

GAO

United States General Accounting Office
Report to Congressional Requesters

October 1993

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

A More Systematic Customer Focus Needed





United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

General Government Division

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October 14, 1993

The Honorable John Glenn
Chairman, Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman, Subcommittee on Regulation and
Government Information
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

This report responds to the request of the Committee Chairman and the former Subcommittee Chairman for us to evaluate whether the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) fulfills the needs of its customers. To address this matter, we concentrated on determining how NARA identifies its customers and their needs and how NARA responds to those needs.

Results in Brief

Contemporary management experts stress the importance of improving the quality of products and services, listening to the needs of customers, and meeting those needs for both private and public organizations to succeed. NARA has acted to understand who its customers are and what their needs are, but its efforts could be more systematic and aggressive. From 1988 to 1992, NARA offices collectively documented the needs of about 41,100 customers, which represented less than 1 percent of the 14.5 million customers that NARA served during that time. Some of NARA's offices actively obtained information from their customers. For example, the Office of Records Administration obtained comments from about 4,000 of the 7,000 federal customers it served from 1988 to 1992. However, the Office of Public Programs only surveyed about 1,000 of the 5.7 million customers it served during that time. From all of the surveys it conducted during the 5-year period, NARA identified 87 potential improvements.

NARA primarily relies on evaluations of federal employee workshops, surveys, exit interviews, and informal feedback, such as letters of complaint or commendation. However, NARA management does not require these tools to be used to understand its customers' needs and satisfaction. Further, NARA does not compile the information it gathers from these tools to provide an agencywide profile of its customers' needs and satisfaction. NARA could use additional proven survey tools, such as customer follow-up surveys and customer interviews, for all of its services.

In the few instances when it has identified possible improvements from customers, NARA generally responded to its customers' needs. For example, NARA made or planned improvements at presidential libraries on the basis of suggestions by visitors, such as providing foreign language translators. Also, NARA generally has sought to increase the amount of contact between archivists and researchers on the basis of researchers' suggestions.

We believe that NARA should consider a more systematic, agencywide approach to identify its customers and their needs. NARA could collect data to identify areas that need improvement and incorporate those areas into its strategic plans aimed at meeting customers' needs. The National Archives of Canada asked users to identify what services they needed and made improvements to meet those needs. We believe that NARA could benefit from a similar approach.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

The objectives of our review were to determine how NARA identifies its customers and their needs and how NARA responds to those needs. To meet these objectives, we interviewed NARA officials and reviewed documentation on methods NARA used to survey its customers. We obtained information on the services NARA offers its customers, the number of customers who used those services from 1988 to 1992, and the number of those customers who were surveyed during that time. We also obtained and reviewed copies of NARA's mission statement. In addition, we interviewed the expert archivists and historians listed in appendix I to obtain their opinions on how archival institutions should orient their services to customers and how NARA responds to customers' needs. We selected these experts because they represented leaders in the field of archival studies and users of NARA's services. We also interviewed officials from the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, Canada, to determine how they identify and fulfill customers' needs. We selected these officials because the experts identified the Canadian archives as having an exemplary customer service orientation.

To determine how NARA responds to customers' needs, we compared known customer needs to improvements NARA has made or plans to make. We also interviewed a NARA consultant to discuss his study of services provided by NARA's Office of the National Archives. We also interviewed researchers, a records management organization official, and a business executive whom NARA consulted to obtain their opinions on how NARA responds to customers' needs. In addition, we contacted officials in 11

agencies identified by NARA as being its largest customers to obtain their opinions on how NARA responds to their needs. In appendix II, we list the names of the agencies, the business executive, and the records management organization official we contacted.

Our work was done at NARA headquarters in Washington, D.C., from September 1992 through July 1993 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. We obtained comments from NARA on a draft of this report and included those comments in this report where appropriate.

Background

Established in 1934, the National Archives began as an independent agency to collect federal records, preserve those records, and make them available to the public. In 1949, the National Archives became a part of the General Services Administration (GSA), known as the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), in an effort to consolidate the agencies for more economical and efficient operations. However, some NARS constituents believed that NARS functioned more as a warehouse than a research institution under GSA and that it suffered from a lack of independent statutory authority. To overcome these complaints, legislation was passed in 1984 to establish NARA as an independent agency. However, NARA continued to share records management responsibilities with GSA.

