
SECRET CUSTOMER: TEACHING QUALITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Violeta Toncheva-Zlatkova

University of National and World Economy, Bulgaria, violeta.zlatkova@unwe.bg

Abstract: In the social sciences, a case study is a research method involving an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of a particular case. The case method is well suited for use in public administration courses. Students may lack related work experience to which to apply the theoretical information presented in the course. Case studies provide a good opportunity by which theory can be applied to practice, the new knowledge can be tested, the results can be discussed, the new insights can come. In addition, this method offers an occasion in which students can gain confidence in their ability to propose and defend their ideas, thereby learning skills they will need as public administrators, and they will have a proper understanding about quality of public services from the user's perspective.

In European and world practice, a number of methods are used to study various elements of customer satisfaction, which are focused on attracting them as participants in the service design process and quality improvement. One of these techniques is "secret customer" monitoring. The first part of this article explains the "Secret customer" as a well-established technique in the private sector that has transferred to public services: the use of individuals trained to observe, experience and measure any customer service process, by acting as service users or customers and reporting back on their findings in a detailed and objective way. This procedure can be used over the telephone, in face-to-face situations or by email. The idea is to test out the actual customer experience of services, to take a snap shot of public service delivery and to measure the client's satisfaction.

The second part aims to present the application of the "secret customer" technique in the education of students majoring in Public Administration in the discipline Quality and Competitiveness in the Public Sector. The big challenges facing students are to go through the whole process, create the necessary documents, carry out the inspections and provide evidence of their findings. And all this is related to a good knowledge not only of the methodology and theoretical formulations, but also to the development of soft skills for planning and time management, teamwork, digital skills and more. This case study motivates students to learn and to explore the topic of quality, provokes interest and increases their activity; they have chance to see the two sides of the process – as a customer with his expectations and as a public administrator with difficulties to surpass them.

Keywords: secret customer, quality, public administration, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public administration addresses society's needs, and functions based on organisational structures, processes, roles, relationships, policies and programmes. It shapes sustainable economic prosperity, social cohesion and human wellbeing. It influences social trust and moulds the conditions for creating public value. Public value is value that is shared by all actors in society: citizens, businesses, organisations and informal groups. It is the outcome of all resource allocation decisions taken by all stakeholders in society as a whole. Quality of public administration is defined by the degree of meeting customer needs. The client is the final and ultimate verifier of service quality. It can be concluded that customer satisfaction is certainly the most important factor in services. Customers of public administration are all citizens of a country or region, which assess quality of services provided by the state.

It should be noted that there is a relationship between the needs, expectations and satisfaction. Needs create expectations, based on perception, as well as on direct experience. If the needs and expectations are properly understood, the actions taken up adequate and realistic expectations, which have the target of closing the gap between expectations and experience.

Formation and assessment of quality of public administration services include:

- type of service,
- level of emotional involvement,
- attitude to the rulings of administration,
- level of knowledge about public administration services,
- local taxes and fees,
- standards of service described in law and actually provided.

Quality of service in public administration also depends on economic factors, social factors, organizational and legal factors, technical and environmental considerations.

Organizational culture present in public administration offices plays a key role. It is an indispensable part of quality awareness, the ability to think for the benefit of external customers. Continuous quality improvement can

undoubtedly contribute to a lasting change in culture. In the public administration, we can distinguish three levels of the development of quality services:

- normative level relating to the development of detailed procedures for quality
- effective level involving the study of effectiveness and efficiency of the quality system,
- satisfactory level guarantees high quality of services.

Service quality is an assessment of how well a delivered service conforms to the client's expectations. Service public administrators often assess the service quality provided to their customers in order to improve their service, to quickly identify problems, and to better assess client satisfaction. Service quality plays vital role for customers to decide which product and service they want to avail and how the product or service and organization is performing. Customer satisfaction is qualitative phenomenon in nature so it can be measured through quality of the services. Service quality will help the public structures to realize how they can intervene and gain trust of the customers. The public organizations are using structured quality management principles, tools and techniques to measure the satisfaction of costumers.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In practice for decades, mystery shopping in business has been gaining in popularity. The literature, especially online, is very rich in explaining why a mystery shopping research is very much recommended for various businesses (Seats, 2010). Laura Livers said that you can find if your salespeople are proficient in explaining and demonstrating your products or services (Livers, 1999). It can increase sales and improve service. Used as a benchmark, mystery shopping can pinpoint strengths and weaknesses for training operations and policy refinements (Leeds, 1996). The results help firms to become proactive about compliances. Mystery shopping can bring managers at all levels and front-line employees in touch with customer needs and perspectives (Goldsmith, 1997). Moreover, it seems that sharing long-term results builds the team (Baum, 1998). It makes them feel part of the team and lets them know that the company's objectives are achievable, showing their role in the big picture. Mystery shopping is common in the business-to-consumer area, with shoppers evaluating and monitoring customer service across all types of industries. On the business-to-business side, mystery shopping has only been adopted recently but its use is increasing (Hynd, 2009). You can use more research methods to obtain the information you need. So, you can combine a survey (quantitative research) with a mystery shopper approach (a qualitative research). Narsh says that mystery shopping is a great operations tool. But when paired with customer satisfaction research, it becomes an even better performance improvement tool.

