

CASE STUDY: PUBLIC WATER UTILITY

Surveying Success: Sweetwater Authority's Data-Driven Approach to Customer Satisfaction

CHALLENGE

Sweetwater Authority is a forward-looking public water utility that values its local heritage, and is proud to maintain longstanding local commitments. SWA's service area includes families who have lived within its boundaries for generations. This area is also undergoing demographic change. Because five years had passed since SWA last surveyed ratepayers, the agency wanted to take a fresh look at its customer base to put its finger to the pulse of their needs. The agency wanted to know the real story: how do ratepayers feel about its personnel and services, what's driving their decisions, and how are SWA's auxiliary services perceived? Identifying the drivers of ratepayer preferences, satisfaction points, and areas of concern would enable SWA to make informed decisions about service improvements and enhancements.

RESPONSE

Competitive Edge Research & Communication, Inc., (CERC) has been providing public opinion research solutions to clients for 35+ years. The firm employs sophisticated data analysis techniques to help clients make great decisions in whatever context they operate. CERC designed and implemented a SWA ratepayer survey to supply Sweetwater with a clear demographic picture of current customers, measure customer attitudes and satisfaction about agency-related matters, and advise on communication modes and areas for potential improvement.

BACKGROUND

Sweetwater Authority (SWA) is a public water utility that's operated since 1977. It provides safe and reliable water to approximately 200,000 residents in a 36 square-mile area of San Diego's South Bay, which includes overlapping areas of National City, Chula Vista, and Bonita, California. SWA is proud of its locally elected and appointed directors, and prioritizes the long-term health of its water infrastructure. Residents, businesses, land developers, and other stakeholders reap the benefits of SWA's local control, while it simultaneously invests revenues right back into local infrastructure and capital improvements.



**SWEETWATER
AUTHORITY**

SOLUTION SET

For this project, Competitive Edge leveraged its deep experience in survey research and expert statistical analysis to yield key insights about Sweetwater Authority ratepayers.

COMPREHENSIVE SURVEY & ANALYSIS

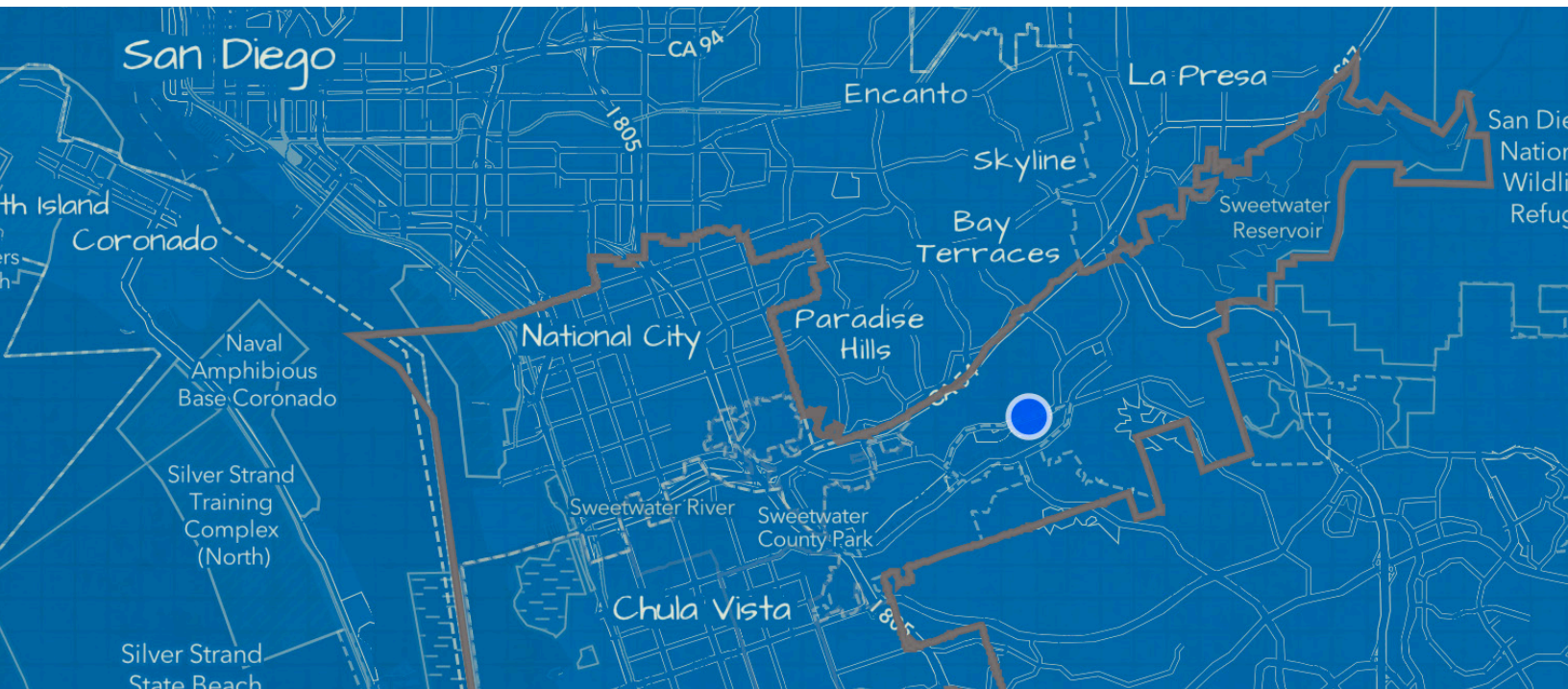
CERC administered 403 surveys to SWA ratepayers responsible for household water use or bills. It implemented a multi-modal methodology that employed telephone and web-based survey invites. SWA posted notices about the survey on its website and twitter account before and during the data collection phase. The survey was administered in English or Spanish. It was pre-tested, included a battery of bias avoidance techniques, and used statistical weighting for optimal data analysis.

