

The Marketing of Public Services: A New Comparative Analysis of Citizens' Expectations

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to verify the validity of marketing theories in the field of public services by means of an empirical analysis. The study is based on the results of market research carried out in 2004, 2009 and 2014, concerning the expectations of the citizens of Gorle (a small town on the outskirts of Bergamo, in the north of Italy) with regard to administration policies.

The contribution of the present work empowers previous analysis, and underlines the important factors that should be taken into consideration for the future as well as how expectations in the three groups of answers have changed over a period of ten years, giving a dynamic impact to the research. Based on the citizen-users' perception of real life, this study can be interpreted as a concrete picture of real (everyday) life and the emerging data provide a snapshot that will lead the new administration in the next five years, regardless of any political belief.

The current literature on this subject has been considered to see the object of the research in perspective and to relate it to what has emerged from the field analysis.

Keywords

Public Services Marketing; Citizen Satisfaction; Marketing Research; Citizens' Expectations; Gap Analysis

1. Introduction – purpose of the work

The wish to discover citizens' expectations was the starting point that set the work presented below in motion for the third time, a work which can be classified as a public market survey.

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2. Review of recent literature

The current literature on this subject (inter alia Parasuraman et al., 1991; Kouzmin et al., 1999; Ebdon and Franklin, 2004; Kelly, 2005; Gelders et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2011) has been considered to view the object of the research in perspective and to relate it to what has emerged from the field analysis.

In particular, reference should be made to the contents of the paper of 2009 (Cavallone, 2009), to concentrate only on the new developments.

Focusing on the difference between the marketing of private firms and that of local bodies, Cavallone and Colleoni (1999:31) outline that: "...marketing in public services is very different because competition, which is the first step to be adopted in order to win customers, does not exist."

However, what has to be taken into consideration in particular is the correct use of the collected data: if citizens understand that their opinions have no effect on the decisions of the public administration, the result is worse than if they had never been consulted (Ebdon and Franklin, 2004): "citizen input is generally viewed as a way to reduce the level of citizen distrust in government, and to educate people about government activities [...] Overall, researchers have concluded that participation is most beneficial when it occurs early in the process, and when it is two-way deliberative communication rather than simply one-way information sharing."

According to Cavallone and Colleoni, "the satisfaction of the citizens' needs represents the principal objective of a town administration that wants to fulfil the function with which it has been entrusted correctly" (1999:31) and that will see, in turn, the continuity of trust with the renewal of the term of office.

Developments of recent literature have seen, amongst others, the contribution of Gelders et al. (2010:35) who once again taking up the concepts of the immateriality of the services report: "Expectations are determined by several factors such as interpersonal communication, personal needs and experiences, and external communication about the service delivery. Each service results from the interaction between producers and consumers and is thus unique".

Referring back to the gap theory, research on public marketing, similar to the one presented herein, may be considered as an instrument for understanding first the separation

between the Management perceptions of customer expectations and service quality specifications and then reconciling them with each other.

On this matter James (2011) highlights the fundamental role of "market intelligence" in the public sector, in order to have a more accurate perception of citizens' expectations and desires, thanks to the adoption of instruments such as opinion polls, citizens' complaints, and conversations with individual citizens and he suggests that "the resilience of normative expectations suggests that poor performance will trigger dissatisfaction and citizen response rather than lowering expectations creating passive acceptance" (2011:1420).

This reaction of the citizens has an impact on the expectations of the administration's proposals: what is "desired" therefore becomes "normative expectations" which, if they are made plain and suitably analysed by the administrators, offer a precise idea of what is expected and at the same time what can be fulfilled (James, 2011).

The above statement confirms the writer's idea, in other words that the citizens' expectations continue to increase and are today comparable with the consumers' expectations in the private sector, a hypothesis that is also reported by Chatzoglou et al. (2013).

This research wishes to perceive the expectations of the citizens who, in the words of Walker (2011:585), "empirically underlined the significance of consumer satisfaction in the provision of public services".

