2012

Citizen Feedback Survey: Business License Office

City of Atlanta
Department of Finance

This survey of all business license applicants providing email addresses to the City of Atlanta from January through October 2011 provided information to improve customer service and generated information about how the City's business license system can be made more effective. A pilot study of using customer feedback in the public sector, results showed a positive response from citizens, positive feedback, actionable information, and low cost of implementation.

The Study

In May 2011, the City of Atlanta Department of Finance committed to an experimental citizen feedback study. It is unusual for a local government to ask for feedback in this way from its citizens. So, this study was innovative and indicative of a strong interest in service delivery on the part of the City and the Department.

The Department committed to making results of the study public in advance of the research, regardless of outcomes, so that participants could see that their voices were heard and so that the Department would be conducting itself with transparency. This report presents study results.

The study was conducted through the School of Public Policy at Georgia Institute of Technology. The Research Associate, Peggy Berg, can be reached at pberg@rosedalellc.net or 404.512.9142 with questions or for further information about the study.

Purposes of the study were to:

• Provide citizen (customer) feedback for service management

• Generate information about how the City's business licensing system could be made more effective for Atlanta's businesses

Research Theory

The idea underlying this study is that matching citizen feedback to government service at the point of interaction can be used to improve government performance, improve citizen perceptions of government, and improve service management through recognition of employee service excellence. Citizen feedback systems require four critical features:

1. **Matched**: invites feedback from citizens who experience a service about that service specifically; business license applicants responded about their experience with the Business License process

2. **Immediate**: invites feedback while the interaction detail is fresh in the citizen's mind and the results are relevant to the government service provider; the first set of surveys sent was up to six months after the interaction. All applicants through October 2011 were included in the study. Once the study started, surveys were sent within two weeks of the interaction.

3. **Actionable**: delivers feedback about specific teams or people who can respond and specific processes than can be adjusted; the study delivered performance and process information about each kind of application, specific teams and individual team members

4. **Accountable**: informs people invited to respond that the results are publically available; study results are being released in this report

Results

Survey results reflect a Business License operation with service ratings that are generally in the highly satisfactory and very satisfactory range. For instance 61% found the cashiers courteous, 65% found them professional, 59% received all the information needed, 63% found the information accurate and 63% were assisted promptly. Ratings for Customer Service were similar while telephone service scored lower.

While the majority was highly satisfied or very satisfied, management saw room for improvement. They used the results of the early rounds of the survey to motivate service improvement in each area. Three rounds were provided.

The survey also provided detail concerning customer experiences with the print and on line forms and the processes for both new licenses and renewals at City Hall. This is summarized in this report and the Department is using the information to adjust its processes and procedures.

Survey Population, Sample and Response Rate

There were 16,056 business license renewals and new applications between January 1 and August 31, 2011. Of these, 6,406, or 40%, provided different email addresses. Email addresses that were duplicated for more than one applicant were only sent one survey. All applicants who provided individual email addresses were sent invitations to respond to the survey by email. All email addresses that did not respond were sent a second invitation.

In total, 10% visited the survey and 9% provided feedback.

The number of surveys sent and the number of responses to each batch are shown in the following table.

Survey Instrument

The survey questions are attached to this report. The pilot used a program called Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) which makes it possible to tailor the sequence and content of questions posed to each respondent both using answers from within the survey (skip logic and piping) and using qualifiers from the City's database such as whether the applicant was a new business or renewal and number of employees (embedded data). Accordingly, only people who used a given service, such as telephone assistance or cashier, were asked questions about that service. Only renewal applicants were asked about the renewal form while only new applicants were asked about the new license form, etc. This made the survey shorter and more relevant for each respondent. Most respondents were served 5 to 6 questions in the pilot study.

Surveys by Month			
Group	**Issued**	**Returned**	**Ratio**
January through June Applicants Surveyed June 1 and June 8			
Renewals	5,889	601	10%
New	179	13	7%
Applicants Surveyed in Two Week Batches at Close of Period			
May 1 - 31	65	6	9%
June 1 - 30	56	7	13%
July 1 - 31	47	4	9%
August 1 - 31	60	9	15%
September 1 - 30	59	5	8%
October 1 - 31	51	8	16%
August 16 - 31			
Combined	**6,406**	**653**	**10%**
Usable		**549**	**9%**

Business License Office Interaction with Customers

Business license applicants can interact with the City on-line, in person at Customer Service in City Hall, at the Cashier's window in City Hall, by telephone, and by mail. Many, particularly new applicants, interact in more than one way. Interaction is 40% on-line as shown in the chart following.

