

Survey Fatigue

5 surefire ways to improve customer response rates

WHO AMONG us has not suffered the endless assault of satisfaction surveys? You simply can't go to the store or visit a website without being asked to provide feedback. Society is surveyed out, but that doesn't mean the pursuit of meaningful customer feedback is a waste of time. It's just that the challenge is getting more difficult.

The first key to success is to ask yourself why you want to take someone's time to communicate their perceptions. If the answer is to meet some obscure customer requirement or certification standard, try another technique. If the answer is to gain accurate information that can drive improvement, read on.

The bottom line is that if a survey isn't returned, you've wasted time. Here are five surefire ideas that can improve response rates.

1. Provide an incentive. A recent client distributed a survey with a brief letter that stated any person who completed the survey will have a \$25 contribution sent to the "Children's Make a Wish" fund in their name. His response rate was close to 90%, and a tremendous amount of goodwill was generated among the customer base.

Research has shown you can typically improve the response rate 10-15% by offer-

ing an incentive. Additional research has shown there is no appreciable difference between offering a significant incentive versus a token incentive in improving response.¹ A simple acknowledgement of the survey-taker's time will go a long way to improve participation.

2. Think: What's in it for them? Aren't you tired of completing the same survey that asks, "How are we doing on quality, service and delivery?" Shouldn't the organization already know the answer to those questions?

Don't waste participants' time with unnecessary questions. When you develop a survey, keep the participants in mind. What do they care about?

Numerous companies are moving toward a market research-driven survey in which a customer's future expectations and needs are more fully explored rather than past performance. Participants will be more likely to participate in the survey if they feel they have some impact on the direction of your product and services.

3. Tailor the questions to the specific department or manager receiving the survey. Most organizations generate one survey with multiple facets and mass mail that survey to the purchasing department. If you want to improve response rates, devel-

op specific surveys. Don't ask the purchasing department about the quality of your products or the quality department about your delivery performance. Tailor the surveys to the individual groups, and you will increase participation.

4. Include a short, personalized introduction letter, hand-signed from someone at the organization. We all love email, but it is impersonal. According to Miss Manners,² a handwritten note is still the acceptable way to thank someone. A brief introductory note from the senior manager indicating the importance of the survey, how it will be used and a simple thank you for participants' time goes a long way to improve response rates.

5. Remember: less is more. I realize you want information, but thinking you are going to tie someone up on the telephone for 20 minutes or asking someone to fill out a two-page questionnaire is foolish. It's better to get a large response to a handful of key questions than a small response on a large amount of questions. One of our clients sent out a survey with one simple question: What could we do better? He came up with a dozen good ideas and achieved an almost 50% response rate.

Using these five ideas can help ensure you put out a satisfaction survey that respects customers' time, incentivizes them to respond and makes them feel their input will make a difference. All of these factors will help you receive the response you want from your surveys and collect meaningful feedback you can put to use to improve your business. **QP**

REFERENCE

1. Allan H. Church, "Estimating the Effect of Incentives on Mail Survey Response Rates: A Meta-Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 1993, pp. 62-79.
2. Miss Manners, www.missmanners.com.



JOEL PECORARO is president of Business Management Services, a business consulting firm in Carmel, IN. He has a bachelor's degree in communication from Purdue University in West Lafayette, IN. Pecoraro is a member of ASQ, an ASQ-certified hazard analysis and critical control point auditor, and an ANAB lead auditor.