In our case we apply a secret customer in the public administration and especially in the training during seminars in the discipline Quality and Competitiveness in the Public Sector for students in the last year with a bachelor's degree. After considering the theoretical concepts and ideas, the different standards and the various aspects, we challenge the students to participate as secret customers and to share their experiences but not only this – they have to go through the whole process and to prepare the survey – from customer's expectations to realization and analyses.

Secret Customer is an observational research methodology that ensures public structures consistently deliver on the promises they make to customers. It leverages trained "customers" to go through product or service interactions across one public authority and report back with a detailed and objective account of their experience. Secret customer helps public organizations understand what their average customer is experiencing, what staff behaviors should be acknowledged or rewarded, and what parts of the customer service journey can be improved. The results are aggregated and used to identify and remedy systemic breakdowns of the desired and intended customer experience. When used effectively, secret customer research can be a powerful performance management tool that creates awareness around important standards/initiatives and drives organizational behavior change - all in the spirit of better serving the customer. However, in our experience of designing and implementing public organization secret customer survey, the students find two sides of the process and understand better the methodology.

The difficulty comes from not misusing the methodology and to not overexpose the role of secret customer, because the result in a program that does not deliver tangible value or meet the needs of program stakeholders. So, while it's important to understand what secret customer "is" and how it can benefit the organization and the quality improvement, it is also important to understand what secret customer is not:

- It is not a way to "spy" on employees to catch them in the act of doing wrong.
- It is not a replacement for voice of the customer measurement or other forms of direct customer feedback.
- Secret customer is not limited to measuring compliance to standards "in place" only. Today, the survey (in plus in COVID-19 situation) can be deployed across any customer channel: one-stop shop, telephone (call or contact center), and across online and mobile touchpoints (website, email, administrative service platforms, etc.).

Beyond these methodological considerations, after a diagnose of existing secret customer study cases, the students understand that the problematic issues are rooted in poor program design and the implementation of the same program but with the different goals. In addition, we define some risks:

- Ask the wrong questions, too many questions, or questions that are not important to customers or to quality of services.
- Prevent that secret customers being recognized and having next level services, different than usual.
- Compilation of time-consuming inquiries, but at the same time to have enough answers for the analyses.
- Defining a basic inquiry leading to main point of interest and provocation to determine the attitude of the employee in the public organization.
- Focus on the right metrics and properly analyze results and disseminate program findings.
- Deliver better design, better execution and better impact across our secret customer study case.
- Develop specific steps that should be followed to build a successful study case or program and increase its return on investment.

These are seven simple steps to make a secret customer study case, teaching quality in public administration.

1. Start with strategy

The absence of clear secret customer study case objectives that look to solve a specific question often result in a diluted program that does not deliver clear value. First, it is the reason to include this type of exercise in education of quality and what is the goal to achieve – new knowledge, new perception, to practice new skills and to link the theory with practical issues. We chose the National Revenue Agency, Electronic services for citizens. The main service is the issuance of a Certificate of no obligation, which requires Personal Identification Code (PIC). Second, we wanted to check the quality of service provided by the call center staff. We recommend referencing the organizational strategy for clear direction on the customer-facing initiatives - the client's charter, quality policy and other documents related to quality service were discussed in detail. From there, we define clear objectives that align with this strategy and ensure that these objectives are addressed by the secret customer study case. Here are a few thought starters when looking for inspiration on designing the study case:

- Measuring adherence to specific standards or promises made to customers/citizens;
- Performance of public administration (department, call center, agency, etc.);
- Customer's experience to find information about services;
- After a new service launch, measuring effectiveness and/or point of compliance.

