Citizen Satisfaction With Federal Government Services Declines for Second Year

Americans are less satisfied with services of the U.S. federal government for a second consecutive year, as citizen satisfaction recedes 2.6% to an ACSI score of 64.4 (scale of 0 to 100). Satisfaction with federal services overall now dips below the score of 65.4 in 2010 when this measure showed similar erosion.

While citizens are generally less satisfied with most aspects of their interactions with federal services, customer ratings of service (specifically, courteousness and professionalism of agency staff) have declined the most. Customer service plummets 6% compared with a year ago—down from a score of 80 to 75. Since the number of federal employees has gone down, the decline in service quality is perhaps not surprising. In both the public and private sectors, customer service is often the first casualty of spending cuts, especially if the service is labor intensive.

About ACSI

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is an independent national benchmark of customer satisfaction with the quality of products and services available to household consumers in the United States. Each year, 70,000 customers are surveyed about the products and services they use the most. The data serve as inputs to an econometric model that benchmarks customer satisfaction with more than 230 companies, 43 industries, 10 economic sectors, and various services of federal and local government agencies. The ACSI’s time-tested, scientific model provides key insights across the entire customer experience. ACSI results are strongly related to a number of essential indicators of micro and macroeconomic performance. At the micro level, companies with high levels of customer satisfaction tend to have higher earnings and stock returns relative to competitors. At the macro level, customer satisfaction has been shown to be predictive of both consumer spending and GDP growth.
For other aspects of agency service, the scores show less deterioration, but also remain lower than customer service. User assessments of the clarity and accessibility of information that agencies provide fall from 71 to 69. Likewise, citizens are less satisfied with the process of applying for and receiving federal services, down from 70 to 68. Government websites show no improvement after declining a year ago. The website score is unchanged at 72.

Overall, the services of the federal government continue to deliver a level of customer satisfaction below the private sector, and the downturn this year exacerbates the difference. Among more than 40 industries covered by the ACSI, only Internet service providers have a lower score.
No federal department scores above the national—both public and private sector—ACSI aggregate of 75.6. The Department of Defense earns the highest score at 73, followed by Agriculture at 69. By contrast, Health and Human Services (62), Veterans Affairs (59), and Treasury (57) all fall short of the federal government average. HHS has a second consecutive decline in citizen satisfaction, with its score plummeting from 69 in 2012 to 62.

This is not to say that all government services are deemed unsatisfactory by those who make use of them. In fact, some individual agencies deliver services that rank as well or even better than the best of the private sector. Retirees receiving services from the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation give their experience an ACSI benchmark of 90, surpassing the top-scoring company in the private sector, Amazon.com at 88. Likewise, the call center operations of the National Recreation Reservation Service earn high scores of 90 from field staff users and 82 from contact center users.

Even for lower-scoring entities such as the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), satisfaction levels can vary depending on how citizens choose to interact with the agency. As in prior years, the IRS provides a much more satisfying experience for citizens who file taxes electronically (76) than those who file on paper (57).
Trust in Government

In the private sector, customer loyalty is the most important outcome of satisfaction and a critical driver of business success. Higher levels of satisfaction result in more loyal customers who are less costly to service and likely to spend more at a greater frequency with their chosen company.

The ACSI measure of trust in agencies focuses on recent citizen interactions with government; that is, it is based on the assessment of Americans who have made use of a specific federal service, program, or website. In general, trust tends to deteriorate when citizen satisfaction lessens, although in 2014 the drop is slight—from 67 a year ago to 66.

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About This Report

The ACSI Federal Government Report 2014 is based on interviews with 1,772 users, chosen at random and contacted via telephone and email between October 17 and November 1, 2014. Respondents are asked to evaluate their recent experiences with federal government services. ACSI scores for individual agencies are derived from independent research conducted by CFI Group, which licenses the ACSI methodology.

The survey data are used as inputs to ACSI’s cause-and-effect econometric model, which estimates citizen satisfaction as the result of the survey-measured inputs of expectations and perceptions of the quality of government services. The ACSI model, in turn, links citizen satisfaction with the survey-measured outcomes of complaints and citizen trust in government. ACSI government clients receive confidential agency and best-in-class data on all modeled variables.

Coming in February 2015

The American Customer Satisfaction Index will release its annual results for the Retail sector in six industries: department & discount stores, specialty retail stores, Internet retail, personal care (drug) stores, supermarkets, and gasoline service stations. The ACSI will publish customer satisfaction benchmarks for more than 50 of the largest firms in these categories.