

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three focus groups were conducted with customers of the Department of Building Inspection. The groups were made up of 1) San Francisco building professionals, 2) homeowners, and 3) community and industry representatives (influentials). Topics centered on their experiences and perceptions of the Department. An overview of the findings is included below.

Building and Renovating Property in San Francisco

- Homeowners cited their extreme frustration and fear of going through the permitting and inspection processes, largely due to a lack of knowledge. . . . *You don't know what hoops to jump through next . . .*
- Professionals and Influentials also cited the fear of homeowners as clients, as well as the amount of time required to convince them to go through the permitting/inspection process. *[It] takes hours and hours for a new client to understand what it takes.*

Perception of the San Francisco Department of Building Inspection

- SF DBI received ratings from all three groups, Homeowners tended to rate their experience lower than either Influentials or Professionals.
- Much of the Homeowners' frustration and dissatisfaction seemed to stem from a lack of knowledge about the inspection and permitting processes, not knowing which person to speak to, or what steps to take next in the permitting/inspection processes.
- Although Professionals (Group 1) and Influentials (Group 3) gave SF DBI higher ratings, the Homeowners' frustration impacted them in several ways. Both Professionals and Influentials indicated that education of clients about the SF DBI process was time-consuming. In addition, both Professionals and Influentials alluded to homeowners (who often didn't know where to go or what to do) tying up SF DBI resources due to their lack of knowledge, thus causing everyone longer waits in line, delays to see staff, etc.
- Both Influentials and Professionals were aware of recent improvements and changes, and both groups indicated their ratings were higher than they would have been as little as 6-12 months prior.

Permitting Process

- Professionals rated their permitting process experience with SF DBI more positively than Homeowners. While both groups expressed many similar positives and negatives, Professionals indicated that there was always someone they could find who was helpful and able to answer their questions or help them – but primarily because they were more familiar with the department. *If you haven't been there, you won't know that, it's more something you find out over time*, one participant noted.
- While Influentials were more likely than Homeowners to feel that they could get their questions answered, some of their lower ratings on other attributes stemmed from a sense of SF DBI taking too much time and/or stalling to make a final decision. *One department looks at the other and no one wants to sign off*, said one participant.

Public Perception of SF DBI

- Although all three groups mentioned rumor and scandals, Professionals and Influentials were more concerned about less knowledgeable people believing everything they read or heard, and felt that public relations was a key component of any changes.
- Both Influentials and Professionals also felt this created more work for them with clients, as they had to convince clients it was not only OK, but desirable, to go through the formal permitting process.
- Homeowners' perceptions focused on their own experiences and those of their friends and neighbors. They were fearful, and worried one question on a minor change would trigger a full-scale overhaul.

Visions for the Department's Future

- All three groups rated the current programs in place, *Expansion of over-the-counter review process* and *Plan review checks by appointment*, the most highly.
- Homeowners did not like the proposed Premium Services plans, as they felt it created a two-tiered system in which San Francisco's wealthiest would receive much better service than the average homeowner. While there was some of this sentiment in Influentials, many in the group looked much more favorably on these proposals. Professionals were more ambivalent about fee-for-service proposals, rating them higher than Homeowners, but not as highly as Influentials.

Usage of the SF DBI Web Site

While Professionals and Influentials had used the web site the most, all three groups felt that it could be better utilized. Group participants felt the web site should allow them to:

- Make appointments
- Track permits/approvals
- Read/download guidebooks or special sections just for homeowners, small business owners, and other infrequent visitors to SF DBI
- Download/print forms
- Print approved permits online, directly from their computers
- Make a microfilm record request
- View inspector assignments for particular areas
- Read/download vital sections of information, including building codes, Sanborn maps, and block identification

Comparisons/Emerging Practices

Professionals and Influentials felt that SF DBI is doing a number of things right – things they would like other departments to adopt. These include:

- SF DBI's thoroughness. Other departments were accused of merely *glossing things through* or providing only boilerplate information.
- Influentials cited the depth of knowledge of SF DBI's inspectors as particularly positive.
- Professionals cited the ability to walk in and talk to someone face to face, without necessarily having an appointment, as a positive.

Professionals and Influentials made the following recommendations for SF DBI, based on what they have seen at other Building and Inspection departments:

- Professionals and Influentials both felt that SF DBI should do more to coordinate with other departments, from having business licenses nearby to parallel plan checks.
- Professionals particularly noted the need for SF DBI to repair its relationships with the Planning Department and the Fire Department. Relevant comments included, *Sometimes [they're] so separate, [there's a] lack of communication, and Building and Fire in SF war with each other too much . . .*
- Influentials stressed the need for larger, more modern, revamped facilities. One Influential summarized his feelings as, *It (SFDBI) reminds me of walking into a hospital, and not a good one.*

Wrap-Up: Recommendation to SF DBI Director

The three groups made very similar recommendations in their final focus group exercises. Key recommendations included:

- Revamping SF DBI offices. In addition to improved signage, this included a better layout, more spacious offices, and a more positive, welcoming environment for visitors and employees alike.
- Streamlining SF DBI processes. All three groups felt a reorganization of how the department works could minimize the steps required, reducing the time and cost of permits and inspections.
- Strive for consistency of interpretation/clarification of jurisdictions. Professionals and Influentials, particularly, saw the need for staff training so that codes were interpreted in a uniform manner. These two groups also felt that boundaries needed to be clarified between when an issue must be decided by SF DBI and when, for example, it should be decided by Planning.
- Improved Information, both online and offline. In addition to adding items to the SF DBI web site, suggestions included informational kiosks (self-serve and staffed) to guide those visiting for the first time. Special resources for homeowners and/or first-time visitors were also suggested.
- A single point of contact for each customer or project. All three groups stressed the need for one person they could contact within DBI who could guide them through the necessary steps, ensure needed approvals weren't waiting on someone on vacation, etc.

Important: This type of qualitative research permits directional rather than statistical analysis.