USER SATISFACTION WITH POLICE SERVICES

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Summary: Scottish Police forces are required to measure the level of user satisfaction with a number of elements of the police – public interaction. The Grampian Police Research Unit have conducted a comprehensive Quality of Service review in response to a number of methodological concerns raised with regards to the previous assessment process. The findings of this review led to the introduction of a new telephone survey methodology in Grampian that is providing more informative data to help drive improvements in the delivery of policing services. This work has been confined to a degree by the requirements of the Scottish Policing Performance Framework's (SPPF) satisfaction indicator. This paper describes how a recent analysis of the Grampian user satisfaction data has identified a few occasions where there has been a failure to meet the public's expectations. With this in mind, the author proposes a new approach to how we consider and carry out engagement with our communities that might provide for a less reactive and more collaborative approach to the delivery of local services. This requires a shift in emphasis towards the actual services we deliver rather than the resulting assessment of them.

INTRODUCTION

Grampian Police conduct user satisfaction surveys to fulfil the requirements of the Scottish Policing Performance Framework's (SPPF) 'Level of User Satisfaction' performance indicator. The survey is designed to ensure we receive feedback from our customers in order to gauge our performance, focus our resources and achieve continuous improvement. The process, which builds on the Force's commitment to research and development, is not intended as a comprehensive quality assurance exercise to address individual instances of dissatisfaction, but is rather a health check of the overall level of service that the Force provides.

Previously monthly postal 'Quality of Service' surveys were conducted, however, the overall reliability and usefulness of the findings was questionable for a variety of methodological reasons. On carrying out an analysis of 20 months' data it was found that there were no significant differences of interest, suggesting that continued quarterly analysis using that format would be relatively uninformative and an inefficient use of current resources.

In 2006, the Grampian Police Research Unit began a comprehensive 'Quality of Service' review with the following objectives:

1. To scrutinize the current 'Quality of Service' methodology in order to identify methodological flaws and areas for improvement;

2. To highlight good practice and where appropriate make recommendations for reform with a view to improving 'Quality of Service' assessment methodology;

3. To consult with key stakeholders within the Force in order to inform the design process to meet existing and future needs;

4. To produce a bespoke 'Quality of Service' assessment procedure and strategy that would meet the needs of the force and act as a catalyst for reform and improvement.

(Kelly & Woolnough, 2006)

As a result of this review the accepted wisdom on Quality of Service has been challenged and Grampian are in the process of delivering a more meaningful and customer led engagement strategy.

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CLEAR DEFINITIONS

A shift in the terminology used in this area has been key to the delivery of a new assessment process. Service quality is not the same as customer satisfaction, although they are closely linked with an increase in one expected to reflect an increase in the other. An opinion regarding Quality of Service can be formed without having experienced the service first hand; in contrast, experience is a prerequisite to forming a satisfaction judgement. Customer satisfaction is concerned with customer feelings about multiple encounters and experiences with a service organisation. Service quality perceptions, developed from either direct or indirect contact, incorporate an individuals overall attitude to a service provider that may be influenced by other factors such as the media, perceptions of value or by the experiences of others (Sureshchandar *et al.*, 2002; Donovan *et al.*, 2001). This has important implications for managing service quality as it implies the need for a dual focus on both improving user experience and public perceptions of overall service quality.

WHY DO FORCES NEED TO GAUGE PUBLIC OPINION?

As a public service, Police strategies and processes should be designed with public needs in mind and should serve their requirements. Services should be of a high quality and continually improve. It is vital that the public is confident in our quality monitoring process and believes that there are appropriate mechanisms in place to act on information gained.

In order to make effective use of the information gained through feedback mechanisms there needs to be a link between public responses and decision making processes (Audit Commission, 1999). The fundamental issue in service quality measurement is not how good or poor is the service, but how it could be better. An effective assessment methodology will uncover what needs to change and how, by drawing attention to potential oversights that have caused performance in particular areas to fall short of expected standards.

WHAT MIGHT FORCES MEASURE?

Above and beyond the high-level satisfaction indicators prescribed by the SPPF, there is currently no agreed methodology regarding the most effective assessment of user experience with the police. The current satisfaction indicators have limited inherent value when trying to establish what, if any, oversights have caused performance on particular measures to fall short of standards and subsequently how these issues can be tackled in order to gain continuous improvement (Moullin, 2004). Generalised performance statements are not easily actioned; rather, the information needs to be dissected into workable items that approach service objectives separately. If service departments are expected to improve their service provision to the public then it is vital that they are aware of the specific areas that need attention. It would be dangerous and foolhardy to overhaul a process that was predominantly effective because of the effects of a single attribute (e.g., failing to keep an arranged appointment) that has caused a negative lasting effect in the customer's mind.

GRAMPIAN'S NEW SURVEY PROCESS

In January 2008, Grampian piloted a new user satisfaction survey methodology whereby each month the Force Service Centre (non emergency contact centre) conduct structured telephone interviews with 200 members of the public who have recently been in contact with the Police as a victim, witness or seeking/ providing information. The telephone survey addresses user satisfaction issues providing data regarding the police-public interaction from point of contact right through to resolution. Importantly, the new methodology has increased response rates from around 40% to 93%.