Answer		Response	%
On-line for Information, Forms or Filing		215	40%
By Telephone (for Information or Assistance)		192	36%
By Mail for Payment		146	27%
At City Hall Customer Service in the Business License Office (Application or Assistance)		87	16%
By Mail for Application		72	13%
At City Hall Cashier in the Marble Lobby		49	9%
I did not contact the Business License office		38	7%
Other:		22	4%

Customer Service Management

The survey delivered customer service ratings for the cashiers, telephone staff and staff at the Customer Service desk.

The survey also delivered written comments about service in response to this question:

Is there any particular employee you would like to provide feedback about? Please include the employee's name and your comments.

Responses include both positive and negative comments and many were detailed. There were 105 written responses to this question.

Comments were clipped into statements about each staff member named. These were sorted by staff member to provide individual feedback. Responses that related to the team as a whole were also sorted.

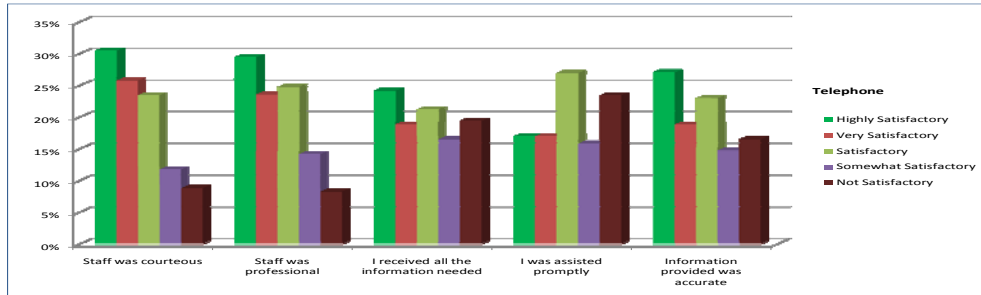On June 23, 2011 management was provided with individual and group

feedback pages to use for individualized and group staff evaluation, motivation and training.

Charts showing ratings for each area were also provided. Each graph was accompanied by a motivational statement from the survey responses.

Management reviewed the results with staff and installed large posters in the office showing the following graphs.
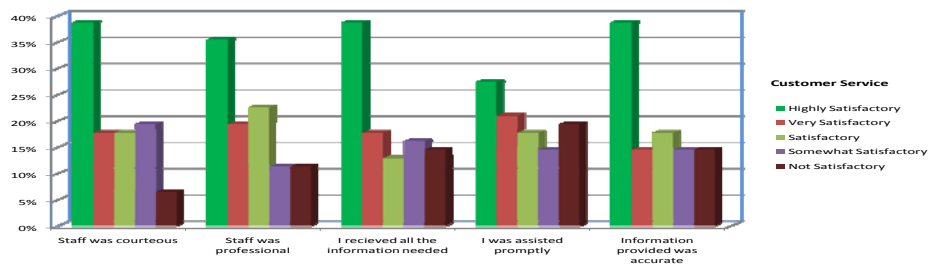
Please rate the assistance you received by telephone about your Business License.


What our customers say: "She quickly returned my call and and she let me fax her information to look over in order to help. Thanks!"

Please rate the service you received at Business License Customer Service (Application or Assistance) Office in City Hall.

What our customers say: "She explained how the license was changing and answered my questions before I even asked them. In addition, she was patient with me as I explained my concerns."

Please rate the service you received at the Business License Cashier in City Hall.
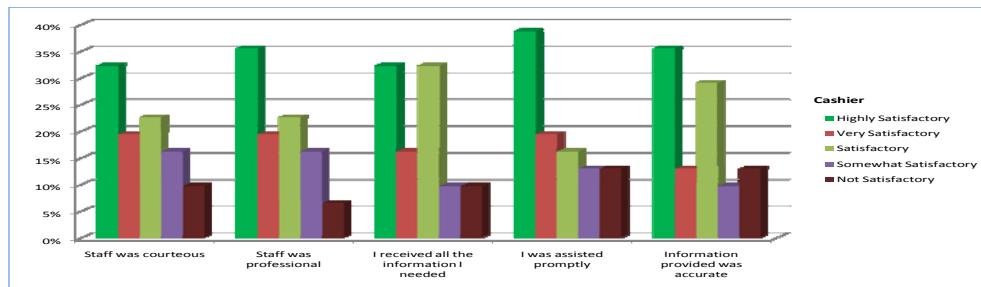
What our customers say: "There was a man who helped me when I didn't understand what I had to do to file, and there was a lady who help me to set up installment payments when my bill was too high for me to manage at one time. They are outstanding."

On August 19, charts showing results subsequent to June 23 were delivered. This sample is smaller because most annual renewals are at the beginning of the year and were incorporated into the first set of graphs.

Results showed improvement overall and these statistics were included on

the charts for motivation. These charts were also reviewed with staff members and posted in the office.

