



**Organizational Decision-
Making & the Successful
Use of Citizen
Satisfaction Data**

**2012 Transforming Local Government Conference
Alliance for Innovation**

Case Study Submission

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City of Olathe, Kansas

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Asking for a critique from your constituents is one thing. Promising to use the results as a guide to governing is another.

The City of Olathe did both in 2000, when it hired ETC Institute, an Olathe consulting firm, to conduct an initial survey of resident satisfaction. The results since that first DirectionFinder survey have shown an ever-rising level of resident satisfaction and a quality of life that is unmatched in the Kansas City metropolitan area and rarely duplicated nationally.

Tim Danneberg, Communication and Customer Services Director for the City of Olathe, however, described the first DirectionFinder Survey as something akin to a blind date.

“The City Council took a risk in asking to have all of the City’s warts exposed,” he said. “But life is good in Olathe, and they wanted to be able to prove it.”

DirectionFinder is an annual survey sent randomly in the fall to 2,500 Olathe households—about half reply. Results are used to assess the effectiveness of City services. The survey also measures citizens’ overall satisfaction with Olathe as a place to live, work and raise children. Geocoding of the responses by ETC showed good representation of all areas of the City.

The initial survey 10 years ago showed Olathe rated average or below average in nearly every category in comparison to the Kansas City metropolitan area. The 2010 survey showed Olathe at the top in every major category covering City services. In addition, Olathe’s satisfaction ratings significantly exceeded national averages.

In general, residents reported improved perceptions of the community across a wide range of indicators in the 2010 survey. Most notably, residents indicated the overall quality of life in Olathe has continued to get better. Olathe residents also reported a large degree of satisfaction with the City and City services, as compared to the U.S. at large. As it relates to overall quality of life, Olathe received very high marks as a place to live, work and raise children.

Olathe has continued to see significant improvements in overall citizen satisfaction when compared to the Kansas City area. Since the survey began, overall citizen satisfaction increased from a baseline of 100 to 130, while the same overall satisfaction index for the Kansas City area decreased from the 100 baseline to 92.

Danneberg said one clear benefit of the annual survey is delivery of a “clear roadmap” of what’s important to residents and where they see priorities in terms of using City resources.

“The first, which came in loud and clear, was traffic flow, specifically the east-west flow through the City,” he said. “It let us know that if we had money to address any one issue—that was where to go.”

There was strong agreement among City residents (54 percent) that the flow of traffic/congestion management should be a top priority for the City. Traffic and congestion issues continued to be a concern among residents in subsequent DirectionFinder surveys. Because there was a high level of ongoing support for addressing those issues, the City Council was able to take a longer-range look at possible solutions as opposed to adopting quick fixes.

That continuity of citizen support for those select issues was especially helpful to City staff and the City Council during the difficult budget years leading to and following the recession of 2008. Despite several years in which the City reduced staff and merged departments to cope with reduced revenue—when just maintaining the high levels of resident satisfaction with fewer resources would have been viewed as a victory—DirectionFinder results again showed growing satisfaction and revealed a city that was doing more than merely treading water.

With confidence that it was addressing clearly identified citizen concerns, the City Council invested tens of millions of dollars over several years to address the traffic flow and congestion issues. Completed projects included the 127th Street overpass at Interstate 35, elevation of the BNSF railroad crossing at Santa Fe Street east of downtown and the College Boulevard roadway widening and bridge construction.

Results in the 2009 and 2010 surveys showed improved citizen satisfaction related to those enhancements. And because the expenditures were the result of citizen input, there was little room for second-guessing of City staff and City Council decision-making during several years of tight budgets.

“We were able to make decisions and commit resources in areas that we knew were important to our citizens,” Danneberg said. “We had verifiable and quantifiable numbers that we could use to counter any special interests that wanted to take a different direction.”

And rather than just serving as a convenient safety net for Olathe's decision-makers, DirectionFinder's results have become a means for building organizational pride and are a source of personal and financial reward for City staff.

Survey results figure into every employee's annual performance review and can result in bonuses when targets are met. If the City maintains or improves its annual scores in three key areas, then all full-time City employees receive a bonus.

The three key areas in the most recent DirectionFinder were overall customer service, overall city services and overall satisfaction. Because the City showed continued high scores in those areas, each full-time employee received a \$500 bonus.

