A CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY FIRE AUTHORITY

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

ABSTRACT

The problem was the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA) had never conducted a customer satisfaction survey to determine the degree of customer satisfaction with services rendered by the members of the Operations Department during emergencies.

The purpose of this research project was to develop and implement a customer satisfaction survey for the Orange County Fire Authority. For this project the descriptive research methodology was utilized and answered the following research questions:

- Is the OCFA 911 system efficient?
- Does the OCFA provide emergency services in a professional and courteous manner?
- Are OCFA emergency personnel taking the time to explain their actions to the public?

The procedures used in this research included a computer search for literature in the National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center and Santa Ana College Library.

A customer satisfaction survey was developed and mailed to individuals who received assistance from the Orange County Fire Authority for emergency medical and structure fire incidents during the month of November 1998.

The results from the survey indicated that the constituents who received service from the Orange County Fire Authority experienced a 96% level of overall satisfaction.

The recommendations of this research project are as follows: continue with the customer satisfaction survey process; stress the importance of interpersonal communications and taking the time to explain actions while on scene; and develop informational handouts to provide the customer, which explains the service delivery methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

The challenge for fire service leaders today is to seek management excellence while addressing the needs and desires of citizens. The Orange County Fire Authority has long recognized the need to evaluate the services provided by members of the Operations Department during emergencies.

Fire departments need to commit to effective customer service. By identifying the needs of the customer, and then developing cost effective programs and services to meet these needs, fire departments will demonstrate to its citizens that they are responsive to their needs and good stewards of local tax revenues.

The problem was that the Orange County Fire Authority had never conducted a customer satisfaction survey to determine the degree of customer satisfaction with services rendered by the members of the Operations Department during emergencies.

The purpose of this research paper was to develop and implement a customer satisfaction survey for the Orange County Fire Authority. For this project the descriptive research methodology was utilized and answered the following research questions:

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BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The fire service must pay more attention to the needs of its citizens. In other words, fire departments will have to commit to effective customer service. By identifying the needs of the customer, and then developing cost effective programs and services to meet those needs, fire departments will demonstrate to its citizens that they are responsive and provide efficient and effective services.

The degree to which fire departments identify with their customers in meeting their expectations is responsible for the image of that organization. If a fire department treats the entire community as merely citizens who will have emergencies, and if firefighters sit behind closed doors waiting for someone to call, there is going to be a gap between expectations and performance (Coleman, 1990).

The Orange County Fire Authority has never conducted a customer satisfaction survey to determine the degree of customer satisfaction with services rendered by the members of the Operations Department during emergencies. As such, the only feedback received was limited to complimentary letters, letters which expressed a specific concern with the level of service, or a telephone call. Essentially, there was no methodology to acquire a sense of customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction and to proactively solicit suggestions from the customers to make changes or adjustments to service delivery.

Today's fire service managers cannot be complacent in assuming that their services are considered absolutely necessary and are immune to budgetary shortfalls and or cutbacks. Fire departments have traditionally relied on a "good guy" reputation to sell their ideas to taxpayers and elected officials (Paulsgrove, 1991). The public services that consumers choose to support are those that best satisfy their needs (Paige, 1990).

Fire service managers need to employ a process to measure the level of customer satisfaction. In his research, Albrecht (1992) emphasizes that in order to get at the issue, there is a need to describe, analyze, and assess the quality of the customers' experience. This means identifying the basic elements of the customers' experience and finding quality indicators that tell us how well we are delivering that experience. Leboeuf (1987) goes further to state that collecting, gathering, and measuring the opinions of the customers provides the crucial information that is needed to improve the organization.

With the information that is collected from customer satisfaction surveys, fire departments can develop strategic plans to better educate the public as to the fire department's functions. Most importantly, emergency personnel can be better educated in how to interact with customers and provide an enhanced level of service to the community.