Part of NARA's mission is to identify, acquire, and preserve historically valuable federal records for public use. NARA's Office of Records Administration develops standards for federal agencies to ensure proper documentation of the organization, policies, and activities of the federal government. In addition, the office appraises records for their historical value and schedules records for temporary storage in 14 regional records centers operated by NARA's Office of Federal Records Centers. The centers eventually dispose of records having transitory value and transfer those with permanent value to one of two offices. The Office of the National Archives, located in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., holds federal records created by agencies located in the Washington, D.C., area. Other permanent records, such as those created by agency field offices and those of state or local interest, are kept in the 12 regional archives located in major metropolitan areas operated by the Office of Special and Regional Archives. Historians, genealogists, and other researchers, both federal and public, can use these records for their research.

In addition, NARA makes available to the public presidential records, personal papers, federal records, and other historical materials through the presidential libraries. The Office of Presidential Libraries oversees nine libraries and two presidential projects—the Nixon Project in Alexandria, Virginia, and the Bush Project in College Station, Texas. The libraries are located throughout the country on sites chosen by the former presidents and constructed with private funds. When completed, the libraries are turned over to the federal government. Each library, in addition to serving researchers with its archival resources, also has a museum exhibiting historical materials. NARA also publishes agencies' rules and regulations and presidential documents in the Federal Register through the Office of the Federal Register.

NARA is best known for housing the Charters of Freedom—the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution—which are located in the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. The Office of Public Programs displays these documents and presents other exhibits and public programs in the National Archives Building.

NARA's appropriation for fiscal year 1992 was approximately \$147 million.

NARA plans to open a new facility in January 1994, known as Archives II, in College Park, Maryland. This facility will primarily be used as a research institution. The National Archives Building will hold records related to genealogy and certain other records, while Archives II will hold all nontextual records, such as maps, still photography, and film; security classified records; and other newer records. Newer records have more diverse formats that require specific heating, ventilation, and air conditioning controls and that can be better housed at Archives II. NARA officials from the Office of the National Archives have met with researchers twice yearly since 1989 to get input on issues such as interior layout, research room procedures, and records allocation for the Archives II facility.

Contemporary management experts stress the importance of improving quality, listening to customers' needs, and meeting those needs, for both private and public organizations to succeed. Management experts, such as W. Edwards Deming, stress that the quality of goods and services should aim to meet needs of the customer and that customer needs and wishes have to be understood.¹ Tom Peters advocates that one of the five

¹W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1986), pp. 5 and 175.

essentials of organizational performance is an obsession with responsiveness to customers.² Similarly, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler have stated that there is no reason public organizations cannot get close to their customers and listen to their needs just as private organizations do.³

In recent years, many federal agencies have adopted quality management programs that focus on customers.⁴ In addition, Osborne and Gaebler have stated that these customer-driven organizations are more accountable to their customers because they solicit and respond to feedback on customer needs.⁵ These efforts will no doubt be given further impetus by the emphasis on customer service programs and surveys in the report of the National Performance Review.⁶ That report promises a presidential directive laying out principles for customer services, such as frequent surveys of customers to find out what kind and quality of services they want.

Expert archivists and historians we interviewed said that the National Archives of Canada was an example of a customer-oriented archival institution. When we visited the National Archives of Canada, Canadian archivists told us that to improve customer satisfaction, the National Archives of Canada recently asked users to identify what services they needed and compared those needs to the services it offered. The Canadian archivists then determined which of the services their customers needed were not being offered and made improvements. The National Archives of Canada plans to conduct this process every 3 years.

In recent years, some NARA constituencies said NARA had problems in accomplishing its mission. For example, in December 1992, the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History stated that NARA had not improved accessibility to public records as it envisioned when the agency became independent from GSA in 1985. Also, in January 1993, the Society of American Archivists stated that NARA had not established a close working relationship with its constituencies. Further, in December 1992, the National Association of Government Archives and Records

²Tom Peters, Thriving on Chaos (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1987), p. 45.

³David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 169-170.

⁴Quality Management: Survey of Federal Organizations (GAO/GGD-93-9BR, Oct. 1, 1992), p. 2.

⁵Osborne and Gaebler, p. 181.

⁶From Red Tape to Results: Creating a Government That Works Better and Costs Less, Report of the National Performance Review (Washington, D.C.: 1993), p. 47.

Administrators said that NARA needed to develop policies to deal with the identification, appraisal, preservation, and accessibility of electronic records.

Although NARA has not adopted a quality management program or used a process such as that of the National Archives of Canada, in an effort to address problems and perceptions raised by Congress and some of NARA's major constituencies, the Archivist of the United States announced a strategic planning process in November 1992. The process involved consulting with some customers and planning experts and led to a new mission statement and identification of critical factors, goals, and objectives necessary to accomplish NARA's mission. NARA officials said they have not adopted a quality management program because their focus has been on improving strategic planning in the agency.

NARA's mission statement, revised in February 1993 as part of its strategic plan for 1993 to 2001, states:

"The National Archives and Records Administration serves the American people and their Government by safeguarding their interests in Federal records and other documentary materials, by promoting effectiveness and efficiency in the administration of those materials, and by advancing the knowledge of the history of the nation."

NARA used its mission statement to shape its strategic plan, which states that the "ultimate mission of an archives in a democratic society is to make information available to users." However, the plan also indicates that "preservation of information . . . will remain the primary concern" of the agency. Therefore, NARA faces a challenge of striking a balance between its two responsibilities if they interfere or conflict with each other. For example, researchers may want to have readily available records and researcher oriented amenities at NARA records centers, whereas NARA and the federal agencies who store the records may view a records center as an economical warehouse with little or no research amenities.

NARA Could Benefit From Agencywide Information on Customer Needs and Satisfaction

According to NARA officials, NARA does not collect agencywide data on customer needs and satisfaction because management does not require them to be collected. Individual NARA offices independently collect some data on customer needs and satisfaction, but NARA does not compile this information to provide an agencywide profile on customer needs and satisfaction. From 1988 to 1992, NARA offices collectively documented the needs of about 41,100 customers. This number represented less than

1 percent of the 14.5 million customers that NARA served during that time. About 13 million of these customers represented visitors to presidential libraries and National Archives' exhibits. In appendix III, we show the number of customers and the number surveyed by each NARA office during the 1988 to 1992 period.

NARA offices primarily used workshop evaluations, surveys, exit interviews, and informal feedback, such as letters of complaint or commendation, to obtain information on customer needs and satisfaction. NARA officials in the Offices of Presidential Libraries and Special and Regional Archives believe that Office of Management and Budget (OMB) regulations are intimidating and make it difficult to survey customers. The OMB regulations require agencies to have prior OMB approval to formally survey customers.⁷ NARA offices could use other survey methods, such as informal customer interviews, to obtain customer needs and satisfaction without having prior OMB approval.

The Offices of Federal Records Centers and Records Administration provide workshops to train federal agency employees in areas such as records management and records disposition. The offices use workshop evaluations to obtain customer comments on the content of the workshops. Such evaluations represent about half of the 41,100 documented instances of customer contact that NARA had during the 1988 to 1992 period. Neither of these offices documents how many agencies participate in these workshops. NARA officials said that they also contact agencies regularly by providing technical assistance. The officials believe this contact helps them gain an understanding of how well they are meeting the agencies' needs.

The Office of the Federal Register provides workshops for federal employees and the general public. The federal employee workshops offer training in drafting and preparing documents for publication in the Federal Register. The office uses letters and comments to gauge customer satisfaction with these workshops. From 1988 to 1992, the Office of the Federal Register served 55 agencies in these workshops. The public workshops teach subscribers how to use and understand the Federal Register system and its finding aids. The office uses letters and comments to determine how well these workshops meet customers' needs. In

⁷The OMB regulation referred to is 5 C.F.R. 1320, on controlling paperwork burdens on the public, which implements the provisions of the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980, 44 U.S.C. Chapter 35. An OMB official told us that OMB does not have readily available data on the number of agency requests for surveys or the number of reports that are rejected. This official said that OMB generally approves agency requests for customer surveys, however.

addition, the office surveys public workshop participants on their needs and the quality of services provided as well as suggestions for improvements. The office initiated an electronic bulletin board in October 1992, which allows users to send messages concerning the office's services. However, comments received through this medium are limited to customers with computers. NARA officials in the Office of the Federal Register also said that their regular contact with agency officials to provide technical assistance helps them understand agencies' needs.

The Office of the National Archives conducted a study in 1990 to identify and examine users and their use of the National Archives. The study consisted of interviews with about 800 researchers, observations of work practices and processes, and reviews of NARA files to understand who uses the National Archives and how the users approach research.

The Office of the National Archives also consults with six user groups consisting of historians, genealogists, archivists, and other members of the public. The members of the groups belong to various archival organizations representing about 250,000 constituents who use NARA's services. The office varies in how often it meets with these groups. For instance, the office consults with the Advisory Group on Archives II semiannually. In addition, the office may consult with other groups to get their input on proposed changes to policies or procedures. Also, other groups may form in response to arising issues. For example, the Motion Picture User Group was formed in 1992 when NARA prohibited videotaping of its motion picture, sound, and video holdings to prevent illegal reproduction of copyrighted material. Customers voiced concerns to NARA and met with NARA officials four times. Eventually, NARA rescinded its rule and rearranged the room in which copyrighted materials were stored so the material would be protected from illegal reproduction.

The other offices serving the public use workshop evaluations on a limited basis and vary in their documentation of customer comments. The Office of Special and Regional Archives provides genealogical workshops and teacher workshops and evaluates the content of these workshops using participants' evaluations. The Office of Special and Regional Archives does not track the actual number of participants evaluated. Seven of the 12 regional archives also conduct exit interviews with randomly selected researchers to determine which records were used and whether researchers met their objectives. NARA officials said that about 2,000 of the approximately 550,000 researchers participated in exit interviews from 1988 to 1992. In addition, the office relies on informal, ad hoc comments

from researchers to inform them of their needs. In addition, the office provides other services, such as exhibits and programs, and relies on informal comments to obtain information on customer needs and satisfaction.

The Office of Public Programs provides public workshops on how to conduct research at the National Archives and uses evaluations from its workshops to gauge customers' satisfaction. The office also provides comment cards in the National Archives Building to enable visitors to comment on their experiences at the National Archives. NARA officials said that they receive fewer than six cards per month. The office conducted a visitor profile survey in 1991 that provided visitor information and suggestions for improvements. The survey represented the office's first attempt to understand the visitors to its exhibits in the National Archives Building. NARA officials said they are waiting to implement the recommendations from that survey before making plans to conduct further surveys of its customers at the National Archives Building.

Eight of the nine presidential libraries obtain information on customer satisfaction using workshop evaluations and surveys. One library and the Nixon Project staff do not conduct any workshop evaluations or surveys. In response to our questions as to the reason they do not conduct surveys or evaluations, an official at the library cited OMB regulations, while the Nixon Project staff official said it had never occurred to them to conduct surveys and they do not provide workshops. The libraries offer a variety of public programs to enhance the public's knowledge of the individual presidents, the institution of the presidency, the American political system, and specific historical events. For example, the libraries sponsor conferences that discuss topics concerning a particular president or the presidency in general and provide teacher workshops to assist local educators in their use of the libraries. Five of the libraries formally obtain information from workshop participants to determine customer satisfaction and to obtain suggestions for improvements, while four of the libraries do not conduct workshop evaluations.

All of the libraries also provide museum exhibits that allow visitors to learn about the life and times of the Presidents from Hoover through Reagan. Five of the libraries surveyed visitors to document their impressions of the museums and how they learned about the museums. Four libraries did not conduct museum visitor surveys. The Nixon and Bush projects do not have museums.

All of the libraries and the Nixon Project staff also make presidential papers available to the public to research events and key individuals of the different Presidents' Administrations. Only two of the libraries conducted surveys of researchers using this service. Of those, one was an exit interview of all researchers to determine what records and finding aids they used and their success. The other, a researcher survey, was a case study to determine the researchers' preparedness for archival research and to document the interaction between researchers and archivists. The other libraries and the Nixon Project staff do not conduct researcher surveys.

In addition, three of the libraries provide comment forms or guest books so that visitors can record their impressions and make suggestions for improvements. All of the libraries and the Nixon Project staff rely on letters and visitors' comments to staff to obtain customer feedback on the services of the museums and libraries.

NARA offices could use other survey methods to obtain information on customer needs and satisfaction. For instance, customer follow-up surveys, focus groups, test marketing, complaint tracking systems, toll free telephone numbers, and suggestion boxes could be used by NARA but are not because there are no management requirements to obtain information on customer satisfaction.

Further, NARA has not taken an approach to gauging customer satisfaction similar to that of the National Archives of Canada. The National Archives of Canada implemented a public service plan in 1992 after the Prime Minister initiated a review of the federal public service in Canada. The review showed that Canadian agencies needed to change their orientation and culture to be more responsive to customer needs.

The National Archives of Canada began its public service plan in 1989 by using informal interviews with customers and staff, statistics and performance measurement data on the use of different services, user surveys, and reviews of existing studies and files to identify customers and their needs. The National Archives compared those needs to the services that were actually offered to determine the shortfall in expected services. National Archives of Canada officials said the public service plan helped to better identify customers and their needs and provide more efficient and effective service. The National Archives of Canada plans to conduct this process every 3 years.

NARA Responds to Most Identified Suggestions

NARA identified 87 suggested improvements from the 41,100 customers contacted during the 1988 to 1992 period. Of those 87 suggested improvements, NARA made 69 and plans to respond to 12, while 7 have not been addressed.⁸ Of the identified improvements, NARA offices obtained 38 from informal comments, 33 from surveys, 11 from workshop evaluations, and 5 from exit interviews.

The Office of Records Administration modified its evaluations of agencies' records management programs to include briefings of senior officials and provide priority ranking of recommendations as suggested by attendees at its workshops. Responding to user requests, the Office of Federal Records Centers now allows agencies to fax requests for records retrieval to federal records centers for more timely service. Also, on the basis of suggestions from users, the Office of the Federal Register now provides electronic access to Federal Register information and plans to allow agencies to electronically submit documents directly to the Government Printing Office (GPO).

The Office of the National Archives improved its reference services by staffing the consultants' office with archivists and made better signs and provided a map of the main reference room in the National Archives Building. The office plans to provide an orientation film and a video on reference services for researchers at the National Archives Building. The Office of Special and Regional Archives allocated money to replace old microfilm readers and added some new ones. The presidential libraries have made improvements, such as providing additional lockers for researchers and articles to help researchers understand how to use the libraries. Planned improvements include providing foreign language translators and redesigning permanent exhibits. The Office of Public Programs developed programs for target audiences, increased public awareness of its programs through advertisements, and provided closed captioning at audiovisual stations on the basis of survey results. All of these changes and 54 others that NARA made were suggested by researchers and visitors.

NARA has not fully adopted seven suggested improvements. Evaluations of Office of the Federal Register public workshops showed that participants wanted a more timely distribution of the Federal Register. However, NARA officials said that GPO handles the distribution of the Federal Register and that they informed GPO of customer concerns regarding distribution and

⁸One identified improvement resulted in both an improvement being made and one being planned.

made several follow-up inquiries to GPO but had no control over GPO's timeliness.

Office of Special and Regional Archives researchers wanted larger microfilm and genealogy reference collections. NARA officials said that the amount of gift fund donations NARA receives dictates its ability to increase these collections and it did not have enough donations to pay for the requested collections.

The Office of the National Archives' user study recommended unifying the consultants' office staff and the security staff at the information desk. According to the study, the proposed change would allow patrons to be accurately and efficiently referred to appropriate branches in the National Archives Building. NARA officials said they have contracted security staff to operate the information desk, which allows consultants to assist researchers in locating records, and that they have no plans to have consultants perform duties designated for security staff. However, according to NARA officials, the security staff were made familiar with procedures for directing researchers throughout the building, and the Office of the National Archives developed a procedures manual to assist security staff.

The user study also revealed that NARA should produce pamphlets describing NARA's holdings and how to access them. NARA officials said that the office currently provides reference papers on particular subjects that summarize information for researchers. They also said that these papers will be analyzed and grouped to produce pamphlets by 1995, if funding allows. The study also showed that respondents believed that NARA should make copies of all audiovisual holdings available. However, NARA officials said that space and cost considerations prevent them from providing copies of all of these holdings. NARA officials explained that they have copies of many but not all of the audiovisual items accessioned by NARA. When researchers request to examine an item for which no reference copy exists, the branch makes preservation and reference copies.

