

# Using The Telephone To Perform Customer Satisfaction Surveys

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This is the third of our series of articles on Customer Satisfaction Surveys. In our first article: “*Why You Need a Customer Satisfaction Survey<sup>1</sup>*”, we explained why it is so important to know how satisfied your customers are and why you should perform regular Customer Satisfaction surveys.

In our second article, “*Performing Your Own Satisfaction Surveys<sup>2</sup>*” we discussed the four media that are generally used to perform surveys (telephone, face-to-face, mail and Internet). Face-to-face interviews provide the closest contact and leave the strongest impression. They are expensive, but they are far superior for speedily gathering both quantitative and qualitative data and for interacting with the customer. Performing your own, telephone-based, customer satisfaction study generally costs about \$50 to \$100 per interview, depending upon the number of interviews performed, the response rate and the degree of complexity. These figures include questionnaire design and testing, interviewer training, interviewing, data entry, analysis and report writing. Much of this cost is attributable simply to trying to reach potential interviewees, particularly if the response rate is low. Automatic dialing, that alerts a

surveyor when a person is on the line, can considerably reduce the cost of telephone surveys. However, such equipment is usually available only to firms that specialize in telephone surveys and telemarketing; this may make it attractive to outsource the task.

Customer service staff may perform the interviews, provided that they have the necessary phone skills and attitude. If not, other people in the organization can be recruited, although using sales personnel is best avoided, because respondents will almost certainly be biased if they are being interviewed by the people who sell to them, and because salespeople may introduce bias of their own, intentionally or not.

Reaching people by telephone is becoming increasingly difficult. Often, one reaches only a machine. In this case, it's best to leave a brief message, indicating that the interviewer wishes to ask about their satisfaction with the company. Some interviewers ask the respondent to call them back, but most people ignore such requests, and if they do call back and the interviewer is busy interviewing someone else, they may become annoyed. It is generally preferable to keep calling until the person has been reached, although there are obviously limits. We suggest not leaving more than a few messages with any one potential interviewee.

Before making any calls, you need to design a questionnaire that will gather information that can be used for decision-making. Questions must not be too general or they will be difficult to answer, and the answers will not be particularly useful. If they are too specific, the interview may become too long, and respondents will become irritated, which is definitely not the result you are looking for.

There are two approaches to the order of the questions:

1. Ask the easiest and least threatening first
2. Ask the most important questions first in case the caller terminates the interview.

The choice should depend on the experience with the particular questionnaire. Experienced interviewers can often maximize the information gathered by sensing the mood of the interviewee and changing the order or the wording of the questions. This must be done cautiously, however, to avoid inadvertently changing their meanings.

(See our previous article: “*Performing Your Own Satisfaction Surveys<sup>2</sup>*” for more information on designing questionnaires and sample selection.)

Some questionnaires include scripted text. They should be read

<sup>1</sup> Agency Sales Magazine, January 2002, page 38

<sup>2</sup> Agency Sales Magazine, February 2002, page 26

verbatim only if the specific wording of a particular question is critical and/or the interviewers are inexperienced. Scripts should serve as conversation guides and should include transitional phrases to avoid dead moments in the conversation. If scripts are used, it is important that the interviewers train long enough to feel comfortable with them, to avoid the telltale sing-song sound of someone who is obviously reading. Interviewers should also be reminded that successful interviews involve far more listening than talking.

Under no circumstances should interviews be recorded without first notifying the respondent and gaining his/her permission. Notifying them however, is likely to cause alarm and may cause them to refuse the interview, or at least to be less forthcoming with their opinions.

The interviewer should try to mirror the respondent's mood, whether they are businesslike or friendly and informal. Interviewers need to speak clearly, particularly when interviewing respondents from different regions, who may not be familiar with their accent. They need to be courteous and respond sympathetically to customers' concerns and complaints, and they must be prepared to answer some questions about the company's business. Because they represent the company; it is vital that the interviewer leaves the customer with a first class impression.

At the outset, they should notify the respondent how long they expect the interview to last. A typical satisfaction survey call should last about three to four minutes. In-depth research calls can take five to ten minutes. It is often difficult to get people to spend more time than that on the phone.

For most surveys, the best way to tabulate the results is to enter them into a spreadsheet, although the results of simple surveys with small samples can be tabulated with paper and pen.

After the data have been tabulated, analyzed and interpreted, the survey's findings can and should be reported to the respondents, assuming that there are at least some positive findings. Even negative findings can be given a positive spin by telling respondents that changes will be made on the basis of their participation in the survey. Of course, it is critical that these changes actually be made. Few things are more infuriating than to spend time with an interviewer, only to find that one's opinions have been ignored.

Many companies perform follow-up studies to measure the success of any changes that have been based upon the first study's findings.

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