Whilst some concerns have been levelled about the potential bias of a telephone methodology (e.g., a lack of independence) the findings indicate that people are willing to provide honest views about the service they have received. The telephone process has been introduced as a result of concerns of an even greater bias in utilising the views from a minority sample in which less than 50% of the sample returned the previous paper questionnaires with the danger of receiving polarised views.

It is hoped that the ongoing development of this new process, that is less focused on what the satisfaction levels are and more focused on what causes satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, can help the organisation identify more relevant priorities for improvement.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?

The most compelling finding from the 2008/9 Grampian survey responses has been the high levels of satisfaction that have been recorded. This coupled with the high levels of reassurance and low levels of negative opinion change are very encouraging for staff and officers who are delivering a service to the public. This positivity is supported by approximately 800 positive comments expressed by the public commending staff for their efficiency, courteousness, professionalism and helpfulness.

The major determinants of public satisfaction often have little to do with the outcome of the incident and more to do with how officers conduct themselves in public encounters (Skogan, 2005). The findings from this survey have identified that there is a significant need to manage the public's expectations about the service they can and cannot expect to receive. Service users are generally satisfied when their perceptions of the service they have received matches their expectations. The main areas of public concern that were identified in this analysis refer to failures to meet expectations, be that with regards to how they are dealt with, follow up, police attendance, sufficient action or time delays. This is with full awareness that this is not necessarily a failing on the part of the police as the expectations of the public may actually be unreasonable which equally needs to be managed.

With this in mind, forces need to consider putting in place a mechanism that mitigates some of the elements of public dissatisfaction. This would intuitively include developing a clear communication strategy that informs both the public and staff about what the police can and cannot be expected to deliver. This needs to be driven by a comprehensive level of engagement whereby the public are involved in influencing the services that are being designed. A number of potential action areas to build on the findings of this survey include:

- Raising awareness of the non-emergency number;
- Providing clear guidance with regards to how the police deal with different incident types, including whether or not a police officer will attend;
- Communicating more effectively to inform the public about actions to be taken in response to their contact, even if a police officer will not respond;
- Developing a comprehensive and clear follow up contact strategy that is agreed with the public at the point of contact;
- Communicating to staff that it is how they deal with the public and not necessarily what actions they take that ultimately drives satisfaction.

It is likely that some, if not all, of the issues raised in the survey are common across the Scottish Police Service and not unique to Grampian. The specific actions taken to respond to the public's concerns may, however, require a greater deal of engagement with our local communities.

FUTURE WORK

The current assessment of user satisfaction involves forces defining the services we provide, defining the manner and standard of these processes, delivering those services and then asking the public whether we managed to achieve what we set out to do. User expectations are generally tapped into, if at all, with a couple of qualitative questions at the end of a survey. Arguably these expectation questions are the crux of our information needs. Crucially, in identifying how well we are doing, what we want to know is 'did we meet your expectations?' and 'if not, why not?'. This latter approach requires a greater commitment in terms of qualitative analysis, increased face-to-face engagement methodologies and a drive to deliver on outcomes. This approach does not necessarily serve the desire to compare forces at a national level on an easily tabulated quantitative scale, but it does allow our communities to articulate their needs and desires.

For any user feedback mechanism to be truly effective forces need to take a step back and ask themselves why they are investing in a user feedback mechanism, what outcomes they are trying to achieve, and with those answers in mind assess whether they are getting the best information return. This will enable the Police Service to identify the most effective method of gathering the information that they require. Surveys are relatively cheap, easy to administer and they can provide a great volume of data, but are we really sure what that data is actually telling us and, more importantly, what we should do in response to it? What is the arbitrary cut off point at which forces are happy that there is no further work to be done to drive up percentage satisfaction levels? Does a positive change in satisfaction levels over time indicate an improved service or lower customer expectations? It is also worth considering the argument that a valid and reliable measure of customer satisfaction with public services may be unobtainable due to the number of independent variables surrounding the nature of the customer and the lack of availability of other service providers (Conroy, 2001).

The evidence to date from the Grampian data indicates that even when the public describe themselves as satisfied there is very often a 'but...' comment in which they are able to articulate an unmet expectation (e.g. speed of police response). This being the case, a key debate to be had regarding user feedback is whether or not we are asking the right questions. Are our current measures of satisfaction telling us what we need to know? Does satisfaction mean the same thing to the police as it does to all our service users?

With increasingly limited resources and a growing desire to engage, is the process of assessing satisfaction after a service encounter a little 'late-in-the-game' for involving the public in the shaping of police services? In many cases an individual's interaction with the police will be a one off event, so in a drive to deliver more locally led services, tailored to the actual rather than perceived needs of our communities, the emphasis for engagement should perhaps be directed towards potential users of our services. There is a developing collaborative agenda led by a government desire 'to ensure the best opportunities for people through reformed public services that are tailored and far more responsive to people's needs' (Brown, 2009). In this vein, police services and the associated assessment of these should not be processes that we do to communities but rather should be developed with communities making greater use of the skills, engagement toolkits and academic support available to us. Not only will this ensure that we avoid overdependence on ambiguous buzzwords such as satisfaction, reassurance and confidence but it will ensure that the outcomes will be more meaningful for everybody involved in the police-public interaction.

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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