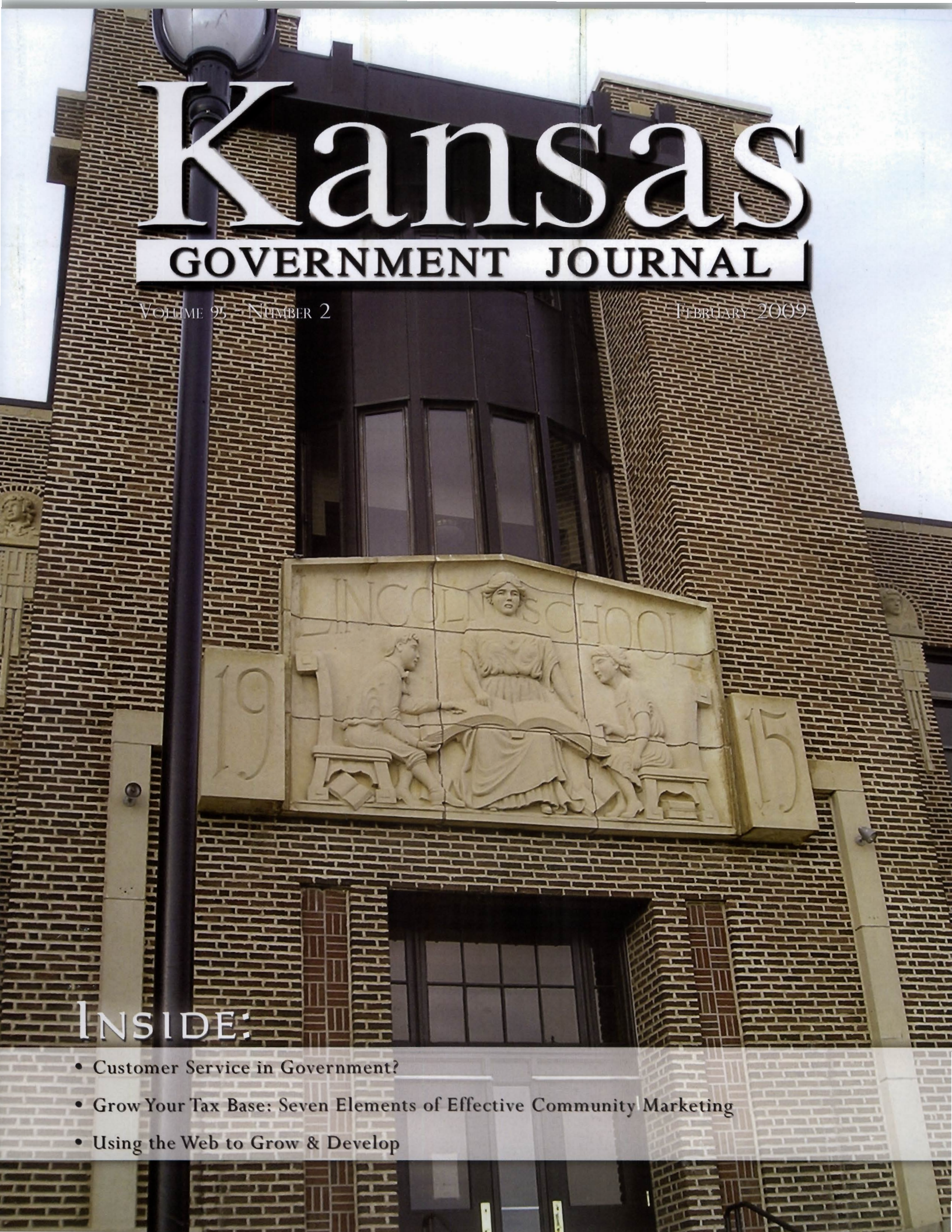
Kansas GOVERNMENT JOURNAL

Volume 95 · Number 2 · February 2009



Inside:

- Customer Service in Government?
- Grow Your Tax Base: Seven Elements of Effective Community Marketing
- Using the Web to Grow & Develop

Customer Service in Government?

City of Salina's Secret Shopper Customer Service Initiative

By: Natalie Fischer

Most local governments desire a high level of customer service for their residents, businesses, and visitors. Unfortunately, most of the public attention to customer service seems to be placed on the private sector, even though the public sector provides many of those services considered most essential. The fact that local governments are considered service monopolies makes it difficult for the public to accept that we believe customer service is important at all. We often hear of terms like Six Sigma, Total Quality Management, and performance benchmarking that originated in the private sector. From time to time, local government may choose to get on the bandwagon and apply similar methods and techniques. However, finding a clear customer service culture and formal program in local government is fairly uncommon. This is something we recently recognized with the City of Salina. As a result, we chose to do something about it!

Salina's Customer Service History

Salina is a community of nearly 50,000 at the intersection of I-70 and I-135 in central Kansas. We operate under the commission-manager form of government and employ more than 500 full-time personnel, with a budget of $67 million. Like most local governments, we are a full-service city, providing most of the typical services. This means we impact the public through our policies, services, and thousands of daily interactions throughout the year.