3. The research methodology adopted: samples of 2004 , 2009 and 2014

The research of 2014 was carried out by means of direct random interviews on the basis of a questionnaire that was sent to all the population resident in Gorle. A large part of the questionnaire remained the same as that of the two previous surveys in order to be able to compare the data collected previously and a few other questions were added. The data for 2004 were collected both by means of interviews with a group of 20 opinion leaders and by means of a random sample, interviewing citizens directly in the street for a total of 55 people. The data for 2009 were obtained spontaneously in response to the magazine "La nostra Gorle", which is distributed to all the citizens, and the 114 copies of the completed questionnaire that were received. In 2014 the number of questionnaires collected rose to 211, of which 204 were valid.

The current population of the town of Gorle is 6,604, although the number of citizens having the right to vote is 5,096; the sample of 2014 is, therefore, equal to 4.2% of the population with an average age of 50 and an age range from 18 to 92. It should be added that for the first time the survey had a geographical reference based on the various districts: Baio, Celadina, Centro, Martinella and Villini.

The comments given below are made on the perceptions of the three years.

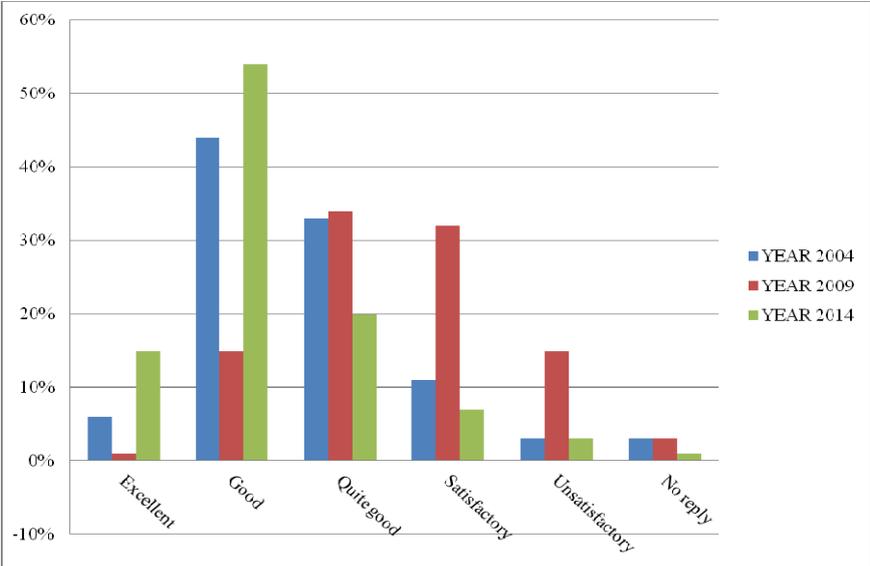
4. The analysis and the comment on the data

4.1. How do you judge the quality of life in the Municipality today?

Observing the trend in the opinion of the quality of life over the three surveys, a "U" shaped development is recognised, with a good overall level in 2004, a considerable drop in the level in 2009 and again a very good level in 2014 (15% excellent + 54% good; the sum of the two items gives 60%). As a consequence, there is a drop in the other items as the preference is distributed over the positive items. The concentration of such positiveness comes from the replies of the areas of Baio and Villini; the data from Celadina are very

different and in particular none of the inhabitants of the area judges the quality of life to be “excellent”, in fact the majority of the “unsatisfactory” answers were localized in this area.

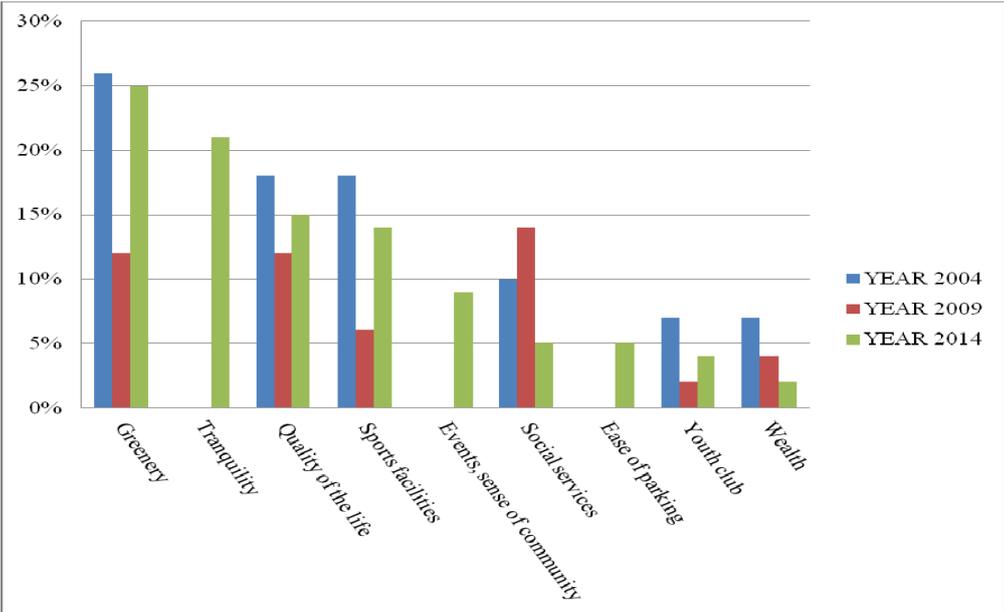
Table 1. How do you judge the quality of life in the Municipality today?



