

Listening to the Voice of the Customer

A Counting Opinions White Paper



Sacramento Public Library, Central Library



Hamilton Public Library, Central Library

Executive Summary

By implementing an effective listening strategy, libraries provide their customers with a meaningful voice in library operations, strategy and advocacy efforts. This in turn can positively impact: a) individual customer relationships, and b) support the library's overall community engagement and relevance objectives. As we will see, this White Paper reviews how two public libraries have successfully implemented a listening process that gives substance to the theory. Details follow...

The Value of Listening

Organizations that systematically listen to what customers have to say and act on what is heard are much more successful than their counterparts who do not listen. Clearly being a listener is not a *passive* activity but rather requires concentration, effort and *active* attention. Organizations that actively listen, and listen in many ways, are more likely to hear the views and opinions of their customers to help shape the future of the library.

Ways to Listen

As noted below, organizations can “listen” to customers using structured and unstructured methods and hear the views of customers that are both solicited and unsolicited. Each “box” in Figure 1 identifies the various methods that can be used to “listen” to customers. The goal is to listen using several methods so that a more accurate and comprehensive picture will emerge about what the library’s customers are saying about the library.¹

Perhaps the most popular method of listening is to use a survey, often times called a customer satisfaction survey, to get responses from a large number of people. Collecting customer satisfaction data on a continuing basis allows for the library to track the quality of services over time.

Figure 1

Solicited	Well-Structured	Less Structured
Solicited	Surveys Community forums Focus groups Interviews Mystery shopping	Generic Feedback forms (Comment or suggestion cards) Non-specific open-ended survey comments
Unsolicited	Observations Interactions with staff (verbal and written exchanges)	Comments on blogs, web sites and via social media Free form submissions (email, letter, voice-mail, text)

¹ For more information about the various methods that can be used to listen to the voice of the customer, refer to Peter Herson and Joseph R. Matthews. *Listening to the Customer*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2011.

Barriers to Listening

Many libraries feel that they are simply too busy to embark on a program to systematically listen to their customers and/or that their customers have “survey-fatigue”. Others feel that such an effort requires time, staff training, and financial resources that the library simply does not have. And still others will suggest that the management team and librarians already know what customers are saying since they interact with them frequently.

A Smarter Approach to Listening

Many libraries rely on a customer satisfaction survey, usually developed by the library, which is offered for a period of time and then not used again until 2–5 years later. Questions are often reworded, added, removed and these changes do not help the structure and consistency of the feedback, not to mention they disable comparisons over time. An alternative approach is to provide the option for a customer to respond to a survey at any time of their choosing, whether the customer is physically visiting the library or interacting with the library online. Such a survey can even be marketed to non-users who could respond to a different set of questions once they respond to an initial question that they do not use the services of the library. This continuous listening approach provides more immediate feedback about library services and results in a larger set of responses for the library to consider.

Most public libraries typically operate in reactive mode to complaints and have difficulty in gaining an understanding of the bigger picture (a mix of positive and negative comments) or no way to prioritize amongst the myriad suggestions. Without a systematic way to capture the vast majority of customer comments, the library will not have the opportunity to “hear” the verbal customer comments...often conveyed informally to staff, nor “hear” the comments made by customers using media tools such as voice-mail, email, Facebook, Twitter and so forth.

Capturing stories about the impact of library services in a systematic manner allows the library to:

- Provide context for the numerical responses to customer satisfaction surveys
- Communicate the impact of the library to crucial stakeholders
- Provide a vehicle for library staff members to learn about the work and effectiveness of other departments and gain a broader understanding of the value of the library
- Provide an additional lens to learn about how people are actually benefiting from the use of library services.

LibSat: The Counting Opinions Solution

LibSat is the first continuous web-based Customer Satisfaction Survey Solution specifically developed for academic and public libraries, regardless of size. Unlike point-in-time surveys, LibSat is a continuous feedback management system – providing immediate and continuous results with the added flexibility of longitudinal analysis and internal/external benchmarking. LibSat delivers unparalleled insight for planning and responding to library customers' needs, and for measuring the impact and outcomes of management efforts and initiatives.

