

Consumer Satisfaction



People talk about consumer satisfaction a lot. At the systems level, consumer satisfaction is one of the ways to measure whether providers of services and equipment are working and spending money effectively. On an individual level, consumer satisfaction refers to whether someone who acquires equipment or services is satisfied with what he or she received.

What Is satisfaction?

Satisfaction is a deceptively broad term. It can be divided into three parts: satisfaction with how the services and equipment are provided, with what services and equipment are provided and with the consequences of acquiring the services or equipment.¹ The following questions help to identify some of the factors that may contribute to consumer satisfaction.

- Was the equipment or service delivered?
- Was the cost reasonable?
- Was the time spent waiting reasonable?
- Did the provider demonstrate good knowledge and skills?
- Did the provider have a good attitude?
- Did the service or equipment

solve the problem it was meant to fix?

- Did the service or equipment hold up under use?
- Did the service or equipment create any new problems?
- Did the service or equipment change the consumer's life in the expected way?






Describing satisfaction is difficult because what satisfies one person may not satisfy another, and an individual's perception of satisfaction may change over time. David McNaughton, an AAC researcher and educator, discusses the elusive nature of satisfaction in a paper called "Measuring Parent Satisfaction with Early Childhood Intervention Programs: Current Practice, Problems, and Future Perspectives."² He summarizes, "Satisfaction is a highly individualized and volatile construct."

We must remember that the people who interact socially or professionally with the consumer also have their own ideas of what satisfies them and what would satisfy the consumer.

Asking consumers

The best way to find out if consumers are satisfied with technology and services is to ask them. But what should consumers be asked, and how and when should they be asked? I wanted to know what consumers of AAC services and equipment would say about these issues, so we developed a consumer questionnaire.³ The purpose of the questionnaire was to find out more about consumer satisfaction data collection from the AAC consumer's perspective.

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Message from the author

The rallying cry in the early days of AAC was, “Everybody has something to say and people can say it by any means necessary.”

There wasn't much choice in those early days. Communication devices were often home-made by friends or creative speech language pathologists. Consumers lucky enough to use a communication device had no basis for comparing quality. Everything was new and exciting. Consumers in those days broke down into two camps: You either used an AAC device, or you did without. There was no middle ground.

Times have changed, of course. The rise of AAC manufacturers and a growing market for electronic devices have provided consumers with a wide variety of communication devices with features to suit almost every need.

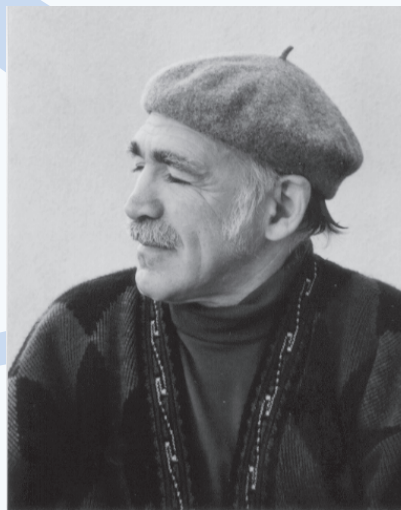
This is all to the good but there still seems to be no rational basis for comparison of goods and services within the field of AAC. In researching this issue of *Alternatively Speaking*, I was surprised to find there were no studies of

AAC satisfaction done from a consumer perspective or from the perspective of parents and care givers.

What's going on here? You'd think researchers and manufacturers would be jumping all over this topic. Apparently, this is not the case; not yet, anyway.

We shall attempt to explore these uncharted waters as we ask the question: Are you getting any? Satisfaction, that is.

A



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I put the questionnaire out on the ACOLUG listserv⁴ and we gave it to people we met on our travels.

I ended up with thirteen completed questionnaires from two states in Australia and eight states in the United States. The people who responded use a variety of communication technology. While some had received a lot of technology and services, others had received very little. (One was still waiting for a device.) Our findings should be interpreted with caution given the small number of respondents.

We asked these AAC consumers to indicate whether (and how) service providers and manufacturers inquire about their satisfaction with AAC devices and services. We also asked them how they prefer to be queried about their satisfaction.

