In God we trust - for everyone else bring statistics

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Abstract

When putting your hand out for a slice of the pie, Animal Management Officers (AMOs) need to use the tools their own managers use to gain the resources they need to deliver services. Negotiations with Councillors or management and competing with other Departments for funding within your Council will only be successful if you have good statistics, not 'gut feelings'. Benchmarking is a tool to 'draw a line in the sand' and an essential part of direction setting in strategic planning. This paper will provide information on positive and achievable benchmarking, and describes a basic model on the benchmarking process.

Background

Of the many of the buzz words bandied around in management forums and strategic planning sessions 'benchmarking' and 'best practice' are prominent. Benchmarking means the development of meaningful standard measures of performance either internal to an organisation or across organisations (Cole 2001). This definition includes a refinement of this process known as 'best practice benchmarking', which means comparing measures of an organisation's performance with those of other organisations in the same or different industries (Cole 2001).

Animal Management Officers should see benchmarking as an integral part of strategic planning and an opportunity to promote the service they provide for their Council. Sound strategic planning involves looking back (retrospective), looking inside (self-analysis) and looking outside (benchmarking) before looking forward and setting directions for the future (DPI 2006).

In line with the theme of this year's AIAM Conference "Back to Basics" this paper and subsequent presentation will provide information on benchmarking as a process and the current benchmarking activity being conducted by the Victorian Department of Primary Industries' Domestic Animal Management Implementation Committee (known as DAMIC).

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is one part of a planning framework that can provide measures of your performance, determine if you are performing well, identify your strengths and weaknesses and compare how you are performing against other Councils that provide either an identical or similar service.

Types of benchmarking

- Internal – look at ourselves (self analysis);
- External – look at competitors (business orientated);
- Industry – look at leaders in your field (consider the operation of previous AMO and AMO Team of the Year winners);
- Process – look at different business types (benchmark work processes not practices).

Positive benchmarking involves choosing the right measures, involving the right people and understanding that benchmarking is an ongoing process.

Making benchmarking achievable

There are six common steps to most benchmarking methods (Matters and Evans 1999), these include:

1. Planning – what do we benchmark and with whom?

This is the time to ask yourself questions like what is important to us and our residents? What would happen if we didn't exist? Would the behaviours of our residents change if we changed our operation? In this paper, the term 'residents' refers to all possible users of your animal management service, including pet owners, non-pet owners, operators of domestic animal businesses, etc.

The Domestic Animal Management Implementation Committee (DAMIC) developed a benchmarking exercise with the aim of determining the industry standard or best practice operation of animal management in Victoria. DAMIC also wanted to determine if the legislation in Victoria for companion animals was working and identify potential 'hot spot' issues councils may need to address now or in the future.

During this planning step you need to determine the 'stuff that matters' to you and your residents, but don't get hung up on the buzz terms like Critical Success Factors (CSFs) or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), etc. Once you have completed the analysis on the stuff that matters, the gaps you identify between your Council and another Council's operation can be perceived as 'hot spot' issues that you may need to address with an action as part of a strategic plan.

2. Forming a working group – select and manage working group

Many of the steps involving benchmarking are conducted by an individual, but effective benchmarking involves a team of people with a common goal. The team's structure will be dependant on the size of your Council, the resources you have available and how many councils you wish to benchmark against.

The team should incorporate a leader who will be responsible for the direction of the team. This leader should be chosen from the team not just due to their position within the Council.

A basic benchmarking team should include an Animal Management Officer with direct involvement in providing the animal management service, a supervisor of Animal Management Officers, a member of the customer service team and an 'outsider' from a totally different department within your Council (who could provide the 'outside the box' thinking).

The entire benchmarking process should be developed in a simple, concise manner to ensure the team understands the reasons for conducting the benchmarking exercise, the benchmarking model you are going to use and what you hope to achieve from the exercise. It is important to keep the direction of the team consistent during the first exercise and any future benchmarking exercises. Establishing an aim or goal for the team will assist to keep the team focused.

3. Collecting data – identify similar Councils and gather information from them

Identify similar types of Councils to your own (ie 'compare apples with apples') and ask the questions your working group have identified as the stuff that matters to you and your residents.

In the DAMIC Benchmarking Exercise in Victoria, Councils were separated into 'like groups' depending on physical size and populations. These 'like groups' were described as Inner Metropolitan Melbourne, Outer Metropolitan Melbourne, Provincial Cities, Large Rural and Small Rural Councils. Defining Councils into 'like groups' is a tool to attempt to compare yourself with other 'apples'.

The first stage within the data collection step is to identify your own demographics, statistics and performance. Only when you know yourself can you effectively go out to other like groups of Councils to ask them similar questions for comparison.

The types of questions you should be asking yourself include:

- Size of municipal district, population and number of households;
- Number of staff involved in animal management (may not be whole figures, equivalent full time or EFT);
- Numbers of dogs and cats owned within the municipal district (Australian BIS Shrapnel statistics);
- Numbers of registered or identified dogs and cats within your Council;
- Numbers of complaints associated with dog attacks, animal wandering, animal trespass or animal nuisance;
- Enforcement outcomes (payment of infringements and/or success in court action);
- Education strategies (education of both of Animal Management Officers and your residents).

Development of benchmarking partnerships will be crucial to your benchmarking exercise. You have agreed to conduct a benchmarking exercise, but what if none of the Councils within your like group want to be part of the exercise? Benchmarking your Council with data from previous years is a worthwhile exercise in itself and will identify trends for your Council, but without comparison with other Councils you may not be able to identify the gaps in your operation. You will need to make contact with these Councils and get them on board with the process. Part of the partnership will be to provide the results of the exercise for their consideration.

