

The NPS Visitor Survey Card:

First year survey and implications for park management

By TERRY R. BERGERSON

In 1993, Congress passed the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA), which directs federal agencies to join the “*performance management revolution*.” For the past several years, the National Park Service has been working to implement GPRA, to make it “fit” the agency and mission and to make it useful. As mandated by GPRA, the Park Service has developed national park systemwide standards for a broad range of key performance measures including both annual and long-range goals. One of these goals involves the annual measurement of visitor satisfaction in units of the national park system.

In 1997, the National Park Service assigned the Social Science Program the task of developing a standard GPRA survey that could be used annually by all park units to measure visitor satisfaction. The survey was given the name Visitor Survey Card (VSC)—a GPRA-based, customer evaluation system for the National Park Service modeled after “the best in business.” The project is being conducted by the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit (UI CPSU), under the direction of Dr. Gary Machlis, NPS Visiting Chief Social Scientist. Terry Bergerson coordinated the project.

The overall objectives of the project were to develop a visitor service evaluation system that:

1. is efficient and cost-effective to implement,
2. is appropriate for use in all units of the national park system,
3. allows for comparison at various NPS organizational levels,
4. is timely for managers,
5. is scientifically sound, and
6. provides useful information to managers—for meeting GPRA reporting requirements and improving visitor services.

The VSC is similar to mail-back customer satisfaction surveys successfully used in major U.S. corporations (figure 1).

The card addresses 12 indicators of visitor satisfaction, allowing visitors to rate the quality of park facilities, visitor services, and recreational opportunities. Visitors rate the services using a 5-point scale (“very good,” “good,” “average,” “poor,” and “very poor”). For GPRA reporting purposes, the card includes an overall quality question used as the primary measure of visitor satisfaction.

Methods

The VSC studies are based on a systematic survey of park visitors. Four-hundred survey cards are distributed to a random sample of visitors in each park during a 30-day study period. Visitors at selected locations that are representative of the general visitor population are sampled. For each survey, park staffs select an interval sampling plan based on the previous year’s visitation. Park staff are trained to carefully hand out survey cards according to an approved set of survey instructions and guidelines.

Survey administration

After a 45-day collection period, all returned survey cards are electronically scanned, and the data coded and analyzed. A standard VSC data report is generated and delivered to each park

Figure 1. 1999 Visitor Survey Card.

approximately three months after the completion of their survey. At the end of the year, reports at the cluster, region, and systemwide levels are generated and delivered to the National Park Service.

Results

A 1998 VSC survey was completed in 281 national park sites. The average response rate for these park surveys was 24%.

Each park report contains three categories of data—park facilities, visitor services, and recreational opportunities. Within these categories are graphs for each indicator evaluated by park visitors (table 1). Responses for indicators within

Table 1.
Visitor Response Categories and Indicators

Service Categories	Service Indicators
Park Facilities	Visitor center Exhibits (indoor and outdoor) Restrooms Walkways, trails, and roads Campgrounds or picnic areas
Visitor Services	Assistance from park employees Park map or brochure Ranger programs Commercial services in the park
Recreational Opportunities	Learning about nature, history, or culture Outdoor recreation Sight-seeing

See “Survey Card” on page 38

each service category are averaged into a combined graph for the category.

For GPRA-reporting purposes, each report contains a rating of the park's overall quality of facilities, services, and recreational opportunities. A visitor is "satisfied" if their response is either "very good" or "good." Based on evaluations by park visitors, there is strong evidence of excellent customer service in the national park system. Of the 281 parks that completed a 1998 VSC survey, 275 (98%) successfully met the annual systemwide goal of 77% visitor satisfaction.

In addition, survey results are summarized at the cluster level. Table 2 shows the percentage of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and recreational opportunities for 12 clusters in the national park system. Some regions include a single cluster or do not have a cluster designation. These areas

Table 2.
Percent of visitors satisfied, by cluster, in 1998

Cluster	% Visitors Satisfied
Allegheny	96
Appalachian	96
Chesapeake	96
Gulf Coast	96
Atlantic Coast	95
Colorado Plateau	95
Columbia Cascades	95
Rocky Mountain	95
Southwest	95
New England	94
Pacific Great Basin	93
Pacific Island	90

(n=281 parks, 22,913 respondents)

Table 3.
Percent of visitors satisfied, by region, in 1998

Region	% Visitors Satisfied
Midwest	96
Southeast	96
Intermountain	95
Northeast	95
Alaska	94
National Capital	93
Pacific West	93

(n=281 parks, 22,913 respondents)

are not included in table 2. Overall satisfaction scores for these clusters ranged from 90%-96%.