Satisfaction with AAC services

Current practice. Seven out of the thirteen consumers who responded to the questionnaire said they had been asked about their satisfaction with AAC services. Six said they had not. We used a very broad definition of “asked.” It might have been a questionnaire, a phone call or a casual question. According to respondents, the most commonly used method to ask AAC consumers about satisfaction with AAC services is a questionnaire. Four had received a questionnaire in the mail, two were given a questionnaire at the end of an appointment, three were “just asked during casual conversation,” one was asked questions by telephone, and one was asked questions following a Speech-To-Speech phone call. Three of the seven said they were asked about their satisfaction with

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AAC services in two or more ways.

Consumer preferences. Respondents said their preferences on being queried about their satisfaction with AAC services depended upon whether service providers or manufacturers were asking.

Seven respondents said they would prefer *service providers* to ask them in person during casual conversation, three would like to be telephoned, three would choose to be given a questionnaire at the end of the appointment (at least one expected assistance in completing it), two said they would like to be mailed a questionnaire, and one would prefer to be contacted by e-mail. Two had indicated two or more preferred methods.

Five respondents answered that they would prefer *manufacturers and their representatives* to mail them a questionnaire, four would choose to be asked during casual conversation, three would like a questionnaire at the end of the appointment, two would prefer to be asked questions over the telephone, and two would opt to be contacted by e-mail. Two had indicated two preferred methods.

Satisfaction with AAC devices

Current Practice. Three respondents said manufacturers had not asked them about their level of satisfaction with the AAC devices they use. Of the ten who were asked, eight reported being asked during casual conversation, three received a questionnaire in the mail, and one was asked questions by telephone. One of these respondents had been asked in three different ways.

Preferences. Of the twelve AAC consumers who answered this question, five indicated they would prefer that *service providers* who helped them acquire equipment ask them in person, three would like to be mailed a questionnaire, two would choose to be telephoned, one would prefer to be given a questionnaire at the end of the appointment, and one would opt to be contacted by e-mail.

On the other hand, seven of the thirteen who responded to this question said they would like *manufacturers and their representatives* to mail them a questionnaire, five would choose to be telephoned, two would prefer to be asked in person, two would like to be contacted by e-mail, and one would prefer to be given a questionnaire at the end of the appointment. Three of the thirteen respondents indicated that either a questionnaire or a phone call would be fine.

Personal satisfaction

When asked about their own personal satisfaction with *AAC services*, more than half the respondents said they are “usually” satisfied. Specifically, seven respondents answered yes, five no, and one didn’t answer.

When asked about their overall satisfaction with *AAC equipment*, six said they were “usually” satisfied, and six said they were not. One didn’t answer.

Good questions

It appears that the way questions are phrased affects the answers. For example, all but one respondent let me know that they are not satisfied in some significant way with AAC devices. The following answers to “yes/no”

questions may help shed some light on the frustrations of AAC consumers.

Q: “Do you think the cost of the device is reasonable?”

A: “Is this a joke?”

Q: “Are the costs of repair and maintenance reasonable?”

A: “What is reasonable?”

Q: “Does it interfere with your meeting other needs you might have?”

A: “Excellent question.”

Q: “Is it easy to learn to use?”

A: “It was easy for me to learn, but I think my previous computer background was quite helpful.”

Q: “Is it easy to take care of?”

A: “If I remember to plug in the damn thing.”

In our survey we asked AAC consumers to indicate whether they felt any of the questions in the box on page four should be used by AAC manufacturers and service providers to measure satisfaction with AAC devices. The five AAC consumers who responded to the questions’ validity endorsed all of them. Eight of the respondents answered the satisfaction questions personally rather than commenting on the validity of the questions. In my opinion, those who answered the questions personally also validated the questions by choosing to answer them.

One respondent pointed out that these questions might also be considered before purchasing a device.

Ask children

The last question we asked in our survey was, “How old do children have to be before they can tell AAC service providers and manu-

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facturers (or their representatives) whether they are satisfied with their AAC services and equipment?” The answers ranged from age two to eighteen with an average of age ten. One respondent wrote, “I think a child of seven or eight is old enough to tell others what works for them.”

