

Strategic Uses of Ongoing Fast Feedback Customer Satisfaction Studies

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ABSTRACT

Historically, utilities have relied upon process evaluation results to provide data about program performance so program managers can make modifications that improve operations, results, and customer satisfaction. Unfortunately, some evaluations take one to two years to complete, which affects the timeliness of actionable information. In 2013, Consumers Energy instituted an ongoing customer satisfaction survey process in its residential energy efficiency portfolio. This process reports on customer perceptions within a month of participation and has led to the development of a key early warning system and a platform for dialogue between evaluators, program managers, and implementation contractors. This approach has identified systemic program issues, process breakdowns, and customer priorities related to participation. These system and process improvements are occurring on a granular, operational level and are improving program results within program cycles instead of on an annual or longer cycle. The impacts of program enhancements or other corrective action are readily discernible, sometimes noted in the next round of surveys. The information provides timely and relevant insights and is also accomplished at lower cost compared to a traditional process evaluation.

Results from the surveys have also been used to develop research questions for broader evaluation efforts. Customer response to the surveys has been strong since inception, with overall response rates hovering at 30% of the approximately 50% of customers with available e-mail addresses, providing feedback from 15% of overall program participants. This rapid feedback ongoing customer satisfaction process is potentially a best practices tool for assessing energy efficiency portfolios and can lead to more cost-effective investment of research dollars.

Introduction

Consumers Energy is one of the nation's largest combination utilities, providing electric and natural gas service to nearly 6.6 million of Michigan's 10 million residents. In 2009, Consumers Energy launched a portfolio of energy efficiency programs in response to legislation,¹ which required the utility to meet annual energy savings targets and renewable energy portfolio standards, starting at 0.5% of utility load in 2009 and increasing to 1% of electric sales and 0.75% of gas sales in 2012. The legislation also created provisions for performance incentives if Consumers Energy exceeded the established targets.

In parallel with the expansion of the energy efficiency programs, Consumers Energy established an internal target to substantially increase customer satisfaction across all four of its service areas—residential gas, residential electric, business gas, and business electric—and its standing in the J.D. Power scores.² A series of general population surveys showed that customers who are aware of the availability of energy efficiency programs give higher customer satisfaction ratings than customers who are not aware, but there appears an opportunity for additional increase in satisfaction between customers simply aware of programs and those who have actually participated. One could hypothesize that there is additional potential to increase

¹ State of Michigan. Act No. 295, Public Acts of 2008. Available online: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov/documents/2007-2008/publicact/pdf/2008-PA-0295.pdf>.

² More information about J.D. Power is available at: <http://www.jdpower.com/energy-solutions/electric-and-gas-utilities>.

overall satisfaction with Consumers Energy as an energy service provider through program participation, but to maximize that increase, program participation should be an exceptional customer experience. The regular collection of feedback on the customer experience and measurement of satisfaction levels is designed to identify the ways to increase both program and utility satisfaction levels.

Most of the programs in Consumers Energy's residential energy efficiency portfolio are implemented by third-party contractors, some of whom conducted their own satisfaction research. Consumers Energy had little control of the implementers' research and found that the research did not necessarily address the effect of the program experience on customers' satisfaction with the utility. The utility decided to assign the customer satisfaction research to Cadmus, the independent, third-party program evaluator. The objectives were to establish a regular frequency for conducting specific research, improve consistency in the research approach to allow aggregation and comparison analysis across programs, and centralize reporting to ensure timely distribution of results to program staff so they could adjust the program to increase satisfaction. Consumers Energy has also integrated customer satisfaction metrics, informed by this research, into its organization goals and implementation contractor performance criteria.

Customer Satisfaction Research

These next sections present customer satisfaction research to date, its role in the overall evaluation efforts, the applicability of the customer satisfaction research, limitations, and any important considerations in designing an ongoing customer satisfaction effort:

- **Logistics of the survey effort.** How do you efficiently manage the research effort to minimize the impact on customers?
- **Survey design.** Are you asking the right questions to get the information you need to support continuous program improvement?
- **Validating results.** How do you make sure the survey results represent the broader population of program participants?
- **Survey reporting.** Which results are of interest to which audiences?
- **Examples of customer satisfaction results in use.** How have customer satisfaction insights been used to support improvements in program design and/or guide additional research efforts?