4.2a. What are the reasons for this opinion/judgement? (positive opinions)

From an analysis of the second question, four items emerge which account for 69% of the answers and in particular they are Greenery, Tranquility, Quality of Life and Sports facilities. In this case too, two of the items have shown a “U” shaped trend (greenery and quality of life), while items that were not considered in the past such as tranquility and social events and festivals, have shown to be very positive.

Table 2. What are the reasons for this opinion / judgement (Positive opinions)



4.2b. What are the reasons for this opinion/judgement? (negative opinions)

Table 3. What are the reasons for this opinion / judgement (Negative opinions)

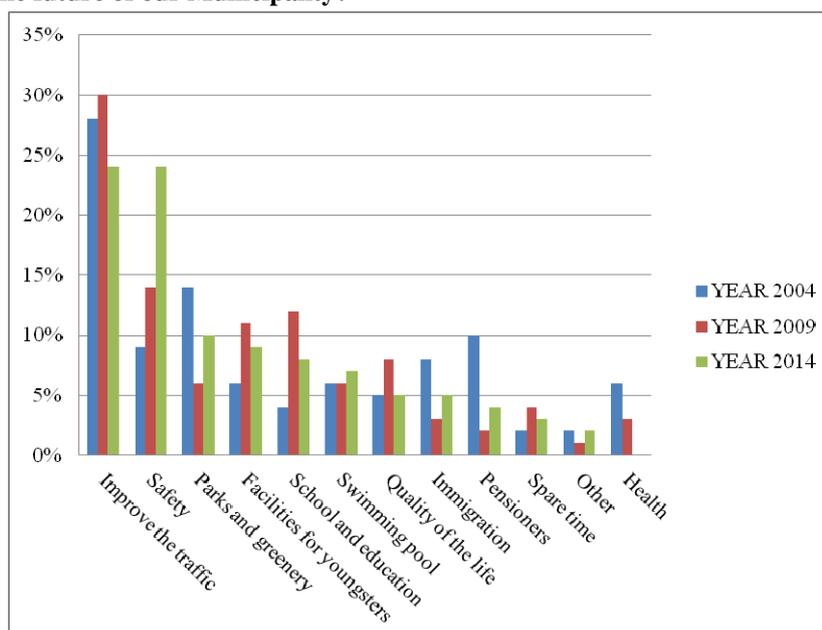
	Traffic problems	safety	pollution	other	Total answers
Celadina	1	2	0	2	5
Martinella	0	0	0	0	0
Villini	1	1	0	0	2
Baio	2	2	1	0	5
Centre	1	0	1	0	2
TOTAL	5	5	2	2	14

The seven people (3.43% of the sample) who replied that the quality of life in Gorle is unsatisfactory based 70% of their negative opinion on problems related to traffic and safety. It should be noted that in this case the inhabitants of the districts of Celadina and Baio represent the maximum number of dissatisfied people for the same reasons.

4.3. In your opinion what are the three most important points to be considered when thinking about the future of our Municipality?

