

Improving customer service

An innovative Australian Customs Service computer-based complaints and compliments handling system is helping Customs to improve its customer service across Australia.

During its inaugural year of national operation (1999-2000), Customs new system recorded a total of 1399 cases, comprising 707 complaints and 692 compliments.

The launch of the new system was accompanied by the wide distribution of a *Tell Us What You Think* brochure which was very successful in encouraging clients to speak directly to Customs about their experiences.

Customer comments have resulted in a number of changes in the way Customs goes about its business.

These innovations have included:

- Provision of credit card facilities in areas of public contact such as at Customs facilities in international mail centres and at seaport terminals;
- Fully re-designed counter areas in some Customs offices used for the clearance of personal effects and commercial importations;
- Extension of operating hours at some cashiers' counters;
- Better public access to some Customs buildings;
- Changes to Customs auction processes;
- Improved signage in counter areas to assist with public access;
- Introduction of 'snake' queuing

(eg at Melbourne Airport);

- Streaming of passengers into separate Australian and non-Australian passport-holder queues;
- Training for staff in cross-cultural awareness and dealing with difficult people;
- A review of 'release of cargo' procedures to reduce delays; and
- Improvements to the Customs Internet site.

These improvements are of great benefit to both clients and staff. Customs staff also provide feedback into the system about their interactions with clients and these comments are also valuable in identifying how customer services can be improved.

One benefit of the new system has been that it allows Customs staff to address clients concerns earlier than in the past, which can help reduce the number of later complaints about the same issue. Staff members are thus able to get on with doing their jobs sooner and clients are satisfied that the matter has been dealt within a professional and responsive manner.

The new system is also being used to record compliments, as well as complaints. The four most common compliments during 1999-2000 were that Customs have:

- friendly staff;
- good liaison skills with other agencies during joint tasks and good skills at sharing information with other agencies;
- efficient service; and
- high level of professionalism.