This project was prepared to satisfy the applied research requirements of the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program. The problem addressed by this research project relates to Unit 10 of *Executive Development* course, titled "Service Quality and Marketing." This unit of instruction emphasized the need for fire service organizations to focus on the aspects of quality, service quality, and the customer. True service quality is achieved by creating predictably positive experiences and by continually striving to exceed the customer's expectations. It was anticipated that the customer satisfaction survey recommendations would be beneficial to other fire departments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to summarize the research that has been conducted concerning the use of customer satisfaction surveys by the fire service. Information was collected from

trade journals, and business and marketing texts, as well as Applied Research Projects for the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program.

Fire departments are utilizing customer satisfaction surveys as an instrument to gauge their performance. According to Jones (1985) the results of community opinion surveys help managers understand how their agencies work and how the general public and specific groups see their performance. Many managers consequently have been able to alter agency procedures to enhance efficiency and effectiveness or to coordinate the organization's activities to maximize public understanding.

According to Stone (1995) the fire service, in its role of internally evaluating the needs and wants of the public may not always accurately reflect the public's need and desires, resulting in harder competition for diminishing tax dollars with the community. While we have the best intentions to provide the highest level of service, we should try to give the public what it wants, not what we think it ought to have (Marinucci & Baldwin 1989). Generally, the type and quality of service are not the result of customer input, but rather customers get what service providers think they ought to have (Paulfraz, 1981).

In order for fire service organizations to provide cost effective fire services, it first must identify what products the consumers are demanding. The fire service is no longer just an emergency responder, but a service provider who's customers expect a level of a service. The public has come to expect service organizations to be efficient and responsive to their demands. The only opportunity to excel is to establish satisfaction programs that target the community, seeking to gain recognition and support. In a service oriented organization, where image is important and meeting customer

expectations critical, customer feedback for the fire service is the recipe for success (McIntosh, 1995).

As a result of this literature review, a customer satisfaction survey was developed and customer opinions were solicited. The best companies are pushed around by their customers, and they love it (Peters and Waterman, 1982). After gathering this input it is important to then listen to what the public wants and needs from the department, and develop programs accordingly (Stone, 1995). Fire departments in particular must strive to constantly provide service to meet the ever-changing needs of the community. Since public safety service is the "product" of the fire department and this product is not a profit making one, the service must meet the community's need in an excellent fashion or the citizen will spend her/his tax dollar on other services (Cannon, 1992).

Fire service organizations who are customer orientated will identify customer needs, and then do everything possible to meet those needs. This will not be simply a fad and then fade away, but will become an expected level of performance. Quality customer service will be an essential element of the fire service.

PROCEDURES

To begin the research for this project, a computer search was performed at the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center during the period of August 10-21, 1998. The search was intended to gather information related to customer satisfaction surveys in the fire service. The subject search produced a list of articles and research papers related to customer service and customer satisfaction programs. Several of these documents provided information relative to this research paper.

In November 1998, an additional computer search was conducted at Santa Ana College Library to obtain information from business and marketing textbooks.

The customer satisfaction survey form (Appendix A) was developed and formatted similar to the Santa Clara County Fire Department's survey form. The design of the survey is a single page, addressed form, with a prepaid postage return address.

A Business Reply Mail Accounting Systems (BRMAS) application was completed with the United States Post Office to establish an account to pay for postage on all completed and returned surveys. By doing so, it was not necessary for the customer to pay postage or cause any unnecessary postage for surveys which were not returned. As part of the BRMAS application process, the United States Post Office required that it approve the final survey document to evaluate the document's adherence to address and bar coding format.

The satisfaction survey consisted of seven questions which were designed to determine the degree of customer satisfaction with the services experienced by the customer. The questions were designed to systematically take the customer through the incident beginning with the initial contact with the emergency 911 operator, an evaluation of fire department personnel, and overall satisfaction with the fire department. An optional step allowed customers to place any suggestions or comments on the survey, and to request a follow-up phone contact for any further comments or clarification.

A computer program was developed to extract data related to structure fires and emergency medical responses from the Orange County Fire Information Reporting System (OCFIRS). The data extracted included incident number, date of incident, type of incident, involved property owner/patient name and mailing address, and responding unit. Any incident involving deceased persons was not

extracted. Removing incidents with deceased persons did not create any limitations to the survey. This was done to be sensitive to the respective families.

