Business Marketers Create Survey Fatigue

Don’t you just love to be asked to fill out a survey? Most likely your answer is “NO”. You are not alone. Small business CEOs tell me that when they send out a survey to their customers, they usually get a response rate of 3-5% or under and those that get close to 10% are very few and far between. Customers hate to be pestered with questions about what they think.

The typical customer is over solicited. In the digital age, marketers can survey consumers in myriad ways – in store, through bottom-of-receipt surveys; online, via pop-ups or post-purchase email surveys; and, increasingly, on mobile devices.

Jonathan Levitt wrote recently in Chief Direct Marketer that “just because you can survey your customers at every turn doesn’t mean you should.” With surveys, the goal is to coerce consumers to answer questions you have, instead of listening and learning from your their real concerns. Be honest. How many hours have you spent crafting survey questions to get to the answers you want? I have seen many consumer surveys where there is simply no wrong answer—great for justifying marketing spend, but not so good for improving the customer experience.

The facts are that surveys rarely seem to translate into customer service or product improvements, consumers are increasingly ignoring them. But at the same time, technology changes have empowered millions of consumers to give their opinions on brands, products, and services on their own terms. According to Forrester Research company, consumers generated more than 500 billion impressions about products and services through social media, reviews, open-ended comment cards, and other non-invasive methods. And open-ended customer feedback will only grow more popular on mobile platforms.

So what are market researchers saying about how we can improve upon the dreaded survey and start listening to our customers? Here are a few tips to get started.

✔ **Invite customers to share:** Your goal as a marketer is to get as many people as possible to contribute their opinions on your products or brand—but on their terms. Use social media, paid ad campaigns, or even in-store signage to let customers know they can submit feedback any time via your website, mobile site or mobile app. Encourage them to ‘leave a review’ or ‘look for the feedback button’ and invite them to share any and all questions, comments or concerns.
✔ Keep it short and simple. Customers want to quickly let you know what’s on their minds – not trudge through a lengthy question-and-answer session. Embrace short and concise feedback as the key to insight, collecting feedback wherever your customers are talking (reviews, tweets, Facebook posts, or directly to your brand through digital comment cards). And never get in the way of their site or mobile app experience by popping-up a box asking for their feedback.

✔ Measure what matters most. A lot of customer-centricity efforts get hijacked by irrelevant metrics. Marketers always want data to fit with their assumptions. But in an open-ended feedback program, you have to sit back and listen to what your customers are saying, and then find ways to measure what’s important to them. Your ultimate goal is better customer service and better products – not to have databases full of useless marketing metrics.

✔ Close the loop: acknowledge customers’ contributions. Always make sure to let customers know their voices have been heard. Thank them for their feedback right away. If a customer has a gripe, thank them for their honest feedback and offer to fix the problem right away. If a customer leaves an email address, you can also send follow-up thank you gifts, such as small coupons or discounts, but it’s not always necessary. The most important thing is to acknowledge you heard them.

Levitt suggests that survey fatigue is a real and growing problem. Don’t alienate your customers by hitting them up for lengthy surveys. Instead, invite them to provide feedback on their own terms to drive engagement, loyalty and sales. Otherwise, you'll find yourself cut off from the customer voices that are the only sure path to building your brand and business today.

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