Analysing the expectations for their future in more depth, the citizens' answers are concentrated in two blocks: 48% look for improvements to the traffic and the level of safety, following on from this are items with similar percentages linked to the parks and greenery, facilities for young people, schools and education, a swimming pool. In this way two feelings are perceived: one concerns improvement especially to the traffic, even though it has dropped by six percentage points compared with 2009 and the other is related to the preservation of what citizens already acknowledge they have. It should be noted that the item safety has shown a considerable increase (ten percentage points more). In this case too a partial differentiation emerges between the judgements and the priorities of the inhabitants in the various districts. For example, looking at the data for the two most important overall priorities (safety and traffic), it is seen that the maximum value for safety is shown in Baio, while the maximum value for the traffic is shown in the Centre.

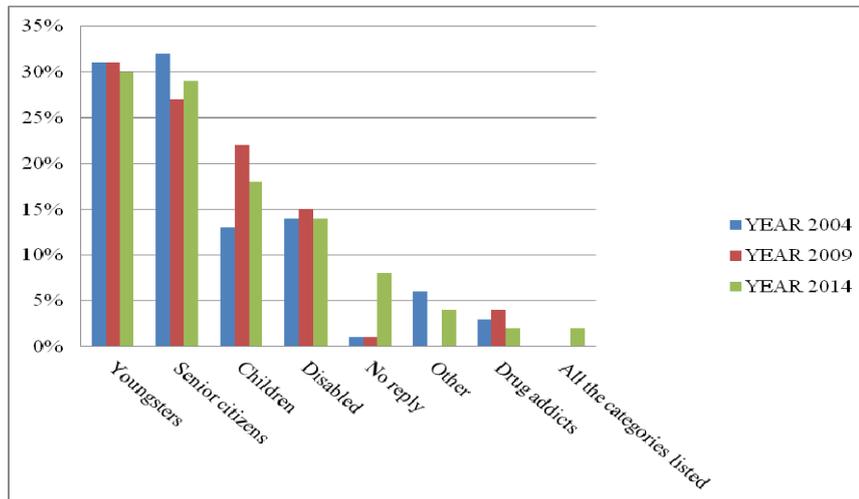
Table 4. In your opinion what are the three most important points to be taken into consideration when thinking about the future of our Municipality?



4.4. Which category of people in Gorle need greater attention?

This question confirms a priority in the distribution between the young and the elderly followed by children and the disabled; it should be noted that eight percent answered “nobody” and two percent stated “all the categories”. For the inhabitants in the Centre, the elderly account for 38.6% while for those in Martinella they account for 22.6%; none of those answering the questionnaire in Martinella or in the Centre replied “drug addicts”.

Table 5. Which category of people in Gorle need greater attention?



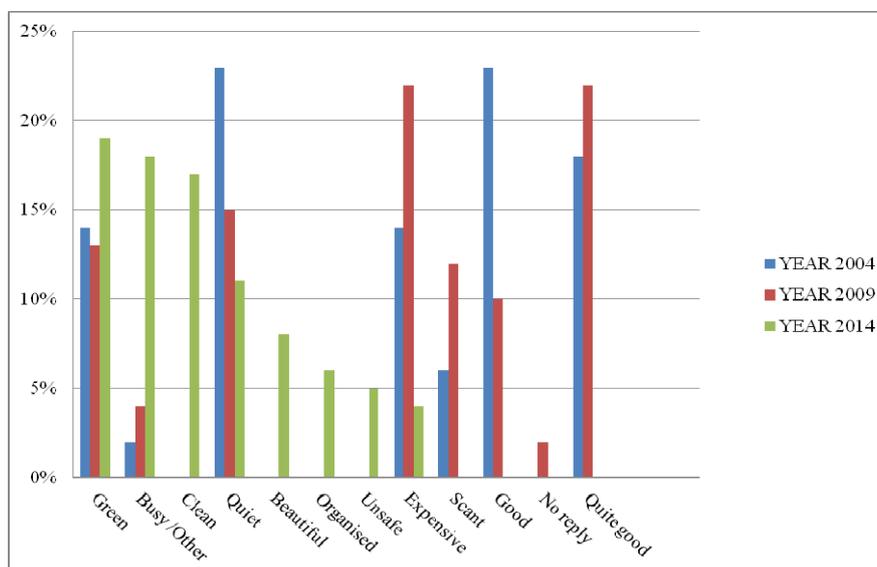
4.5. Choose three words/adjectives that describe Gorle today

This question was subdivided into positive and negative aspects and some items were added that were not included in previous questionnaires and so it becomes difficult to compare the data in a suitable way.