Please rate the assistance you received by telephone about your Business License.
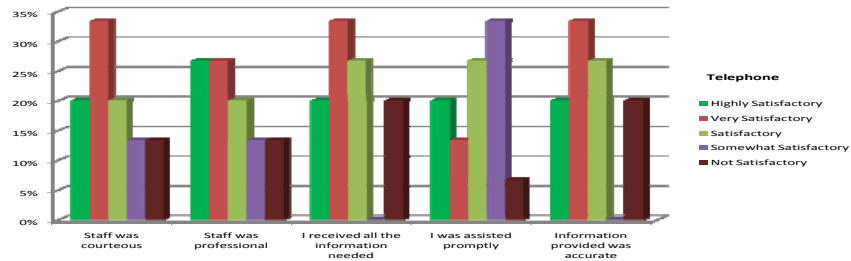
Highly and Very Satisfactory **up 7%** since June.

Please rate the service you received at Business License Customer Service (Application or Assistance) Office in City Hall.
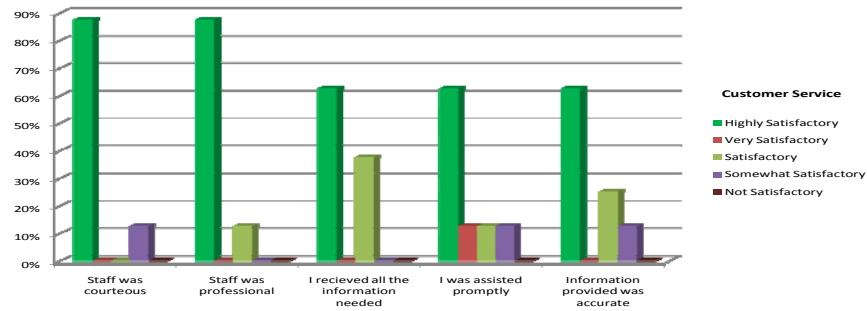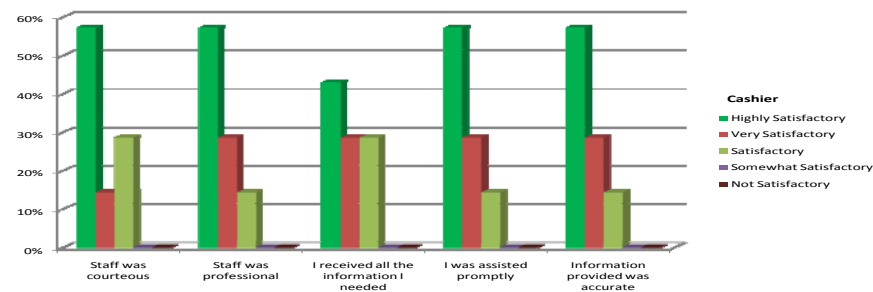

Highly and very satisfactory **up 40%** since June.

Please rate the service you received at the Business License Cashier in City Hall.

Highly and very satisfactory **up 53%** since June.

All ratings are combined in the following tables. Means are calculated on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 is the highest rating.

Telephone

Telephone	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory	Responses	Mean
Staff was courteous	29.79%	26.06%	22.34%	12.77%	9.04%	188	2.45
Staff was professional	29.95%	23.53%	23.53%	14.44%	8.56%	187	2.48
I received all the information needed	24.60%	18.72%	21.93%	14.97%	19.79%	187	2.87
I was assisted promptly	18.09%	16.49%	26.06%	16.49%	22.87%	188	3.10
Information provided was accurate	26.74%	19.25%	22.99%	13.90%	17.11%	187	2.75

Customer Service

Customer Service	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory	Responses	Mean
Staff was courteous	43.33%	15.56%	17.78%	16.67%	6.67%	90	2.28
Staff was professional	39.33%	20.22%	20.22%	10.11%	10.11%	89	2.31
I received all the information needed	40.45%	15.73%	12.36%	17.98%	13.48%	89	2.48
I was assisted promptly	29.21%	21.35%	15.73%	16.85%	16.85%	89	2.71
Information provided was accurate	39.33%	16.85%	16.85%	15.73%	11.24%	89	2.43

Cashier

Cashier	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory	Responses	Mean
Staff was courteous	41.18%	21.57%	17.65%	13.73%	5.88%	51	2.22
Staff was professional	39.22%	27.45%	17.65%	11.76%	3.92%	51	2.14
I received all the information I needed	41.18%	19.61%	25.49%	7.84%	5.88%	51	2.18
I was assisted promptly	39.22%	25.49%	13.73%	9.80%	11.76%	51	2.29
Information provided was accurate	41.18%	23.53%	21.57%	5.88%	7.84%	51	2.16

Comparisons

Ratings in a format to compare performance between service groups are shown in the facing chart. In this case, for instance, cashier out-performs telephone.

