

Examining Citizens' Contact to Local Public Institutions

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Abstract: Objective - This study aims to explore the communication process within local public administration as a determinant of citizens' satisfaction. **Prior work** - Several authors had examined if having contact with certain service providers will affect people's attitudes toward the service quality, but the researchers have not focused yet on the effect of citizens' contact to local authorities on satisfaction. **Approach** - This research seeks to address this field using an exploratory approach. Following a quantitative methodological approach, a survey was applied to a sample of 380 citizens within Western Romanian. **Findings** - By analyzing data it was possible to determine citizen satisfaction and to assess its relationship with customer contact. In addition it was revealed that in Crisana Region city hall is the most frequented local public institution. **Implications** - The results showed a negative effect of frequency of access to local authorities on overall customer satisfaction. The effect of citizens' contact to local authorities received less attention from the academic researchers, as a need in the literature is to expand this field. **Value** - This research is the first to specifically examine the contact to local authorities and the effect of frequency of addressing on citizen satisfaction within Crisana Region.

Keywords: Citizens; city hall; communication; county council

JEL Classification: H79, M31

1. Introduction

Satisfaction is the result of a customer's appreciation of a service based on a comparison of their perceptions of service quality with their prior expectations (Bitner and Hubbert, 1994; Johnston and Clark, 2005; Oliver, 1997). Flanagan, Johnston and Talbot (Flanagan, Johnston and Talbot, 2005, p. 374) suggested that an important precursor of a service experience is a customer's feeling of confidence in an organization.

When a client or a citizen feels unfairly treated because of political considerations or the self-serving interests of the public official, he/she will be inclined to react

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initially by reducing his/her level of satisfaction with or trust in governance, by reducing his/her loyalty to the governmental and administrative system, or by withholding voluntary activities and downgrading his/her attachment to the democratic system (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007, p. 288).

Brown and Benedict (2002) stated that frequency of contact with the police had a significant influence on their satisfaction regarding police services. Likewise, contact, influences the satisfaction and in the case of the police service, appears to adversely affect the public's confidence in the police [Flanagan, Johnston and Talbot, 2005, pp.382] . Unlike in the USA, in Canada is of little relevance the contact with the police. In his study O'Connor (2008, p. 590) the findings regarding the effect of citizen's contact with the failed to produce significant results.

This exploratory study aims to establish whether there are differences in citizens' perception of the quality of communication depending on the institution that is the most frequented respectively, city hall or county council. In addition the goal was to determine if there is a relationship between the citizen frequency of access to the public institutions and the perception of satisfaction.

Service quality and customer satisfaction have traditionally been conceptualized and measured using cognitive indicators (Martin et al., 2008, p. 224). The efficiency and quality of communication is particularly difficult to assess because when it involves a cognitive and affective judgment, therefore the opinions can be divided and the absence of a physical outcome is leading to difficulties for the local public organizations in stipulating the quality standards their public servants should follow.

The SERVQUAL instrument was developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) as a tool to measure service quality in a variety of service industries. The proposed model uses service dimensions derived from the original SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988). As, Carman (1990) recommended to modify the SERVQUAL instrument to fit the specific needs of the analyzed sector, some of the 22 items were replaced in order to reflect the specific of the communication process within local public administration.

2. Method

To develop and validate the survey instrument, several steps were taken prior to data collection: a qualitative design (interviews and focus groups) was used to identify items that could be used in questionnaires; furthermore, the development of the instrument from the literature and the preliminary results of the qualitative research, initial pre-test of the measures. The survey instrument was piloted on a group of more than 60 citizens. Finally, a cross-sectional survey design was used.

The research hypotheses were established taking into account the prior knowledge to the subject and the results of the undertaken qualitative research.

H1. There are significant differences in citizens' accessing to local public institutions, so that there is a higher frequency in citizens' addressing to City Hall in comparison with County Council.

H2. There are significant differences on the five dimensions of citizens' satisfaction (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) on the communication of local public administration depending on the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

H3. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the frequency of citizens' accessing the local institutions and their satisfaction regarding marketing communications from local government institutions.

