

Keeping customers satisfied

Effective customer satisfaction research brings accurate feedback and valuable data, says **Jonathan Pickup**, B2B research manager at McCallum Layton

Customer satisfaction is integral to a successful business operation and is strongly linked to customer retention. But not all businesses formally evaluate and track the changing satisfaction levels of their customers. In particular, B2B organisations tend to rely on more anecdotal feedback, provided by relationship managers or account handlers. While this can work, there is a danger that dissatisfaction can remain hidden until it is too late. Relationship managers may be reluctant to feed back minor issues that might not portray their own work in the best light.

Engaging a third party to conduct customer satisfaction research brings more rigour and independence to the process. The opportunity to speak anonymously allows customers to provide more honest feedback. A good research provider will also help you to maximise the value of your customer satisfaction measurement.

Here are some tips for getting the most out of your customer satisfaction research.

1. Who to survey?

It is easy to bias your results from the start if care is not taken when compiling the list of customers to contact. The best starting point is to put together a comprehensive list of all contacts, regardless of how likely you feel they are to respond to a survey, or to answer positively.

Next, think about how you might classify your customer base. It makes sense to conduct the survey with a representative sample of customers, but there may be good reason to consider conducting research with certain subgroups. For example, your organisation may provide different products or services to different markets – and customer experiences may therefore differ widely. Similarly, you may wish to include more of your most important customers, especially if these relationships are managed differently.

2. What method?

Once you have compiled your list, consider how customers could best be contacted. Most B2B customer satisfaction research is conducted by telephone, as this usually achieves the best levels of response. If you typically communicate with your customers electronically, however, an online approach

could also work. High-value customers may be interviewed face-to-face, to help reinforce the relationship.

3. What to ask?

Your results should not just measure satisfaction, but also identify the most effective steps you could take to improve perceptions. Listing the factors on which you are likely to be judged is a good starting point. Include overall satisfaction and loyalty measures, as easy reference scores that can be communicated throughout the business.

A good customer satisfaction survey would normally take about 10–15 minutes. Much longer than this and the depth and quality of customers' responses may suffer, or they may be less likely to agree to take part in the first place. If your initial draft is too long, separate the 'nice-to-know' from the 'need-to-know' – focus on what is important to the customer and those factors you can really do something about.

4. How often?

Many customer satisfaction projects are run as regular tracking programmes, rather than one-off surveys. This helps you to keep your finger on the pulse of customer opinion, and evaluate any actions you have taken based on previous results.

How often you need to take measurements will depend on the nature of your market. If most customers tend to

build long-term relationships with your organisation, satisfaction may be a fairly stable measure that is unlikely to change dramatically in the short-term unless there are exceptional circumstances (e.g. major changes to pricing). In this case, annual tracking may be sufficient.

Conversely, if your industry is fast moving and competitive, and customers readily switch suppliers, more frequent waves may be appropriate, allowing you to identify and react to any changes in customer opinion promptly.

5. Data analysis

The analysis of customer satisfaction data tends to centre around identifying weaker areas of performance, so that improvements can be implemented. A quick scan of the results will identify the areas of service where scores are lowest.

What this does not provide, however, is any kind of prioritisation. Most customers will accept a lesser service in areas they think of as less important, as long as performance is good on the critical factors. A 'key driver analysis' can be used to identify factors most closely correlated with overall satisfaction, so that you can focus first on improvements that are likely to have the greatest impact.

6. Review and refresh

Whilst the first wave of research should provide you with a greater understanding of customer opinion, it is important that future waves continue to build on this. An effective customer satisfaction tracking survey will offer much more than just a regular set of top-level figures.

The programme should be regularly reviewed to identify any new areas of interest to include in future waves. Even though the survey is designed to track data over time, this does not mean that the questionnaire cannot be changed at all, as long as care is taken not to introduce any new bias into the overall measures.

Finally, leave room in your questionnaire for a tactical response section that changes periodically. Questions can be inserted as new issues of interest arise, providing topical information to the business without needing to set up and conduct separate research studies.

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