2. Design with customer in mind

Once strategy is developed, the next step to implementing a smarter secret customer study case is to design with the customer in mind. The common mistake made by organizations is developing a secret customer program that is based on what is important to the organization, not their customer. In our case these are the citizens and students in this role. For example, while it might be important that the employees always wear a nametag, or present themselves with family name on phone call, the students noted this may or may not be important to them as customers, but it might be more important that associates are friendly, helpful and knowledgeable. There are various techniques used to ensure customer feedback is properly embedded. This includes using customer journey maps, conducting driver analysis with customer satisfaction data, and leveraging focus groups and pilots to inform the design of study case. Students in group discuss and give thought to key “moments of truth” where can either create pain or delight from the customer's point of view. The main question is “What are the customer's expectations?” and students summarize a list with all their expectations, beliefs and characteristics of the ideal service. Also, they give examples of good and bad experience, paid attention what language does the customer use to talk about those moments and what is the meaning of “exceeding expectations”. This step is very important. The other point of view was also considered here - when public organizations or structures fail to view their services through the customer's eyes, it often results in adverse behaviors such as “score chasing” vs. driving outcomes such as reducing customer churn, improving satisfaction/likelihood to recommend or driving new customer acquisition and retention.

3. Define customer and secret customer requirements

The next best practice is to define the customer and secret customer requirements for the study case. Defining the customer requirements starts with identifying the target customer profiles (ideally through customer segmentation data). It needs to be carefully considered of both demographic and psychographic profiles of customer base - students. In our study case take part 112 students. Knowing that there will probably be several segments, it is need to determine which ones will be served by the secret customer program. This, of course, depends on the task - whether an inspection will be made of a specific administration, territorial directorates, whether international students can be included, etc. The choice could be to look at a nationally representative sample, or focus on a specific or

underserved segment. This will then lead to the specific “personas” that customers will either need to fit or the scenarios they will need to role play.

After defining who the customer will be, next level is the “rules” or requirements for the customer but also for the public administration itself. Taking the time for explanations and discussions regarding the models of behaviour, the ways of communication, the overall presentation and the attitude of the customers is essential for the quality performance of the tasks from study case. We raise awareness about:

- Good communication - having good communication is one of the best ways to be a successful secret customer and to eliminate the confusion that can arise due to scheduling conflicts and the types of tasks and administrations.
- Stay objective - it is critical for secret customer to be able to stay as objective as possible. The best secret customers are those that deliver objective inspections and those who are able to keep a professional mind about them.
- Be detail oriented – paying close attention to details will make the reports that much better, by taking good mental or written (for calls) notes and completing the reports with as much attention to detail as possible.

It is important to think about specifics such as the one-shop-stop to visit (or contact centers to place calls to), how many times to visit that administration, the daypart or day of week to conduct visits, how much time the customer will need to spend in the administration/on the phone, whether they will need to give personal data, to sign documents, etc.

4. Design a sound survey instrument

The next step is to design a sound survey instrument. This is the survey the secret customer will fill out after the interaction with public administration. We use MS Forms to gathering information. The survey itself will capture what the study case looking to measure and should be built in an organized and systematic manner. Good survey design is the single biggest factor contributing to interesting case study design and quality issues.

- First, the survey must be kept largely objective. Avoid subjective, perception-based Likert-scale questions within the survey and instead focus on discrete, binary questions. Some questions, especially when noting the impressions regarding the service provided: did the employee ask questions / was he / she kind, did he/she show that he/she wanted to help you, did he/she give you additional information, etc. Likert-scale is most suitable.
- To avoid issues with customer recall, the survey should be as short as possible (less than 30 questions is ideal) and always tied to the objectives developed at the outset of the study case.
- Design the survey scoring or weighting scheme, by assigning points to each question that are proportional and based on question importance.
- Finally, be sure to describe a short story, following the entire inspection and evidence of its implementation (brochures, documents, photo, screenshot, etc.)

5. Create realistic scenarios and thorough briefing materials

One of the essential moments is to create scenarios/ script and briefing materials in parallel with the survey instrument. The secret customer scenario differs from the survey itself as it is the script, situation or “persona” that you would like the secret customer to role play while in the place in public authority (or on the phone, online, etc. depending on the study case). Briefing materials are leveraged to train the customers on how the interaction should play out. This is critical to ensuring consistency, quality, and overall success in the study case/ secret customer program, no matter what size or scale to deploy. The good practice is briefing materials to be deployed via written instructions that outline each step of the process. While this can be effective, designing a smarter program means leveraging technology across each phase of the program - including customer briefing. Deploying video briefing materials via short, engaging multimedia clips is an effective way to illustrate what want to accomplish during the inspection, while also demonstrating to the customers where they may encounter pivot points throughout the scenario. We make an written instruction and several online briefings through MC Teams with all explanations and overview of the scenario and highlights of it. An option is to create an online customer certification to ensure they understand and have retained the materials. This allows for an added level of confidence and credibility throughout the teacher on who is conducting the secret customer and the results that come back. In any case the teacher must conduct calibration inspection (several test) to ensure intended secret customer design is feasible and capturing the type of information. In addition, the scenarios for conducting the specific monitoring should be: reliable; ethical; practical; safe for secret clients; objective; suitable.

