that low quality internal services are unlikely to produce high quality external services, and available research suggests there is room to improve internal services. For example, the Ontario survey, *Best Value for Tax Dollars*, included eight internal services which were rated by internal clients; performance ratings ranged from 47 to 57 out of 100, suggesting opportunities for improvement. In this light, the practice of focusing surveys on external clients to the exclusion of internal clients seems somewhat misguided.

Like surveys of external clients, internal surveys should strive for information that can lead to service improvements. Again, there is little purpose in focusing efforts on items that are number 10 on internal clients' list of priorities for approval when numbers 1 through 5 have yet to be addressed. In short, survey questions should explore what services are most important to internal clients, how satisfied they are with these services and why, and what they see as barriers to both internal and external service improvements.⁸⁴ By collecting data in these areas, organizations can begin to identify priorities for action, benchmark against each other, and track progress over time. To this end, some progress is being made. According to Treasury Board Secretariat's 1996 report, *Quality Services: A Progress Report*, Veterans Affairs Canada and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada are currently soliciting feedback from internal clients, and a few other organizations are planning such initiatives in the future. Unfortunately, the relationship between internal and external service quality is still not well understood, and thus remains an important area for further research.

With respect to service standards, the 1992 Ontario survey, *Best Value for Tax Dollars*, was the only survey reviewed that addresses the development of routine service standards for internal clients. Interestingly, the survey found that internal clients rated the quality of the services they received at 52 (0-100 scale), yet internal service providers rated the quality of the services they provided at 82.⁸⁵ Therefore, while service providers believed their own service to be of a very high quality, receivers of those services shared a different view. Not unlike the expectation-perception gap that can exist with external services, internal gaps can be reduced by improving service or managing expectations through various means, including the development of service standards.

⁸³ A number of surveys address employee involvement and human resources issues, but this is distinct from determining their perceptions of satisfaction, priorities for improvement, and barriers to improvement as internal clients.

⁸⁴ A fairly balanced approach to addressing employees and external clients in service improvement initiatives is provided in Canada, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Quality Services Guide XIII: Managers' Guide to Implementing Quality Services* (Ottawa: 1996).

⁸⁵ Continuous Improvement Services Inc. and Erin Research Inc., *Best Value for Tax Dollars: Improving Service Quality in the Ontario Government* (February 1992), p. 23.

Key Findings

This note has reviewed an array of research and commentary with a focus on citizens' perceptions of services, the methodology and findings of surveys to date, and the potential of surveys to guide improvements in service delivery. From this work, three key findings emerge of significance for the public service generally, and for improving service delivery specifically:

1. **Specific vs. general services:** surveys which compare the service provision of government or public services in general to specific private sector services may not be telling an entirely accurate story. Research indicates that public ratings of government or public sector services *in general* are significantly lower than their ratings of *specific* public sector service experiences. This suggests that the performance gap which supposedly exists between public and private sector services may be smaller than previously reported, and for some services may be nonexistent.
2. **The need for normative benchmarks:** it is difficult to attribute meaning to satisfaction ratings in the absence of normative benchmarks. Currently, a number of survey methodologies are used to measure a variety of public services. Since some services are predisposed to receiving high or low ratings, it is difficult to make reliable comparisons. If public sector service providers were able to compare their ratings with those of similar public sector providers, they could then determine how well they are performing relative to others. This, in turn, would allow for the development of normative benchmarks at the public service, agency, and program levels. Comparisons could be made using scale conversion methodologies, a customer satisfaction index, or a standardized survey instrument; it is argued here that the last of these three instruments provides the most advantages.
3. **The value of surveys:** surveys are a powerful tool for identifying and closing gaps between internal and external clients' expectations of and satisfaction with services; they have, however, been vastly underutilized in the past. If surveys ask the right questions, especially with respect to satisfaction, drivers of satisfaction, priorities for improvement, and internal services, the findings generated can inform managers of what they need to do in order to improve service to their clients specifically and/or to citizens generally.

Areas for Further Research

This paper has highlighted some of the findings, features and uses of surveys and their application to governments as tools for service improvement. But many gaps in our knowledge remain. It is believed that the knowledge gained from further study in these areas would assist governments to close the gap between citizens' and clients' expectations of services on the one hand, and their satisfaction with service performance on the other. These areas are highlighted below for further consideration.

