

Comment

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Platek and Särndal raise an excellent challenge for all statistical agencies. They state “Good survey methodology is important for realizing quality.” They point out the very different definitions of quality natural to the different types of employees of a statistical agency (all referred to by them as statisticians). Without a common agreement on what quality means to the agency, it is hopeless to expect all staff to work coherently to improve the utility of the information they provide. In fact, it is this conflict in definitions of quality that often undermines the best efforts to improve quality in statistical agencies around the world.

The article begins with a reference to the definition of quality in official statistics given in the Encyclopedia of Statistical Science (Elvers and Rosén 1998), which is similar to that provided in *Survey Methodology* by Brackstone (1999). Interestingly, neither definition includes cost or relevance! Appropriately, cost is frequently mentioned in the next two sections of this article. Cost is frequently absent from strategic plans produced by statistical agencies. Whenever we have discussed this issue with agencies, the common endpoint is a recognition that cost to a government agency is synonymous with staff hours. Although lack of adequate staff hours is often given as a rationale for an agency’s inability to improve quality, maximizing quality given fixed resources (staff and costs) should be a fundamental task for a survey designer.

We have interpreted the authors’ question of delivery in terms of “customer need.” In Section 8 Platek and Särndal state: “It is not evident that a focus on customer satisfaction . . . will facilitate the progress on total survey error measurement. Instead, the emphasis shifts away from error measurement, by stressing instead user satisfaction on ‘nonstatistical’ aspects of quality.” To overcome this requires an understanding of the customer’s *needs*, how the customer will use the information, to truly understand customer satisfaction. This is similar to the Japanese concept which recognizes the need to *delight* your customer, not just satisfy them.

In Section 6, Platek and Särndal point out the dangers of over-reliance on customer satisfaction surveys. Such surveys are an important source of customer input, but should not be the only source. Traditional customer satisfaction surveys may not measure accuracy and other customer needs, but they can help. Nongeneric satisfaction surveys can indeed measure accuracy, for example a customer satisfaction survey we have used for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office asks specifically about satisfaction with mailing “accurate filing notices for . . . applications.” By understanding how the customer plans to

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use the information, customer satisfaction surveys can be designed to support quality improvement. Focus groups and other procedures can improve understanding of how the data will be used, thereby identifying the information that is really important to provide.

The article did not address a particular class of survey statistician, the manager, whose decisions play a major role in delivering high quality surveys. It is the statistical manager's responsibility to realize that developmental, "maintenance" work must be given some priority if quality is to improve. This class of statistician chooses between the development of specialized software unique to every survey and the investment in resources to create general purpose routines that can be used across many designs (which though viewed as all unique in fact often can be served by the same software). It is a challenge to develop theory that informs a manager on how much to "invest" in training or in the preparation of Current Best Methods (CBMs). This class of statistician must also "deliver" if survey quality is to improve.

While Platek and Särndal focused on external customers, it is also important to understand the needs of internal customers. Much of the staff in a statistical agency provides services to internal customers. Staff responsible for maintaining registers have internal customers, as do the information technology professionals. It is vital that the internal customers' needs be measured as well. These internal customers may help emphasize the need for the improved accuracy the authors desire.

This leads to our final point, the importance of communication to delivering what is needed by customers. The end of Section 2 states that "communication is essential," and we could not agree more. This is, or should be, the basis for a CBM in every statistical agency. Every agency we have worked with (including our own) has suffered from problems in communication between statisticians, between project staff and programmers, and between the agency and its customers. We frequently hear "half of the tables I ask for are wrong the first time," and "my managers don't understand why this is important," or "they misused our data again." This is why good agencies develop teams of staff to work on projects. However, some of these teams are more successful than others. This knowledge of what works and what does not must be shared throughout an agency. Developing a CBM on communication can make a statistical agency more efficient and more accurate, and can free up resources for the types of improvements we all enjoy making, whether theoretical statistician, methodologist, or survey manager.

The absence of a complete, unified theory covering all aspects of survey quality has not in the past, nor should it in the future, stop survey statisticians from using their knowledge to design surveys using current best methods. We believe many excellent survey statisticians continue to "deliver" high quality surveys. Morris Hansen was fond of the phrase, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." In the absence of a perfect theory, good practice can and should be the basis of design.

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² Note: This contribution arrived too late for being taken into account by Platek and Särndal in their Rejoinder