During the month of November, 4,119 incidents were extracted and the names of all involved property owners or patients were identified. Using this information, survey forms were mailed by the Clerk of the Fire Authority. The Clerk of the Fire Authority entered the data from returned surveys into a survey database. Telephone calls were made to all individuals who included negative comments or had questions on their survey forms by a staff battalion chief assigned to headquarters.

The data obtained from this process was summarized into a report (Appendix B). Copies of the report were distributed to Executive Management, Division Chiefs, Battalion Chiefs, and Station Captains. The report was arrayed by Battalion and Unit, and included the following data: number of surveys responses received; simple numeric average score for each of seven questions; the average score for questions 1 and 2, which pertain to the 911 communications system; the average score for questions 3 through 7, which pertain to services provided in the field; an overall average for all questions, and any comments included on the survey form. Not all units appeared on the report, only those which survey forms had been returned were included on the report.

The procedures used for this research project allowed each of the following three research questions to be answered:

- Is the OCFA 911 system efficient?
- Does the OCFA provide emergency services in a professional and courteous manner?
- Are OCFA emergency personnel taking the time to explain their actions to the public?

RESULTS

The results of this research project indicate that constituents who received emergency services from the Orange County Fire Authority were very satisfied with the level of service performed by members of the Operations Department. The Orange County Fire Authority received an overall satisfaction rate of 96%.

During the month of November 1998, the Clerk of the Fire Authority distributed 4,119 surveys to constituents who received services from the Orange County Fire Authority for structure fires or medical emergencies. The Post Office returned as "undeliverable" 352 or approximately 9% of the initially distributed surveys. This rate of return was surprising and underscores the importance of collecting accurate patient/owner information.

A total of 1,111 or 27% of the surveys were completed and received by the Clerk of the Fire Authority. Only 21 surveys were responses to structure fires. The remaining 1,090 or 98% of the surveys were for EMS related incidents.

The responses were rated on a scale of four (4) strongly agree to one (1) strongly disagree based on the level of agreement with the statement provided on the survey instrument. Table 1 demonstrates the degree of satisfaction as they relate to the specific survey questions and provides an overall level of satisfaction. The scores were calculated based on a simple average of all collected scores.

Qu	estion	Ratings in percentages				
1.	The 911 system was prompt	97				
2.	The 911 operator was courteous	96				
3.	The fire department responded promptly	95				
4.	Fire department personnel were courteous and helpful	98				
5.	Fire department personnel took time to explain their action	ons 94				
6.	Fire department personnel were professional in appearan	nce 97				
7.	Overall I was satisfied with the fire department	96				

The survey results show that respondents have a 96% level of satisfaction with the emergency 911 system. Specifically, respondents felt that the 911 system was prompt and that dispatchers are courteous.

The survey illustrates that the fire authority's response time for structure fires and medical emergencies meet the customer's satisfaction 95% of the time.

The members of the Operations Department who responded to structure fires and medical emergencies were perceived to be courteous and helpful and were rated with a 98% level of satisfaction. This question received the highest level of satisfaction provided by respondents.

An area that demonstrates the need for improvement is the time that fire authority personnel take to explain their actions. Although receiving a 94% level of satisfaction, the written comments indicate that personnel need to make a more concerted effort to explain their actions while on scene of an incident.

The survey results show that respondents felt that fire authority personnel were professional in appearance and received a satisfaction rating of 97%.

The constituents who received service from members of the Operations Department indicated a 96% level of overall satisfaction with the fire department.

Although the Orange County Fire Authority received high ratings, the comments section provided the most valuable information. The written comments provided by the respondents were consistent with the high degree of satisfaction which was noted on the survey forms. Comments included: "Our use of the 911 service and OCFA has been most satisfactory". "They were courteous and professional". "Your operator calmly talked with me continuously while quickly getting help to me".