Variances between departments indicate that the City's customers are sensitive to varying service levels.

The same team handles telephone calls and customer service. Their performance is better in person than over the telephone, particularly in terms of the accuracy and completeness of information received. These are issues that can be addressed by management with tools such as scripting of more information for

I received all the information I needed January -June 15
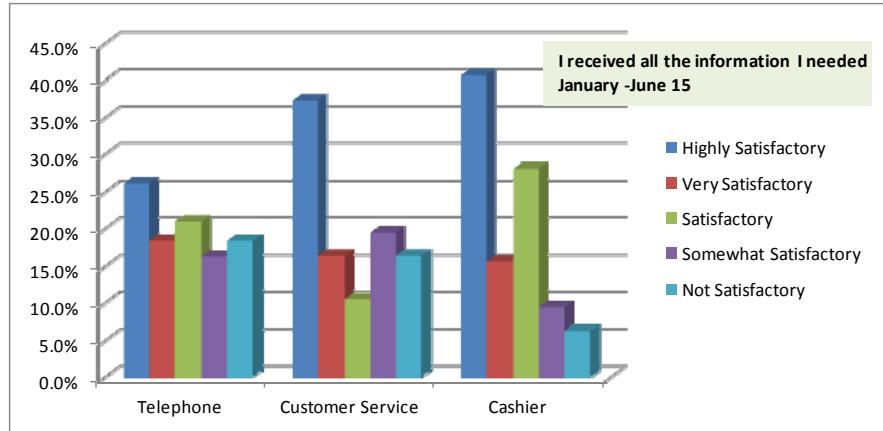
telephone response. Results may also reflect telephone equipment shortcomings.

The survey was designed to permit periodic performance reporting in order to provide regular feedback to the staff and encourage continuous improvement.

The following table shows the change from the first set, January through June 15, to the second set after June 15.

	Cashier			Customer Service			Telephone		
Comparison of Responses January to June 15 with Responses After June 15									
Question	Highly + Very	Satisfactory	Somewhat + Not	Highly + Very	Satisfactory	Somewhat + Not	Highly + Very	Satisfactory	Somewhat + Not
Staff was courteous	15%	-16%	72%	38%	-33%	49%	-19%	7%	146%
Staff was professional	18%	-16%	56%	57%	-62%	38%	-21%	32%	119%
I received all the information I needed	22%	-25%	67%	18%	74%	51%	-14%	27%	102%
I was assisted promptly	-4%	26%	96%	52%	-17%	47%	-30%	27%	111%
Information provided was accurate	40%	-37%	28%	31%	-24%	61%	-20%	74%	83%

The first set is dominated by renewals and the second by new applications. Highly and very satisfactory ratings are combined as are somewhat and not satisfactory ratings. Results suggest that customer surveys can provide temporal and continuing feedback for the public sector.

Forms and Processes

The survey also asked about forms used by the department, and the processes applicants follow. These questions are designed to provide actionable information for the department to improve its effectiveness. The questions follow and showed a picture of the form.

Was there anything on the RENEWAL form that was difficult to understand or could have been easier to complete? Please check all areas that were confusing or difficult for you.

Please explain why the items you checked were difficult or confusing. Renewal. ALL.
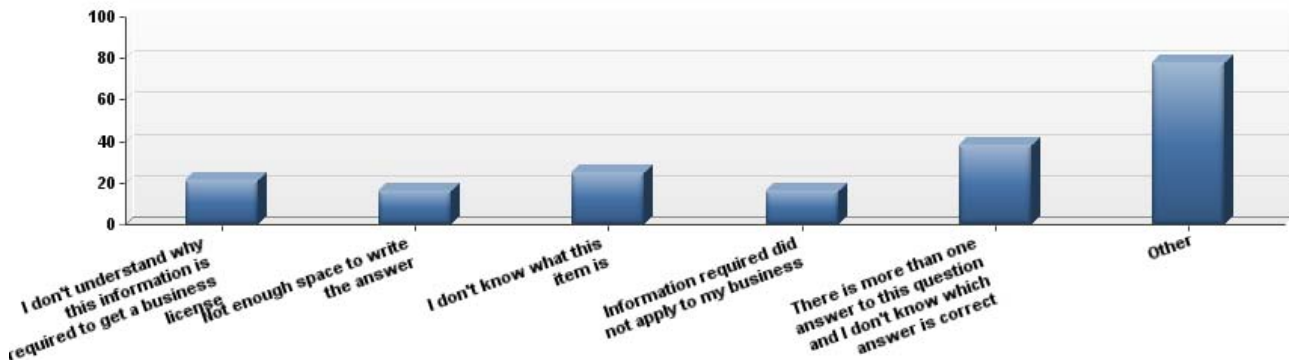
Was there anything on the NEW APPLICATION form that was difficult to understand or could have been easier to complete? Please check all areas that were confusing or difficult for you.

