

Performing Your Own Satisfaction Survey

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The Internet allows simple questionnaires, one-on-one interviews and even interactive focus groups across broad audiences at relatively low cost. It also opens the possibility of hybrid survey tools, such as questionnaires with built-in intelligence that take respondents down different paths according to their answers. The Internet's major limitations are that it doesn't permit face-to-face contact and that it is limited to those with Internet access.

Design the Questionnaire

The questions you ask will vary according to the media that you choose and what you are trying to find out. Mailed questionnaires require precise questions and usually multiple-choice answers.

Telephone questionnaires serve as guides, prompting you through the interview, but allowing you to follow tangential lines of thought that may arise in the conversation.

The questions need to be neutral. "How wonderful are we to work with?" would obviously be a biased question. A better one would be "How are we to work with?"

Closed-end questions are those that can be answered with "Yes", "no" or a number. Open-ended questions are answered with a phrase or sentence. Open-ended questions are much more sensitive but can be difficult to analyze. Often a combination is useful: "How do you rate our shipping department's performance on a scale of 1 to 5? Why did you give it that rating? What do you like or not like about it?" Don't forget to make sure that the respondent is qualified to answer your questions. Respondents who do not know often guess. Don't be afraid to do a preliminary open-ended survey with a small sample of customers to identify the key issues. And always test the questionnaire!

Whom to Survey?

To avoid bias, your survey sample must be representative of the composition of the group(s) that you are studying (such as your ex-, current, or potential customers). You can survey as many of each group as you wish, depending on the group from whom you need more detailed information, but when combining the results, remember to reweight them to reflect the real share represented by each group.

Customer satisfaction surveys can be complex and very powerful, however it is possible to gather very useful information using simple "Do-It-Yourself" techniques. To be successful, as in any activity, you must first think through what you wish to accomplish. Without clear goals, you are likely to finish up with a mishmash of information from which it is impossible to draw clear conclusions. Keep the survey focused. Do not try to learn everything in one survey. Even the most gracious respondents will give you only a limited amount of time.

Collecting the Data

How you collect the data will depend upon your resources, the sample size and the information you are after. The usual survey media are: **Phone**

This allows you to ask open-ended questions that may lead to new discoveries. You can also ask follow-up questions and get a sense of the respondents' real feelings.

Mail

It's easier to query large samples via mail, but typically low response rates (3-5%) can bias the results. Mailed responses are unlikely to convey the nuances that can be gathered over the phone or from face-to-face interviews.

Face-to-Face

This is the most powerful medium, but it is expensive, limited to a narrow geographic range and is usually for small samples. Focus groups bring many respondents together and explore responses and attitudes in depth and generate detailed information. They do require skilled facilitators and are also costly.

Internet

How Many to Survey?

The survey size depends on how many current, potential and ex-customers you have, what you are trying to find out, how precise the results need to be, how much detail you need and how much the responses vary. If everybody says pretty much the same thing, you can use a smaller sample; you can estimate the amount of variability via a small, preliminary survey.

Typically you will need between 10 and 30 respondents per group.

Analyze and Interpret the Data

The first step is generally to calculate the average numerical responses from each respondent group.

Be careful of drawing too many conclusions. Much information can be drawn from the results, but correct interpretation often requires careful statistical analysis, which is why many companies hire specialists.

If you do this part yourself, watch out for three common traps:

1. Sample bias; you need to make sure that the composition of your survey sample is representative of all of the group(s) you are surveying.
2. Reverse causality; i.e., concluding that the weather gets cold in the autumn because the leaves fall from the trees.
3. Multivariant colinearity; a good example is concluding that tall people are smarter than short people; the truth is that adults (who are generally taller than children) do better on adult intelligence tests; the "colinearity" part in this example is that it was impossible to separate the

effects of being tall from age. A better sample or a more comprehensive analysis could have resolved this distinction.

When you try to figure out what the raw findings mean, apply the criterion of "reasonableness". The results may lead to surprising conclusions, but if they appear absurd, they are probably wrong.

Build on Favorable Results and Fix any Problems

Your study will probably show that you are better than your competitors in some areas, poorer in others, and about the same in the rest.

On items where you scored well, let your customers (especially the study respondents) know how great your company is doing and how lucky they are to have you as a supplier. Areas where you fared badly need to be addressed. Identify the cause(s) of the problem(s), make the necessary changes and then launch a communications program to tell your customers about your new, improved service/product.

Track the improvements

We recommend that companies redo their studies in 3 to 6 months, to assess the impact of any changes. If you don't overdo it, your customers will be impressed that you care enough to ask them how you are doing. It is also a great way to stay in contact with your customers and introduce yourself to new ones.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys are an indispensable tool for improving your performance and understanding your market. Even a simple do-it-yourself survey can bring exciting results, but a one-time survey is rarely enough. A program of surveys and follow-up is the secret to success.



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