1. What drives service satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

- a. In order to improve service satisfaction, it would be helpful to determine first what drives it. It is known that a variety of elements influence citizens' and clients' perceptions of services. Further research in this area would allow for the verification of these elements as well as the identification of other common or service-specific elements which influence ratings of service quality.
- b. Typically, client surveys measure generic service elements such as courtesy and responsiveness, yet the public service adheres to unique values such as due process and equity. It is unclear how important these elements are to citizens and clients; are they more, less, or equally as important as generic service elements? The question on the role of government in the 1997 Ekos *Rethinking Government IV* survey (as noted earlier) suggests these elements may be more important to citizens. Since these principles and values are integral to the public service, further investigation should be considered.
- c. The answer to the above question may also lead to a related question: why does the federal government receive performance ratings equal to or below those of provincial governments, and consistently below those of local governments? As noted earlier, low levels of trust in politicians and government, combined with an inability to clearly discern between politics and government on the one hand and public servants and service delivery on the other, may be an important part of the answer.

Another probable explanation is that the activities of municipal governments are more visible and tangible than the activities of the federal government. Consider the inconspicuous nature of many of the federal government's activities. Unlike most local governments, much of the federal government's revenue is used to pay interest charges on a large debt (interest payments on the debt totalled \$45 billion in 1996-97). In addition, federal funds are passed on in the form of transfer payments to provincial and local governments. Therefore, many of the services funded by the federal government are actually realized at other levels of government. Consider the \$8.9 billion (1995-96) in equalization payments to provinces to help ensure comparable services at comparable tax levels (at the time of writing received by all provinces except Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia). Likewise, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) ensures that provinces possess the means to provide social assistance and social services, health care and post-secondary education; the CHST totalled \$26.9 billion in 1996-97.⁸⁶ Thus, many of the benefits provided by federal revenues are not realized at the federal level per se, especially when compared to the conspicuous activities of local governments whose revenues (some of which come from other levels of government) are almost entirely allocated to providing direct service provision such as garbage pickups, public safety activities (e.g., police, fire, etc.), utilities services, and public works activities (e.g., maintenance of traffic signs, sidewalks, streets, etc.). As a result, unlike their perception of activities at the federal level, citizens can see what their local government is doing for them on a day-to-day basis in a very tangible way. This raises the question: if higher ratings are directly related to the visibility of the benefits provided to citizens by governments, how should this situation be addressed by the provincial and federal governments, if at all?

2. What is the relationship between specific service experiences and perceptions of government performance in general?

- a. While the evidence suggests ratings of specific service experiences will be higher than ratings of government services in general, it is unclear whether ratings of one will have an impact on ratings of the other. That is to

⁸⁶ The Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) replaced Established Programs Financing (EPF) and the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) in 1996-97. Instead of using the cost-sharing arrangements under CAP, the CHST is entirely a block fund like EPF.

say, will an improved rating of a specific service experience affect one's rating of the performance of government in general, or vice versa? It is often said that improved service delivery will lead to improved perceptions of government in general, but this relationship has yet to be demonstrated.

- b. What factors drive trust and confidence in government and how strong is the link between trust and service satisfaction? If citizens have a low level of trust in government, are they more inclined to rate service satisfaction as poor? Conversely, if clients and citizens are dissatisfied with public services, are they more inclined to rate their trust in government as "low"? For each of these questions the correlation between trust and performance at each level of government should be considered. To address these questions effectively, a distinction should be made between ratings of politics and politicians on the one hand, and ratings of the public service and public servants on the other.

3. How does the level of citizens' and clients' satisfaction with specific public sector services compare with their level of satisfaction with specific private sector services?

The public service has a good story to tell, but this story has quite possibly been tainted by survey results which supposedly "prove" the poor performance of public sector services as compared to private sector services. An analysis of the two sectors suggests that such comparisons may well be invalid given their distinct means and ends. Still, putting that possibility aside, evidence suggests that the gap between client and citizen ratings of public and private sector service performance may be smaller than previously thought, and possibly even nonexistent. If this finding can be verified, it could have a positive impact on the public's perception of government performance, the public service's agenda for action, and public servants' perception of themselves. As a result, a survey comparing specific public and private sector services should be considered.

4. What are citizens' and clients' priorities for action, including their priorities for single-window service clusters, nationally and by province?

Instead of assuming that measures such as alternative service delivery and service quality initiatives will improve service, citizens and clients should be consulted on their priorities for improvement. What areas are priorities and how can these areas be improved? What clusters of services would citizens like to see available in a single-window setting? By identifying the answers to these questions, governments could then focus on those things that would make the most difference to citizens.