General Perception

SWA enjoys high name recognition, with 88% of ratepayers able to spontaneously recall it as the agency that provides their household with water. Trust in SWA is also highly favorable – 7 out of 10 ratepayers trust the authority's information. Unsurprisingly, some ratepayers feel that their water bills are high.

Customer Service

Customer service is a very strong point for SWA. When asked why they are satisfied, almost half point to some element of outstanding personnel, i.e., responsiveness, friendliness, good customer service, helpfulness, and strong communication. Words such as "quick," "friendly," and "helpful" are mentioned frequently.



KEY FINDINGS

CERC's ratepayer survey discovered that SWA is doing quite well with customers, and demonstrates strong performance in several key areas. It also expands SWA's understanding of its customer base by adding demographic dimensions to the analysis. The research identified several areas where the agency could enhance its relationship with ratepayers and share its story with the community.

Services

Few customers who use SWA's services & programs are dissatisfied with them. Ratepayers are most satisfied with the agency's hiking and riding trails – 89% of users like them – followed by "water smart" check-ups, clothes washer rebates, toilet rebates, and fishing. However, more than six-in-ten respondents are completely unaware of SWA's hiking trails. The rebate, landscape audit, and bill adjustment services are unknown to even more ratepayers.

LESSONS

CERC furnished SWA with key takeaways based on thorough data analysis. The most important: the surest way for SWA to bolster positive perceptions is to work to ensure ratepayers perceive their bill as fair and avoid the dreaded “high” label. The bill’s actual amount is not the issue; it’s about ratepayers’ perception of the amount. A second strong lesson is that stellar interactions with SWA personnel truly pay off. The survey shows that SWA communicates

RESULTS

Perhaps the most interesting action SWA took as a result of this survey was renewed emphasis on shaping its messages about water taste and quality. Ratepayer perceptions about both were subject to an array of outside factors and misinformation during Covid-19. Armed with scientific findings from this ratepayer survey, SWA confidently increased its post-Covid community outreach, even taking a water truck to local events to promote its tapwater.



SWA Richard A. Reynolds Groundwater Facility

extremely well with certain segments. SWA could look for ways to replicate these types of interactions across all customer touchpoints. The survey also demonstrates that water taste is a deciding factor when it comes to trusting the water’s safety, and, by extension, overall trust in SWA information.

An additional survey lesson is that SWA could make its auxiliary services and amenities better known to the public. And, though SWA’s hiking trails are highly appreciated by those who use them, they do not in and of themselves drive ratepayer satisfaction.

The ratepayer survey was also well received by Sweetwater Authority’s Board. It has increased SWA’s self-assurance in how it engages ratepayers, and provided insights for continuous improvement. By involving ratepayers in its decision-making process, SWA has advanced its objective to build trust and strengthen community relationships.

Competitive Edge extends its appreciation to SWA for its responsiveness and helpfulness throughout the duration of this project.