LibSat includes professionally designed online (paper compatible) customer satisfaction survey modules (in several languages). About a third of respondents choose to complete the short form, another third complete the regular form, and the final one-third complete the long form of the LibSat survey. LibSat provides library managers with ongoing insight into customer feedback to assist in prioritizing and improving a library's quality of service. Authorized library staff has real-time access to all customer data and reports and in fact, can have specific feedback delivered to the appropriate staff member(s) via email, immediately upon submission.

Libraries Listening to Customers

Two libraries that have embraced the concept of listening to their customers are the Hamilton (Ontario, Canada) Public Library and the Sacramento (California) Public Library. During the almost 18 months (February 2014 to May 2015), 2,974 customers of the Hamilton Public library and 974 customers of the Sacramento Public Library have completed a LibSat survey (from January 2013 to May 2015). The experience of both libraries in using the tools provided by Counting Opinions illustrate and illuminate the value of systematically listening to your customers on an ongoing basis.

Use of the Data

Rivkah Sass, Director of the Sacramento Public Library, is focused on developing the library's next strategic plan. According to Rivkah, the real value of the LibSat survey is that the library receives "open, honest and unmediated feedback from customers." Rivkah also noted that "being able to see the ways in which patrons would like to see improvements, sorted by branch, is going to be very helpful as we develop our next strategic plan." Rivkah is referring to the Opportunity Index report shown here.

Current Date		Opportunity Index		Survey Start Date	
2015-07-12				2012-10-01	
Region: -- All Regions --	Location: -- All Locations --	Since: 2012	Context: --All--	Reload	
Service	Opportunity Index	Importance	Satisfaction	Respondents	
Hours of access and operation	11.5	9.08	6.8	284	
Books and other materials available to borrow/reference	10.72	9.31	8.01	334	
This library's web site	10.39	9.27	8.29	304	
Borrowing items (books and/or other materials)	10.37	9.61	8.96	426	
Comprehensive list of items in the collection	10.28	9.17	8.19	325	
Accessing library services from a location other than the library (online or over-the-phone)	10.15	9.38	8.85	336	
Overall Importance and Satisfaction	10	9.14	8.53	833	
This library's facilities with regards to your personal safety	9.82	8.91	8.41	273	
Holds/Renewals	9.74	9.18	8.92	299	
Lending policies	9.44	9.11	9.16	298	
Parking	9.41	8.19	7.83	280	
Checkin/CheckOut	9.34	9.04	9.18	298	
Accessing the internet while at the library	9.29	8.75	8.9	191	
Facilities for security of personal belongings	9.16	8.43	8.28	258	
Database lookup stations	9.05	8.42	8.51	74	
Via phone, fax, email, modem/TTY, web	9.03	8.48	8.48	244	
Catalogue Terminals	8.97	8.84	8.6	205	

Denise Davis, the Deputy Director of the Sacramento Public Library, feels that the real value of "the LibSat survey is that it provides longitudinal data so we can track trends." And Jessica Zaker, Central Library Manager, and Stephanie Manansala, Central



Rivkah Sass

Director of the Sacramento
Public Library



Denise Davis

Deputy Director
of the Sacramento
Public Library



Paul Takala

CEO and
Chief Librarian of the
Hamilton Public Library

Library Supervisor of the Sacramento Public Library both feel the strength of the LibSat survey is that the library is “able to hear the direct voice of the patron that is not filtered in any way.”

Paul Takala, CEO and Chief Librarian of the Hamilton Public Library, noted “We implemented the LibSat survey to further our strategic priority of remaining relevant and responsive. The software allows us to strengthen our ability to respond to customer insight, make operational improvements and coordinate our advocacy efforts.”