5. What is the best way to develop normative benchmarks for services within and across Canada's governments?

It is difficult to assign meaning to survey results when there is no point of reference with which to compare them. Complicating the problem, research suggests that certain services will consistently rate high, and others will consistently rate low. The use of a standardized survey instrument would enable departments and agencies to develop normative benchmarks based on ratings of similar services within and across governments and would allow them to determine how well they are performing in relation to similar public sector services. For these reasons, further consideration should be given to the development of a standardized survey instrument.

6. What are citizens' expectations of generic service standards?

There are many service elements which are common to almost all organizations. Examples include the time spent waiting on hold on the phone or in line at a counter for a government representative. Identifying what citizens' view as acceptable levels of services in these generic areas would provide valuable benchmarks, help organizations set appropriate standards of service, and ultimately help ensure consistent levels of service for clients.

7. What is good performance for internal services, and what is the relationship between internal service satisfaction and external service satisfaction?

Internal clients are critical players in the service quality equation, yet they are rarely consulted for the purpose of improving services. This is unfortunate, as low quality internal services may lead to low morale, an inharmonious work environment, and ultimately poor external services. In order to improve internal services, more research is required to identify barriers to and priorities for service improvement, to establish normative benchmarks of performance, and to improve understanding of the linkages between internal and external service satisfaction.

Conclusion

The leitmotif of this paper is simple yet powerful: improving service to citizens requires accurately identifying their satisfaction with our services and their priorities for improvement. To this end, the paper has explored what we do and do not know about citizens' views of government services. In fact, the paper questions long-held beliefs about the tepid performance of public services, especially as compared to specific private sector services. But it also notes that the private sector is probably not the appropriate yardstick against which to measure the performance of most public sector services. What is needed, therefore, is a standardized survey instrument that allows public sector managers to compare the performance of their organizations both over time and with similar public sector organizations. Once managers have an accurate picture of how their performance is perceived by citizens/clients, and have tapped into citizen/client priorities for improvement, improvement targets can be confidently set. By surveying regularly, performance can be tracked over time. Surveys can help managers accomplish all this. Unfortunately, they rarely ask the kind of questions necessary to effectively guide service improvements.

It is clear that there is much we still do not know about what citizens/clients want from government services. While this study cannot possibly fill, or even identify, all these knowledge gaps, it has attempted to provide a foundation upon which others can build. Ultimately, further research will be required to provide managers with the strategic information (e.g., drivers of satisfaction) and tools (e.g., a standardized survey instrument) necessary for them to measurably improve service to citizens.

Postscript

Since the research and writing of this report, carried out primarily between November 1997 and March 1998, the Network has undertaken a number of research projects which have filled many of the knowledge gaps identified in this paper. The two most significant projects, in this respect, resulted in the reports *Citizens First* and *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Common Measurements Tool*. *Citizens First*⁸⁷ is the report of the Network's national survey. Led by CCMD and co-sponsored by federal organizations and provincial governments, it is the most sophisticated survey ever undertaken on Canadians' views of federal, provincial and municipal services. Also undertaken at the request of the Network were *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Common Measurements Tool* and its companion report, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Manager's Guide*.⁸⁸ Collectively, these two documents provide managers with a new standardized survey instrument and guidance for undertaking surveys.

The following describes, in summary fashion, some of the new knowledge and tools generated by these projects, and shows how they have advanced our knowledge in the areas identified earlier in this report as needing further research. For more information on these and other Citizen-Centred Service Network reports, please refer to the inside cover of this publication.

1. What drives service satisfaction/dissatisfaction?

Citizens First has revealed that five "drivers" account for over 70 percent of the variation in clients' service quality ratings:

- Timeliness;
- Knowledge/Competence of staff;
- Courtesy;
- Fairness; and
- Outcome.

When all five drivers were rated highly (4 or 5 out of 5), the overall satisfaction rating was 85. If only one of the five drivers was rated low, the overall satisfaction rating dropped 25 points to 60 out of 100.⁸⁹

2. What is the relationship between specific service experiences and perceptions of government performance in general?

Citizens First reports that citizens' opinions of government do indeed affect their ratings of their specific service experiences. Those who believe, in general, that governments, politicians and public servants are doing an excellent job tend to rate service quality higher than those who do not. However, the study was unable to identify if the reverse is true – whether improved service to citizens (and thus higher ratings of specific service experiences) leads to more positive attitudes towards government in general.⁹⁰

3. How does the level of citizens' and clients' satisfaction with specific public sector services compare with their level of satisfaction with specific private sector services?