DirectionFinder also is finding favor among other municipalities that are interested in improved customer satisfaction. Since November 1999, the survey has been utilized in more than 500 cities and counties.

Olathe's 2010 DirectionFinder Survey is available online at the following link:

http://www.olatheks.org/files/Olathe2010DF_Final_Report_Web.pdf

Supplemental Information:

Intent of the initiative

The first DirectionFinder Survey was designed to set a baseline score for citizen satisfaction related to the City's performances in key designated areas. The Olathe City Council envisioned it as a tool to use to get better, committing the City to being accountable to the numbers and to ongoing improvement based on the desires of the community.

Length of time it has been in place/when it took place

The first DirectionFinder Survey was completed in 2000. It has been conducted annually since then.

Anticipated and actual outcomes

There was not necessarily an anticipated outcome. What we were seeking was a baseline of performance—something we could build and improve upon. In terms of actual outcome, we received verifiable and quantifiable numbers that gave us a roadmap of areas we needed to address.

Costs associated with the initiative

As a charter group member, Olathe receives a discount on ETC's typical DirectionFinder Survey fee of \$18,000.

Savings associated with the initiative

DirectionFinder results gave the City clear direction in terms of areas to identify for potential cost-savings during recent difficult financial times. When it was time to consolidate operations and make employee reductions, we had a good guide to what is important to our citizens. An overall reduction of 100 employees, or 20 percent of the workforce, dramatically reduced general-fund costs. The fact that resident satisfaction continued to improve as we were maintaining or even reducing services more than validates the use of the survey.

Obstacles encountered, new issues, problems or unintended consequences

One effect of using DirectionFinder as a guide is rising expectations among its resident participants. Some issues, such as visibility of police patrols in neighborhoods, are easier and quicker issues to resolve than are real or perceived restrictions on east-west travel through the City. Some bigger-picture issues require a long-term approach that has the potential of frustrating residents in the short term.

Results achieved

Since the first DirectionFinder Survey in 2000, the City has shown consistent improvement in its results. One exception can be traced to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Following the attack, the results experienced an artificially high bump, which was evident when the next year's results, while still strong, were lower than the previous year. Accounting for the artificial increase and subsequent slip, the City's numbers have shown a steady rise since 2000.

Innovative characteristics

The benchmarking nature of an initial DirectionFinder Survey is invaluable in terms of identifying strengths, weaknesses and areas that are important to residents. Annual results are tied to evaluations of employees and City departments, which has increased accountability and fostered a more collaborative effort.

Innovation Study Components

1. Innovation/Creativity

How did the idea/ program/ project/ service improve the organization? Were new technologies used?

The program not only dramatically improved the organization's performance, but revolutionized the culture. It created new filters for employees to view how they work and how customers are impacted. It has directly led to the incorporation of numerous technologies, including how citizens are reached and engaged, how they receive utility bills, how the city tracks and reports performance measures and how police are dispatched.

Was a consultant used?

Consultant Information:

ETC Institute

Chris Tatham

913-829-1215

2. Outcomes Achieved

What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled? Has service delivery been enhanced?

There are examples too numerous to mention. However, incorporating the survey into the culture has made identifying and exceeding expectations a critical component of everything the City does. It has been as simple as changing patrol patterns to increase police visibility in areas identified as "needing improvement," to aligning financial resources with resident priorities and identifying neighborhoods in need of additional attention.

Did the initiative improve access to your government?

Making the survey "real" has dramatically changed access. It not only allowed the City to provide information in the most efficient and effective ways, but allows it to truly understand what the

community feels, as opposed to active special interests only.

Has the health of the community improved as a result?

Financially? Yes. The survey allows limited resources to be applied to citizen priorities during the current economic downturn. Overall, yes. It has helped create a more efficient municipal government that is truly meeting residents' needs in all areas of the City.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

What practical applications will be shared?

DirectionFinder is used by more than 500 cities across North America, but no other city has come close to seeing the type of continued satisfaction improvement as Olathe. This has been done by truly using public sentiment to allocate resources and create priorities.

How applicable is the idea/program/project/service to other local governments?

Many, if not all participating local governments use surveys of some sort. Olathe's example will provide a case study of how to truly optimize those surveys for proven results.

4. Innovation Study Presentation

The presentation will use the DirectionFinder survey and PowerPoint to supplement the discussion of how the survey results were used within the organization to address and improve citizen satisfaction.