SELECTING THE BEST SURVEY METHOD

Current technology has multiplied the number of ways to collect customer feedback, often making it confusing to work out the best way to carry out customer research. Sarah Stainthorpe provides a summary of the different types of research and their purposes, as well as the pros and cons of different ways of obtaining customer feedback.

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Underlying attitudes or transaction-specific?

Fundamentally there are two main types of survey to monitor customer satisfaction and loyalty – first, a snapshot of customers' overall satisfaction and loyalty attitudes at a point in time, e.g. annually, and second, continuous surveys that usually relate to a specific customer experience or transaction. Satisfaction status surveys measure customers' underlying views based on their total sum of experiences with a company. More recent experiences will typically be more influential but customers' underlying attitudes will often be affected by things that happened months or even years ago. This type of survey tends to be more common in business to business markets.

Companies in consumer markets are increasingly using transaction surveys which measure customers' experience with a specific transaction, rather than all experiences over a time period. This may

be a specific claim on an insurance policy, a repair in your home, your most recent visit to a store or a hotel or even something quite fleeting like a specific call to a contact centre. The advantage of this type of survey is that it's more specific and more crucially, can be attributed to a particular store, repairer, call centre or even staff member.

Benefits of transactional surveys

There are several reasons for the increased use of transactional surveys:

1. They allow a more targeted approach to making customer service improvements. So instead of putting equal emphasis on all stores to improve a specific aspect of customer satisfaction, e.g. queue times at the till, the company can focus their improvement efforts on the exact 'priority for improvement' in each individual store – perhaps queue times in one, cleanliness in another, availability of help from members of staff in another etc.

2. Employees' interest in customer satisfaction scores and making improvements is understandably higher if the feedback is relevant to the service delivered by their store or department.

3. Companies are increasingly using customer satisfaction bonuses to ensure staff are focused on improving the customer experience. According to Leadership Factor research, nearly half of companies are now paying some form of customer satisfaction-related bonus. These bonuses will have more impact if based at a lower level rather than company-wide.

However, the drawback for transactional surveys is that it is costly to get sufficient responses to obtain reliable sample sizes at lower levels, especially if you are taking it down to individual employees.

Survey options for large samples

The fundamental types of survey method for comparison are interviews versus self-completion methods. Interviews can be face-to-face but are more commonly conducted by telephone. Technology has now produced an array of self-completion methods, including, web, email, text and IVR (Interactive Voice Response) as well as the traditional postal surveys. The self-completion methods tend to have similar pros and cons to each other. Here's a quick summary of some of the main ones;

✓ **Cheaper** than interviews especially when larger volumes are required, although it's worth noting that postal is usually more expensive than the other self-completion methods (but can reduce if questionnaires are included in existing mailings to customers or in an existing publication).

✓ They are often **quicker** than interviews (although postal is slower) so the results are available closer to the customer experience event, thus increasing their impact with staff.

✓ A given survey method may be more **relevant** or easier for the customer, dependent on the context. For example, if customers conduct all their business with a company online it may be more relevant to carry out the research this way too. T Mobile uses text surveys which is more relevant for their customers than it would be for many other businesses.

✗ There may be some **limitations** on a given method for producing a representative sample and an accurate result. Everyone has a phone but not all customers use text or email. This may affect how representative the responses from customers are e.g. a text survey would attract fewer responses from older customers.

✗ The **response rate** for self-completion surveys tends to be lower than telephone, usually not more than 30%. The bias from non responders makes the data less accurate, especially because self-completion surveys tend to attract responses from customers with extreme views i.e. highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied.

✗ Detailed and **high quality feedback** from customers is more difficult to obtain via self-completion methods, which tends to be crucial for understanding the reasons for customers' views and therefore identifying ways to improve. With interviews, the interviewer can clarify any potential misunderstanding of questions as well as probe for more detailed information such as reasons for dissatisfaction.

Conclusions

Considering the objectives of the customer research is crucial to selecting the most appropriate data collection method. Where companies have more than one objective (which is often the case), it's possible that that mixing data collection methods may well give the best solution.

Telephone is the ideal option for carrying out a survey of customers' underlying, long term satisfaction and loyalty attitudes. This is absolutely crucial information for strategic decision making and planning because customers' future purchasing / supplier selection decisions will be based on these underlying attitudes. A telephone interview allows a longer questionnaire plus the probing necessary to fully understand customers' views. This survey data can therefore be used to identify detailed areas for improvement and to generate specific messages to be communicated to customers and staff. With a sufficiently large sample this can be done right down to low levels. But that comes at a cost, so…

If companies also need to generate scores at very low levels such as individual staff member or store, either for bonuses or to drive ownership and accountability, then a low cost self-completion method such as web or IVR can be a cost-effective way to extend the telephone survey results. The main telephone survey can even be used to generate the longer term more strategic information, supplemented by speedy information from a few questions via the web, text or IVR. Such surveys can also be useful for keeping track of customers who are dissatisfied with a certain issue or who have made a complaint to check that their issues are being addressed. **S**