Survey results are also summarized at the region level. Table 3 shows the percentage of park visitors satisfied overall with appropriate facilities, services, and recreational opportunities for each of the seven NPS regions. Regional overall satisfaction scores ranged from 93%-96%.

Finally, survey results are summarized at the systemwide level. Visitor responses for each of the 12 service indicators (table 1) are combined and averaged at the systemwide level. Table 4 shows the percent of visitors satisfied with these service indicators. Direct employee services such as assistance from park employees and ranger programs received high visitor satisfaction ratings. Commercial services in the park received the lowest visitor satisfaction rating of the 12 service indicators.

Visitor responses for indicators within each service category (table 1) are also combined and averaged at the systemwide level. Table 5 shows the systemwide percentages of visitors satisfied with park facilities, visitor services, and recreational opportunities. Recreational opportunities received the highest visitor satisfaction ratings of the three service categories.

Twenty-two thousand nine-hundred thirteen (22,913) respondents in 281 units of the national park system rated the overall quality of facilities, services, and recreational opportunities at the park they visited. Ninety-five percent of these respondents were "satisfied" with the overall quality of services provided. This high level of visitor satisfaction is strong evidence of the agency's willingness to serve the public.

Survey response rate and nonresponse bias

The project's research and development effort included an investigation to determine a typical survey response rate for similar mail-back customer service cards. Of the firms contacted, typical response rates for similar mail-back customer service cards without financial incentive ranged from 10%-30%. A review of the customer satisfaction literature confirmed this range to be reasonable (Varva 1997, Hayes 1997). The 24% average response rate for the 1998 VSC project is compa-

rable to the best in private-sector customer service evaluations and acceptable for general performance measurement.

Although nonresponse bias is a potential problem in the VSC project, a number of steps were taken to deal with it. Nonresponse bias is a function of many factors within a survey—not just the final response rate (Dillman 1978). These include the *survey instrument*, *survey methodology*, and the final *response rate*. The VSC project carefully addressed each of these factors to reduce the potential for nonresponse bias in survey results. In addition, a test was conducted to identify nonresponse bias within the VSC survey results.

To test for nonresponse bias, the University of Idaho CPSU compared survey results from three VSC studies with the results from three 1998 VSP studies. These VSP studies contained the same

Table 4.
Systemwide percent of visitors satisfied, by service indicator, in 1998

Systemwide Service Indicators	Percent Visitors Satisfied
Assistance from park employees	96
Sight-seeing	95
Learning about nature, history, or culture	93
Park map	93
Ranger programs	93
Visitor center	93
Exhibits	91
Outdoor recreation	91
Walkways, trails, and roads	91
Campgrounds or picnic areas	83
Restrooms	81
Commercial services in the park	74

(n=281 parks, 22,913 respondents)

Table 5.
Systemwide percent of visitors satisfied by service category, in 1998

Systemwide Service Indicators	Percent Visitors Satisfied
Recreational Opportunities	93
Visitor Services	91
Park Facilities	89

(n=281 parks, 22,913 respondents)

Table 6.
Comparison of overall satisfaction within 1998 VSP and VSC survey results

1998 Units	Visitor Services Project		Visitor Survey Card Project	
	% Satisfied	N Size	% Satisfied	N Size
Acadia NP	96	996	95	86
Chattahoochee River NRA	80	658	85	107
Jean Lafitte NP & Preserve	95	528	95	79
Average	90		92	

overall satisfaction question included on the visitor survey card for GPRA measurement of visitor satisfaction. The average response rate for these three VSP studies was 76%. These VSP studies were conducted at the same park, season, and survey locations as the VSC studies. Table 6 shows the percentage of visitors satisfied overall from these three parks for both the VSP and VSC studies. This compari-

son identifies similar results for the two types of studies. The comparison suggests that nonresponse bias is not a significant factor within the 1998 VSC results.