Library Operations

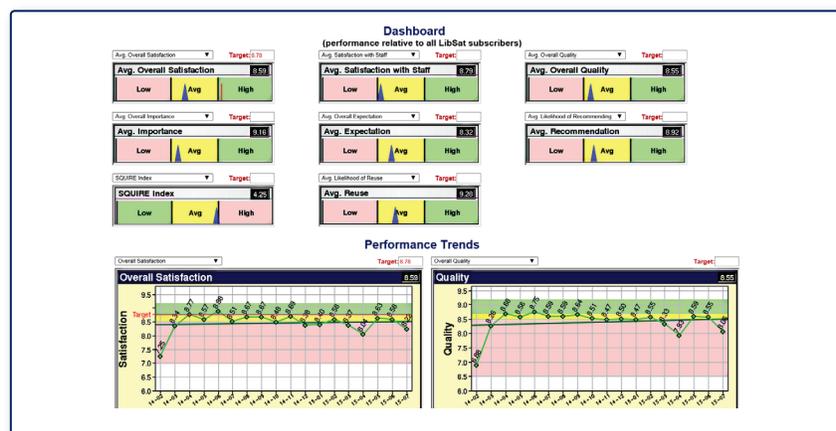
Lita Barrie, Director of Digital Technology & Youth Services, at the Hamilton Public Library, noted that “we value the opportunity to review the comments made by customers on a daily basis so that we can take prompt corrective action should a problem occur.” At the same time, Lita observed “one of the real strengths of the LibSat system is that it assists staff in identifying trends based on the ratings and comments provided by customers when responding to the customer satisfaction survey.”



Lita Barrie

Director of Digital Technology
& Youth Services, of the
Hamilton Public Library

According to Tyler Aird, Project Coordinator at the Hamilton Public Library, the library “views the LibSat Dashboard (shown here) every week to ensure that we are providing services on a consistent basis.”



Decision Making

One of the frequent complaints among customers of the Hamilton Public Library was the fact that the majority of the library's branches were closed on Fridays (due to budget cuts numerous years ago). So the management team used the frequency with which this complaint was made and the customer feedback about the importance of access to the library's space, technology and collections as part of a presentation in which the library requested Friday open hours to be added to the library's Turner Park branch (the request was approved by the Hamilton Public Library Board).

Tyler Aird also noted that the Hamilton Public Library uses the postal code data provided by customers who responded to the survey to prepare an analysis of the distance patrons travel to visit each library branch.

Impact on Staff

The Hamilton Public Library management team shared the LibSat data during one of its recent Staff Development Days so that staff would better appreciate the feedback from customers "so that the library can get better at what we do – providing high quality customer service."

Nicole Powell, supervisor of the North Sacramento branch library, indicated that staff really appreciates having their great customer service being acknowledged by respondents of the LibSat survey.

Sharing with Stakeholders

Paul Takala, CEO and Chief Librarian, of the Hamilton Public Library presents a quarterly report to the Library Board using LibSat and other data to demonstrate the progress the library is making in its quest to achieve its goals.

Rivkah Sass noted that the library has been able to use the LibSat data to support requests for additional funding to remodel and update branch libraries as evidenced by comments from customers that the library facilities were deteriorating. The requests for remodeling were successful.

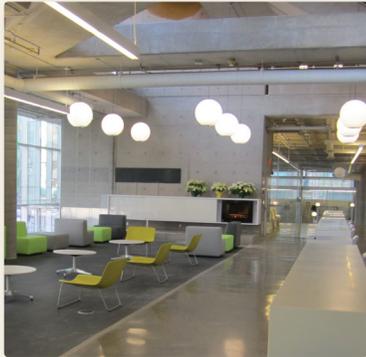


Key Takeaways and Learned Lessons

As can be seen by the experiences of these two libraries, the significant benefits that accrue to a library using LibSat includes:

- **Direct, open and unfiltered feedback.** Customers have the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions and provide feedback, both positive and negative, about the library's collections, facilities, services, and staff.
- **Continuous customer feedback.** Providing customers with any number of opportunities to provide feedback encourages people to report their experiences—both positive and negative. Staff can also use LibSat to record verbal comments as well as tabulate comments about the library captured via email, comment cards and social media.
- **Provides credible data.** The LibSat system collects data in a systematic way so that stakeholders can have confidence in the reliability and consistency of the data. Questions in the LibSat survey have been pretested and used successfully in a large number of libraries over the course of several years.
- **Centralizes data gathered from multiple sources.** The LibSat system gathers a majority of data from respondents who are completing an online survey. This allows the library to encourage customers at all locations to complete the survey using a variety of marketing techniques that have proven to be successful in a number of settings.
- **Supports trend analysis.** The continuous flow of data allows the library to periodically identify trends based on the feedback ratings and comments from customers. The breadth of the data enables the library to focus in a particular area, e.g., facilities, or to monitor a range of performance measures.