For the positive aspects: the increase of the item “greenery” should be considered which comes first in the replies. “Clean” obtained many votes (17%), followed by “beautiful” and “organised”.

For the negative aspects: the great increase (more than four times more) is the item “busy traffic”, a drop in the item “quiet” (from 15 to 11) and the addition of the word “unsafe” with 5%.

Table 6. Choose three words/adjectives that describe Gorle today



4.6. Do you remember a positive or negative episode in Gorle in general and/or concerning your relationship with the Municipal Administration over the last 5 years?

Positive episodes

The majority of those answering (35) recall festivals and social events (e.g. “Nuove cucine” a gastronomic food tasting event), twelve express a positive opinion about the relationship with the municipal offices and acknowledge of their own free will the competence and efficiency of the municipal employees which means that the “administrative machine” works well.

Negative episodes

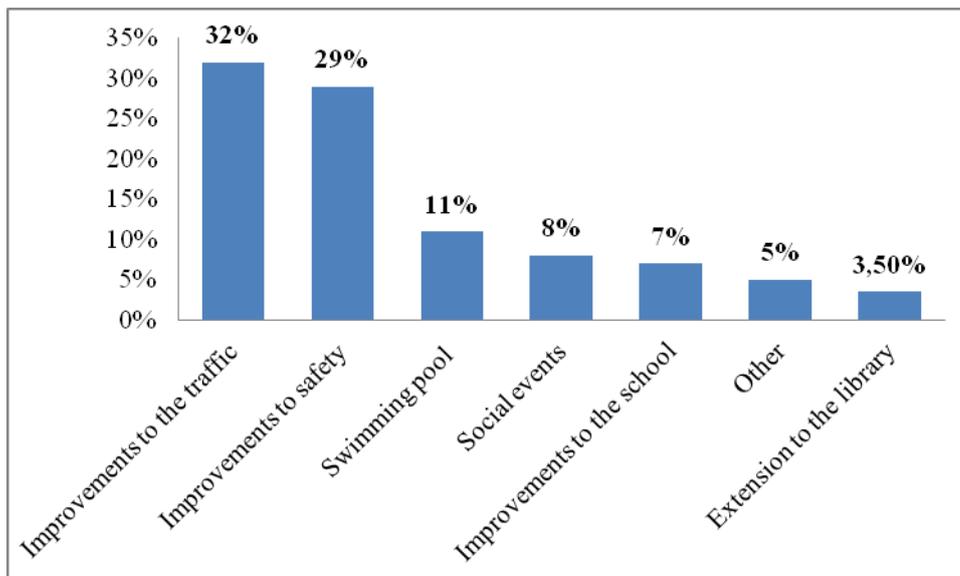
The problem of theft and the lack of security were mentioned by nineteen people; following this with a far lower number of votes (5) was poor maintenance, disturbance of the peace and damage to property and public areas.

One detail: the work done on the road conditions over the last 5 years is for 19 of those answering a particularly positive event and for 20 people a particularly negative event to be remembered.

4.7. What was not carried out in the past (what was not done) and, consequently, is more urgent and pressing for the immediate future?

This question which aims to identify the priorities perceived for the work of the new administration, confirms the items "Traffic improvements" and "Safety" which alone account for 61%; following these items is the building of a new swimming pool (especially for the areas of Martinella, Turati and Centre) and social events.