The City of Salina has always been conscious of the need to provide quality customer service. This is evidenced by our *Statement of Management Values* that was adopted by the City Commission in 1986. This statement communicated how we value citizens, excellence, our responsibility as leaders, employees, communication, and professional ethics. Most of our employees felt comfortable that we provided "above average" customer service. Most of your employees would probably say the same about your organization. We began to feel that this effort was simply not enough. Instead, we realized that, to make great customer service a realistic possibility, a more formal framework was necessary.

Recent Customer Service Initiatives

In April of 2007, we instituted a much broader *Statement of Organizational Values*. These values were created with input from our employees through our Employee Council and department heads, and formally adopted by the City Commission. This document states that we value professional ethics, our **commitment to citizens through customer service**, and a commitment to excellence. The inclusion of customer service is intended to be a big reminder of why we are here and how we should treat others.

A major significance of this new approach is that we have directly linked customer service to salary increases. Our employees must now demonstrate the organizational values in their work in an ongoing basis in order to qualify for merit-based salary increases. Very few organizations are doing this. This has led to more stringent performance reviews, enhanced supervisory training, and our latest endeavor, **The Secret Shopper Program**.

The Secret Shopper Structure

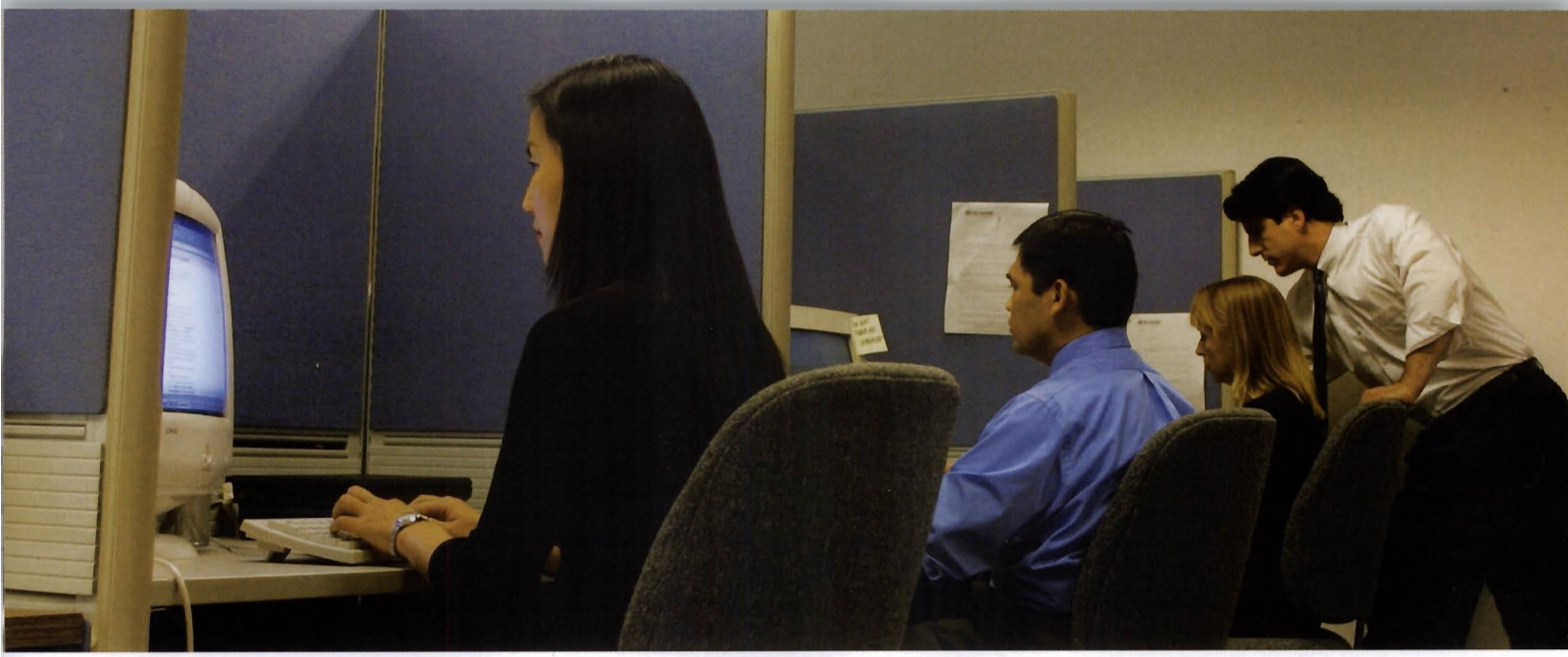
In order to gain an unbiased perspective of how our employees respond to customers, we decided to research our options. We approached a couple of consultants who offered customer service training to see if they performed secret shopper services as well. One firm, The Arnold Group, provided us with a proposal on how they could assist the City of Salina. We collectively determined what data we wanted to obtain and what method we wanted the shoppers to use to obtain it. The City of Salina provided The Arnold Group with a lot of departmental-specific data and typical inquiries in order to simulate a real experience for our front-line service employees.