4. Analysing data – identify hot spot areas between you and other Councils in your like group

The objective of analysing the data is to identify hot spot issues that may be considered a strength or weakness of your animal management operation. To enable meaningful comparisons, after you have compared yourself with your like group of Councils, you should consider using generic scales such as "hot spot issues per 1,000 households".

The DAMIC Benchmarking Exercise used an Excel spreadsheet which was specifically developed to analyse the information provided by Councils (McMurray 2004). Answers to questions were formatted into a specific response, whether that be a "yes" or "no" answer, or a dollar figure or number figure. From this spreadsheet it was easy to develop comparisons with like groups of Council into charts for visual presentation.

In some instances it's easy to perceive your Council has a problem by focusing on a negative. For example, is having a 100% destruction rate for unclaimed dogs an issue if you seize 100 dogs a year and 99 are collected by their owners? Analysing your data should include positive results as well (a pat on the back opportunity) as this will establish a balanced view of your animal management service delivery.

5. Taking action – If a hot spot issue is identified what are you going to do about it?

Once you have identified the stuff that matters, benchmarked your performance with other Councils and determined your hot spot issues, it is time to respond to these hot spot issues with actions.

Your actions should be framed in a strategic plan that clearly identifies the issue, the actions you propose to take to address the issue, who will be responsible for implementing these actions, what resources will be required for the actions to be successful and the timeframe you propose to complete these actions.

A strategic plan should be simple and reflect on what you do and how you do it. These plans should identify what you are doing well and the ways to improve or address hot spot issues you have identified through the benchmarking process.

Like your benchmarking exercise, any strategic plan should be endorsed by your Council or management. Although you should be prepared to manage your plan as this can be an opportunity for criticism if you fail to deliver on an action you have identified in your plan (Moore 2005). Regular monitoring to determine if you are on target is key to ensuring you are delivering on your plan. Exception reporting may be a way to explaining to management that a target was not met due to an unplanned event or usual situation arising.

6. Recycle process – Complete benchmarking cycle at appropriate intervals?

Benchmarking is an integral part of continuously improving or developing a best practice operation in your Council. Continuous improvement is completed through a series of positive incremental actions identified using the results from your benchmarking exercise. Continuous improvement is best explained by the following statement "striving for best practice is like running in a race without a finish line" (quote from David Kearns, Xerox Corporation Chairman).

Benchmarking is not to be considered a one off process, and best practice is constantly changing due to changes in community expectations, Council's strategic direction, Government policy and the animal management industry. Recycling a consistent process will ensure your Council will identify trends and benchmarking is one tool to monitor the effectiveness of your animal management services. Although, in saying this you should be flexible by reviewing the process to meet a legislative amendment or change in industry operation.

Positive benchmarking

Endorsement from your Council or management is crucial to positive benchmarking. While managers and executives use these tools in their processes, they are well versed on negative outcomes from benchmarking exercises. Without their support you could place them in an embarrassing position by showing that you may not be the industry leader in animal management or they may not be prepared to provide the funds to complete the actions you need to fill the gaps in your service because they were not on board in the beginning.

Plan your process and ensure the structure of your benchmarking exercise is simple and clear so that everyone, from Councillors to Chief Executive Officer down to the Animal Management Officer, can read through the exercise and understand what is being done, why you are doing it and what you are trying to achieve.

Develop specific tools to gather information in a standard format to ensure for ease of analysis. Make certain that all members of the working group understand the tools to be used and are an advocate if you need others in your Council or in your benchmarking partnership to assist you in gathering the data.

Be prepared to develop strategies to address the hot spot issues that you have identified during the benchmarking process. These strategies must identify what you are going to do, who will be responsible, how you will resource the action and the time frame you expect to take to achieve your goal.

As you are aware, Councils operate on strict budgets. You will need to ensure you have the funds, resources and time to conduct the benchmarking exercise to achieve your goals. Most Councils plan budgets up to six months in advance of the end of a financial year, so you may need to be prepared to provide your strategic plan in December or January before the financial year you propose to action your plan.

Sustainable benchmarking

There is doubt that benchmarking is time consuming and with residents' expectations of Animal Management Officers growing and changing all the time, you will need to be prepared that if you commit to this process it may require resources (maybe funding) to ensure it will succeed.

Drawing a line in the sand is a one off process, establishing trends requires commitment to recycle the benchmarking process at appropriate intervals. These intervals will depend on many factors including your resources, the resources of your benchmarking partners and the types of questions you want to ask.

In Victoria, the Bureau conducted its first benchmarking exercise in 2001-02 and the next in 2005-06. Ideally the plan was to benchmark every three years knowing that certain events will have occurred and a reasonable amount of time will have passed to assess if our actions had assisted Councils.

When deciding on intervals for benchmarking you will need to identify seasonal issues that may affect your Council, such as kitten season during spring/summer on cat control services or increase in reports of dog attacks during the summer months when people are more active. While obtaining figures annually is a standard practice in benchmarking, be mindful that a month by month breakdown may assist when analysing the data to explain unusual hot spot issues.

Conclusion

There are many factors involved with successful benchmarking; this paper has only touched on one basic process. Positive benchmarking involves getting the right people within your Council to identify the type of Council you are, who your residents are, what your residents want, and establishing a framework to achieve this.

Successful benchmarking will only occur if you have the support of your Councillors or senior management (preferably with their involvement in the working group). You must be prepared to continue the cycle in the future to strive for continuous improvement or best practice in your operation.

Statistics are a powerful tool to wield. Benchmarking is the process to gain control of the statistics and provide evidence to the 'powers that be' that there are areas requiring support in order to achieve a best practice animal management service.

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