6. Formulate a smart and strategic sampling plan

The sixth step to design study case program is to formulate a smart and strategic sampling plan. There is no clear-cut answer to how many inspections should conduct, the number of customers (students) or scenarios should deploy,

and/or how frequently should be visiting a specific location. However, the rule “every location, every month”, very popular in business, it is not always possible or appropriate for public administration. The sampling plan have to be tie back to the strategy and objectives. This case study can be run for one month or for one semester and it depends of objectives and the depth of the research being targeted. The best practice is the timetable or Gantt chart, that illustrates a project schedule, the dependency relationships between activities and current schedule status. The students can work for time management skills, project management and planning abilities. Over time, the sample plan can (and should) be adjusted to meet the changing needs of students or new findings in the study case. Designing a smart sampling plan also involves determining the right channels to inspection (one-stop shop, contact center, online and mobile) as well as developing the right mix of all types and complexity. We start with the idea for traditional secret customer inspections in one-stop shop in different public administration entities, but because of state of emergency due to COVID-19, we make changes – a phone call in only one public agency and one scenario.

7. Design an analytical plan

The last step in designing an optimal secret customer study case is to design an analytical plan. The analytical plan is simply an outline of the results that are expected to be obtained after the completion of the study. It outlines the questions to be answered, hypotheses of these questions and an assessment separately of the analytical approaches that will be taken to get there. An appropriate analytical plan can help validate or refute the results at the end of the study. It should not be forgotten to identify the subgroups of information that are important for the analysis - this can be across geographies, communication channels, methods of providing services and everything else that is warranted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This present material shows the use of secret customer methodology as a case study in Public administration specialty – in order to depict facts as accurate as possible – of the quality of services provided by the contact personnel in National Revenue Agency. In order to evaluate the situations that are as similar as possible to the daily ones, we implemented a „Secret customer” program. The purpose of this study consists in determining the perceptions and opinions of our students who go through the whole process by seven steps, create materials, scenarios, survey and evaluate, as objective as possible, certain aspects, which are included in an evaluation form. For the evaluation to be valid, it is a must for all the secret customers to share the same common set of premises, acquired in advance, and at the end of their inspections, to fill in the evaluation forms their experience in less than one hour after having the call. The targeted domain is public services, because it is a special, dynamic and very flexible domain, and the satisfaction of customers (citizens) depends on the high quality of one's performance in front or in phone call of the customer. At the same time, taking into account the result of this case study, the students that will offer services as public administrators, is better trained, more aware and better understand the impact and quality of public services. This case study is an exercise based on the accurate registration of what usually happens in the administration aimed.

In addition, the following results are achieved:

- The students participated very actively in study case process.
- They have to have certain abilities required by the role given:
 - ✓ to be well organized, in order to be able to plan the visits/calls according to the imposed time schedule and to deliver the reports in time;
 - ✓ to be good observers in order to be able to answer all the questions in the questionnaire;
 - ✓ to be good narrators in order to be able to describe the inspections they made;
 - ✓ to be brief (avoiding the insignificant details);
 - ✓ to be objective (the report describes the inspection and not the secret customer's opinion in general or based of previous experience).
- They acquired new skills – teamwork, time planning, project management, communication, and refined their knowledge - quality and public services, etc.

The following restrictions are considered:

- Some students had difficulty getting into a role and working strictly on the scenarios;
- The COVID-19 situation hindered the implementation of the originally conceived study case and it was adapted.

5. CONCLUSIONS

A smarter designed and optimized secret customer case study will increase the long-term impact on discipline Quality and Competitiveness in Public Sector. By measuring the proper customer journey and the right channel(s), can drive improvements throughout the public administration. This kind of research may be considered a solution

for increasing the quality of the services provided by public organizations. Leveraging the seven steps above for implement secret customer study case will help improve the design and operational execution of the university curriculum, but will also drive more impactful results for students and will help create true behavior change across the quality of service in public administration and the new understanding and perception of quality issues.

The quality and value of the secret customer study case depends on the design and execution of the scenarios used to test service delivery: planned but simple approaches are likely to be the most effective, it is important to be careful and to ensure ethical behaviour, to emphasize learning lessons not allocating blame, because the critical issue is the culture of the organisation, meaning that the identity of the parties involved is not really the point. In conclusion, this study case gives opportunity to students to see the value of the process from beginning to end, provides an interesting way to measure the satisfaction of public service delivery and ensure a new focus on quality in public administration services.

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