Following on the recommendation of this paper, the Network's national survey asked respondents to rate the quality of specific public and private sector services. *Citizens First* reports that Canadians *do not* rate the quality of private sector services higher than that of public sector services, thus dispelling the myth. When citizens rated specific services from both sectors, they gave them similar average ratings.⁹¹ The fact is, some public sector services rate higher than some private sector services, just as the converse is true.

⁸⁷ Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998). This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

⁸⁸ Canada, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Common Measurements Tool*, Faye Schmidt with Teresa Strickland (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, December 1998). Canada, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Manager's Guide*, Faye Schmidt with Teresa Strickland (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, December 1998). These documents are available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

⁸⁹ Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998), pp. 27-50. This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

⁹⁰ Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998), pp. 33-35. This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

4. What are citizens' and clients' priorities for action, including their priorities for single-window service clusters, nationally and by province?

Citizens First identifies citizens' priorities for process improvement, based on a recent and specific experience they had with a government service. Respondents who did not give a positive rating to overall service quality listed as their two top priorities reducing red tape and reducing line-ups. Respondents were also asked to report on situations where they had to contact more than one government department to get a desired service (open-ended question). In the end, most multiple-contact experiences result from a need for personal certificates/paper work, and the most frequently contacted office was Revenue Canada. This kind of information provides an important starting point for determining how government can best cluster services to meet the single-window needs of citizens.⁹²

5. What is the best way to develop normative benchmarks for services within and across Canada's governments?

Building on the research of this paper, the Network has developed a standardized survey instrument which it calls a common measurements tool (CMT).⁹³ The CMT is a ready-to-use survey instrument that is specially designed to allow for the comparison of survey results over time and with similar organizations. By using this tool and lodging their results with CCMD,⁹⁴ a benchmarking database can be built that will enable managers to identify how well they are performing relative to other public sector organizations in their line of business. As noted, the Network's new manager's guide is designed to help managers through the survey process.

6. What are citizens' expectations for generic service standards?

Through *Citizens First*, the Network has identified what citizens view to be acceptable levels of service for generic/routine services. For example, 97 percent of respondents reported that a 30-second wait on hold is acceptable, 85 percent reported that dealing with up to two different people on the phone is acceptable, and 75 percent reported that a four-hour wait is acceptable for a return call. The survey also provides information on citizens' expectations around e-mail, counter service and mail service.⁹⁵ This is new strategic information that public sector organizations can use to help guide their allocation of resources, their development of service standards, and their communications (e.g., expectations management) with clients.

⁹¹ Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998), pp. 5-10, 60-74. This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

⁹² Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998), pp. 49, 19-26.

⁹³ Canada, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Common Measurements Tool*, Faye Schmidt with Teresa Strickland (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, December 1998). Also see Canada, *Client Satisfaction Surveying: A Manager's Guide*, Faye Schmidt with Teresa Strickland (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, December 1998). This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

⁹⁴ CCMD has agreed to collect CMT survey results until a permanent repository can be established to serve the three orders of government.

⁹⁵ Canada, *Citizens First*, Erin Research Inc. (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, October 1998), pp. 51-58. This document is available on CCMD's website at <http://www.ccmd-ccg.gc.ca>.

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Appendix 1

Georgia State Poll: Satisfaction by the General Public Sample and Recent Users

PUBLIC SERVICE	GENERAL PUBLIC			RECENT CONSUMERS		
	MEAN	N	ST. DEV.	MEAN	N	ST. DEV.
Fire department	80.0	333	16.9	82.8	16	21.8
U.S. Post Office	72.8	386	19.6	76.1	340	21.2
Public Health Clinics	70.5	248	22.0	74.4	41	22.7
Municipal trash collection	70.2	314	19.9	75.5	197	23.0
Police	70.1	363	24.5	71.3	95	31.4
Parks & recreation programs	66.1	341	27.1	77.1	182	19.3
Public transportation	65.1	192	27.2	76.6	63	16.7
Public schools	63.5	334	27.2	68.2	172	27.7
Street maintenance	63.0	372	26.5	59.2	380	26.7
All public	69.0			73.5		
PRIVATE SERVICE						
Private mail carriers	81.2	369	16.2	84.5	213	15.4
Grocery stores	75.1	382	19.3	77.1	408	17.3
Banks or savings & loans	71.2	364	22.7	81.7	301	20.2
Private doctors' offices	70.7	360	21.2	80.6	278	19.6
Fast food restaurants	68.9	355	23.1	68.5	374	20.9
Movie theatres	67.3	280	23.6	75.5	200	17.4
Auto repair shops	61.2	334	24.5	71.7	219	27.9
Cable TV providers	58.2	288	27.6	66.2	260	26.3
Taxicabs	54.2	168	24.6	59.6	34	30.8
All private	67.5			73.9		

Recreated from: Theodore H. Poister and Gary T. Henry, "Citizen Ratings of Public and Private Service Quality: A Comparative Perspective," *Public Administration Review* 54, no. 2 (March/April 1994), pp. 155-160.