Prior to data analysis the research instrument was assessed for its reliability and validity (Straub and Carlson, 1989). Reliability is the degree to which measures are free from errors and therefore yield consistent results (Zikmund, 1997). Cronbach's alpha coefficient is by far the most popular statistic of internal consistency. For both pilot et final study the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were above 0,7.

The composition of the five dimensions for both perceptions and expectations is: tangibility- 4 items, reliability- 4 items, responsiveness -7 items, assurance - 4 items and empathy-3 items.

Data were collected over one month period. The cluster sampling method was used, data were gathered at different locations (communes and towns from Crisana Region), on different days of the week, and at different times of the day, reducing location and timing biases. The number of questionnaires for each county was set proportional to the number of citizens within Crisana Region.

Table 1. The questionnaires distribution by county

Territorial administrative unit	The number of questionnaires
Arad County	79
Bihor County	167
Satu-Mare County	68
Sălaj County	66

Source: Made by author

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents by the author. The statements from the questionnaires used ordinal Likert scale where the respondent expresses the degree of agreement indicating one of them and score the statement is equal to the algebraic sum of the relative values indicated by each subject. The intensity of agreement / disagreement score is estimated by dividing to the number of respondents (Prutianu, 2005, p. 94). All of the scales described above were responded to on a five-point Likert type scale (1 -strong disagreement, 5 - strong agreement). Data from the socio-demographic questionnaires were used to characterize respondents by using nominal and interval scales. After collecting the questionnaire data analyzed using SPSS version 20.0.

3. Findings

In order to verify the research hypotheses were calculated the following statistical tests: Paired-Sample T Test, Independent-sample t test and Spearman coefficient.

The results of the testing (Table 2) reveal a mean difference between the preponderent contact to County Council and preponderent contact to City Hall pair is 0,989. Sig. value associated with the statistic t-test is 0,000 (is less than 0.05), which allows us to conclude that differs significantly from zero.

Table 2. Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 contact_prevalent county council - contact_prevalent city hall	.989	.145	.007	.975	1.004	133.112	379	.000

Source: Processed by author

It can be reached the same conclusion by observing the 95% confidence interval witch is between 0,975 and 1,004 with degrees of freedom 379, and since the confidence interval does not pass through the 0,00 the difference is statistically significant at two-tailed significance level of 5%.

In these circumstances the first research hypothesis H1 is confirmed, there is a significant difference in the accessing of the local public institutions by citizens.

H2.a. There are significant differences on the tangibility dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration by the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

Considering the significance level of Sig. Levene test for equality of variances is high 0,127 it was used the test Equal variances assumed. For this value, the t-test is equal to 2,111 with degrees of freedom of 378 and a probability Sig. (p value) 0,035 which is less than 0,05, and this shows that the mean of the two groups - 0,955 and -2,250 differ statistically significant.

The mean difference between the mean on the tangibility dimension, considering the respondents who attended more frequently the City Hall (Mean = -0,955 and Std. Deviation = 0,861) and the mean differences on the tangibility dimension regarding the respondents who attended more frequently the County Council (Mean = 2,250 and Std. Deviation = 1,767) is 1,294. The 95% confidence interval of difference between the mean which is from 0,089 to 2,500. Since the interval does not include 0,00 the difference is statistically significant two-tailed 5%.

Thus, the mean gap on tangibility dimension varies significantly depending on the institution to which the citizens` have most of the contacts, respectively city hall or county council.

The research hypothesis H2.a. is confirmed, there are significant differences on tangibility dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts.

H2.b. There are significant differences on the reliability dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration by the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

Considering the significance level of Sig. Levene test for equality of variances is high 0,395 it was used the test Equal variances assumed. For this value, the t-test is equal to -0,016 with degrees of freedom of 378 and a probability Sig. (p value) 0,987 which is more than 0,05, and this shows that the mean of the two groups -1,134 and -1,125 does not differ statistically significant.

The mean difference between the mean on the reliability dimension, considering the respondents who attended more frequently the City Hall (Mean = -1,134 and Std. Deviation = 0,861) and the mean differences on the reliability dimension regarding the respondents who attended more frequently the County Council (Mean = -1,125 and Std. Deviation = 0,530) is -0,009. The 95% confidence interval of difference between the mean which is from -1,209 to 1,189. Since the interval includes 0,00 the difference is not statistically significant two-tailed 5%.

