Minnesota Department *of* Health

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Customer Focus in Public Health

Having a customer focus encompasses the ways in which a public health agency or program listens to the voice of its customers, builds customer relationships, determines customers' level of satisfaction, and uses customer information to identify and act on opportunities for improvement. While many public health agencies assess the satisfaction of their clients/ customers, customer focus is not limited to customer satisfaction.

Having a customer focus can benefit a public health agency or program in many ways, including:

- Contributing to a better understanding of the effectiveness and efficiency of services
- Enhancing the ability to understand and meet customer needs
- Contributing to a culture of quality by fulfilling a guiding principle of quality improvement
- Contributing to the ability to meet the Public Health Accreditation Board Measure 9.1.4 A: "Implemented systematic process for assessing customer satisfaction with health department services" (Source: PHAB Standards & Measures, Version 1.5)

CONTENTS

HOW TO ACHIEVE A CUSTOMER FOCUS

This section guides you through the key steps that public health agencies and programs can take to achieve a customer focus.

IDENTIFY CUSTOMERS

Identifying customers is one of the first steps to achieving a customer focus in a public health program or agency. It is important to identify who your customers are for each program/service/product you provide because different customers want and need different things. The more specific you can be when identifying your customers, the easier it will be to determine their wants and needs and the more successful your agency or program will be at achieving a customer focus.

Customers are the direct recipients or users of the programs/services/products provided. They can be both internal and external (see examples below) to your agency or program. Another term you may use to describe customers is stakeholders. However, in a customer-focused agency or program, stakeholders and customers want or care about different things and therefore, need to be distinguished. Stakeholders care about and are interested in the programs/services/products provided but, unlike customers, stakeholders do not necessarily use them.

Examples:

PROGRAM, PRODUCT, SERVICE	CUSTOMER	STAKEHOLDER
Conduct restaurant inspections	Restaurant owners	People who dine at restaurants
Give immunizations	Patients receiving immunizations	Advisory board
Develop and maintain website	Website users	General public
Provide new employee orientation	New employees	Employer
Manage grants	Grantee	Funder
Process timecards	Employee	Employer
Write reports	Other health agencies	Program manager

To begin to identify your customers, create a list or table (like the one above) and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What programs/services/products do I provide? What do I do?
2. Who is the recipient of my programs/services/products?

You may also choose to identify stakeholders in order to help you narrow down your customers appropriately. A template is available for identifying customers that you may find helpful to use:

- Customer Identification Worksheet (DOC) (Minnesota Dept. of Health)
  A free tool used to help you identify your customers and their needs based on what program/service/product you are providing.

PRIORITIZE WHERE TO FOCUS

Due to capacity and resources, it may be necessary to limit your customer focus activities to certain programs/services/products. If you need to limit what programs/services/products you focus on, here are some criteria to help you prioritize them (in no specific order):

- Largest number of people served
- Largest program/service/product, in terms of budget or staff
- There are clear opportunities for improvement (e.g., programs/services/products with known complaints or issues)
- Highest strategic priority
- High profile programs/services/products, or programs/services/products with known controversy (Source: Measuring Customer Satisfaction [PDF], King County WA)

DETERMINE CUSTOMER NEEDS AND REQUIREMENTS

Another step in achieving a customer focus is to identify your customers' needs and requirements for the programs/services/products you plan to focus on. Customer needs and requirements are the qualities that make customers satisfied with a program/product/service. This is also referred to as the voice of the customer (VOC). Examples include, but are not limited to, things like:

- Convenience (was it easy to obtain or participate in the program/service/product?)
- Reliability (is performance consistent each time the program/product/service is delivered?)
- Staff attitude (were the staff courteous, polite, friendly?)

To understand what your customer needs and requirements are, you must ask them. This can be done by way of interviews, surveys, focus groups, complaints, customer observations, or even expert groups (e.g., talking to staff who provide the programs/products/services directly to the customers). The important thing is to identify and use this information. How you identify it will depend on the resources and capacity you have available.

It is important to regularly gather this information because customer needs and requirements change over time. You use this information to inform how you measure what satisfies your customers and to understand what has changed.

Tools to help determine and prioritize customer needs and requirements include:

- Critical to Quality Tree (MindTools)
  The CTQ Tree is a tool used to translate broad needs and requirements into specific, measureable performance requirements.

- Kano Model (ASQ)
  The Kano Model is a tool that helps prioritize customer needs and requirements by grouping them into three categories: Expected Quality (must haves), Normal or Performance Quality, and Exciting Quality.

COLLECT AND ANALYZE CUSTOMER INFORMATION

After determining customer needs and requirements, the next step in achieving a customer focus is to regularly collect and analyze customer information. The customer information collected and analyzed here, as opposed to that from the previous step, is used to inform you about customer satisfaction and whether or not you are meeting your customer needs and requirements.

The collection and analysis of customer information can be as simple or complex as you want to make it. The important thing is to collect information that you will use. If you are not going to use it, why use resources and take the time to collect it?