Examples of the questions asked include: "We're planning on pouring a new driveway in a couple of weeks. Do we need a permit for that?" "My water is discolored. Is it OK for me to drink it?" "Can you tell me if the city has any job openings right now?"

After lots of tweaking of the survey, the shoppers were selected, trained, and sent out to "shop" the City departments, both in person and via telephone. The only individuals who knew of this project were the City Manager and two HR Staff, but neither the specific times/dates of when departments were being shopped nor the identities of the shoppers was disclosed.

The Results

The overall results for our departments were very positive, with the majority of the experiences rated as above average. In a few areas where some concerns were noted prior to the shopper



program, the program reaffirmed the performance concerns with unbiased data. The data also helped us draw key conclusions:

1. All departments were rated high—at least above average if not higher.
2. Our service on the phone is not consistent with the customer service provided in person.
3. We lack protocol and need to make efforts to improve our service approach.

The conclusions, in our opinion, are not necessarily the result of employee faults, but rather a fault of the City of Salina not providing training or establishing specific procedures.

What's Next

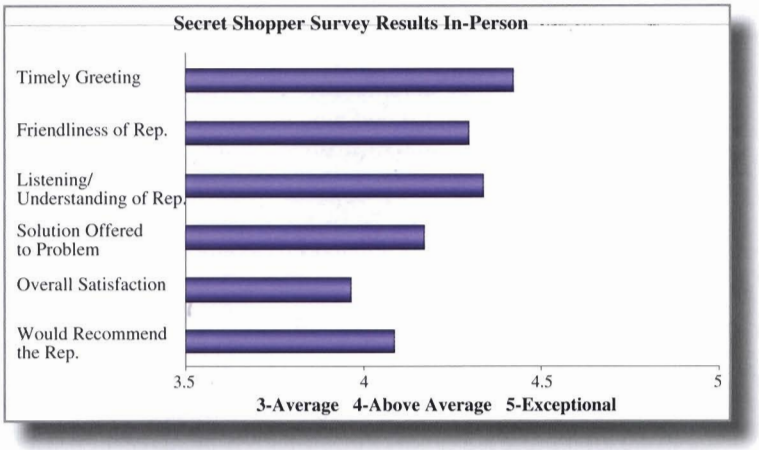
The shoppers will continue to visit departments, both in person and via telephone, at least for the next year. The City of Salina will also provide customer service training and standard protocols and procedures training for basic things such as how citizens are greeted, whether or not employees identify themselves by name on the phone, and how calls are transferred. We'll monitor shopper survey results, comparing pre- and post-training. We are also contemplating providing small incentives for those employees who receive excellent ratings on shopper surveys.

We hope this information provides you with the inspiration and a tool to improve your customer service. Please feel free to contact us at the City of Salina, 300 W. Ash, Salina, KS 67401, 785-309-5710, or via email: Jason Gage, City Manager: jason.gage@salina.org. Natalie Fischer, Human Resources Director: natalie.fischer@salina.org.

Our Results

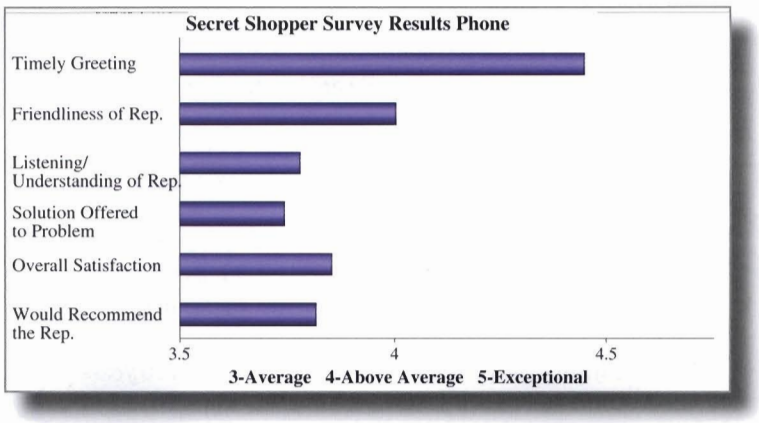
The following is a small sampling of feedback obtained from our first round of the Secret Shopper visits.

In-Person Results: Overall results were very good. We intentionally had the shopper ask for assistance from individuals who were outside of that department's internal function so we could make sure an attempt was made to refer to another department that could assist.



Phone Results: Although were still strong, in comparison to our in-person "shops," our phone results were lower.

*Survey tool provided by The Arnold Group.



About the Author

Natalie Fischer is the Director of Human Resources for the City of Salina. She can be reached at (785) 309-5710.