



Experts like online surveys because they are easy to administer and make it easy for customers to provide detailed answers.

Customer Surveys Done Right

Surveys can tell you what customers really think—and give you ideas to drive product and service innovation. By Dan Calabrese

Your success or failure as a pet retailer ultimately comes down to customers' attitudes about your store. Do they like the experience of shopping there? Do they find what they need? Is the experience friendly and pleasant for them?

Few pet retailers would dispute the value of knowing customer attitudes on these matters. Yet gathering the information in a complete and usable form might give you pause. After all, it's one more thing to do. It's an imposition on the customer's time. It requires time and resources to do it right. And there's a chance you will wince at some of what you see.

But professionals in the field argue that the value of customer surveys is beyond serious dispute.

"The value is gaining a return on your investment for the dollars spent trying to attract customers," said John Barrett, vice president of sales for Atlanta-based Infosurv. "It's very expensive in general

to get that customer in the door that first time. You don't want to spend your time, your marketing dollars, attracting someone into your retail property and then disappoint them when they're in the store so they never return again."

Here's what the experts say about why you should conduct customer surveys—and how to do them right.

Why Surveys Are Valuable

Customer surveys often are the only way to find out what customers are really thinking, said Jeff Miiller, senior associate at Los Angeles-based Kohn Communications. "I think that many are unable to articulate their feelings about your company, so surveys give them an opportunity to put into words what they really like about your business," Miiller said. "When they have the ability to articulate what they like, chances are they're going to use this as sales dialogue

to help you sell your business."

Jon Picoult, founder and principal of Watermark Consulting (Simsbury, Conn.), agreed that retailers will miss most of the feedback they need if they don't do surveys.

"It's uncommon that customers take the time to share with a business any suggestions for improvement, and even more so if the customer is dissatisfied in some fashion," Picoult said. "The research has shown that 90 percent of them won't say anything to you. They'll just mutter under their breath and look for another business to patronize for those services if they can find one."

Why don't customers volunteer feedback? There are lots of reasons, Picoult said. Most people prefer to avoid confrontations. Sure, they can ask to speak with a manager, but if they've already had a negative experience in the store, why would they want to draw it out by standing around waiting for a manager to come out and talk to them?

Surveys also can be goldmines of ideas that can help move your business forward, Picoult said. "When you survey customers very often, what you find is that if you design the survey effectively, you won't just get feedback on the quality of their most recent interaction with you. If you're designing the survey well, what you can also tease from your customers is more generic feedback—what frustrates them, what needs do they have that no one is currently serving. That can drive product and service innovation."

Asking the Right Questions

Just any old survey won't necessarily generate the most useful information or take the customer-retailer relationship to the next level. Asking the right questions is crucially important.

Effective questions are usually a combination of fairly general inquiries and specific items about issues that matter to your store in particular, said Barrett.

General questions include:

- Were you welcomed when you came into the store?
- Was the staff knowledgeable and helpful?

- Were you thanked for your business?

These get down to the brass tacks of customer service and satisfaction as well as anything, said Barrett.

Beyond these, you might want to include questions that pertain specifically to your store, or that might address an issue you believe is especially important to your customers.

Some specific questions might include:

- Was someone available in the reptile department to help you?
- Was the store clean and well-organized?

"I'd always want to understand a couple of things," said Barrett, whose company conducts online customer surveys for businesses in a variety of industries. "First, are you happy with this experience? And I like to design surveys in such a way that if that answer on a 10-point scale falls below a certain number, it automatically pulls up a box that asks you why you weren't satisfied. That gives me a key understanding of the dissatisfiers."

The best surveys are also even-handed. "Don't stack the deck," Picoult said. "Make it unbiased. It's very easy to create surveys that create some kind of data bias. The classic example is when companies have five-point measurement scales on them, and three of the five points are actually positive—excellent, very good and good. The last two points are fair and poor. That's a biased scale, because you're not giving people an even number of choices."

It's also important that the volume of information gathered is manageable. "The biggest mistake is gathering too much information at once," Barrett said. "A retailer wants to know if [customers] were greeted, if they were treated with respect, if someone in the aquarium department came up to help them. I prefer to keep it crisp and to the point."

In order to get enough information without making the survey too long, Barrett recommends that retailers change their surveys up over time, keeping certain crucial questions constant but changing more specific questions.

"When you get to the center part of the survey, you make that about a specific portion or a seasonal focus," Barrett said. "That's when you start to gain an understanding of departmental initiatives, pricing initiatives, promotional initiatives."

"In doing the survey, you've said, 'We value your opinion.' If you don't take the feedback and respond in some way, you've made it look like your efforts were a waste of time and you were not sincere."

—Jeff Miiller, senior associate, Kohn Communications

Choosing a Format

Just as crucial is determining what form the survey should take. Options include written, online, phone and in-person surveys—and even downloadable smartphone applications.

Here's how our experts assessed survey methods:

- **Written surveys.** "The biggest downside with written surveys is that the response rate is really low," Miiller said.

Not many customers will take the time to fill out a written survey, agreed Barrett.

Another downside to written surveys, said Miiller, is that customers rarely provide enough detail. "They may give you a numbered score or a rating, but they rarely write down the reason they gave you that score. And that's what you want to know, because otherwise the number is meaningless."

- **Online surveys.** Picoult is a fan of online surveys because they are easy to administer and business owners can easily see who filled them out.

Barrett believes online surveys are by far the most effective. "With an Internet survey, you have room for open-ended questions, and that allows customers to explain why they feel the way they do," he said.

He also likes the fact that Internet surveys allow retailers to set up alerts, so that if a customer gives a particularly poor score on a certain question, it lets store managers know and gives them the option of taking action.