However, in addition to the positive comments and accolades, a number of critical comments were received. The negative comments focused on service delivery issues, interpersonal skills, and patient hospital destination. Specific comments were: "Why do you send out fire equipment-no fire identified-presumably there's some test or equipment the paramedics can't handle". "Why was it necessary to have 2 ambulances? County personnel were just on the scene and a civilian ambulance was also dispatched". "No one told us what was going on". "I was told to go Saddleback Hospital, but my husband went to Mission Hospital".

The survey instrument also advised respondents that they would be contacted by Orange County Fire Authority staff if they requested such by providing their phone number and a convenient time to be contacted. After receiving the first 20 surveys and contacting the respondents it was noted that the respondents did not want anyone to follow up with them. Although appreciated, the respondents had merely provided the information because the survey instrument had a place to indicate such information, not realizing that follow up action would occur. Therefore Orange County Fire

Authority Executive Management made the decision to only follow up with phone calls those survey instruments which listed negative comments, poor ratings, or specifically requested telephone follow up.

This significantly reduced the number of surveys which required follow up calls.

The follow up phone calls reaffirmed the respondents opinion on the survey whether the level of service was listed as satisfactory or not. Additionally, this allowed the respondent to further explain their opinion. In all cases, the respondents were very appreciative that a follow up occurred.

DISCUSSION

When compared to the results of others in the literature review, the results of this project support the importance of customer satisfaction surveys.

The literature review consistently established the theme that a customer satisfaction survey would give fire service managers a gauge with which to measure their performance. The survey instrument used in this research project further reinforced this position. The results are representative of what Jones found in 1985 when he emphasized that surveys help managers understand how their agencies work and how the general public and specific groups see their performances.

The Orange County Fire Authority received outstanding ratings from its constituents. From a statistical perspective it is much too early to reach any conclusion or to leap to interventions. In reviewing the comments provided by the respondents, there are areas in which service levels may be enhanced. As suggested by McIntosh, customer feedback for the fire service is the recipe for success. With the comments provided by the respondents, there is an opportunity for the Orange County Fire Authority to identify any consistent themes or trends and then give consideration to initiating any interventions in a methodical fashion.

In his research Stone recommends that by listening to what the public wants and needs, fire departments will need to develop programs accordingly. The survey results indicated that respondent's greatest dissatisfaction was in the area of interaction with fire department personnel during the emergency. The Orange County Fire Authority must give some consideration to enhancing personal interaction with its customers during emergencies. This is necessary to maintain the high caliber of service that the public has come to expect. By not doing so would certainly place the Orange County Fire Authority in a position of not listening to its customers. As Leboeuf suggested in 1987, collecting, gathering, and measuring the opinions of customers provides the critical information that is needed to improve organizations. In his research Cannon emphasizes that fire departments must strive to constantly provide service to meet the ever changing needs of the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research project recommends that the Orange County Fire Authority continue with its customer satisfaction survey program. The following actions or interventions should be considered by the Orange County Fire Authority Executive Management.

- The customer satisfaction survey continue to be limited to all structure fires and emergency medical incidents.
- Stress the importance of interpersonal communications and taking the time to explain fire department actions while on the incident.

 Develop an informational handout to provide the customer, which explains the service delivery methodology provided by the Orange County Fire Authority related to structure fires and medical emergencies.

Limiting the customer satisfaction survey to structure fires and emergency medical incidents allows the program to be managed efficiently with the limited staff assigned to facilitate this program. To attempt to capture all incidents would require full time personnel solely dedicated to facilitate and manage the program. Present staff includes the Clerk of the Fire Authority and one Battalion Chief.

The point of contact customers have with the Orange County Fire Authority during the emergency establishes the experience with the organization. Realizing this, the Orange County Fire Authority should consider developing the interpersonal communications skills of its emergency responders. The development and implementation of sensitivity training relating to the needs of the customer will enhance this experience.

