

## **Focusing on a Customer Experience Survey**

By Chip Bell, John Patterson and Lindsay Willis

“We need to survey our customers!” When these words are uttered by a senior leader it can prompt all manner of meeting, mania and macerations. It triggers a group of questions someone in marketing masterminds to send around to various departments for critique. This is where the fun begins.

Billing wants to ask detailed questions about stuffers, operations is interested in queries about field work, and customer service wants to know whether front liners were friendly. In time what gets mailed or put on line is a forty pound survey comprised of questions that are confusing, complex, and irrelevant. When only a few get returned, the question ax is brought to the next meeting for some heavy handed cuts required to reduce the weight of the survey.

In the spirit of appeasing all interested parties, only a fixed number of questions are allowed. When the trim job yields only a slightly higher return rate, senior leaders conclude that customers are uninterested in using a survey to register their two cents worth. They turn their attention to enterprise planning or the next board meeting, exiting the survey business. One more survey effort fizzles for the wrong reasons.

Customer surveying is complex business today. Recall how many surveys you have received in the last year. And, whose life is getting simpler or less cluttered? Any survey (whether on the phone, in the mail or on the web) must be appealing enough to rise above all the distraction. It must attractive enough to get someone to complete it after holding it longer than five seconds and interesting enough to insure a survey starter is a survey completer. Finally, the survey must be reliable enough for the sender to be able to actually use the intelligence the responder has provided.

What makes a survey appealing, attractive and relevant to the customer; and what makes the survey results reliable to the organization all starts with asking the right questions in the right way. And, rightness comes not from a brainstorming session in market research or copying a survey bragged about in a book. It starts with the customer!

Does this mean it is important to survey customers about surveys? In a sense, ‘yes.’ All effective surveys are tests. A good survey designer tests questions to determine if they yield the learning’s expected. As customers change,

yesterday's jackpot question might become tomorrow's ho hum question. Surveys are always an investigation-in-progress.

But, where does a survey designer begin? One of the most potent tools is a well-crafted focus group. Focus groups can provide powerful themes about the top-of-mind interests, issues, and concerns of customers. They can inform the moderator of the rich and useful meaning behind customer's evaluations. They can deliver a helpful gauge on emerging concerns before they become the subject of dinner table discussions or even the 6 o'clock news.

Should focus groups be used for targeted decision-making? Of course not! Focus groups represent a tiny percentage of customers. And, even the best focus group can fall under the influence of the herd mentality. We all know how an outspoken participant can lead others to agree with positions they would never register using the privacy of a survey. Yet, despite its limitations, a focus group under the care and guidance of a skilled focus group facilitator can be a rich forum for insight and understanding.

Think of a focus group as the modern day version of a fireside chat—a spirited assortment of fact and opinion; rumor and myth. However, out of this forum can emerge a blend that reflects real people talking about real issues in a real way. Properly managed and interpreted, the results can be a valuable way to provide the basis for customer survey research. Focus groups have the added benefit of surfacing “customer language” that is important to making the survey read like people actually talk--not like researchers think.

## **From Focus Group to Survey Design**

A focus group is literally a group conversation with a focus. Skilled focus group leaders clarify the interview intent, outline the protocols and facilitate the discussion to yield an open, comfortable forum for beliefs, issues and assessments. When a focus group is done properly, each participant feels their say is as valid as all others. With proper guidance the conversation can feel like attendees are collectively involved in a treasure hunt to unearth choice nuggets of customer intelligence to be later refined.

There are many traditions around focus groups—held on neutral turf, 6 to 8 people, participants with recent experience in the topic, a facilitator who can evolve from general to specific questions, keep comments non-judgmental and ask probing questions aimed at clarifying information, etc. However, the central issue is what to ask in order to yield fodder for a customer experience survey.

There are several themes relevant for this type of research. Primary is the search for loyalty driver candidates. Customers judge organizations based on

the value they receive. Think of value as comprised of three buckets—price, experience and product (or outcome for non-object making companies). If the perceived product or outcome quality drops, for example, there must be adjustments in one of the other two buckets to make up the difference in order for value to remain stable—either the price must drop or the service must get noticeably better. However, assuming the product or outcome is satisfactory and the price fair, the spotlight is on the customer’s experience as the bucket most likely to drive them to be more loyal.

It is also important to separate loyalty drivers from satisfaction drivers. Satisfaction is defined as “sufficient to meet a need.” When considering a product or outcome, satisfaction is the goal. Customers do not expect the objects they purchase to do any more than they were intended to do. However, customer experience is judged with a completely different yardstick. A customer experience that is only satisfactory does not yield a memory that would entice a customer to return. Because customer retention is associated with loyalty, not satisfaction, it is important to identify loyalty drivers.

## **Shifting from Satisfaction to Loyalty**

Getting focus group participants to “think” (and therefore answer) in the language of loyalty requires setting up the line of questioning differently. Such a discussion might start with a question like, “When you think about an organization that consistently delivers a great customer service experience—one that wowed you---what organizations come to mind?” From here the research questions can better surface loyalty drivers. For example, let us assume Acme Solutions, Inc. was conducting focus groups with customers in an effort to unearth key loyalty drivers about their service experience. Examples of the questions the focus group leader might use include:

- ★ **If (your favorite customer service organization) were to be in charge of Acme’s service experience, what is one thing they would likely do?**
- ★ **What are the features you would expect of a good customer service experience from Acme Solutions? (List on the board or chart) Now, what would each of these features look like if we put them on steroids?**
- ★ **If Acme Solutions wanted to increase their fees/prices by 50% and still have you view the value that you received as a good one, describe the service experience they would have to provide?**
- ★ **If Acme offered a 100% money back guarantee if you were not happy with your service experience, what part of your experience with Acme would get you your money back? What would they have to do to never pay you that guarantee?**

The thrust of these questions is to take focus group participants out of the realm of customer satisfaction and into the domain of customer loyalty.