Commentary

Respondents indicated that both manufacturers and service providers are more likely to ask about satisfaction with devices than services. It concerns me that only half (7) of the respondents said they were asked about their level of satisfaction with AAC services, while more than three-fourths (10) reported being asked if they were satisfied with their AAC devices. AAC professionals who deliver services must start asking consumers about their satisfaction levels. This is particularly critical in light of the fact that nearly half of the AAC consumers who completed our questionnaire indicated they were not usually satisfied with services or devices.

AAC consumers who responded said that service providers and manufacturers use a variety of methods to determine consumer satisfaction, both for AAC services and equipment. We found that respondents have definite preferences about how they want to be asked about their level of satisfaction. More thought needs to go into finding the best way(s) to ask about consumer satisfaction. E-mail was brought up as a preferred method by some, and – a surprise to me – many want to receive a phone call or talk in person.

LOOKING FOR SATISFACTION IN ALL THE RIGHT PLACES
Adapted from Batavia and Hammer’s study⁷ as referenced in S. Blackstone, *Augmentative Communication News*, 5:3 p. 2.

- Does your AAC device do what the manufacturer claims it would do?
- Does it meet your specific needs?
- Does it interfere with your meeting other needs you might have?
- Do you think the cost of the device is reasonable?
- Are the costs of repair and maintenance reasonable?
- Is the device reliable?
- Does the device operate according to instructions?
- Is it easy for you to operate?
- Is it easy for others to understand?
- Is it easy to take care of?
- Is it easy to learn to use?

When service providers and manufacturers don’t ask about consumer satisfaction in ways that consumers prefer, how does that affect the responses? David McNaughton says, “The impact of the use of non-preferred response styles on the data is not well understood, and is in need of additional research.”⁵

McNaughton is talking about parents of young children with disabilities, but this issue may be even more significant for people with communication disabilities.

Respondents reported a preference for a more personal contact from service providers rather than from manufacturers. I am intrigued by this. Do the respondents have low expectations of the manufacturers’ responsibility to them or is it natural for a customer/merchandise relationship to be more distant?

Another concern is that simply asking if a person is satisfied may not get to the truth. McNaughton says that both the questions asked and the survey techniques used will have an effect on the responses.⁶ Until there is more

research, manufacturers and service providers must take the time to ask very specific questions, and consumers need to stop and think before casually answering, “Yes, it’s great,” when someone asks them if they are satisfied with their services or equipment.

I am very pleased that these thirteen AAC consumers took the time to respond to my questions. People who rely on AAC have ideas starting at a young age about the work AAC professionals do and how it should be done. It is time to start asking AAC consumers what they think. The few questions I asked these AAC consumers raised some interesting points, as well as some interesting questions. I encourage AAC researchers to investigate these questions and encourage AAC service providers and manufacturers to recognize the importance of asking us about our satisfaction with the services and equipment they provide.



Parent Surveys

When AAC consumers are children, the satisfaction of their parents with AAC services is important because understanding a parent's satisfaction with services received can help service providers tailor a program for that child and can help improve service for all children. David McNaughton has written a wonderful article called "Measuring parent Satisfaction with Early Childhood Intervention Programs: Current Practice, Problems, and Future Perspectives."⁸ The article is not specifically about AAC services, but his points about parent satisfaction certainly apply to AAC services for children.

What is satisfaction?

McNaughton says that "satisfaction is a highly individualized and volatile construct."⁹ It can mean different things to different people. He says the key factors in satisfaction are: 1) expectations and 2) perception of outcome. Expectations may vary from parent to parent and within a parent, from service to service and from time to time. For example, if a program has a good reputation, parents may expect more from it. Also, parents who have received good AAC services in the past, may have high expectations. The parents' satisfaction comes from comparing their expectations with their perception of services received.

Why collect this data?

McNaughton gives four main reasons to collect parent satisfaction data.

1. Whether the parents think the intervention has been successful is very important.
2. Satisfaction data can be used to develop better services.
3. Parents may participate more if they feel they have a say in the program.
4. Satisfaction data can convince others of the program's value.¹⁰

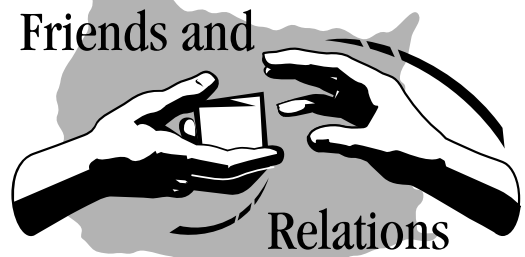
Role of parents

Parents must be involved in the evaluative process from the very beginning. They should be part of the team that designs or chooses the evaluation tools (such as a satisfaction questionnaire). McNaughton says there are three parts to the comprehensive evaluation of services: program planning (identification of goals), program implementation (quantity and quality of services) and program impact (observed outcomes). Parents must actively participate in developing measurement tools that include all three of these areas.