As suggested by the survey, the Orange County Fire Authority needs to make a more concerted effort to explain fire authority actions during the emergency. Although circumstances may not always permit effective dialogue to occur. The use of informational materials such as a handout may be useful. The materials should explain how the Orange County Fire Authority provides emergency medical services. Specifically it should address resource deployment, and the use of private ambulance companies for patient transportation. Utilizing corporate sponsorships may offset the printing costs of such materials. The Orange County Fire Authority's Community Relations and Education Section currently utilizes corporate sponsorships for its Childhood Drowning Prevention program, and other high profile safety issues. This public private partnership has proven to be highly effective.

For fire departments that are considering the use of customer satisfaction surveys the design of the survey instrument is critical. To provide an area which respondents can provide written comments is extremely valuable and permits respondents to provide critical comments and an opportunity to make suggestions.

If the survey instrument allows the respondent to place their name and phone number as a request to be contacted, adequate staff and time must be allotted to insure timely follow up.

Additionally, clear directions must be provided to insure that respondents are placing their name to be contacted, rather then being compelled to do so because of the format of the instrument allows space.

To collect and collate the statistical information from the survey instrument is a labor-intensive process that is proportional to the number of surveys returned. Here again, adequate staff is necessary.

Fire service managers need to share the results of the survey with the members of the organization. Doing so will instill a sense of pride and establish a benchmark to with which gauge future performance.

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Appendix A

Orange County Fire Authority Customer Satisfaction Survey

Recently you dialed 911 because you needed help or we came into your community to render assistance to one of your neighbors. The Orange County Fire Authority takes great pride in the service we provide to you and the community. We are constantly seeking ways to improve service to our customers. To assist us, we ask that you evaluate our level of service by completing and returning this survey.

We thank you for the opportunity to assist you. As your fire department, we are always here for you!

		Strongly Agree Disagree	Ag	ree Disa	Strongly gree		
1.	The 911 system was prompt.						
2.	The 911 operator was courteous.						
3.	The fire department responded promptly.						
4.	Fire department personnel were courteous and helpful.						
5.	Fire department personnel took time to explain their actions.						
6.	Fire department personnel were professional in appearance.						
7.	Overall I was satisfied with the fire department service.						
Do	Do you have any suggestions for improving our service in the future.						

(Optional)If you would like to be contacted regarding the service we have provided, or if you have questions about your fire department, please provide your name, phone number, and the best time to call. If you would like to contact the OCFA, please call the Clerk of the Authority at 714-289-7401.

Name:	Phone:	Best	time	to	call:
AM/PM					

Appendix B

SUMMARY FOR ALL BATTALIONS Surveys Received November 1 - 30, 1998

	No. of		Average Scores								Overall
Battalion	Responses	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q1-2	Q3-7	Average
1	164	3.68	3.84	3.68	3.80	3.68	3.81	3.71	3.76	3.74	3.74
2	94	3.91	3.82	3.97	3.93	3.70	3.87	3.92	3.87	3.88	3.87
3	65	3.88	3.67	3.59	3.92	3.82	3.79	3.87	3.77	3.80	3.79
4	271	3.89	3.90	3.81	3.90	3.79	3.90	3.83	3.89	3.85	3.86
5	114	3.89	3.86	3.92	3.92	3.83	3.93	3.93	3.88	3.91	3.90
6	147	3.91	3.83	3.86	3.94	3.79	3.93	3.85	3.87	3.87	3.87
7	100	3.90	3.81	3.75	3.86	3.70	3.82	3.72	3.85	3.77	3.79
8	156	3.89	3.90	3.90	3.94	3.82	3.94	3.92	3.89	3.91	3.90
Overall	1,111	3.87	3.83	3.81	3.90	3.77	3.87	3.84	3.85	3.84	3.84
Overall F	Percentage	97	96	95	98	94	97	96	96	96	96

Total Survey Forms Mailed:	4,119		Ratings:
Total Returned - Undeliverable:	352	9%	Strongly Agree 4.00
			Agree 3.00
Total Returned - Completed Survey forms:	1,111	27%	Disagree
2.00			
			Strongly Disagree 1.00
Completed forms related to fire responses:	21	2%	
Completed forms related to EMS responses:	1,090	98%	

