

Complaints and

*The Australian Customs Service is introducing
- and learning from - complaints and compliments*

The decision to introduce the national system follows a successful trial carried out in New South Wales from April to December 1998. From 1 July 1999, the system will extend to Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory. Victoria, Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory will follow from 2 August.

The system and the trial were developed under Customs Quality Improvement program by a Quality Improvement Team formed from staff members.

The team's research showed that Customs was inconsistent in handling complaints and compliments and that staff generally regarded complaints as negatives rather than

opportunities for improvement. The team recommended a cultural shift from merely processing good and bad feedback to recognising them as opportunities to maintain and build public confidence and continuously improve services. It also recommended a Complaints and Compliments Unit which was set up in Sydney to trial the concept. The model was based on the team's study of best practice in business and government organisations in Australia and overseas.

The trial coincided with Customs publication of service charters covering its guarantees of service level to businesses and travellers. The charters formalise benchmarks for Customs service standards, such as specifying time limits in which Customs staff must resolve



Brickbats and

A selection of comments

"The first impression you get when you enter the country is at Customs. Out of six employees, not one of them smiled in the seven minutes that I was waiting. It's not hard to smile. I can just imagine what is going through the minds of the visitors to our country."

"I was not satisfied with the service because I have come back into Australia 5 or 6 times this year. I notice in other countries, residents have their own lanes which they breeze through. In Sydney we have our own lanes, some called Express, which take just as long as all the other lanes. Could you open more lanes for Australian nationals or speed up the procedure for Australians returning."

"Insufficient and obviously disinterested staff caused considerable delay in completing a simple [cargo] transaction. Further delay caused by requirement to pay duty to cashier on another floor.
No facility for payment by credit card."

"I have recently been introduced to the vastly unjust importation laws regarding tobacco. My husband, a Dutchman, received several packets of tobacco for a birthday present and was made to pay nearly \$60.00 merely to receive it. His parents had already paid \$100.00 for the tax and postage, not to mention the cost of the present itself.
I find this absolutely terrible.

I understand the need to tax the importation of goods especially large amounts, but this is more relevant to companies and individual importers who would otherwise regularly profit. For a once-a-year gift this is grossly out of proportion.
Across the board legislation such as this does not work. It is unjust & unfair, & needs to be amended immediately."

Complaints and compliments

Introducing a national system for swift handling of complaints from travellers and businesspeople.



complaints. The charters were drawn up after extensive consultations with consumer, business and government representatives.

Under the new system, negative and positive feedback can be analysed effectively to help identify where Customs can improve its procedures.

Two brochures, which invite people to 'Tell Us What You Think', are encouraging public response. One includes a detachable reply-paid form and information in 12 languages as well as English. It will be prominently displayed at places where Customs has a high volume of public contact.

The second brochure is designed to assist initial response to written and oral brickbats and

bouquets. It advises people how to lodge a complaint or pay a compliment, promises confidentiality and aims to issue a full response within 15 working days. Information is provided on how to take a complaint elsewhere, such as to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

If 15-day deadline cannot be met, the unit will advise the reason for the delay and regularly report on progress.

The Complaints and compliments Unit can be contacted on:

FREECALL 1800 228 227 or
<http://www.customs.gov.au>

See 'Tell Us What You Think', page 11.

Compliments from travellers and importers

"I've been making this trip for 10 years – often twice a year. I was most impressed with the efficiency. My plane landed at 6:00, I bought duty free, picked up luggage, etc. and was on the road home at 7:15! Your improved procedures are very effective."

"On my frequent international travels over the past year I have been struck by both the rapid improvement in the efficiency and the friendliness and customer orientation of our immigration/passport staff at Sydney and Melbourne, both on arrivals and departure. This performance compares very favourably with major international airports such as Singapore, Los Angeles and others. Well done!"

"It was our first overseas trip. With a large family to buy gifts for, and with Christmas in mind, it was always going to be difficult to stay within allowances. Then a depreciated dollar did not help. Your staff on duty were extremely helpful and tolerant with the novices they had to process. Thank you."

"Officers from the Sea Cargo Automation Help Desk made a presentation to the course. Their team presentation on the Sea Cargo Automation system was most informative for the group, and more importantly was 'user friendly' and fostered a cooperative relationship between Customs and the members of the group. I am sure this will assist in trade facilitation as well as create awareness of the benefits of the Frontline program."

"What really touched me was that although you knew that I had been briefly informed through the phone by one of your fellow officers, you took the effort and sent me the relevant information by fax next day. This is true commitment and dedication. THIS IS EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE."