

EXPERT AUDIENCE VIEWS OF FEDERAL REGULATION: COMPLIMENT AND COMPLAINT  
BEHAVIOR BY USERS OF THE CALENDAR OF FEDERAL REGULATIONS

Robert C. Haring, University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

The subscribers as users of the Calendar of Federal Regulations were surveyed by the OMB with post paid "comment cards" over 1979-1980. Three mailings provided 430 replies representing a cusomer profile, evaluation of regulatory information, complaints and compliments.

BACKGROUND

Federal regulation is widely and popularly debated, and historically has evoked strong public viewpoints. It is also a topic that has received regular study, including surveys of business executives (Greene 1980) and household segments (Cunningham et al 1982). A diverse literature of many studies and surveys fills out profiles of several, diverse publics (Antil 1984, Barksdale et al 1976). On balance, the overall picture of consumer behavior related to regulation is quite incomplete in a number of areas, including the audience for Federal regulatory information (Cunningham and Cunningham 1976).

The pulling together and consolidation of the status of rulemaking is of recent origin, starting with the first Calendar of Federal Regulations, which continues today as the semi-annual Agenda of Federal Regulations. Government surveys on this type of topic are uncommon (G.A.O. 1981) and not regularly scheduled. However, the occasional studies do appear to support the findings of private sector research. One such study was conducted by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget beginning in 1979 utilizing return address "comment cards" for three publication cycles of the Calendar (Haring 1982).

Given the topic, public suggestions and complaining behavior were anticipated as being the dominant forms of response. Fortunately there was an abundant companion literature in complaining behavior which touched on many of the issues being explored in the survey (Bernacchi 1978, Day and Landon 1975, Griffin and Mellott 1979) and the various classes of replies which were received. However, the survey was aimed at a "special clientele" for regulatory information who demonstrated expertise in the nature of their responses (Landon 1977, Langmeyer and Langmeyer 1979, Schuck 1979).

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

In the consumerism and satisfaction literature, the study is an extension of public opinion and public involvement research (Paglin 1977) often associated with consumerism (Barksdale, Darden and Perreault 1976, Arndt et al 1982). However, customer service experience suggested that understanding of the Federal regulatory process was weak, and government offices tended to receive complaints to the nearly total exclusion of non-complaining behavior, especially compliments (Haring 1983).

The study was unusual since it was government originated and concerned with the public response to

de-regulation (Gilly 1979), yet not directed to organized interest groups readily visible is the lobbying process (Schuck 1977). In addition a number of internal constraints were present, namely: (a) the survey format had to be adapted to rules and procedures of the Government Printing Office relating to publication in the Federal Register, (b) it must be submitted to other O.M.B offices that approved surveys during a time when approvals were granted sparingly, especially in a view of Paperwork Reduction Act pressures.

NATURE OF THE SURVEY

Four hundred and thirty comment cards were returned providing at least 390 replies to all critical items. An initial profile of the 430 corresponded closely to the geographic mailing of the Federal Register (Lambert 1981), which was tested by chi-square analysis. Some 45 percent were Washington D.C. and N. E. locations, which sorted as business and industry associations. Another 25 percent was E.N. Central for the same reasons with other replies widely scattered. It was noted that many states were not represented, and Federal Register offices confirmed few or no FR copies were regularly delivered to those postal locations except library depositories. There were few responses from the media even though they received copies of the CFR and thus surveys by way of an internal "master public mailing list."

Followup telephone calls were made to respondents with 100 percent confirmation, i.e., apparently no "crank replies," and the FR staff confirmed the n=430 was in the "good range" of FR survey experience. On balance, sampling biases were considered minimal for a specialized population of regulatory information users (Haring 1982).

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Calendar users are readily divisible into two groups. The first, representing approximately 80 percent, rated the regulatory information as excellent or very good and provided supporting compliments for that assessment. However, the same groups regularly complained about specific rules or agencies, i.e., apparently appreciated the organized information and status reports while opposing particular regulatory actions. The issue of disconfirmation was also present, e.g., review of particular rulemaking in the Calendar was to their liking although not anticipated by the audience.

The second group of roughly 20 percent were opposed to particular regulations and actions by agencies and indifferent or opposed to information releases about regulation (see Table 1). Their write-in comments of less than 10 percent of total were quite strong sometimes bordering on "hate mail." Looking at the 20 percent block, the following summarizes their position:

(1) they opposed regulation strongly, including the publication of regulatory information, and thus proposed it not be published (since regulation should be abandoned?),

(2) there were indications of long term, highly involved dissatisfaction with Federal regulations or particular agencies. It could be that this behavior is much like companion research about "grudge behavior" (Hunt et al 1987).

The ratings on particular portions of the information service were consistently high (see Table 2). It was concluded that the Calendar was encyclopedia-like, that most respondents used a few sections of the entire publication and analytical appendixes, but rated their availability quite high as a quality source of information.

Table 1. Rating on Overall Usefulness

<u>Likert Categories</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Very poor, quite a bad idea.	4.1
Not good, not satisfactory.	2.6
Indifferent, so-so, OK.	13.6
Good, highly useful, very helpful.	70.7
Extremely good, exceptional, and excellent idea.	9.0
	100.0

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