Appendix 2

Relative Performance of Public and Private Sector Services in Mainland Britain

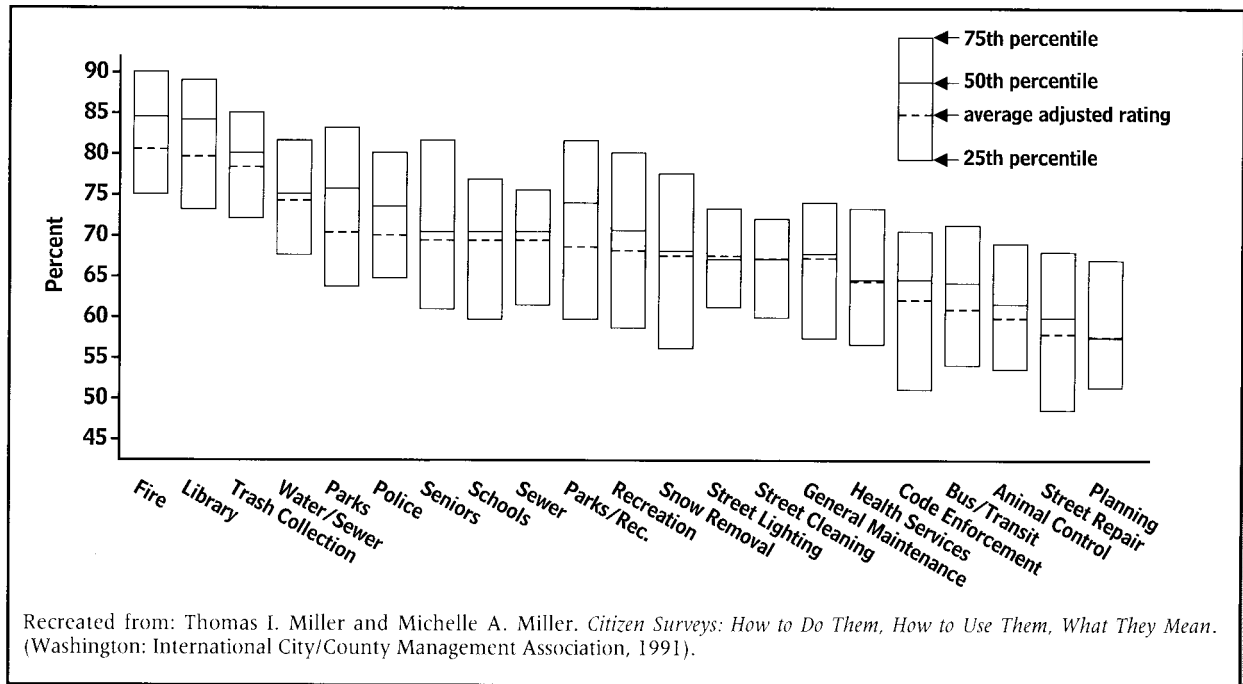
SERVICE TYPE	PERFORMANCE (% VERY WELL OR FAIRLY WELL)	IMPROVEMENT (% WANTING IMPROVEMENT)
Supermarkets	93	3
Postal Services	92	3
Doctors	91	9
Primary Schools	84	25
Refuse Collection	83	9
Customs (Ports and Airports)	78	1
NHS Hospitals	77	37
Police	74	24
Banks	70	19
Inland Revenue	70	5
Buses	68	24
Local Street Cleaning	65	19
Social Security	64	14
British Rail	57	26
Job/Unemployment Offices	57	21
Local Roads	48	26
Law Courts	46	17
Prisons	45	15

Note: 1993 random sample survey for the UK Citizens Charter Unit, of 3,097 respondents.

Recreated from: ICM Research, *Citizen's Charter Customer Survey: Research Report* (March-April 1993).

Appendix 3

Average Adjusted Percentage to Maximum (PTM) Ratings for Individual Services



Appendix 4

Framework for Modernizing Public Sector Service Delivery