Feedback from the NPS

In an effort to improve the VSC survey, each park staff had an opportunity to evaluate the 1998 survey and reporting process. An evaluation card was provided for each participating park unit. Fifty-six percent of the parks completing a VSC survey returned an evaluation card. Figures 2 and 3 show the results of this evaluation.

The evaluation results suggest that park staffs found the VSC instructions and guidelines easy to use (figure 2). The results also suggest that park staffs were satisfied with the quality of services provided by the VSC staff (figure 3).

Using the VSC survey results

As part of the GPRA process, the National Park Service has developed a hierarchy of mission statements and goals to guide the performance management process. This planning framework provides the structure for measuring park performance across the system. At the park level, long-term and annual goals are tools for performance evaluation. The long-term and annual goals for visitor satisfaction state the desired future condition of the visitor's experience at units within the national park system.

In 1999, the annual goal for visitor satisfaction will be increased to establish a reasonable systemwide standard. In future years, the annual and long-term goals will be used as a tool to increase the level of visitor service in all units of the national park system.

Conclusion

The 1998 VSC survey results provide the National Park Service with useful information for managers, staffs, and the public on customer satisfaction. The results also allow the agency to monitor performance on customer service standards in accordance with the National Performance Review. In addition, survey results provide the Park Service with the ability to transfer the usable knowledge gained from the evaluations into improved customer service at the local, regional, and systemwide levels.

While the National Park Service is providing excellent customer service, there are still opportunities for improvement. The survey results show that visitors rate certain service indicators lower than others. Although the majority of parks have high customer service ratings, an effort is needed to bring all units of the system to this high level of visitor service. Finally, there is the long-term challenge of maintaining a consistently high level of visitor service in all units from year to year.

In future years, additional benefits will be realized as VSC survey results accumulate from year to year. Baseline data at the individual park, cluster, region, and systemwide levels can be compared with each new year's survey results. In addition, annual and long-term goal performance will continue to be monitored at all parks across the system. And perhaps most importantly, continuous measurement of customer service performance will become a part of the agency culture. **P₃**

References

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Terry Bergerson is the Visitor Survey Card Project Coordinator. He is a Research Support Scientist with the University of Idaho Cooperative Park Studies Unit in Moscow, Idaho, and can be reached at 208-885-4806; e-mail: tberger@uidaho.edu.

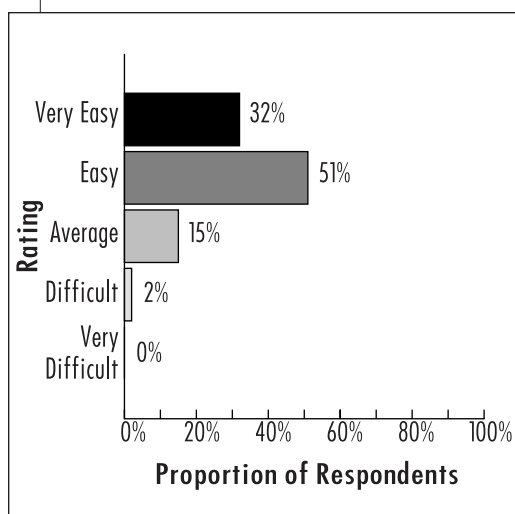


Figure 2. VSC evaluation: ease of use (n=156).

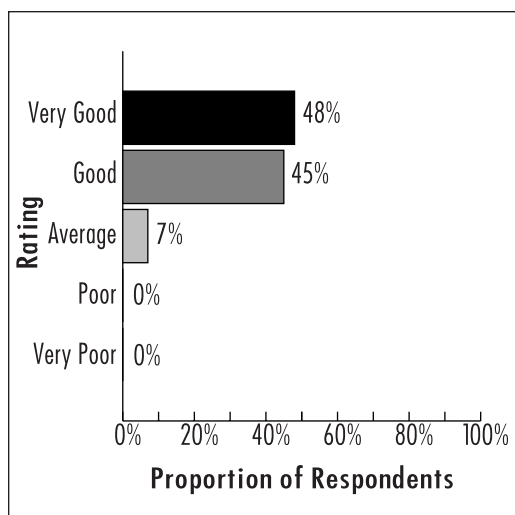


Figure 3. VSC evaluation: quality of services (n=156).