

TG-7 PUBLIC INQUIRIES
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This task group was asked to discuss the importance of a good records system in answering questions from the public.

Our observation is that inquiries from the public are few and generally irrelevant or trivial.

However, if we adapt the long-standing theory of the advertising and public relations businesses--as well as a growing number of political campaigners--there is no such thing as the public, but rather a collection of "publics"--groups of people with similar motivations, desires, dislikes, goals, etc.

In this--and again regarding the record system from the standpoint of users--there are many publics to be served at varying levels. Most are obvious--police, courts, prosecutors, traffic engineers, highway and street departments, public health agencies, private safety councils, researchers, driver ed. teachers, legislators, insurance companies, auto manufacturers, etc. Many of these are both contributors to as well as users of the records system. It must be shown that a good records system is a "put and take" system; that they will get from the system in proportion to what they and similar users put into it.

The uses and benefits to the above named contributing users are so obvious as to not need enumeration. But they demonstrate how a good records system is valuable and necessary to meet the needs of a variety of "publics."

Again, speaking on behalf of users--usually managers or administrators relatively unsophisticated in modern data processing methods--this task group believes that the developers and operators of records systems are duty-bound to maximize the utility of such systems by doing two things which we do not believe many are now doing.

One is to be extremely frank and honest about flaws, weaknesses or gaps in the data they produce. This task group has knowledge of cases where users were furnished data with unmentioned deficiencies, in it which resulted in serious repercussions to the user and damage to the reputation of the records system. It also is aware of cases where data was published with openly acknowledged gaps and the result was favorable. In fact, the revelation of gaps in the data has prompted users to ask how they could help fill the gaps. In other words, a demonstration of the value of even incomplete data may encourage improvements in the data gathering.

The second imperative for records keepers and analysts is that they become better informed about the traffic safety problem which they profess to study, to become more perceptive and understanding of the requirements of administrators, to anticipate future requirements and develop data to meet such needs and to be more innovative in demonstrating to administrators and planners what data is available and/or could be available.

Finally, we find real shortcomings in the issuance of records system data to the popular media, especially in a palatable and usable form. We note that the NHTSA-financed D-A-Y report quoted many newspaper editors, commentators, etc., as saying they were crying for good solid "news" in the traffic safety area: new developments, new programs, new ideas, new research, etc. They were tired of the same old propaganda and stereotyped traffic safety material. It is our conviction that even our imperfect records systems are gold mines of such information which is not reaching the public.