A visitor profile study in the Office of Public Programs revealed that visitors to the National Archives Building disliked being rushed while viewing the Charters of Freedom. NARA officials said they cannot control when large crowds visit and that they try to reduce long lines when this occurs. NARA officials said they encourage people to come at times when crowds are usually light. The survey also showed that visitors wanted improved lighting. NARA officials said that bright lighting could damage the

documents and that the lighting currently meets the safe standards for records.

Customers Have Needs of Which NARA Is Not Aware

We contacted officials at 11 major federal agencies and departments identified by NARA officials as major customers of NARA's services and officials at the other organizations listed in appendix II to obtain their opinions on NARA's customer service orientation. These officials expressed concern over some unmet needs, although they were generally pleased with NARA's services. While our contact with these NARA customers was not designed to identify all customer needs or note overall customer satisfaction with NARA services, it showed that some NARA customers had needs of which NARA is not aware.

Four records managers said that the Office of Records Administration could provide better help with electronic records, especially in terms of training and guidance. Also, a representative from the Association of Records Managers and Administrators said that federal records management had been a "disaster" since 1985 because neither GSA nor NARA had assumed responsibility for it. One records manager also said agencies need guidance on records removal before they begin to develop their own policies.

Two agency officials said there have been occasions when they received records belonging to other bureaus or agencies. These officials said they would like the Office of Federal Records Centers to send the correct documents requested by bureaus or agencies. One agency official said that the office needs to provide space so that large records groups could be accessioned together. While NARA officials said NARA's automated inventory easily locates these records, the agency official said its tracking system does not easily locate records that are not accessioned together. Another official stated that NARA's current process of transferring records from the records centers to the National Archives sometimes keeps the records in limbo, because they cannot be retrieved from the records centers and are not available at the National Archives. This agency official suggested that NARA should improve the timeliness in which records are transferred from records centers to the National Archives.

A company president that produces and sells electronic versions of the Federal Register and the Code of Federal Regulations to the public said that the Office of the Federal Register should make all information in these

publications available electronically.⁹ Similarly, one agency official stated that this office needs to expand the electronic transmission of documents to include wire transmissions.¹⁰ The same official said that the office could improve its technical assistance by providing consistent answers.

One agency official commented that the Office of Federal Records Centers needs to conduct forums of agency customers to provide information on customer needs without creating a paper burden.

Two researchers we interviewed said that NARA needs to develop new finding aids to help researchers locate records. The researchers said that without adequate finding aids, NARA's documents are unusable. One researcher said that NARA needs more professional staff and orientation materials for historians and other researchers other than genealogists. The same researcher also said that service at the records centers is "terrible," because the centers are basically a warehouse operation that are not intended to provide services for researchers as do the National Archives or Special and Regional Archives. Another researcher said that consultants need to inform researchers about locations of all records related to the researchers' areas of study. One researcher said that NARA needs to educate the public about what records are available and how materials are organized.

Conclusions

Contemporary management experts stress that managers—both private and public sector—should deliver quality service as defined by the customer for the success of their organizations. While NARA has attempted to understand some of its customers and their needs, NARA does not do so systematically. As a result, NARA has incomplete information for purposes of delivering quality service as defined by its customers. Although NARA has sought information on customer needs and generally responded to the needs identified, our interviews with customers showed that NARA could increase its understanding of its customers' needs by conducting more comprehensive surveys.

NARA primarily relies on workshop evaluations, surveys, and informal feedback to understand its customers' needs and satisfaction. However,

⁹GPO, not NARA, is responsible for the distribution of the Office of the Federal Register publications. NARA officials said they thought GPO would soon make the Federal Register available on-line.

¹⁰While recent equipment modernization within GPO and the Office of the Federal Register has made it technically feasible to use wire transmissions, NARA officials said there are legal considerations to be addressed. Some considerations include the possible modification of the Federal Register Act (44 U.S.C. Chapter 15) to allow acceptance of electronic documents and the lack of federal standards concerning electronic, digitized signatures and the transmission of sensitive, but unclassified material.

NARA does not use these tools to provide agencywide information on customers' needs and satisfaction because it is not a management requirement. NARA offices could devise a plan to regularly contact a representative sample of their customers and use other tools, such as customer interviews, customer follow-up surveys, and complaint tracking systems, to obtain information on customers' needs and satisfaction.

We believe that NARA would benefit if it undertook an approach similar to that used by the National Archives of Canada, which surveyed customers regarding services they wanted, compared those needs with services being offered, and addressed the unfulfilled needs. We also believe that NARA should have more information from its customers before it continues its strategic planning initiative and should use its strategic plans to address customer needs.

Recommendations

We recommend that the Acting Archivist of the United States consider a systematic, agencywide approach to identify NARA's customers' needs, compare those needs with services offered, and examine how to meet shortfalls. Any needed corrective action could be incorporated into NARA's strategic plans.

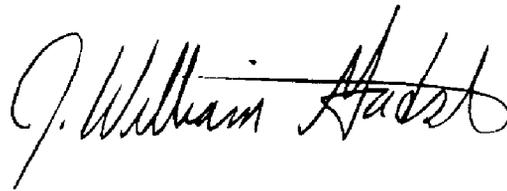
Agency Comments

We gave a draft of this report to NARA officials to obtain their comments. A copy of NARA's written comments is included in appendix IV. In its written comments, NARA agreed with our recommendation and said the agency had begun to use its recently instituted strategic planning process to systematically determine customer needs and improve its responsiveness to those needs. NARA officials also provided informal comments and clarifications that we included in the report where appropriate.

As agreed with the Committee, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the date of the report. At that time, we will send copies to the Acting Archivist of the United States, the Director of OMB, the Administrator of GSA, other interested congressional committees, and others who may have an interest in these matters. Copies will also be made available to others upon request.

The major contributors to this report are listed in appendix V. If you have any questions or require additional information about this report, please call me on (202) 512-8387.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "J. William Gadsby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending across the middle of the name.

J. William Gadsby
Director, Government Business
Operations Issues

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Abbreviations

GPO	Government Printing Office
GSA	General Services Administration
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NARS	National Archives and Records Service
OMB	Office of Management and Budget

List of Experts GAO Consulted

We contacted the following experts to get their opinions of archival institutions and customer service orientation. These experts were selected because they represent leaders in the field of archival studies and users of NARA's services. In addition, NARA officials identified five of these experts as researchers we should contact because of their participation in NARA's strategic planning process.

Mr. Arthur Breton, Senior Archivist, Archives of American Art,
Washington, D.C.

Dr. Phil Cantelon, President, History Associates, Inc.,
Rockville, MD

Dr. Paul Conway, Head, Preservation Department, Sterling Memorial
Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT

Mrs. Elsie Freeman Finch, former Director of Academic,
Professional and Public Programs, Education Division at NARA,
Ithaca, NY

Dr. Sam Gammon, Executive Director, American Historical
Association, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Larry Hackman, Archivist of New York State, Albany, NY

Dr. Ruth Harris, Director of Research, History Associates, Inc.,
Rockville, MD

Mr. James Lide, Director of Litigation Research, History
Associates, Inc., Rockville, MD

Mrs. Marie Melchiori, Certified Genealogical Record Searcher and
Executive Vice President, Association of Professional
Genealogists, Vienna, VA

Dr. Page Putnam Miller, Director, National Coordinating Committee
for the Promotion of History, Washington, D.C.

Dr. Anna Nelson, Professor of History, American University,
Washington, D.C.

Appendix I
List of Experts GAO Consulted

Mr. Bill Price, Director, Department of Cultural Resources and
Division of Archives and History, North Carolina State
Archives, Raleigh, NC

List of Agencies, Businesses, and Organizations GAO Contacted

We contacted the following organizations to get their opinions of NARA's customer service orientation. We selected agencies that represented NARA's largest federal agency customers. We also selected a business executive and a records management organization official who use NARA's services and were contacted by NARA officials during its strategic planning process.