Please explain why the items you checked were difficult or confusing. NEW. ALL.

Renewal: *Responses 389*
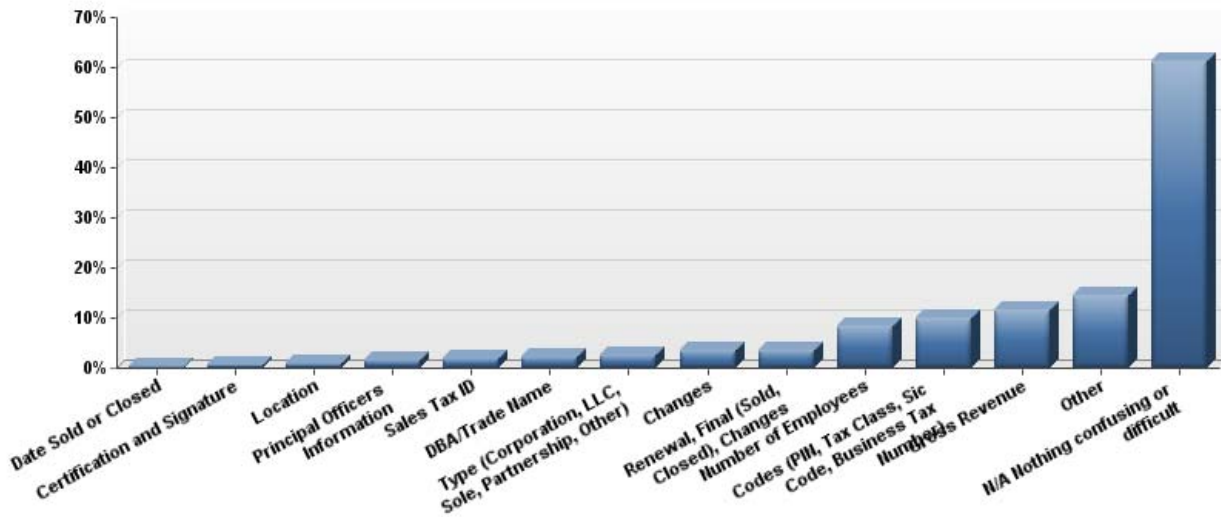
Renewal:

The same questions were asked for the NEW BUSINESS and FINAL/CLOSE forms that businesses use to report starting or ending a business license. Each showed unique challenges and these explanations were provided to the Department.

Most applicants found nothing confusing or difficult with the forms. However, 39%, including both new and renewal

applicants, had trouble with one or more aspects of the form. Their ratings and written responses clarified the issues and provided actionable information for the department. Most issues related to confusion about definitions or other information that the Department can provide on-line, in scripts and in printed materials.

New business applications are processed through the City's Zoning office as well as the Business License office. Ratings for the Zoning office were as follows.

Although the sample was small, results illustrate operational and management challenges in Zoning.

