

Evidence-Based Management

SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Karen Strauss, Chief of Main



San Francisco Public Library Challenge: Getting the Survey Questions Right

The San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) serves a committed and vocal community from which it gathers patron feedback through a variety of communication channels. One of those channels was an annual patron satisfaction paper survey, distributed at various points in the Main Library and at every branch with drop boxes from which the surveys were collected and tabulated manually. The survey covered a specific period of time and required staff training to implement

Managing the annual survey presented significant logistical challenges. The questions needed to be well-written and clearly presented. To speed tabulation, the survey had to fit onto one page. And, the survey needed to be translated into multiple languages to reach the diverse San Francisco population.

The entire process was very labor intensive, even without the added challenge of ensuring the right information was being gathered. In addition, the survey was tweaked each year so year-to-year comparisons were difficult.

According to Karen Strauss, Chief of Main, the library was investing a disproportionate amount of time for too little return. “The fact was, we didn’t always frame the questions in the right way to get the information we wanted,” she says.

The LibSat Solution: Another way to hear the voice of the patron

Strauss says LibSat offered the library a triple benefit. They could save time and effort they were expending to develop the survey and distribute it in paper; they would have professionally developed questions to ensure they gathered the type of information they wanted to get; and, they would eliminate the cost of paying a consultant to do the tabulation.

“We’re accountable to the city and to the taxpayers. It’s important that we quantify whether we’re meeting the community’s needs and interests. Measuring satisfaction with library service and collections is an important

performance measure. We set our goals each year and LibSat helps us put an authoritative numerical value to our performance to share with stakeholders.”

Listening to what the patrons say can result in important changes. For example, Strauss says, they received a lot of comments when the library changed its website. To respond to patron concerns, the library now imbeds library card information so people don’t have to authenticate repeatedly when they come to the library website. She says she aggregates comments to spot areas of concern (e.g., bathrooms and security) so that the library can evaluate whether they’re really doing what they say they’re doing. “It’s a good reminder when you see repeated comments over several months to check into whether we’ve been attentive to areas of patron concern.”

Strauss points to the following benefits of using LibSat:

- Saves staff time. Most of the tabulation is handled by LibSat, reducing a labor-intensive task from staff. The library still does an annual paper survey using the LibSat survey, primarily to meet the needs of people with disabilities and others who might not be comfortable with an online survey. Those surveys are entered manually into LibSat by staff so all data is collected in one place, but the number of paper surveys is greatly reduced since staff point to computers those patrons who are willing to fill out online forms instead.
- Counting Opinions’ responsiveness. Strauss says they appreciate the work Counting Opinions does to develop the survey questions, even though SFPL uses LibSat a little differently than other libraries. Keeping the survey consistent to benchmark against other libraries is not as important to them as the other advantages they realize with LibSat. Counting Opinions worked with SFPL to create a hybrid survey that allows for tracking different measures as the needs arise while still retaining some consistency year to year.

- Data to support performance goals. SFPL prepares a numerical report every six months to present to the city. Every three months they review patron comments and share them with the Administration and managers to assess trends. “Some of the comments we receive are very thoughtful and provide a snapshot of public opinion, both positive and negative. It’s very important for Administration to see these comments since many of them have limited direct exposure to patrons.”
- Reinforces data gathered in other ways. Strauss says they have several outlets for gathering patron feedback. “The comments we receive through LibSat often mirror what we hear via other channels. It’s beneficial to have this reinforcement that our multiple channels for hearing the voice of the patron are effective.”
- Supports library fundraising. SFPL has an active Friends of the Library group. Through LibSat, the names of patrons who indicate their interest in Friends’ activities are forwarded.
- Ability to track trends. LibSat provides a continuous flow of data to look at specific periods of time (e.g., the first six months after a branch opens) or to compare year-to-date scores with previous years. This replaces the library’s need to mount a special survey to cover the period of time they want to examine.

Strauss says patron feedback is critical to the way SFPL operates. “Every meeting of our public service and IT staffs is an opportunity to review what we’re hearing through all our feedback channels.” And, she adds, although the library was gathering data prior to LibSat, “now we are getting consistent customer satisfaction data and our process is much more productive and cost effective.”

About the San Francisco Public Library

The San Francisco Public Library system is dedicated to free and equal access to information, knowledge, inde-

pendent learning and the joys of reading for its diverse community.

The San Francisco Public Library represents the cultural, ethnic, gender, and age diversity that is a hallmark of San Francisco. San Francisco’s public libraries are true community centers and anchors in their neighborhoods, providing access to important resources and information for all. The Library also remains at the forefront of innovative ideas and has become a steward for the environment through new ecologically sound processes and informative public programs.

In operation for more than 130 years, the system boasts a Main Library, 27 branches and several bookmobiles for this city of more than 800,000. San Francisco’s libraries are needed – and visited – more than ever before. In neighborhoods across San Francisco, people from all backgrounds turn to their libraries for a wide variety of resources and services that educate, inspire, empower and entertain. At a time when public resources are shrinking drastically, San Francisco’s libraries are growing and improving the ways in which they provide for the diverse community they serve.

About Counting Opinions

Facing constant competitive challenges, libraries and library organizations need better tools to understand and manage customer needs and to compete more effectively for scarce resources. In business since 2004, Counting Opinions provides libraries and library organizations with a cost-effective, evidence-based management solutions’ platform for the comprehensive management of their performance and customer satisfaction data. Solutions for custom surveys, open-ended customer feedback, trends, benchmarking, outcomes and peer comparisons are also available.

For more information, www.countingopinions.com.

Note: Interview conducted and case study prepared by JAM Marketing LLC



Please cite this article as: San Francisco Public Library
Karen Strauss, Chief of Main