Logistics of the Survey Effort

The primary mode for collecting the customer satisfaction data is through an online survey. Each month, program implementers send Cadmus a list of the most recent program participants via a secure data transfer. Cadmus identifies all participants with valid e-mail addresses then sends each a message asking for their response to a short online survey. Customers click on a link in the message, which takes them to the survey website. The survey link is unique to each participant so that their survey responses can be paired with important program information, such as participation date, measures installed, contractor, and specific field staff serving the participant. Cadmus sends a reminder e-mail about one week later to any participants who have not yet responded. After the survey has been open for approximately two weeks, response data are downloaded, analyzed and reported. Currently, surveys for these six Consumers Energy programs are delivered in this way:

- ENERGY STAR[®] Appliance Rebates
- HVAC and Water Heating
- Appliance Recycling
- Insulation and Windows (InWin)
- Home Performance with ENERGY STAR (HPwES)
- Home Energy Analysis

For direct delivery programs, including Income Qualified and Multifamily, program technicians give program participants paper surveys along with other program collateral. Technicians are trained to encourage responses and to answer any customer questions but to try not to influence the customer ratings. Surveys are coded by month to allow the analysis team to match the period of program delivery. Participants returning their surveys via a postage paid envelope are entered into a monthly drawing for a \$100 gift card. The paper-based surveys are structured similarly to the online surveys; they are scanned using optical recognition software to create a dataset similar to online data.

In this paper, the authors focus on the six programs for which data is collected online. Surveys about these programs have been fielded for longer and represent 96% of the 12,600 survey responses received in 2014.

Survey Design

Each program survey is unique but all were designed to be completed in five minutes or less and include three primary components: core questions about overall program satisfaction and willingness to recommend the program, questions about specific program elements, and solicitation of suggestions for program improvements. Consumers Energy has adopted the 10-point scale across much of its customer satisfaction research, where 10 represents the most favorable response and 1 the least favorable.³ A 10-point scale gives the respondent a fair amount of granularity and has an even number of integers. Respondents cannot pick a midpoint (5.5) to indicate a neutral position and must show a disposition of at least slightly satisfied or slightly dissatisfied.⁴

The core questions (overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend the program) allow some comparison between programs, though each program has its own baseline rating. Programs that are relatively simple to participate in, such as Appliance Recycling, tend to rate higher in overall satisfaction than programs that entail more customer effort, such as the InWin program. Therefore, comparing the *trends* in satisfaction or willingness to recommend is better than comparing mean scores. For example, a program that has a lower mean score but scores are on an upward trajectory may indicate more implementer attention to customer satisfaction than a program with higher satisfaction but declining scores. More importantly, the core questions align with the Consumers Energy's customer satisfaction metrics and are a leading indicator for future results. In recent months, Cadmus added a core question about the willingness to recommend Consumers Energy if given a choice in energy services providers. Results of questions about willingness to recommend are calculated both as a mean score and a net promoter score (NPS).⁵

Program-specific questions are designed to draw insight about customers' satisfaction with specific program elements and also to examine how these elements drive overall program satisfaction. **Table 1** lists the program-specific areas of inquiry for programs with online surveys.

³ Survey research literature contains considerable discussion about the effectiveness of different scales.

⁴ Reed, John H. and Nicolas P. Hall, *Methods for Measuring Customer Satisfaction*. Chicago, International Energy Program Evaluation Conference, 1997. Reed, John H. and Nicolas P. Hall, *Methods for Measuring Customer Satisfaction*. Chicago, International Energy Program Evaluation Conference, 1997 (p. 27).

⁵ The Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a loyalty metric developed by Fred Reichheld. Reichheld suggests asking customers, "How likely are you to recommend (company) to a colleague or friend?" His recommendation is for a 0-10 scale where a score of 0 would indicate extremely unlikely and 10 would be extremely likely to recommend. Consumers Energy uses a scale of 1 to 10 to be consistent with its other scales. Respondents providing score of 1 through 6 are categorized as "detractors," those scoring 7 and 8 are considered "passives," and those scoring 9 and 10 are "promoters." The NPS score is calculated as the percentage of customers designated as promoters minus the percentage of customers who are detractors. More information is available online at: <http://www.netpromoter.com/home>.

Table 1. Program-Specific Questions

Program	Areas of Inquiry
Appliance Rebates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of application • Selection of incented products • Time to receive rebate • Retailer experience
HVAC and Water Heating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equipment performance • Contractor professionalism and service quality • Level of and time to receive the rebate
Appliance Recycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease and convenience of scheduling • Convenience of scheduling • Time to receive rebate • Collection experience • Technician professionalism and skill
InWin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of application • Level of and time to receive the rebate • Contractor professionalism and quality of service
HPwES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usefulness of comprehensive assessment report to identify conservation opportunities • Contractor professionalism and quality of service • Level of rebate
Home Energy Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease and convenience of scheduling • Performance of equipment installed • Analyst knowledge and skill • Usefulness of energy savings information

Overall satisfaction scores and the participants' likelihood to recommend programs (core questions) are metrics tracked for both Consumers Energy and implementation contractor staff. In selecting program-specific questions, Cadmus worked with staff to identify areas of vulnerability or points where customer satisfaction could be impacted by differences in staff experience and skill, adherence to established processes, interaction with trade allies, and the practicalities of implementing programs with finite budgets (i.e., rebate levels). While program-specific questions provide insight to the drivers of overall customer satisfaction and willingness to recommend, they are not a metrics for either utility or implementer program staff.

At the end of the survey, customers are asked, in an open-ended question, if they have any suggestions to improve the program. Verbatim comments are categorized to identify trends and themes. Because the comments sometimes reveal situations that warrant further investigation, the survey includes a statement informing participants that a program manager may want to follow up to learn more about a customer's experience. The respondent can opt out by checking a box indicating they do not want to be contacted.

Validating Results

One concern about the online survey format is potential response bias; that is, survey respondents do not represent the program participation population. For example, participants may be motivated to respond to a survey because they have had either a more positive or a more negative experience than other participants. Although there is no way to fully eliminate possible response bias, the survey design in the

Consumers Energy’s programs attempt to control for bias. The e-mail invitation informs participants that the survey will only take a few minutes and indicates the exact number of questions to be asked. It also clearly states the purpose of the survey—to improve program delivery and design—and the importance of candid feedback from participants. As shown in **Table 2**, the relatively high rates of available e-mail addresses and responses serve to alleviate most concerns over response bias.

Table 2. E-mail Availability and Response Rate

Program	E-mail Available	Response Rate
Appliance Rebate	83%	23%
Appliance Recycling	50%	35%
Home Energy Analysis	65%	26%
HVAC	47%	21%
INWIN	65%	29%
HPwES	57%	23%
Total	59%	28%

One mechanism to test that survey respondents are representative is Consumers Energy’s customer segmentation. Each residential customer is assigned to one of eight segments based on factors such as age, marital status, memberships or association, homeownership, and other demographic characteristics. These segments are used to assess customers’ propensity to participate in utility programs, identify preferences in communication modes, and create targeted messaging. Periodically, Cadmus reviews the segmentation mix of program participants (which varies depending on program), program participants for whom e-mail addresses exist, and customers who actually respond to the survey. If any segments participating in the program are significantly underrepresented in the survey responses, Cadmus would gather input from that segment using an alternate survey mode, such as phone surveys. To date, however, this has not proved to be necessary. In comparing the program, e-mail, and respondent segmentation mix, Cadmus found some segments slightly over- or under-represented, but the respondent mix fairly closely follows the participation mix.

Consumers Energy also conducts more traditional process evaluation surveys periodically (approximately biannually). These are particularly important as their results can be calibrated with customer satisfaction surveys. Significantly different scores across the two surveys would be a cause for further investigation. To date, however, scores have been consistent. **Table 3** shows how customer satisfaction surveys fit into the overall evaluation scheme.

Table 3. Evaluation Customer Data Collection

Data Collection Effort	Primary Mode	Scope/ Magnitude	Frequency	Other Uses
Customer Satisfaction Survey	Online	Program and utility satisfaction	Monthly	
Process Evaluation Surveys	Telephone	Program awareness, satisfaction, and influence, measure	Annually or biannually	Satisfaction survey calibration, recruitment for other research

		persistence		
Installation Verification	Telephone, site visits	Measure persistence and performance	Biannually for measures that represent significant savings	Customer characteristics, equipment saturation
In-Depth Interviews	Focus groups	Program influence, design preferences	As needed	

Ongoing Reporting

Utility senior managers, program management staff, and implementation contractors receive customer satisfaction results at different levels of detail.

Senior management receives a scorecard format with the monthly mean values for the two core questions by program and an indicator if a change in score is statistically significant from the previous month or year to date (Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 1). As discussed earlier, an advantage of the 10-point scale is that customers must indicate some degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction (above or below the midpoint of 5.5). Note in the scorecard that scores that fall below 8.0 are highlighted in yellow to indicate an area to be investigated. Although in theory, scores higher than the midpoint indicate some degree of customer satisfaction, Consumers Energy strives for an exceptional customer experience (score of 8.0 or higher).

	YTD 2013		Q1 2014		Q2 2014		Q3 2014		October 2014		November 2014		December 2014		YTD 2014	
OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THE PROGRAM	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score
Appliance Rebate	n=191	8.6	n=92	9.1	n=347	8.4	n=477	8.8	n=143	8.8	n=176	8.9	n=271	8.9	n=1544	8.7
Appliance Recycling	n=3616	9.2	n=512	8.7	n=872	8.9	n=1428	9.2	n=352	9.2	n=356	9.2	n=252	9.0	n=3898	9.1
Home Energy Analysis	n=1948	8.9	n=620	8.8	n=615	8.8	n=373	9.1	n=147	9.0	n=128	9.0	n=121	8.7	n=2091	8.9
HVAC	n=1173	8.7	n=677	8.6	n=366	8.8	n=542	8.9	n=223	9.0	n=349	9.0	n=323	8.8	n=2569	8.8
INWIN	n=1056	8.5	n=466	8.4	n=362	8.4	n=371	8.4	n=90	8.3	n=201	8.4	n=174	8.4	n=1736	8.4
HPwES	n=161	8.8	n=35	7.8	n=34	8.0	n=27	9.0	n=13	9.2	n=9	8.9	n=18	9.2	n=146	8.5
Income Qualified							n=61	9.6	n=70	9.5	n=96	(++) 9.8	n=68	9.6	n=295	9.6
ENERGY STAR Lighting							n=37	8.4			n=37	8.43			n=74	8.4
Multifamily											n=16	8.6	n=14	9.4	n=29	9.0
TOTAL	n=8145	8.9	n=2402	8.7	n=2596	8.7	n=3316	9.0	n=1038	9.0	n=1368	9.0	n=1241	8.9	n=12382	8.8
LIKELIHOOD TO RECOMMEND	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score	Sample Size	Mean Score
Appliance Rebate	n=193	9.2	n=96	9.4	n=362	9.1	n=491	9.2	n=148	(++) 9.5	n=185	9.4	n=285	9.4	n=1607	9.3
Appliance Recycling	n=3670	9.5	n=518	9.3	n=905	9.5	n=1464	9.5	n=351	9.6	n=361	9.6	n=261	9.5	n=3985	9.5
Home Energy Analysis	n=1996	9.1	n=635	9.0	n=632	9.0	n=390	9.4	n=153	(-) 9.1	n=135	9.2	n=123	9.0	n=2157	9.1
HVAC	n=1172	9.2	n=671	9.2	n=365	9.3	n=536	9.4	n=226	9.4	n=352	9.4	n=324	9.3	n=2563	9.3
INWIN	n=1061	9.2	n=465	9.2	n=358	9.2	n=373	9.2	n=90	9.1	n=203	9.3	n=178	(-) 9.0	n=1739	9.2
HPwES	n=163	8.9	n=34	8.1	n=35	7.8	n=28	9.3	n=13	9.3	n=10	8.6	n=18	9.2	n=148	8.5
Income Qualified							n=61	9.7	n=70	9.6	n=95	9.8	n=69	9.9	n=295	9.7
ENERGY STAR Lighting							n=37	9.1			n=37	(+) 9.43			n=74	9.3
Multifamily											n=16	9.0	n=14	9.9	n=30	9.5
TOTAL	n=8255	9.3	n=2419	9.1	n=2657	9.2	n=3380	9.4	n=1051	9.4	n=1394	9.4	n=1272	9.3	n=12598	9.3

Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 1. Customer Satisfaction Scorecard

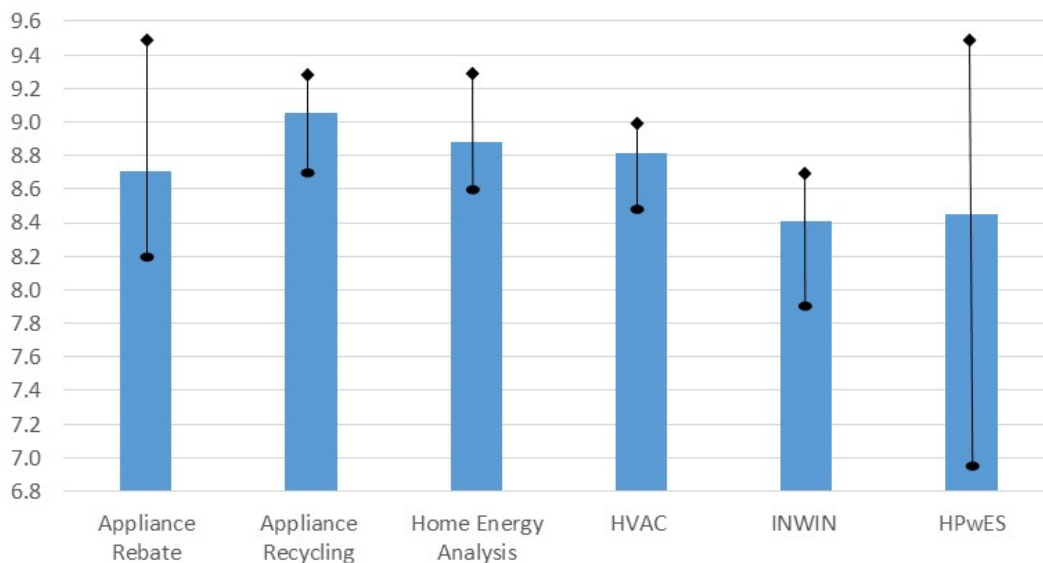
Program managers' reports have more detail, including an analysis of core and program-specific questions. If scores change significantly, additional analysis can determine root causes or relationships. For example, if a monthly mean score were to decline by a statistically significant amount, analysts take several steps to understand why. First, they examine the distribution of scores to determine if satisfaction declined

across the participants generally or if the number of low scores increased (indicating that a few participants had a bad experience and brought the overall score down). Analysts then look for any correlation between different program elements or between the level satisfaction with a particular aspect of program delivery and overall satisfaction. Finally, analysts review verbatim comments to identify themes related to scores. More detailed examples of the reporting to program managers is shown in the discussion of customer satisfaction results in action section below.

General Survey Results

Ongoing customer satisfaction results have been remarkably stable over time for most programs, with some variation for programs with lower participation and when unusual events impact effective implementation. Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 2 shows the range and average of monthly mean customer satisfaction scores for the six Consumers Energy residential programs for which online surveys are conducted. The blue bar is the average mean score, the black line is the range with the minimum monthly mean score at the bottom (•), and the maximum monthly mean score is at the top (♦). Average mean scores in 2014 ranged from 8.4 to 9.1. Monthly mean scores ranged from 6.9 to 9.5.



Mean	8.7	9.1	8.9	8.8	8.4	8.5
Min	8.2	8.7	8.6	8.5	8.1	6.9
Max	9.5	9.3	9.3	9.0	8.7	9.5
n	1,544	3,898	2,091	2,569	1,736	146

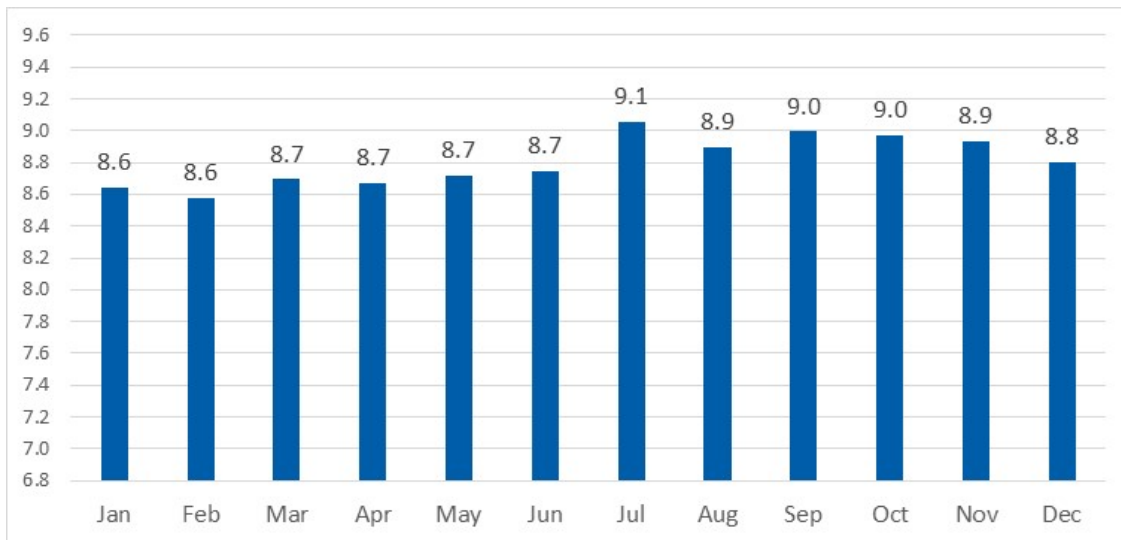
Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 2. 2014 Summary of Customer Satisfaction Results

Four of the six minimum monthly means occurred in the first quarter of the year and five of the six highest scores in the second half the year. In general, overall satisfaction measured across the programs increased over the year.

Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 3 shows the weighted average mean scores across all six programs. Although it is tempting to attribute the increased trend in satisfaction to the measurement effort, the trend may be seasonal. In addition, some unique conditions at the beginning of 2014 impacted customer satisfaction (discussed in the next section).



Source: Cadmus Analysis

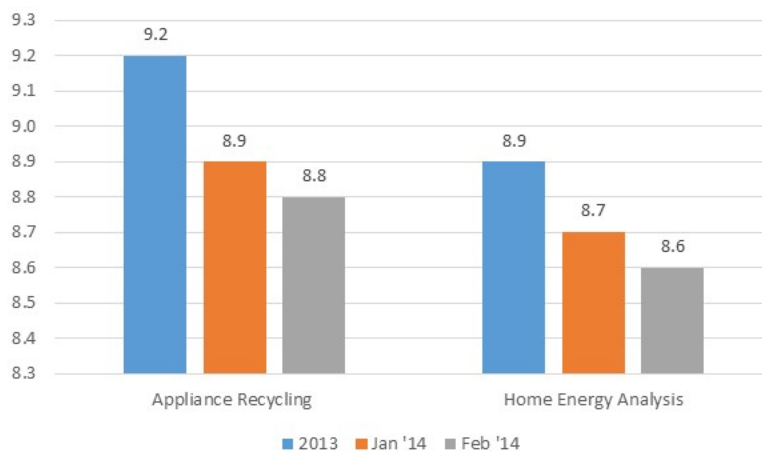
Figure 3. 2014 Summary of Customer Satisfaction Results – Monthly Portfolio Mean Scores

Customer Satisfaction in Action

The monthly customer satisfaction surveys have produced useful data for program diagnostics, opportunities for program enhancement, and program elements that drive overall customer satisfaction. Some examples of quick customer feedback and program response are described in this section.