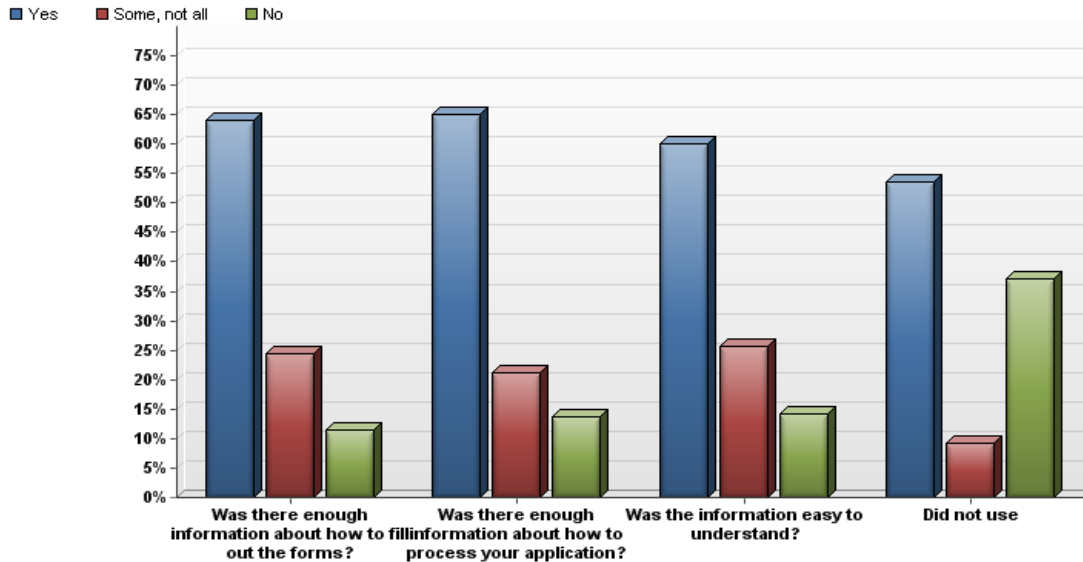## Zoning: *Responses 12*
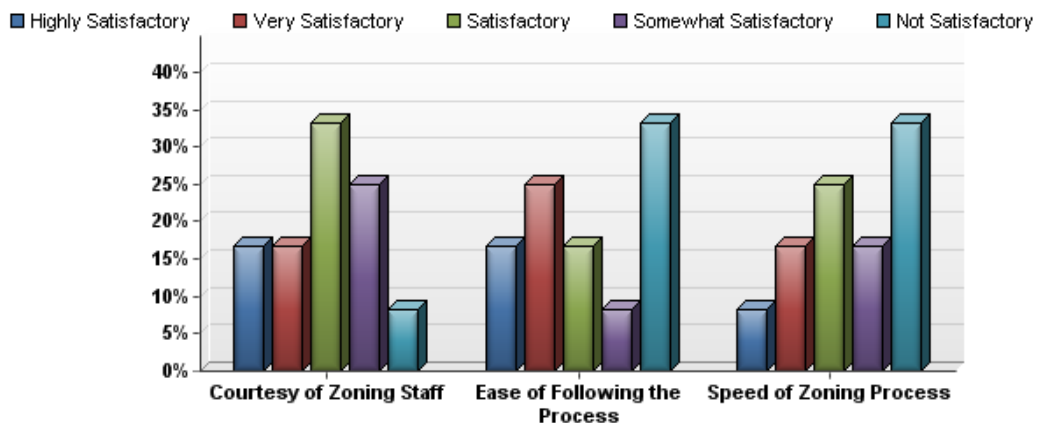
On-Line

For applicants who worked with the Department on-line, there was a specific question to assist the Department in improving its website:

On the WEBSITE or FAQ DIRECTIONS was there anything that was unclear, confusing or missing (information that would have helped you with the license process)?

Website: *Responses 355*

Many applicants find the system easy to use, particularly those who have used it for several years. Others find it difficult to navigate, whether at City Hall or on-line. The survey included open ended questions soliciting detailed feedback because the issues encountered, and the potential improvements, may not lend themselves to a standardized multiple choice question.

If you have additional feedback about zoning, please use the space below.

If you have additional feedback about code enforcement, please use the space below.

Your additional feedback is welcome. Thank you for your assistance.

Written responses included:

- 72 about the Renewal Form
- 2 about Code Enforcement
- 7 about the New Applicant Form
- 7 about zoning
- 4 about business closure
- 168 providing additional feedback

Every written response was analyzed by clipping individual phrases and sorting them by topic. Recurring topics are highlighted as follows.

These questions were asked in order to enable the department to improve its processes, and to address issues that may not occur frequently or for a majority of businesses, but that create hurdles to some.

Drilling down into the written responses provided actionable information about specific training opportunities and areas where additional information would improve the process for customers.

Although written response counts under 50 on a single topic are small relative to the population of business licenses, they identify hurdles for business license customers. Given the sample size, each hurdle may affect several hundred customers each year.

- Form (45 + 72 responses)
  Respondents report that Renewal and New Application forms could have more space to write answers, clearer definitions and explanations of the information needed, and options to change/update information on file. Also, some respondents found the form easy to use.
- On-line (39 responses)
  For some, the on-line system is easy or an improvement over prior systems. Many however would like an on-line system with better calculation and payment options, better explanations/instructions, more pre-filled, simpler corrections, better navigation, etc.
- Corrections (11 responses)
  Respondents report difficulty changing and updating information on file about their companies.
- Processes (39 responses)
  Respondents recommend better signage in City Hall. They note difficulty with taking the license process through Zoning, and they have suggestions to improve service at the Business License window.
- Calculation (32 responses)
  Respondents report confusion about how to calculate their tax; about the business codes used in the calculation; about how to count sole proprietors, no employees, and contractors as employees in the calculation; and about how to pay when the application is completed.
- Fines
  Fines were referenced directly and indirectly in the feedback often.

- Telephone service (18 notes)

  Several respondents had difficulty getting calls answered or returned; some had trouble getting correct information by telephone, some had trouble getting assistance for corporate employees outside the Atlanta area. There were also positive responses from people who called and received the assistance they needed.