The most common methods used to collect and analyze customer information are:

METHOD	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES	BEST PRACTICES	ANALYSIS
Surveys	Quick Inexpensive Large sample sizes (more representative and generalizable) Provide quantitative and qualitative data	Need well-written questions Low response rates	Include: • Likert Scale questions (with an additional N/A or Do Not Know option) • Open-ended question(s) • Demographic questions • Questions related to customer needs/requirements Length: as short as possible	Likert Scale: median and range Open-ended: categorization or themes, if possible
Focus Groups	Deeper conversation Specific information Can read body language, if in-person Group dynamics	Time consuming Need a good facilitator and recorder Qualitative data only Not everyone is comfortable speaking up in a group setting	Use focus groups in addition to a quantitative method. For example, can be used to help interpret results of the other method.	Categorization or themes
Interviews	Deeper conversation Specific information Can read body language, if in-person One-on-one	Time-consuming Qualitative data only		Categorization or themes
Comment/ Complaint Cards	Specific, detailed information about likes/dislikes Repeat comments/complaints confirms customer need/requirement	Most people do not complain; they just go somewhere else or stop using the program/ product/service Low rates of completion		Categorization or themes

While many of these methods will not provide you with statistical validity or generalizability (i.e., you will not get research-level, statistically sound data), that level of rigor is not always necessary—especially when you are just beginning to focus on customers. Choose the method(s) that will work for your agency or program based on your capacity and use of the information.

For example, a smaller change, like the addition of signage, could be made based on a less rigorous and a smaller amount of customer information. A larger change, like the reallocation of resources or design and development of a new program/ product/service, would require higher quality and a larger amount of customer information.

Once you determine the method(s) you will use to collect and analyze customer information, you will need to develop the following components, which will help with consistency and accountability:

- **Data collection tool**
  The data collection tool contains the questions, instructions, and guidance that become the method(s) you use to regularly collect customer information.
- **Data collection plan**
  The data collection plan outlines the process you use to collect customer information. It includes the purpose for collecting the information, frequency of collection, the tool used to collect it, where and how the collected information is stored, and the person(s) responsible for collecting it.
- **Data analysis plan**
  The data analysis plan outlines the process you use to analyze the customer information you collect. It includes the frequency of analysis, where the information to be analyzed is stored, the person(s) responsible for the doing the analysis, and the type of analysis performed. It could also include any specific performance measures and their respected targets, if appropriate. You may choose to combine the customer information collection and analysis plans into one document, if that makes more sense for your agency or program.

For more detailed guides, books, tools, and websites related to this topic, visit Resources.

TAKE ACTION: USE AND SHARE CUSTOMER INFORMATION

Taking action and using the customer information you collect and analyze is the most important part of a customer-focused agency or program. Taking action both starts and ends with sharing customer information with the appropriate stakeholders and customers. You will want to share the customer information you gathered and analyzed with decision-makers for use in making their decisions. You will also want to share the decisions made and actions taken with those impacted by the decisions.

To ensure customer information is shared consistently and regularly, it is important to develop a plan for sharing customer information (a plan like this is also known as a communication or reporting plan). This plan will include who receives the information, why they receive it, the frequency they receive it, how they receive it, and the specific information they receive. It should also include who is responsible for carrying out the plan.

With whom and when you share customer information will depend on the purpose for sharing it. Consider sharing customer information with:

- Agency/program leadership
- Agency/program staff
- Governing board, elected officials, or advisory board
- Customers
- General public or other stakeholders

Reasons to share customer information include:

- To demonstrate transparency
- To show customers that the information is being looked at and acted on
- As a means to promote the customer focus of your agency or program

- To encourage use of the information for making decisiosn
- To inform your agency or program on how to meet your customers' expectations and increase customer satisfaction

As part of your plan for sharing customer information, you will want to create templates for each audience you choose to share the information with. Creating templates will help with consistency and ease of regularly sharing the information. Templates used to share customer information can be as simple or complex as you would like to make them, and will look different depending on your audience and purpose.

Again, taking action and using the customer information you collect and analyze is the most important part of a customer-focused agency or program. Examples of decisions and actions resulting from customer information include:

- Adding evening hours to immunization clinics, so more patients are able to attend
- Creating a mobile version of the agency website, so users can view it on mobile devices
- Sending email reminders a few days before timecards are due, so that employees do not forget to submit them and have their paychecks delayed
- Including a summary of key points and next steps with restaurant inspection reports, so that restaurant owners can more easily understand the inspection results

Examples of how other health departments have used customer information can be found on PHQIX: Public Health Quality Improvement Exchange.

HOW TO CREATE A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED CULTURE

This section outlines the steps that help public health agencies and programs can take to create a customer-focused culture.