The downside, said Barrett: There is still a percentage of the population that lacks Internet access, or won't take an online survey.

- **Phone surveys.** The biggest advantage Barrett sees is that a phone interviewer can interview the customer a little more extensively, following up on answers to learn more about an issue or problem.

The biggest downsides, however, are cost and getting people to actually take

the time to talk to you.

Furthermore, "In-home phones are disappearing, and people don't want to burn cell phone minutes," Barrett said.

- **Smartphone surveys.** Smartphone applications allow a customer to receive a survey moments after walking out of the store, enabling an instant response while the experience is still fresh in his or her mind. But there are limits to what you can do with a smartphone survey.

"If you're just looking to get a snapshot of how the person felt about their most recent interaction, and why they give you the rating they did, that's a one- or two-question survey, and that can work on a smartphone," Picoult said. "But if you want to get more detail out of people, that might be a little tougher to do on a smartphone, and the quality of the responses you get might not be as good because of the limitations of how comfortable they are texting the response."

Picoult emphasizes that no one option is good enough to serve as a retailer's entire strategy.

"The first piece of advice is not to think of surveys alone as the be-all and end-all in terms of soliciting customer feedback," Picoult said. "Make sure you don't have to rely on one type of listening post too heavily, because they all have their advantages and disadvantages. If you just rely on paper-based or electronic surveys, you might miss input that might be gleaned from others, like one-on-one, in-depth conversations with customers, or placing someone outside your store to interview them."

On a side note: If you see a person standing outside your store asking your customers to do an in-person satisfaction survey, chances are they're working for a competitor and doing opposition research, said Barrett.

Interpreting the Data

Once you've gathered the data, the

next step is interpreting it.

With analysis, you might discover you've been focusing on the wrong priorities. You thought the lighting in your reptile section was your best asset? What makes you so sure?

"You tend to be somewhat prejudiced because it's your store," Barrett said. "I did some work for an ice cream chain a few years ago. This was a walk-up. They always thought the crucial table stakes were the cleanliness of the store. We found that this was merely an expected behavior, and that engaging the customer and welcoming them to the environment resulted in financial upsells—asking them if they'd like a waffle cone instead of a sugar cone. This retailer had absolutely no clue until we did the survey work. They had built all their training programs around cleanliness."

Understanding the data you've collected can be complicated because you have, on the one hand, a massive amount of information in the aggregate. On the other hand, you have a lot of individuals with whom you want to have business

relationship—and as they say, no one wants to be regarded as merely a number.

Lonnie Mayne, chief experience officer at Mindshare Technologies (Salt Lake City), says retailers cannot overlook the importance of dealing with feedback on an individual basis.

"Our company believes in the sample size of one, so what we have built is an operational improvement system that focuses on the idea that your experiences are just as important as mine," Mayne said.

The system can create alerts that tell store managers if a customer gave negative feedback on a particular issue, and can enable the manager to follow up instantly—not only with the customer but also with employees who may have been involved in the incident.

Mindshare also uses a tool called comment analytics, which looks at large aggregations of answers to open-ended questions and searches the data for useful information and action steps. In one case, Mayne said, comment analytics delivered the unexpected news that people at

restaurants like certain kinds of pickles with certain kinds of entrees.

Taking Action

The most skillfully executed and brilliantly analyzed survey still will not yield results if you don't take the right action steps. Consultants say it is all too common for retailers to go through the process of a customer survey, only to fall down on the follow-up.

One problem with follow-up action, of course, is that retail managers are already exceedingly busy.

"We were tailoring a program for a very large retail client, and I said to the client, 'I understand that your managers might only have 15 minutes a day to look at customer feedback and the reports we're going to give you,'" Mayne said. "She said, 'Actually, you're wrong. It's not 15 minutes a day. It's 15 minutes a week.'"

So Mindshare developed a product called Mindshare Coach, which directs retailers to work each month on a specific issue that, according to survey data, will do the most to drive up customer



satisfaction numbers.

"We've developed very simplified, straightforward reports that tell our customers what to work on by location," Mayne said. "We can't give them 300 reports to look at in 300 different ways."

According to Miiller, doing a survey and failing to take action in response to the feedback is worse than doing no survey at all.

"You've asked them for feedback," Miiller said. "In doing the survey, you've said, 'We value your opinion.' If you don't take the feedback and respond in some way, you've made it look like your efforts were a waste of time and you were not sincere. This happens a lot. Businesses in general have a habit of asking their clients how they are doing, and then not doing anything with the results."

Sometimes companies fail to follow up, Miiller said, because they don't really know how to solve problems. So they take actions that look like follow-up but don't really accomplish anything.

"Sometimes companies tabulate the results and create these beautiful pie

charts, and it will show how many are somewhat satisfied and how many are extremely satisfied," Miiller said. "That's great if you're submitting some sort of internal report to the decision-makers in the company, but you need to be focused on responding to the feedback, and that means holding the decision-makers accountable. There needs to be some kind of discussions internally as to how that's going to happen."

One sticky issue with follow-up is that customers often demand things that are hard to do. Sometimes you can't do them, but that doesn't mean it's OK to just ignore what the customer said.

"If they say your prices are too high, what are you going to do?" Miiller said. "You're not going to reduce your prices, so how do you respond to that? They're not really sure how to fix the problem so they brush it under the rug."

Picoult calls that a failure to close the loop.

"Taking action doesn't necessarily mean, in all cases, making the requested changes," Picoult said. "There might be legitimate reasons why you're unable to accommodate a particular suggestion or idea. But closing the loop is as much about getting back to a customer and explaining to them what you are able to do or what you're not able to do."

No one ever said it would be easy—but growing your business without really knowing how your customers feel about shopping your store is likely to be far more difficult. ■

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