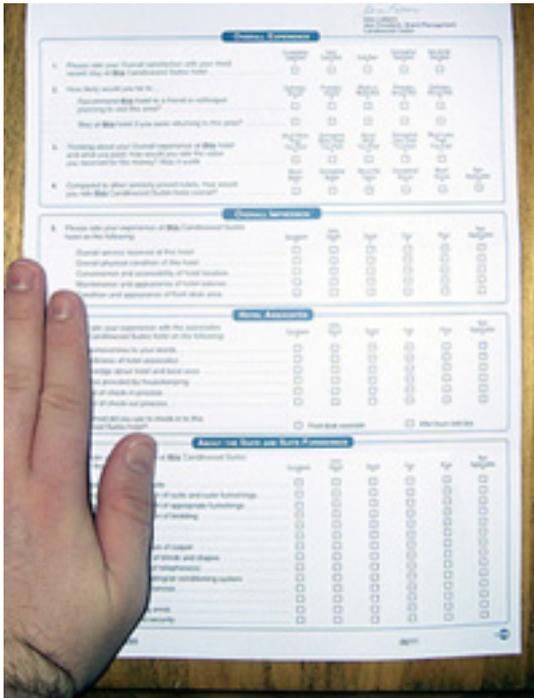


What Residents Can Tell Government

by Douglas Muzzio

Monday, July 24, 2006 12:00 AM



[Taking the Public Pulse](#)

--Gail Robinson

[Beyond 311: Listening to New Yorkers](#)

--Diana Fortuna

[The Web Site, 311, Surveys and Focus Groups](#)

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--Brooke Myhre

Government officials, management experts, and program analysts agree that government services must be customer driven and results-oriented. Governments should pay attention to residents' perceptions and assessments of the quality of the services they receive. "The best way to encourage good performance is to measure it, and the best indicator of government performance is citizen satisfaction," according to the [International City and County Management Association](#)

Hundreds of municipalities, including Phoenix, Miami-Dade County, Detroit, San Diego, San Francisco, Austin, San Jose, and Portland, Oregon, use resident surveys to evaluate the quality of services.

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Resident surveys provide a unique perspective on municipal services that is not available from other sources. In particular, resident surveys can provide information on:

• constituents' satisfaction with the quality of specific services;

• facts on who uses and does not use various services, including how often people use the services and how to use them;

• the reasons specific services are disliked or not used

• high priority but inadequate services;

• potential demands for new services;

• residents' evaluation of and support for policy or service delivery options.

Resident surveys concentrate on the outcomes or results of government services -- how satisfied people are with their schools and parks, how safe they feel in their neighborhoods. On the other hand, administrative measures including those found in New York City's Mayor's Management Report focus on inputs (money, staff), effort, and sometimes outputs (tons of trash collected, number of potholes filled). While these are important, what the public wants from government centers on results.

Furthermore, resident surveys allow for the analysis of individual differences in how people use and experience city services -- for example, differences by race, ethnicity, age, and gender. In a city as diverse and dynamic as New York, such differences in how people experience government services are significant.

The city's 311 program provides much valuable data to managers and policy-makers as well as the city's diverse stakeholders. But 311 data are not outcome measures. And users of 311 are not representative of New York City residents generally. Callers self-select, violating the cardinal rule of survey research that calls for a random sample.

Interestingly, callers to 311 may not be the most disgruntled New Yorkers. In fact, most dissatisfied customers don't complain -- they just take their business elsewhere. In the public sector, the dissatisfied citizens may simply stop trusting government or move someplace else.

And what about the things New Yorkers like about their government -- do people call 311 to pay the city compliments? Probably not. A citizen survey would help capture positive views and document areas where New York City government should keep up the good work.

Moreover, calls to 311 are motivated by a need for information or services, not to provide feedback. The system in no way enquires about residents' awareness, use and assessment of services, nor does it provide data on the demographic or socioeconomic characteristics of its users.

Noise complaints offer an example of how such information might be misused to diagnose where service problems exist. A map of noise complaint calls made to the city's quality of life line in fiscal year 2001 found more complaints from Staten Island's community boards than from all of the Bronx -- a borough three times Staten Island's size. As one Bronx community board member stated at the time, "The only reason why the number of [noise] complaints may not be

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as high is that many of the people in our community don't trust the system. And they don't believe that they are going to get results.”

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