“The Weather Outside is Frightful, but We Strive to be Delightful.” The results in January and February of 2014 saw a precipitous drop in overall satisfaction for the Appliance Recycling and Home Energy Analysis programs compared to 2013, as shown in Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 4.

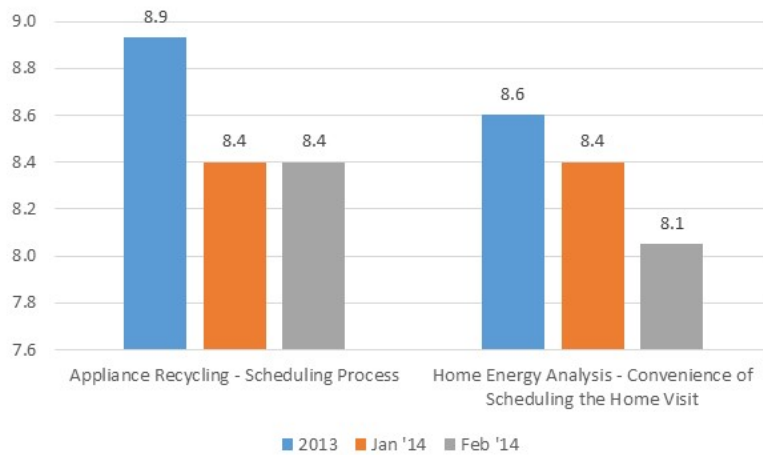


Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 4. 2013 and Early 2014 Customer Satisfaction Results – Overall Program Satisfaction

As the first step in diagnostics, Cadmus looked for factors impacting satisfaction in the responses to program-specific questions. Both programs showed a drop in overall satisfaction in scheduling home visits (to collect the appliance or to conduct the analysis), as shown in Source: Cadmus Analysis

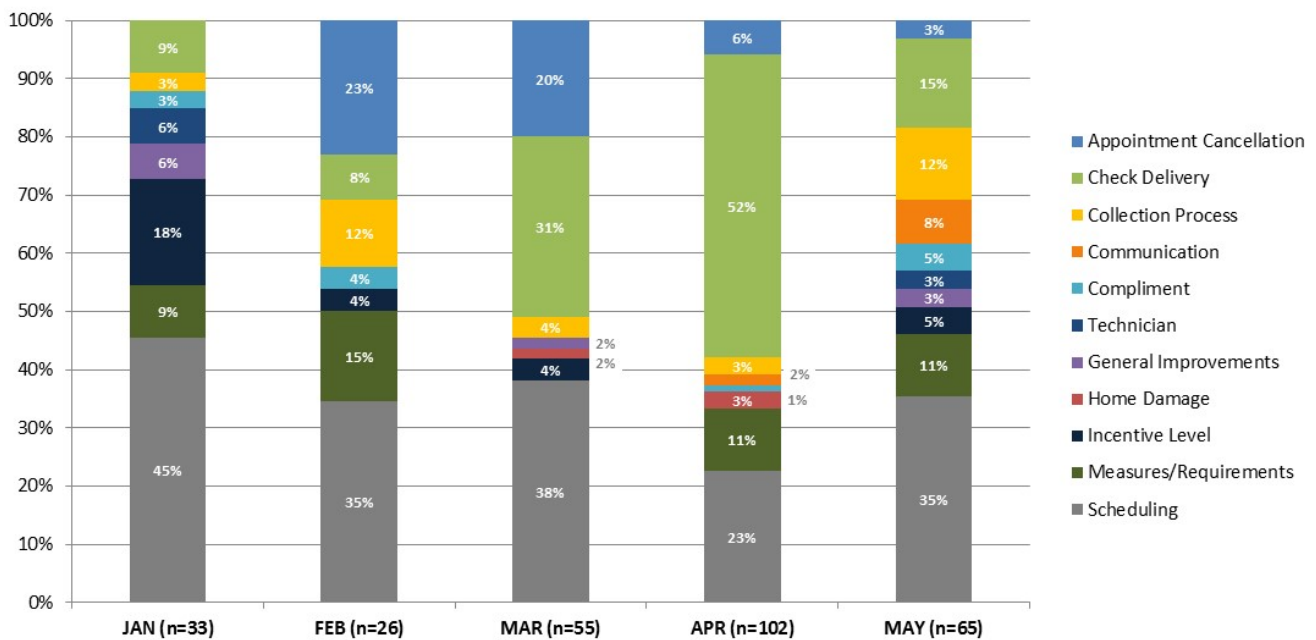
Figure 5.



Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 5. 2013 and Early 2014 Customer Satisfaction Results – Scheduling

Cadmus studied the distribution of scores and customers’ verbatim comments, looking especially for any customers who were less satisfied or had particularly bad experiences. Comments indicated a high incidence of appointment cancellations—for example, *“I had scheduled it and it got cancelled due to weather which put it out another 2 weeks.”* **Error! Reference source not found. Figure 6** shows monthly categorization of verbatim comments about customers’ satisfaction with a wide range of topics.⁶ Notable are the high proportions of comments about cancellations (February and March) and scheduling.



⁶ To facilitate comparison across programs, standard categories have been established for grouping verbatim comment; however, some programs required additional categories for unique issues.

Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 6. Appliance Recycling – Verbatim Comments

Because bad weather can be hard to predict for a specific day (especially when scheduling two weeks in advance in Michigan’s harsh winters), Consumers Energy has since established a protocol to maintain customer satisfaction during inclement weather. The protocol includes extended time between appointment to allow for safe travel, day-ahead confirmation calls, and priority appointments for any customers who must be rescheduled.

“The Check is in the Mail.” After early 2014s severe winter weather, overall satisfaction for the Home Energy Analysis program rebounded. However, overall satisfaction with the Appliance Recycling program dropped to 8.5 in March (the annual and all-time low score for this program) because of another issue. Cadmus followed the process for diagnosing decreases in satisfaction; ratings declined across all Appliance Recycling program elements, but the largest related to rebate level (which had not changed). Further investigation of verbatim responses showed large increase in the number of customers reporting they had not yet received their rebate. As shown in Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 6, in January and February, less than 10% of customers suggested that the program’s check delivery could be improved, but the percentages rose to 31% in March and 52% in April. There was also a dramatic increase in the total number of comments offered by survey respondents in response to the question asking for suggestions for ways to improve the program. During April, 28% of respondents provided comment compared to an average of 15% across all of 2014. .

Early in the customer satisfaction research, Consumers Energy and Cadmus noted the importance of having program participants get their rebates prior to the survey request. The schedule sets at least three weeks between issuing a rebate check and sending a survey invitation. However, during this period of program implementation, as much as five weeks or more passed between check issue and customer receipt. The program implementer, who was immediately notified, quickly addressed the staffing change that had caused the breakdown and documented the process so any future changes would not compromise program operations.

The customer responses and commentary prompted Cadmus to carefully review the questions included on the survey. Although the researcher may think the intent of a specific question is clear, the customer’s understanding may be different. Cadmus also found that respondents could reinterpret one question to convey their message if the survey did not ask a specific question about something that mattered to the respondent. In a revised survey, the question about timeliness of the rebate was added to capture important feedback about an element of the program that was a clear driver for overall program satisfaction.

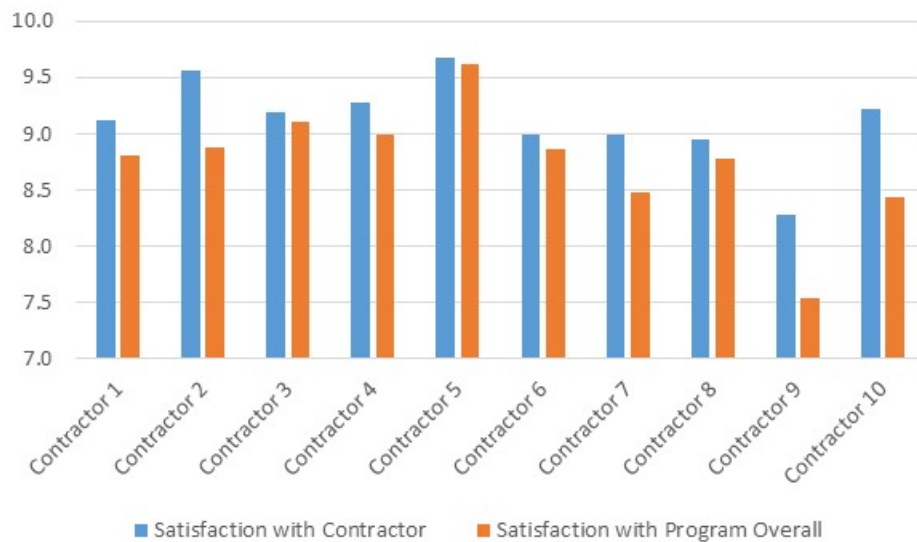
Similarly, the review of the responses about scheduling that were collected when the program was facing scheduling challenges revealed nuances that the survey, as originally structured, could not effectively differentiate. The question of convenience of scheduling had different meanings to different respondents. Respondents had a range of interpretations, including: scheduling appliance pick up; the availability of preferred appointment dates or times; or the adherence to the appointment time (i.e., did the technician arrive as scheduled). The program implementer supplied useful information to recrafting questions by taking descriptions of the different stages of the participation process from program materials. In this way, questions are structured to more clearly capture feedback on critical program functions.

