

# SURVEYS IDENTIFY SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

A recent survey of Australian businesses involved in cargo imports and excise production has indicated generally high levels of satisfaction in dealings with the Australian Customs Service.

The survey, a national pilot study, was carried out by AC Nielsen-McNair to provide a baseline for Customs to assess progress in its national Quality Management program. It covered levels of satisfaction with a range of Customs services and staff attributes.

A later survey of Customs officers directly servicing businesses in excise matters and cargo imports showed strong correlations with the survey of businesses.

The business survey involved 681 telephone interviews with excise producers (such as companies involved in alcohol, tobacco and petroleum products), importers, customs brokers, couriers and freight forwarders, container terminal operators, airlines and shipping companies.

The results showed that for most respondents, the average level of satisfaction with Customs was between 6.9 and 7.3 on a scale where 1 meant 'extremely dissatisfied' and 10 meant 'extremely satisfied'. Average overall satisfaction was highest for certain types of manufacturers subject to excise at 7.9 and major stevedores recorded the lowest level at 6.5.

Overall, the survey indicated a net improvement in satisfaction levels over the last two years. Only shipping companies recorded a deterioration. Respondents rated Customs staff highest in terms of professionalism, helpful attitude and listening ability.

AC Nielsen-McNair's report said the survey results indicated that Customs had much to be proud of in the overall levels of satisfaction among the clients surveyed and the evidence of improvement in recent years in the quality of services it provided.

Customs Chief Executive Officer Lionel Woodward said the results reflected well on efforts made by all Customs staff to continuously improve its services to Australian industry and people.

The survey pointed to four areas that could be improved: variations in interpreting rules, particularly between one Customs office and another; a desire for a greater Customs 'presence', and more face-to-face dealings; a need to improve contingency plans during failures of Customs computer systems used primarily

for importing and excise processes; and a need to simplify and improve the Sea Cargo Automation system.

The results of the pilot survey will be used to complement existing forms of industry consultation, enabling direct feedback from a representative cross-section of business and industry. The issues and trends identified through surveys will help development of service initiatives such as Service Charters.

## Staff attitudes

The survey of Customs industry contact officers was also carried out by AC Nielsen McNair, and results were analysed from 596 self-completion questionnaires. Industry contact officers were asked to rate Customs performance on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 meant very poor and 10 meant very good. On average, officers rated Customs at 7.2. Officers involved with excise rated performance at 7.4, while those dealing with cargo imports gave an overall rating of 7.2.

Performance levels had improved over the last two years according to 58 per cent of staff. Only 16 per cent thought performance had deteriorated, giving a net improvement of 42 per cent.

A quarter of the officers believed they were well trained to deliver good customer service, 59 per cent thought they were moderately well trained, 11 per cent said poorly trained, and 3 per cent said very poorly trained. Officers' main suggestions for improving service included better training, more staff, more consistent rule interpretation between Customs regional offices, better understanding of industry needs, and closer consultation with businesses.

AC Nielsen McNair's report noted a low rating in terms of importance and performance for the service attribute 'adopting a team approach'. It said this might merely reflect a view that Customs regulatory responsibilities meant that a team approach "could only go so far". The report said the results indicated that Customs officers and business representatives perceived similar positives and negatives.