1. Incorporate customer focus into your agency's vision and values.
2. Assess and build leadership and staff knowledge in the concepts of customer focus.
3. Identify all of your agency's internal and external customers.
   See Identify Customers for more information about this step.
4. Determine the current state of customer satisfaction in your agency. (What are the existing customer satisfaction data and data needs for all programs and services?)
5. Prioritize which programs and services to focus on for assessment and improvement of customer satisfaction.
   See Prioritize Where to Focus for more information about this step.
6. Develop your agency's plans for using customer information.
7. Develop customer satisfaction performance measures.
8. Identify customer satisfaction data sources and develop data collection methods and instruments.
   See Determine Customer Needs and Requirements and Collect and Analyze Customer Information for more information about this step.
9. Develop a process for monitoring and reporting customer satisfaction data.
   See Collect and Analyze Customer Information and Take Action and Share Customer Information for more information about this step.
10. Standardize customer satisfaction throughout your agency:
    a. Standard data-collection
    b. Standard customer assessment
    c. Standard reporting
    d. Standard use of customer data
11. Use the information from customers to improve programs and services:
    a. Empower employees to take corrective action based on customer data
    b. Use customer data in decision-making and daily operation
    c. Engage customers in decision-making and improvement processes
    See Take Action and Share Customer Information for more information about this step.

Source: Roadmap to a Culture of Quality Improvement, National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO)

DEFINITIONS

CUSTOMER

A customer is the direct recipient of the product or service provided. Customers can be internal or external, and individuals or entities. Example: another governmental agency, organizations applying for grants, agencies or businesses that are regulated or monitored by the government agency, perhaps other staff within the agency itself.

CUSTOMER FOCUS

Customer focus addresses how an organization listens to the voice of its customers, builds customer relationships, determines their satisfaction, and uses customer information to improve and identify opportunities for innovation or improvement.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Customer satisfaction depends on the features of the service offered and the quality of the service interaction. Service-quality literature identifies ten determinants that drive customer satisfaction, which are mapped to five broad dimensions:

Serving Well: Execution of the service, delivering the service as promised

- Reliability, including timeliness and accuracy

Conveying Courtesy and Respect:
Interaction between the agency and the customer

- Responsiveness, including helpfulness
- Courtesy
- Communication

Earning Trust: Inspiring trust and confidence among stakeholders and the general public

- Competence, including expertise
- Credibility
- Understanding the customer
- Security

Inviting In: Availability of a service and the ease with which it can be obtained

- Access, including available information
- Tangibles

Program Effectiveness: Customers' perceptions of the value received from the service

- Determinants vary by program

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Customer service is defined as a series of activities designed to enhance the level of customer satisfaction—that is, the feeling that a product or service has met the customer expectations (Source: Turban & Efraim, 2002).

PERFORMANCE MEASURE

Data that determines progress toward a specific program, service, product, or process target. Performance measures indicate how much, how well, and at what level products and services are provided to customers. Measures may be expressed in a number, percent, or other standard unit.

STAKEHOLDER

A stakeholder is a person, group or organization that has an interest or concern in the product or service provided, but does not necessarily use the product or service provided. A stakeholder can influence and/or be influenced by the product or service, and often they indirectly benefit from the product or service.

VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

Voice of the Customer (VOC) is the term used to describe the spoken and unspoken needs and requirements of the customer.

RESOURCES

GUIDES

- Measuring Customer Satisfaction (PDF) (King County, WA)
  One county's guide to help its departments, agencies, and programs focus on their customers. It has tools and resources that address the purpose, design, and use of customer information to improve programs/services/products.

- Measuring Customer Satisfaction: Nine Steps to Success (Association of State & Territorial Health Officials)
  A resource for those interested in doing surveys. It takes you through nine steps to prepare your own surveys and apply the results.

BOOKS

- Superior Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: Engaging Customers to Drive Performance (ASQ)
  A book (available for purchase) for those interested in more detailed information about customer focus, including unbiased surveys and statistical analysis.

TOOLS/TEMPLATES

- Critical to Quality Tree (MindTools)
  A tool used to translate broad customer needs and requirements into specific, measureable performance requirements.

- Kano Model (ASQ)
  A tool that helps prioritize customer needs and requirements by grouping them into three categories: Expected Quality (must haves), Normal or Performance Quality, and Exciting Quality.

- Customer Identification Worksheet (DOC)
  A tool used to help you identify your customers and their needs based on what program/service/product you are providing.

WEBSITES

- Roadmap to a Culture of Quality Improvement (National Association of County & City Health Officials)
  Customer focus is a foundational element of an organization's quality improvement culture. This free resource is a guide developed for local health departments to help them achieve a culture a quality, including how to improve customer focus.

- PHQIX: Public Health Quality Improvement Exchange
  An online database of quality improvement (QI) initiatives from across the country. It includes QI projects that focused on improving customer satisfaction, examples of how others incorporated customer input into their QI initiative, and this webinar about customer satisfaction.

- Public Health Accreditation Board
  A website that provides information about how customer satisfaction is incorporated into public health accreditation, and the documentation needed to meet the standards.