“I (Heart) My Trade Allies.” A large part of the residential natural gas savings programs are delivered through trade allies, who inform customers about the programs, help select qualifying equipment, ensure quality installation of measures, and submit the rebate application (for the HVAC program). The customer satisfaction surveys gather information about the role and effect of the trade allies in achieving

energy savings and enhancing customer satisfaction.

HVAC and Water Heating program managers have been particularly interested in the relationship between satisfaction with the contractor and satisfaction with the program overall. Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 7 shows trade ally and program satisfaction for the top ten trade allies by projects completed (nearly 7,000 projects). Projects completed by individual companies shown ranged from 386 to 1,644. Mean scores for satisfaction with the trade allies are slightly higher than the scores for overall program satisfaction; however, results between the two are highly correlated (correlation coefficient = 0.87). Efforts to increase satisfaction with trade allies (providing education and training to ensure quality installations, supporting clear descriptions about rebate levels and qualifications, streamlining application processes and capability to track status of rebates through the process) can all increase satisfaction with program offerings and, ultimately, with the utility service provider.



Source: Cadmus Analysis

Figure 7. Trade Ally and Program Satisfaction Levels

Consumers Energy is examining how it can use customer satisfaction research to enhance the role of trade allies and their impact on driving overall satisfaction for the utility. It is currently considering periodically providing survey scores to trade allies, developing trade ally support elements to address issues that impact satisfaction (for example, training to address quality issues or developing a portal so trade allies can more easily submit rebate applications or track status), and developing a system to recognize top-performing trade allies based on volume, installation quality, and customer satisfaction scores.

Conclusions

Collecting regular feedback from participants about their satisfaction provides valuable insights into program performance and effectiveness of the delivery infrastructure. The results can identify issues needing immediate corrective action and any opportunities for longer-term program improvements.

Consumers Energy program participants have been receptive to a straightforward appeal to provide information to improve the programs. A subjective or focused survey also supports high rates of response and survey completion. To date, survey respondents appear to be representative of overall program

participation; any concern about potential bias is minimal.

Careful construction of survey questions is critical to ensure they ask about specific elements of the program that are of interest and that impact overall satisfaction. The implementation contractor can provide information that helps ensure questions match language with program descriptions and process. The survey instrument should be periodically reviewed conducted to ensure questions reflect current program processes and priorities. Questions can be rotated to broaden the area of inquiry without lengthening the survey and compromising the ease of response. Some trade-off is to be expected between collecting feedback quickly and minimizing the impact on customers and conducting comprehensive research that provides detailed analysis of program design and delivery and how the program impacts customer energy awareness and usage. Rapid feedback customer satisfaction research is not a substitute for a process evaluation; it is, rather, designed to complement, and even provide guidance for, longer-term studies.

Templates can facilitate rapid reporting to program managers; however, some of the most meaningful insights come from exploratory analyses of the data to find patterns in satisfaction levels and correlation between program elements and overall satisfaction. In 2015, the surveys added an area of inquiry about the impact of program participation on the satisfaction with the Consumers Energy as a service provider because, besides achieving cost-effective energy savings, Consumers Energy wants to positively impact customer satisfaction with the energy efficiency programs it offers. Conducting timely, precise, and sensitive surveys of its customers is an effective way to measure satisfaction and continue to improve program operations and offerings.

Senior management's engagement has been key to success of the customer satisfaction research. Overall program satisfaction scores have been incorporated into the scopes of work of the implementation contractors, which have been given opportunities to earn financial incentives for meeting or exceeding threshold scores. Consumers Energy uses a balanced scorecard to assess organizational performance, and customer satisfaction scores are included as a key metric. When scores drop below targeted levels, the program manager and implementation contractor are expected to develop an action plan to address identified issues.

Although the focus in this research was to conduct research on fast feedback customer satisfaction research for residential programs, the process can be applied to programs targeting other sectors. Particularly for programs with relatively large participation, sufficient responses can be obtained in any given month to conduct meaningful analysis. The process for Consumers Energy has evolved over time. The initial effort was launched with three programs and other programs were added. The monthly reporting process has also been refined over time, and additional quarterly and annual reporting provide insights about long-term trends and seasonality of results. Other utilities that are considering researching fast feedback customer satisfaction should start with a limited scope and expand as the infrastructure is built. Management support and attention to the results are important to ensure the effort yields the program improvements available.

References

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