Data collection

In the past, researchers did not take satisfaction data collection seriously. But times are changing, and they are now defining the problems. The next step will be to solve them. Problems in satisfaction data collection identified by David McNaughton include:

- There are no standard satisfaction surveys with proven validity or reliability.
- The best way to ask about satisfaction is not known and may vary from parent to parent.
- The questions asked and the collection techniques may influence the answers.
- Asking questions in non-preferred ways may affect the answers.



- Parents may feel they have to be polite in answering satisfaction questions.
- Expectations (and therefore satisfaction) rise and fall.
- Satisfaction with service data does not include the opinions of people who were unable or unwilling to access the service.
- Satisfaction with service data does not include the opinions of people who withdrew early from the service.
- Satisfaction means different things to different people.¹¹

Recommendations

I am hesitant to recommend that busy parents develop a basic expertise in satisfaction data collection, but if you don't, you will continue to be frustrated by satisfaction surveys that ask you to fit your square pegs in their round holes. Let your service providers and manufacturer's representatives know you want to be actively involved in planning how and when to measure parent satisfaction.

Each stakeholder (administrators, funding agencies, therapists, parents) has an agenda in measuring parental satisfaction. The parents' main agenda is to improve services. Why not ask "How will the satisfaction data be used to improve services?" and "What will change?" Services that are more satisfying to parents or satisfy more parents make the work of satisfaction data collection worthwhile. **A**

Beer, Blondes and Bananas

As you may know, my friend Mick Joyce¹² does quite a bit of thinking, writing and talking about AAC issues. He is a great advocate as well as a competent health policy researcher. I asked him if he had any comments about consumer satisfaction, thinking I might get a provocative quote or two to spice up this article. Instead this essay¹³ came by e-mail. I like how Mick reminds us that consumers, manufacturers and service providers are all responsible for consumer satisfaction. Thanks, Mick.

The average consumer

Augmented users, all too often, are led around like baby ducks following their mother. Some of us know no better. Most are new to the vast rehabilitation industry which, in some cases, runs consumers through a piece-meal factory without much consideration of individual needs. We are caught up in the hustle and bustle and don't mind. We are fitted with a device that works fairly well. For some, this is adequate.

Augmentative and alternative communication systems are designed for the average user. The problem is that no one is really average. By definition the average client doesn't exist. Perhaps the best benchmark of a program or piece of equipment is how much it allows for individual needs and preferences. For example, I need to have my device off to the side, not directly in front of me. Yet, few mounting systems allow for this. I could

operate a device in front of me, but it would be slow and take more energy. It took me many years of experience to know where I needed my device for proficient use and to be assertive enough to tell the engineers exactly what I needed.

Raising our expectations

Optimal use of devices is important. It is putting the full power of a communication system to work



for us. It isn't enough for my system to say, "Hi, my name is Mick Joyce; I like beer, blondes and bananas," and a few other things. Yet, how many of us settle for just that? Just enough to get by, and that's it. I have used my system eight years now, and I still don't use its full power. It takes time to master; I still don't know all of its depths. Good programs are like that; there are always new things to learn, new words to pump in, old words to delete and new ways to say things faster.

Some of us settle for the beer, blondes and bananas without

thinking about what we really want in our systems and going after it. We yield to our own laziness and to obstructions and deferrals from the rehabilitation and education industries. Some service providers and device-makers aid us in this effort. It's easier for them, too. We all sink down in a tepid tub of cryptic condolences. It's not really what we want, but it's better than nothing, and it's easy.

Too often we judge the results of such meekness to be successful outcomes, but they are not. They are like ice cream sundaes without the cherry on top. We do not have to be satisfied with these easy outcomes. We must be assertive to get what we really need.