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- **Provides benchmarking data to compare with peer libraries.** LibSat is being used by many of Counting Opinions public library customers. All of this aggregate data is presented in such a way so that each library can see how well it is doing compared to its peers. In some cases for the first time the library can benchmark how well it is doing from the customer's perspective.
 - **Supports performance goals.** Using data gathered by LibSat, the management team can track the progress of goals established by the library. In addition, all customer comments can be categorized in a variety of ways providing a more complete picture of how well the library is doing towards meeting its goals and objectives.
 - **Supports funding requests.** The LibSat data can be used to support a library's annual budget request as well as to address specific concerns, e.g., open the library additional hours. Most libraries using LibSat routinely present summary data to their funding decision makers during their budget request hearings.
 - **Gather qualitative (customer comments) data.** Having all customer ratings and comments in a central place enables easier access to the data when needed. The comment management and reporting features of LibSat provide comprehensive search and analysis of open-ended feedback. The combination of anecdotal and numeric data is a powerful combination that resonates with stakeholders.
 - **Save staff time.** The LibSat system automatically tabulates all data captured from survey respondents. It can also automatically route incoming comments to the appropriate staff (e.g., comments about facilities directed to the facilities manager.) Since customers typically complete the survey online, library staff is not needed to enter this data. In addition to custom report generation features, the system provides a rich variety of easily accessible standardized views that offer interaction from a number of perspectives. Data can also be merged and/or downloaded and imported into other software tools for use in presentations and spreadsheets enabling generation of highly targeted and standardized reports. The standardized report views feature drill-downs to more levels of detail and sorting/filtering by location, region, time period, and survey. 



*Interior view of the
Hamilton Public Library*



*North Natomas branch
of the Sacramento
Public Library*



About the Hamilton Public Library

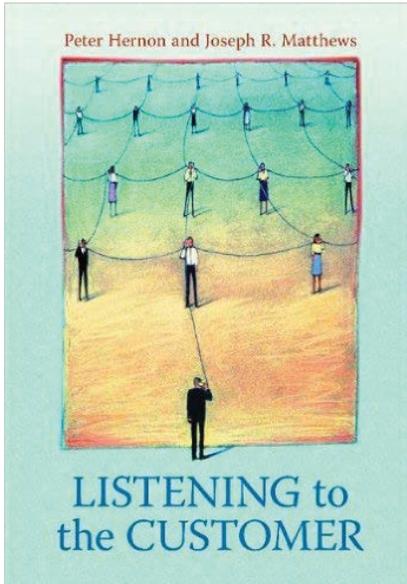
The Hamilton Public Library provides programs and services to 535,000 residents of Hamilton, Ontario at the Central Library and 22 branch locations with a collection of more than one million materials. More than 3.7 million people visited Hamilton Public Libraries last year and attendance at all programs topped 160,000 while borrowing of materials exceeded 6.7 million. For more information about the Hamilton Public Library, visit <http://www.hpl.ca/>

About the Sacramento Public Library

The Sacramento Public Library provides programs and services to 1.3 million Sacramento, California county residents at the Central Library and 27 branch locations with a collection of more than 1.5 million materials. More than 4.5 million people visited Sacramento Public Libraries last year where they borrowed more than 7.5 million items. For more information about the Sacramento Public Library, visit <https://www.saclibrary.org/>

About Counting Opinions

Facing constant competitive challenges, libraries and library organizations need better tools to understand and manage customer needs and to compete more effectively for scarce resources. In business since 2004, Counting Opinions provides libraries and library organizations with a cost-effective, evidence-based management solutions' platform for the comprehensive management of their performance, customer satisfaction and reading club data. Solutions for custom surveys, open-ended customer feedback, trends, benchmarking, outcomes and peer comparisons are core features. For additional information about Counting Opinions, visit <http://www.countingopinions.com>



About the Author

Joseph R. Matthews, who prepared this White Paper, is a library consultant and is the author of numerous articles and books about libraries. Joe is the co-author of *Listening to the Customer* published by Libraries Unlimited. This book provides a wide ranging discussion of the multiple ways libraries can better “listen to their customers.”