- Timing (22 notes)

  Respondents would like to know what their fee will be at the time of application; for some, the wait between applying and getting billed or between paying and receiving their license was too long.

- Zoning (7 notes)

  Respondents would like to be able to check whether their location is zoned appropriately for their business themselves and would like the Zoning approval process to be faster and more convenient.

- Business Friendly (15 notes)

  Respondents feel that the City should encourage business formation and suggest roles for the Business License department in supporting and informing new businesses.

Study Costs

This pilot study demonstrated that customer feedback is an affordable performance measure and management tool. It cost less than $500 and 50 hours.

Costs for a Public Sector Customer Survey for a Department Serving 15,000 Over 10 Months		
Survey software	$ 278	Qualtrics cost $0.50 or $1 per response; other software costs less but does less
Data processing & analytical software	$ -	Included in survey software or Microsoft Office
Survey distribution	$ -	Distributed by email and returned via Web
Customer lists	$ -	City owned database
FTP software	$ -	Free online service
Printing	$ 20	Most reports produced in PDF format
Presentation	$ -	Presented in Powerpoint
Staff presentation materials	$ 168	Printing poster for wall mounting
Total	$ 466	
Analyst time	**Hours**	
Survey development & testing	10	
Meetings and presentations	11	
Analysis (non-academic)	12	
Interim report preparation	14	
Total	47	

Lessons Learned

This pilot study demonstrated that customer feedback is a viable tool for application in the public sector. Considerations to make effective use of customer feedback include the following lessons from the pilot study.

1. **Independence:** For credibility and confidentiality, customer feedback will be most effective if it is handled through an independent third party provider. Using an outside provider to develop survey questions that are unbiased and to provide anonymity to respondents seemed to add credibility with respondents and value for the department.

2. **Interpretation:** Clipping and sorting written comments involved separating phrases that expressed anger and annoyance from phrases that provided actionable information. This is a task that would require an outside analyst or consultant to be effective.

3. **Training:** Staff was presented with the study charts, but the presentation was passive. The staff was interested and orientation to the data and active discussion of the results would have improved its effectiveness. Discussing the results with the staff in exit interviews for the study showed that they valued the opportunity to participate in customer service improvement. Training could be provided in-

house. It would add time to the budget if provided by a third party.

4. **Comparison and Competition:** The pilot was a one-time study and therefore did not have benchmarks or targets and did not have comparisons across departments. Benchmarks and comparisons would add relevance and challenge to the use of customer feedback.

5. **Custom and Standard Questions:** The survey questions rating customer service (courtesy, professionalism, promptness, information accuracy, completeness) apply to most customer interactions and can be standardized and compared across departments and with targets or standards. Process questions are specific to each department and both the questions and implementation of the results would vary by department.

6. **Targets and Consequences:** When customer feedback was widely introduced in the hotel industry, hotel managers made little use of the results, except for managers of the highest performing hotels. When the hotel chains set performance (QA) standards using customer feedback surveys and there were consequences for meeting or missing the standards, managers responded to the survey results and service improved. A similar outcome is likely in the

public sector. Customer feedback is only likely to be effective if senior management set targets and consequences for all departments using customer feedback results.

7. **Sample Size:** At about 30 responses, these graphs, charts and statistics become meaningful. In the pilot study, about half of customers provided an email address and about 10% of those emailed chose to provide feedback. This suggests that a department or group with about 600 customer interactions per month is the minimum size for regular customer feedback reporting. Groups with smaller volumes might opt for quarterly reporting.

8. **Dashboard:** Results for the pilot study were presented primarily in graph form. Management suggested a dashboard in addition to the graphs to show composite results over time using a few traceable numbers. A dashboard would be a critical reporting piece.

Attachment:
Business License Office
Citizen Feedback Survey Instrument

The survey is designed to be quick and easy for respondents to take. Respondents are generally served 5 to 7 questions and only questions that relate to their specific experiences with the Business License office.

The first question is used to determine which other questions are offered to each respondent.

1. **You recently contacted the City of Atlanta about your business license. How did you interact with the City for your business license? Please check all that apply.**

   - ☐ By Mail for Payment
   - ☐ By Mail for Application
   - ☐ At City Hall Customer Service in the Business License Office (Application or Assistance)
   - ☐ At City Hall Cashier in the Marble Lobby
   - ☐ By Telephone (for Information or Assistance)
   - ☐ On-line for Information, Forms or Filing
   - ☐ Other: _____
   - ☐ I did not contact the Business License office

Respondents are offered one or two of the next three questions, so they only get questions about the staff they met.