What we want

I listen when augmented communicators discuss AAC devices and services. Consumers say they want devices and services to be:

- Practical
- Flexible
- Advantageous
- Functional
- Useful
- Serviceable
- Effective
- Valuable
- Worthwhile
- Operative
- Durable
- Adaptable
- Changeable
- Compliant
- Expandable
- Augmenting

These are words that consumers,

When the Satisfied Customer Isn't



device-makers and service providers should keep in mind.

Leaves me speechless

Knowing how hard it is to change without encouragement from one's community, I am inaugurating the *Leaves Me Speechless* list. Anyone in the AAC community should feel free to publicize their own *Leaves Me Speechless* list. It is my hope that this list, and others like it, will inspire readers to do some serious self-evaluation.

- Suppliers that require devices to be sent in to replace “special” batteries.
- Company representatives who evaluate as well as sell devices.
- System makers with old “lock boxes” that have to be moved from computer to computer.
- Device makers who raise prices 500 to 1,000 percent over cost.
- Systems providers who require many hours of training, but don't have any free, accessible on-line support.
- Training programs that are once a year and require “being there.”
- System evaluation clinics that mold people into their ways rather than listening first.
- Clinics that only provide token follow-up services.
- Payors that buy expensive devices, but say no to repairs.
- Makers of expensive devices who provide little warranty protection.
- Professional groups that provide little advocacy services and much lobbying.

A

Twelve years ago I helped design a custom voice output communication device for myself. I was quite excited about this project. I thought it would provide me with the ideal device to foist my thoughts and ideas on an unsuspecting world.

It didn't work out that way. My heart sank when I saw the finished project, and when they put the device on my lap, I immediately knew my dreams would never be realized.

It wasn't for lack of money. The project was generously funded by the California Department of Rehabilitation. It wasn't for the lack of technical and professional people. The project was headed up by some of the top augmentative communication and rehabilitation engineering people in the United States. It wasn't for the lack of consumer input. I was in on the project from day one. I was shooting my mouth off at every opportunity, and people were listening to me and taking me seriously.

So, if everything was so right, what went wrong?

The trouble was the device never lived up to the ideal I had in my mind, even though it had all the

features I listed as important. The prosodic features I thought would be critical to successful communication turned out to be cumbersome and impractical to use on the fly and in conversation. The extra volume I asked to be built into the device to compensate for rooms with high ambient noise, also added much more weight due to the bigger speakers and batteries. Finally, and most surprisingly, when I saw the finished device for the first time, I was shocked at how it looked. It looked like what it was: a prototype built in a machine shop.

When the device was placed on my lap, I felt like a candidate who is twenty points down in the polls the weekend before the election: I knew I was going to lose, but somehow I had to find a way to carry on.

Although it was a private disaster for me at the time, in retrospect it was a valuable experience. I learned that it is difficult to cobble dreams into reality, especially when you are working in a field that is just beginning to take off, and that custom made items aren't always what they are cracked up to be.

A

Satisfaction

My communication system is a work-in-progress. I can always think of some way to make it better. Each time my communication system is improved, I become a better communicator, and I think of more features I could use. I asked two young friends how they would improve their communication system.

“What would make your communication system even better?”

“I want my communication device to have a built-in cell phone and fax machine. When I want to spell a word it should be able to predict the letters I need next. The display should be big enough for me to read. I really like my communication device, it gets me in and out of trouble.”

Daniel, age 13

“To hook it up to my computer at school easier. To learn my communication device better if people would teach it to me. It weighs too much, make it lighter. A small mount to use on the table in a restaurant for people who eat on the table. Options of computer port on either side. A strap that doesn't get all twisted and look junky.” Chris, age 14

Send me a fax or e-mail and tell me how you would improve your communication system.



The next issue will be about mentoring. Mentoring is when an older person shares what he or she knows with a younger person.

What have adults told you that helped you the most?

You can write to me: Michael Williams, Augmentative Communication Inc., One Surf Way, Suite 237, Monterey, California 93940.

You can send me a fax at (408) 646-5428.

You can send me electronic mail at mbwill@well.com

Sources & Resources

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3 Questionnaire developed with help from Sarah Blackstone. Available upon request.

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13 An earlier version of this essay was published in the May 1996 ISAAC *Bulletin*.