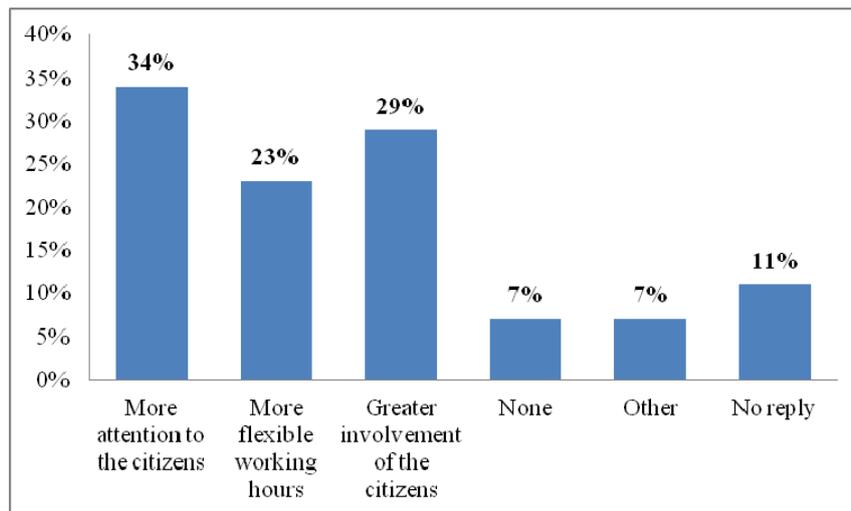
Table 7. What was not carried out in the past (what was not done) and, consequently, is more urgent and pressing in the immediate future?



4.8. *What improvements would you make to the management of the public administration?*

These questions confirm the desire to find out the expectations from the citizens themselves: the answers concentrate mainly on: the wish to be listened to more (the purpose behind this research led in this direction right from the first survey) which, together with a greater involvement of the citizens, accounts for 63%. The possibility of having more flexible opening hours at the town hall offices is another requirement that emerged very clearly (23%).

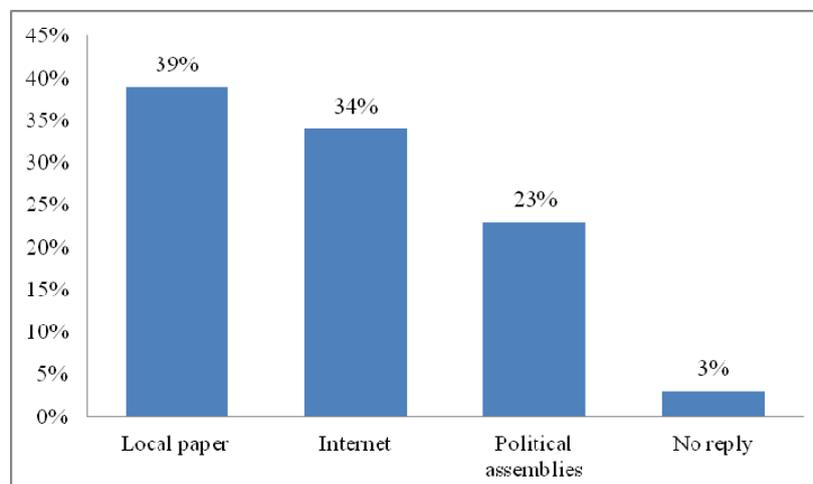
Table 8. What improvements would you make to the management of the public administration?



4.9. *Which informative methods do you think the town hall should use to communicate with the citizens-users?*

This is a further question that wishes to reduce the gap between the citizens and the administration and encourage a dialogue; the local paper with 39% of the replies obtains the greatest number of preferences, testifying to the work done. It is very interesting that as many as 34% of those interviewed use the internet for Citizen - Town Hall communication: a suggestion for the next administration is to think about some “instruments, functions, new formulas” to strengthen this channel. Public assemblies (23%) are confirmed as important moments of communication and sharing.

Table9. Which informative methods do you think the town hall should use to communicate with citizens-users?



5. Conclusions and limitations of the research

In conclusion, it can be stated that, despite apparent paradoxes demonstrating that there are significant differences regarding some aspects, listening to the opinions of the citizens of Gorle it is mostly “greenery, tranquility and cleanliness” that are the elements to be defended and valued; on the contrary, safety and road conditions (and the traffic) are the main areas for improvement according to the expectations of those answering the survey. A certain complexity is noted in reconciling some specific priorities / requirements of the various districts: Gorle is not a “large metropolis”, but there are some differences between the various areas that must be taken into consideration to satisfy the specific expectations of those living there in the best possible way.

The willingness to repeat the analysis of the citizens’ expectations three times over the last 10 years is certainly evidence of the constant attention paid to researching the expectations with regard to what needs to be done.

The sample of 4.2% of the voting population guaranteed a greater significance of the analysis base; the possibility to extend the number of interviewees still further would guarantee a greater degree of representativeness of the findings, strengthening their scientific value.

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