Once the transcripts of the focus group interviews are ready for review, the next step in the process is analysis of themes. Look for similar word pictures that are repeated. Individual customers cannot always report precisely what they prefer, but the themes revealed in the answers of multiple customers often yield nuances and insights that point to preferences and aspirations.

## Constructing the Survey

After selecting the ten to twelve most favored drivers, the next step is to craft questions that give survey respondents an opportunity to register both their evaluation of a particular driver as well as its importance to them. Because the realm is loyalty (not satisfaction), the evaluation descriptors must use subjective language similar to that used by the focus group participants. Customers of a five-star restaurant do not rave to their friends that their dining experience left them “completely satisfied!” Loyalty comes from emotional evaluations that reflect delight, joy, happiness, glee, etc.

The structure of the paired questions might read something like:

How would you rate Acme Solutions in terms of the *friendliness of the people* who served you?

5. Terrific    4. Very good    3. Okay    2. Not so hot    1. Awful

How important is *friendliness* when it comes to the people who serve you at Acme Solutions?

5. Critical    4. Very important    3. Average    2. Not that important    1. Unimportant

It can also be helpful to include a couple of overall questions. One popular overall question is: “When you recall all the aspects of your service experience with Acme Solutions, what overall grade would you give them?” Two popular overall loyalty questions are: “Would you recommend Acme Solutions to your friends or colleagues?” and “Would you likely buy from Acme again?” Both the “would recommend” and “would repurchase” questions can be cross tabbed against the importance questions to yield an accurate reading on the true drivers of customer loyalty. It also can be very instructive to add a “fill-in-the-blank” question at the end. A popular option is: “What is one thing Acme Solutions could do to improve your service experience?”

A debate in the survey design world is whether an overall evaluation questions should appear at the beginning or end of the survey. Those favoring placing it at the beginning contend that it is a more objective view since it is untainted by

later questions that could lead a respondent to place too much weight on one aspect. Those favoring placing it at the end posit that getting an opportunity to review assorted aspects through the survey questions helps a respondent register a more comprehensive assessment of their overall experience.

Survey writers also enjoy arguing for a 10-point scale over a 5-point scale. Those favoring a 10-point scale believe it allows more precision and can be easily converted to the 100 point world of school grading. Those favoring 5-point would argue that the survey is already subjective in nature (thus less than precise) and most respondents would be hard pressed to articulate the difference between a 7 and an 8. Some use the ABCDF version of 5-points used in school grading. Finally, while survey purists prefer to craft surveys by starting with their analytical tools, it is always wise to first consider what makes it easiest for the survey respondent to communicate their assessment.

Wording of questions is also a fun category for survey research debates. The goal is to find language that all respondents will interpret in much the same way. It is also the intent of questions to serve as tools to extract feedback from the respondent in as pure a form as possible. Questions that favor a particular answer or preference obviously limit this purity. However, purity must be balanced with response rate. Crafting questions that sound like people talk can yield a higher return rate without sacrificing the reliability or validity of the data. The focus group can be a boon to learning how customers talk about their experiences and thus inform the vernacular of the survey questions.

All surveys need to be piloted before being launched. It can be embarrassing to send out a gazillion surveys or put a survey on-line only to start getting calls saying "question #5 is very confusing" or "there is no box to check for question 8." Follow-up phone interviews with respondents of the pilot survey can teach the survey designer if instructions are clear, the layout or approach comfortable, or the incentive of value. It is also valuable to get a reading on the overall experience of taking the survey. If respondents think the survey is ugly, boring, challenging, lengthy, confusing, etc. they may be among those starters who are not finishers.

Surveys are at best predictive tools. This means they are a semi-scientific means to extract from customers a valid, reliable report of their assessment. Surveys are not reports of truth; they are tales of perceptions and impressions. While the application of survey science can help reduce subjectivity, it is important to remember that the nature of service is emotional. While customers can determine with certainty if their flight was on-time or late, when it comes to judging the manners of the flight attendant or the comfort of their seat, customers are as certain as a fortune teller and as exact as the weathermen.

## SIDEBAR

### Research on Survey Research

Great preliminary work with a focus group and survey design can still yield disappointing results if the administration of the survey is faulty. Below are a dozen tips, all derived from scholarly articles on survey research. Use them as guidance, not as absolutes.

- Advance notice of survey increases the return rate.
- The response rate following telephone pre-contact is significantly higher than following an advance letter.
- Follow-up letters are not effective in increasing return rates; re-mailing the survey does result in an increase in surveys returned.
- Letting respondents know how long an e-survey will take or the number of questions involved will increase response rate.
- Allowing respondents a way to save a partially completed e-survey to finish it later increases the likelihood of completion and return.
- Providing ample space for open-ended questions increases survey response rates.
- Stamped envelopes (on mailed surveys) yield a higher return rate than metered envelopes; commemorative stamps yield no higher return than regular stamps.
- Promise of a contribution to a charity does not produce a significantly higher return rate. A cash incentive does produce a higher return rate.
- Personalized cover letters yield a higher return rate than form cover letters.
- A signature on the cover letter with mailed surveys increases the return rate. If the respondent recognizes the name and thinks positively of the person it significantly increases the return.
- Pre-coding surveys has little effect on the return rate.
- Creating a survey that is attractive, easy to complete, and easy to return significantly increases response rate.

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