The research hypothesis H2.b. is rejected, there are not significant differences on the reliability dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts.

Table 3. Independent Samples Test

		Independent Samples Test									
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower		Upper	
Tangibility/P-E	Equal variances assumed	2.334	.127	2.111	378	.035	1.294	.6133	.08907	2.5008	
	Equal variances not assumed			1.035	1.003	.489	1.294	1.250	-14.503	17.093	
Reliability P-E	Equal variances assumed	.725	.395	-.016	378	.987	-.0099	.6099	-1.2092	1.1893	
	Equal variances not assumed			-.026	1.028	.983	-.0099	.3776	-4.5089	4.4890	
Responsiveness P-E	Equal variances assumed	1.989	.159	1.498	378	.135	.8779	.5858	-.27408	2.0299	
	Equal variances not assumed			.768	1.003	.583	.8779	1.143	-13.559	15.315	
Assurance P-E	Equal variances assumed	2.586	.109	1.544	378	.123	1.126	.7294	-.30810	2.5603	
	Equal variances not assumed			.750	1.002	.590	1.126	1.500	-17.834	20.086	
Empathy P-E	Equal variances assumed	2.424	.120	1.442	378	.150	2.484	1.722	-.90211	5.8703	
	Equal variances not assumed			.709	1.003	.607	2.484	3.502	-41.751	46.719	

Source: Processed by author

H2.c. There are significant differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration by the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

Considering the significance level of Sig. Levene test for equality of variances is high 0,159 it was used the test Equal variances assumed. For this value, the t-test is equal to 1,498 with degrees of freedom of 378 and a probability Sig. (p value) 0,135 which is more than 0,05 and this shows that the mean of the two groups - 0,979 and -1,857 does not differ statistically significant.

The mean difference between the mean on the responsiveness dimension, considering the respondents who attended more frequently the City Hall (Mean = -0,979 and Std. Deviation = 0,823) and the mean differences on the responsiveness dimension regarding the respondents who attended more frequently the County Council (Mean = -1,857 and Std. Deviation = 1,616) is 0,877. The 95% confidence interval of difference between the mean which is from -0,274 to 2,029. Since the interval includes 0,00 the difference is not statistically significant two-tailed 5%.

The research hypothesis H2.c. is rejected, there are not significant differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts.

H2.d. There are significant differences on the assurance dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration by the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

Considering the significance level of Sig. Levene test for equality of variances is high 0,109 it was used the test Equal variances assumed. For this value, the t-test is equal to 1,544 with degrees of freedom of 378 and a probability Sig. (p value) 0,123 which is more than 0,05 and this shows that the mean of the two groups -1,373 and -2,500 does not differ statistically significant.

The mean difference between the mean on the assurance dimension, considering the respondents who attended more frequently the City Hall (Mean = -1,373 and Std. Deviation = 1,024) and the mean differences on the assurance dimension regarding the respondents who attended more frequently the County Council (Mean = -2,500 and Std. Deviation = 2,121) is 1,126. The 95% confidence interval of difference between the mean which is from -0,308 to 2,560. Since the interval includes 0,00 the difference is not statistically significant two-tailed 5%.

The research hypothesis H2.d. is rejected, there are not significant differences on the assurance dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts.

H2.e. There are significant differences on the empathy dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration by the institution to which citizens have most of the contact.

Considering the significance level of Sig. Levene test for equality of variances is high 0,120 it was used the test Equal variances assumed. For this value, the t-test is equal to 1,442 with degrees of freedom of 378 and a probability Sig. (p value)

0,150 which is more than 0,05 and this shows that the mean of the two groups -3,349 and -5,833 does not differ statistically significant.

The mean difference between the mean on the assurance dimension, considering the respondents who attended more frequently the City Hall (Mean = -3,349 and Std. Deviation = 2,418) and the mean differences on the empathy dimension regarding the respondents who attended more frequently the County Council (Mean = -5,833 and Std. Deviation = 4,949) is 2,484. The 95% confidence interval of difference between the mean which is from -0,902 to 5,870. Since the interval includes 0,00 the difference is not statistically significant two-tailed 5%.

The research hypothesis H2.e. is rejected, there are not significant differences on the empathy dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts.

Correlation analyses were conducted to establish the relationships among the communication quality dimensions.

H3. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the frequency of citizens' accessing the local institutions and their satisfaction regarding marketing communications from local government institutions.

As is evident from Table 4 there is a weak negative relationship between the frequency of citizens contact to local authorities and their satisfaction regarding the marketing communications from local government institutions($r = -0,163$, $p = 0,001$ and is less than 0,05) so that the null hypothesis is rejected. The more often the citizens' contact with the local authorities the lower is their satisfaction regarding marketing communications from local government institutions.

Table 4 Correlation between citizens' satisfaction and their frequency of contact to local authorities

Correlations			GAP_P_E	Frequency
Spearman's rho	GAP_P_E	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.163**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.001
		N	380	380
	Frequency	Correlation Coefficient	-.163**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.
		N	380	380

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Processed by author

4. Conclusion

Citizens can have an advisory opinion on the communication process within local public administration even if they do not have regular contact with those institutions, therefore, they have a certain opinions regarding the local governments' activity and their perceptions of communication performance are mostly based on the evaluation founded by the indirect communication. It may be argued that ordinary citizens are acutely aware of organizational politics through various means such as the media, personal contacts with others, or their own experience with public agencies (Vigoda-Gadot, 2007, p. 289).

The majority of the participants mentioned that they go to the city hall once or twice a year, when they pay their taxes or fines, but citizens have contact with local authorities for other reasons as well. In addition, it was revealed that in Crisana Region city hall is the most frequented local public institution.

The first research hypothesis H1 is confirmed, there is a significant difference in the accessing of the local public institutions by citizens. The second hypothesis is partial confirmed, only on the hypothesis H2.a. is confirmed, there are significant differences on tangibility dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts, H2b, H2c, H2d, H2e, were rejected, there are not significant differences on the reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government by the institution to which citizens have most of the contacts. The data on the relationship between the frequency of the citizens' contact to local authorities and perceived quality are consistent with the literature. Thus, the testing of the third hypothesis showed that there is a negative correlation between the frequency of the citizens' contact to local authorities and their satisfaction regarding marketing communications within local government institutions($r = -0,163$, $p = 0,001$ is less than 0,05). The higher the frequency of accessing to local authorities the bigger is the citizens' satisfaction regarding marketing communications within local government institutions. This supported other authors findings (Bittner, 1990, Walker, 1992) who stated that the number of contacts and frequency lead to more conflict and hostile interaction between people (especially young people) and police. This might suggest that either the public's expectations and confidence is too high (prior to use) or that the police do not do an acceptable job in managing

the satisfaction and confidence factors during contact. (Flanagan, Johnston & Talbot, 2005, pp. 382-383).

Brown and Benedict (2002) summarized the findings of over 100 articles on public perceptions and attitudes towards the police and found that frequency of contact with the police had a significant influence on their satisfaction on public police. The results underscore the importance of the interactions and the interrelations between the public servants and citizens when they come into face to-face contact.

The local public institutions have the opportunity to influence the experience through efficient communication and by having a transparent policy. Making the citizen contact experience more efficient will positively influence citizens' perceptions regarding communication within local public administration. One assumes that poor communication influence the perceived quality and it is a factor that can lead to dissatisfaction.

While local authorities traditionally regarded the direct contact with the citizens as a part of their obligation to come and pay their taxes or other payments, communication as the "essential element" can influence citizens' perception by considering it an operative and good contact or on the contrary unsatisfactory.

Future studies could utilize larger sample sizes to increase the reliability of the results. Further research should explore in depth the correlation between the frequency of contact and citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication process within local public administration. Therefore it could be investigated the relationship between citizens' satisfaction and the nature of various types of contact (tax payment, fine payment, the obtaining of civil status documents, building authorizations) and the effect of media use on the attitudes toward the communication process within local public administration.

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