1. **Please rate the assistance you received at the Business License Cashier in City Hall.**

	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
I was assisted promptly	○	○	○	○	○
Information provided was accurate	○	●	○	○	○
Staff was professional	○	○	○	○	○
I received all the information I needed	○	○	○	○	○
Staff was courteous	○	○	○	○	○

2. **Please rate the service you received at Business License Customer Service (Application or Assistance) office in City Hall.**

	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
Information provided was accurate	○	●	○	○	○
I received all the information needed	○	○	○	○	○
Staff was courteous	○	○	○	○	○
Staff was professional	○	○	○	○	○
I was assisted promptly	○	○	○	○	○

3. **Please rate the assistance you received by telephone about your Business License.**

	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
Staff was professional	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I received all the information needed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Information provided was accurate	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was assisted promptly	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Staff was courteous	☐	☐	☐	☐	

Only people who renewed their license are offered the next two questions (not new licenses).

1. **Was there anything on the RENEWAL form that was difficult to understand or could have been easier to complete? Please check all areas that were confusing or difficult for you.**

- ☐ N/A Nothing confusing or difficult
- ☐ DBA/Trade Name
- ☐ Location
- ☐ Sales Tax ID
- ☐ Type (Corporation, LLC, Sole, Partnership, Other)
- ☐ Codes (PIN, Tax Class, Sic Code, Business Tax Number)
- ☐ Principal Officers Information
- ☐ Certification and Signature
- ☐ Renewal, Final (Sold, Closed), Changes
- ☐ Gross Revenue
- ☐ Number of Employees
- ☐ Date Sold or Closed
- ☐ Changes
- ☐ Other: _____

2. **Please explain why the items you checked were difficult or confusing. We are collecting information to improve the form and instructions.**

- ☐ Information required did not apply to my business
- ☐ There is more than one answer to this question and I don't know which answer is correct
- ☐ I don't understand why this information is required to get a business license
- ☐ Not enough space to write the answer
- ☐ I don't know what this item is
- ☐ Other: _____

Only people who applied for new licenses are offered the next four questions (not renewals) and only people who took their application through zoning at City Hall are offered the second two questions.

1. **Was there anything on the NEW BUSINESS form that was difficult to understand or could have been easier to complete? Please check all areas that were confusing or difficult for you.**

- ☐ N/A Nothing confusing or difficult
- ☐ Start Date
- ☐ Employees
- ☐ Estimated Gross Revenues
- ☐ Business Name/DBA and Address
- ☐ Sales Tax ID
- ☐ Type (Corporation, LLC, Sole Owner, Partnership, Other)
- ☐ Owner, Officer, Partner Information
- ☐ Certification and Signature
- ☐ Residential Business
- ☐ Other: _____

2. **Please explain why the items you checked were difficult or confusing. We are collecting information to improve the form and instructions.**

- ☐ I don't understand why this information is required to get a business license
- ☐ Not enough space to write the answer
- ☐ I don't what this item is
- ☐ Information required did not apply to my business
- ☐ There is more than one answer to this question and I don't know which is correct
- ☐ Other: _____

3. **Please rate processing your application through zoning.**

	Highly Satisfactory	Very Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Somewhat Satisfactory	Not Satisfactory
Speed of Zoning Process	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Courtesy of Zoning Staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ease of Following the Process	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. **If you have additional feedback about zoning, please use the space below.**

Only people who filed a Final/Close form are offered the next two questions (not renewals or new applicants).

1. **Was there anything on the FINAL/CLOSE: FINAL REPORT/CLOSE BUSINESS FORM that was difficult to understand or could have been easier to complete? Please check all areas that were confusing or difficult for you.**

☐ Business Tax Registration Certificate Number:
☐ Federal Tax ID Number:
☐ Date Business Closed: _____
☐ Actual Amount of Revenue (dollar volume) for number of months in business generated in Georgia:
☐ Number of (equivalent) full time employees:
☐ Name and Address of New Owner
☐ Notarization

2. **Please explain why the items you checked were difficult or confusing. We are collecting information to improve the form and instructions.**

☐ I don't understand why this information is required to close a business
☐ I don't what this item is
☐ Information required did not apply to my business
☐ There is more than one answer to this question and I don't know which is correct
☐ Other: _____

Only people used the website are offered the next question.

1. **On the WEBSITE or FAQ DIRECTIONS was there anything that was unclear, confusing or missing (information that would have helped you with the license process)?**

	Yes	Some, not all	No
Was there enough information about how to fill out the forms?	☐	☐	☐
Was there enough information about how to process your application?	☐	☐	☐
Was the information easy to understand?	☐	☐	☐
Did not use	☐	☐	☐

All respondents are offered the last two questions.

1. **Is there any particular employee you would like to provide feedback about? Please include the employee's name and your comments.**

2. **Your additional feedback is welcome. Thank you for your assistance.**