Office of the Federal Register

Counterpoint Publishing, Cambridge, MA—President
Department of Health and Human Services
Food and Drug Administration—Chief, Regulation Editorial Staff
Health Care Finance Administration—Senior Regulations Analyst
Department of Labor
Occupational Safety and Health Administration—Safety and Health Specialist
Environmental Protection Agency—Federal Register Liaison Officer
Nuclear Regulatory Commission—Chief, Rule Review Section

Office of Federal Records Centers

Department of Health and Human Services
Social Security Administration—Chief, Records Administration Section
Department of Justice—Records Officer
Department of the Treasury
Internal Revenue Service—Records Management Analyst

Office of Records Administration

Association of Records Managers and Administrators, Washington, D.C.—Editor
Department of Defense—Records Officer and Chief, Records Management and Privacy Act Branch
Department of State—Chief, Records Management
Department of the Treasury
Office of the Comptroller of the Currency—Associate Director, Library and Information Services

Number of Customers Served and Surveyed by NARA Offices During 1988 to 1992

This table lists for each NARA office the major services provided, the number of customers served from 1988 to 1992, and the number of customers surveyed during that time. As explained in the accompanying notes, some of the number of customers and customers surveyed are approximations, primarily because NARA does not always track the number of customers served but tracks the number of times a service is offered.

Table III.1: NARA Offices, Services Provided, and Customers Served and Surveyed

NARA office	Major service provided	Number of customers	Number of customers surveyed
Records Administration	Appraises and schedules federal records	6,967 ^a	4,150
Federal Records Centers	Temporarily stores active and inactive agency records	41,426 ^b	18,658
Federal Register	Publishes the <u>Federal Register</u>	8,217 ^c	5,417
National Archives	General research in NARA's holdings	575,760 ^d	800
Special and Regional Archives	General research in NARA's holdings	893,431	2,000
Presidential Libraries	Research in presidential records and museum exhibits	7,281,648	9,154
Public Programs	Exhibits and training	5,735,127	907 ^e
Total		14,542,576	41,086

^aThis number does not include agencies that used the offices' scheduling services.

^bThe Office of Federal Records Centers only counts the number of customers who receive technical assistance. For all other services, the office counts the number of times a service was provided.

^cThe Office of the Federal Register also provided 6,284 hours of technical assistance in 1992 and had approximately 30,000 daily subscribers to the Federal Register that are not reflected in the 8,217 customers shown in the table.

^dThe Office of the National Archives provides other services, such as reproductions and records retrieval. However, the office counts how many times these services are provided, rather than how many customers use these services. The above figure represents the number of times individual researchers or teams of researchers visited NARA from 1988 to 1992, rather than the number of individuals who conducted research.

^eOf the 907 customers surveyed, 607 were in a statistical sample designed to represent about 168,000 customers served during the sampling period, according to NARA.

Source: NARA data.

Comments From NARA

National Archives



Washington, DC 20408

AUG 31 1993

August 31, 1993

Mr. John S. Baldwin, Sr.
Assistant Director
Government Business Operations Issues
United States General Accounting Office
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Baldwin:

We have reviewed your draft report, NATIONAL ARCHIVES: A More Systematic Customer Focus Needed and agree with your recommendation. We have been in the implementation phase of this recommendation since December, 1992 when we invited a broad range of public and Federal Government customers to participate in our first strategic planning effort. Their voices convinced us that "service" needed to be the first critical success factor in our plan and that a systematic approach to determining customer needs had to be a major goal. In the final publication, The National Archives and Records Administration Strategic Plan for a Challenging Federal Environment 1993-2001, we specifically stated that we would:

Establish an ongoing means to identify the public's and Federal Government's expectations of NARA services and to evaluate NARA's effectiveness in meeting those expectations.

Among the steps we have taken since February to implement this goal are:

- Planning for a researcher registration database to be implemented in January 1994 to provide better statistical information about user needs and the capability of producing mailing labels for follow-up questionnaires.
- Establishing the Still Picture Branch as a pilot project to achieve more responsive customer service.
- Formalizing our working relationship with customer advisory groups such as the one formed last year for Motion Picture and Video Researchers.
- Beginning customer service training for all National Archives reference staff.

National Archives and Records Administration

Appendix IV
Comments From NARA

While we are some distance from our final destination of consistent, agency-wide, customer-responsive service, we feel that we are in agreement with the GAO report recommendation and have already begun the journey.

Sincerely,


RAYMOND A. MOSLEY
Acting Archivist
of the United States

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