

Research

AUSTRALIAN MARKET & SOCIAL RESEARCH SOCIETY | VOLUME 35 | NUMBER 2 | APR - MAY 2018

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Understanding *exactly what drives* community satisfaction

Dr Hande Akman explains why focusing on satisfaction with local government service delivery is only one part of the puzzle.

Measuring the drivers of community satisfaction is always challenging for those of us who provide research for local government, as councils constantly seek ways to improve community satisfaction. It is challenging because despite having the capacity to provide high quality and representative primary data, there is a lack of a robust and sustainable overall community satisfaction model.

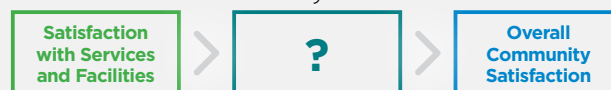
Local councils assume satisfaction with service provision will lead to higher overall community satisfaction. Attempts to optimise the management of service provision are therefore focused on the most important services, which are believed to drive community satisfaction. Satisfaction levels with services and overall satisfaction are then measured periodically to evaluate the impact of the investment made to improve community satisfaction.

However, the results do not always reflect efforts made to optimise service provision. At IRIS Research, we have witnessed local councils investing substantial amounts of money to improve important, but low-performing services, and receive lower or the same level of overall community satisfaction. This is challenging for us and disappointing for our local government clients.

As a result, we hypothesised that the problem lies in the strength and significance of the regression model. The traditional models use community satisfaction levels with a list of services and facilities as the individual drivers of overall satisfaction. However, this approach usually

results in building over-fitted models that fail to explain variation in overall satisfaction.

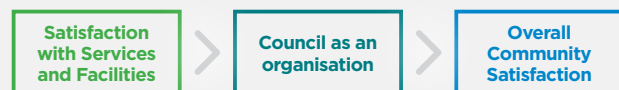
We know the relationships tested in regression models are more complex than we usually assume. We started to wonder whether there was an additional construct sitting between service provision and overall community satisfaction. This measure should have the capacity to build the connection between satisfaction with services and overall satisfaction in the local community.



Community satisfaction survey data collected over 35 years provided some clues. It indicated the importance of a council's organisational skills and community engagement efforts in explaining overall satisfaction. These qualities are not services that are provided for the community but are inherent in the way a council (does or does not) function. They are considered important qualities and are used when designing community strategic plans. So we built our hypothesis around testing the central role of a council in establishing overall community satisfaction. We argued that satisfaction with council's service provision will first generate higher satisfaction with the aspects of council as an organisation, and higher satisfaction with this measure will lead to higher overall satisfaction. In other words, we argued that a council's qualities as an organisation



would facilitate the relationship between its service provision and community's overall satisfaction.



Exploratory research

In order to identify the aspects of a council as an organisation that might lead to higher overall satisfaction, we conducted focus groups with members of a selected community. We selected this particular community for two reasons: first, periodical community satisfaction survey data displayed a decrease in overall satisfaction while performance of service provision remained the same; second, the local council was enthusiastic about the new approach and wanted to take the lead. During exploratory discussions, we identified a number of constructs that measure community perceptions of how council functions as an organisation.

The focus groups generated the following four aspects of the way the council potentially operates as an organisation, which we called 'facilitators':

1. Staff commitment and professionalism captured all level of employees working for council who interact with the community, either directly or indirectly.
2. Widespread communication referred to council making information available for all members of the community.
3. Community-oriented approach referred to council's overall approach to community service provision.
4. Representation of the community referred to the ways council members present themselves in the media and other channels used for public relations.

Hypothesis testing

IRIS Research then designed a quantitative survey to test the constructs underlying the four 'facilitators'. The questionnaire contained two or three items to measure each 'facilitator'. We used a 0 to 10-point agreement scale. Overall satisfaction contained a single item measured with a 10-point scale anchored by end responses of 'very dissatisfied' and 'very satisfied'. We conducted telephone interviews with 800 community members, aged 18 and over.

Internal and external validity and reliability checks confirmed the quality of the measures. This allowed us to run path analysis using Structural Equation Modelling. Results confirmed that staff commitment and professionalism and community-oriented approach facilitated the relationship between service provision and overall satisfaction.



A new perspective, a better model

Our client sought deeper understanding of community satisfaction and our research provided extensive insights. We recommended that the council should adopt a more customer-centric approach. As service providers, councils need to meet the same community expectations as commercial service providers do, as far as customer service is concerned. Our research enabled us to confidently argue that the council's central role as a professional and community oriented service provider would generate higher overall satisfaction.

We believe different 'facilitators' could emerge from a discussion with communities in different regions, so exploratory research is necessary to identify them. It is also important to run a sufficient number of test interviews to measure the external and internal validity and reliability of the constructs, which was a limitation of this project.

Future research should focus on the dimensions of community satisfaction. We recognise that community satisfaction potentially exists on a multi-dimensional scale. Exploratory research followed by empirical testing should generate a universal community satisfaction scale for local councils in Australia.

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