Battalion 1

	No. of		Average Scores								
Unit	Responses	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q1-2	Q3-7	Average
E2	6	4.00	3.60	3.80	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.80	3.96	3.91
E202	1	2.00		2.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	3.00	2.00	3.20	3.00
E225	1	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
E25	2	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
E44	4	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	3.80	3.86
E48	58	3.89	3.91	3.90	3.91	3.84	3.86	3.91	3.90	3.88	3.89
E64	16	3.81	3.75	3.94	3.94	3.81	3.94	3.88	3.78	3.90	3.87
E65	12	3.92	3.91	3.92	3.83	3.82	3.83	3.83	3.92	3.85	3.87
E66	28	3.89	3.89	3.89	3.96	3.75	3.89	3.89	3.89	3.88	3.88
M48	23	4.00	4.00	3.95	4.00	3.82	3.95	3.96	4.00	3.94	3.95
S64	6	3.83	4.00	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.80	3.50	3.92	3.66	3.73
S66	2	3.50	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.75	3.50	3.57
T64	5	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
Overall	164	3.68	3.84	3.68	3.80	3.68	3.81	3.71	3.76	3.74	3.74

Comments:

Engine 2

Our use of 911 service and OCFA has been most satisfactory.

It's outstanding as is. All 3 times we called.

I can't say enough for the fire department and 911 - What would I have done if not for 911.

Engine 202

Make it faster.

Engine 48

I was in an automobile accident and your personnel were very reassuring to me.

Thank you to all who responded.

I was impressed with their efficiency and care.

Response was great

The fire department was great

It was great. They were absolutely wonderful.

Thank you for all of your help. You were so reassuring.

Keep up the good work. We appreciate you fellows. Thank you all.

Do not lower any of your standards for those who wish to join your ranks. Keep selecting only the best qualified as you have. It shows in the performance.

I felt the response time was too long in relation to where I live and the station.

All personnel involved mad me feel very secure and glad to be living where such service is available. The woman who answered our phone call was not flustered by what was happening to me but she knew how to try to stop my nose bleed. I did what she told me to do - although it didn't stop - it however did slow down.

Engine 64

I want to thank you for the outstanding job all personnel did! If it were not for them I would not be writing this letter.

Everything was perfect. Service was prompt, and my mother was in good hands.

What is the possibility of more female personnel. Sometimes female paramedics may be more calming to another woman victim.

I deeply thank you for your service.

The firefighters & 911 operator were very very nice, and prompt. Thank you very very much for being there when I needed you. I love all of you for your services.

Engine 65

I want to go to Huntington Beach Hospital, they take me to another hospital.

The emergency crew was great! Very professional & courteous.

I was very pleased with their professionalism. They were calm, caring & courteous.

God bless all of them and thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Engine 66

Everything perfect.

Your service was great.

The service was first class.

They were great. Keep up the good work.

They were extremely helpful, courteous & kind - top notch individuals - very proud of them.

Please express my grateful appreciation to the men who came to our aid.

I think the service provided was outstanding in all areas. They are courteous beyond reproach.

They were great. They saved my life.

I'm a police officer for the city of Westminster. I got hurt in the line of duty - Sta. 91/Eng 66 came to my aid. I've been with the city for over 10 years and I've never seen such professionalism and caring treatment before in mylife. I'm extremely grateful for the super help I received from these individuals. Thank you very much for your prompt helpful services.

Excellent response - thank you.

Medic 48

It seemed forever for the FD to arrive. The fire was out by the time they came.

I am very pleased with 911 response.

They couldn't have been better or done more.

Service was wonderful

93 yr. old physically handicapped - had medical emergency expertly resolved.

You were angels in uniform.

They were very professional and caring.

They were awesome. Thank you guys! You were so special.

Service was the greatest. Very happy with the prompt service.

Ambulance S64

Excellent job always

They were very polite & courteous. Couldn't ask for anyone more helpful than they were. You have a wonderful team.

I am very grateful to have this service & see them often because of where I live. Thanks so much.