Articles

on

Gathering Customer Feedback

from

PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES newsletter
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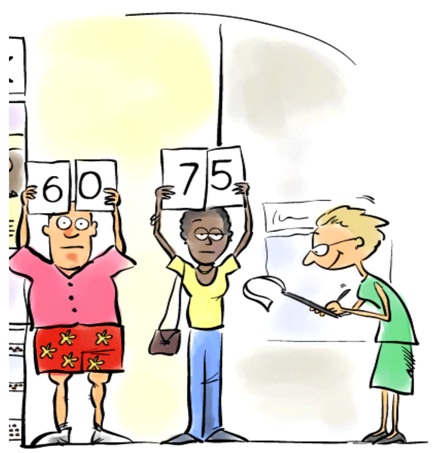

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FEEDBACK GATHERING

Stamping Out Survey Snafus

Clients frequently ask me to evaluate their employee and customer satisfaction surveys. The good news: Many are well-designed, needing only minimal modification. The bad news: Some are dreadfully designed and if administered as is, will generate meaningless feedback. If you'd like to achieve survey savvy:

Focus on your purpose. One survey, sent to people who had used a particular service, asked them to enter the date and time. The date might be useful in summarizing feedback by week or month. But unless there's a need to analyze service delivery by time of day, it serves no purpose to ask respondents to enter it. Purposeless also characterizes the statement I've seen in several surveys indicating that items marked with an asterisk are mandatory. Flagging items as mandatory or optional is sometimes appropriate. But these were brief surveys in which every item served a purpose. If you can't clearly articulate the objective of an instruction, explanation or item in a survey, omit it.

Include only relevant choices. A Help Desk survey asked respondents how many times they had used the Help Desk in the previous three months. The six choices were: [Unknown], [Never], [1-4 times], [5-10 times], [More than 10 times], and [Other]. Now I ask you: What could Other refer to? Furthermore, since the plan was to administer this survey only to people who had contacted the Help Desk in the previous three months, why include Never as an option?

Guard against ambiguities. In this previous example, what is meant by "used" the Help Desk? If multiple interactions with the Help Desk were needed to resolve a given problem, does that count as one use or many? Ambiguities abound in many of the surveys I've been asked to review. The best way to trap them — preferably *before* conducting the survey — is to get feedback from a sample of respondents. Getting feedback doesn't mean having these people *take* the survey, but rather having them *evaluate* the survey so as to alert you to potential pitfalls.

Split AND items into two. Surveys often erroneously ask about two different attributes in a single survey item, such as whether information provided was accurate and consistent, or whether personnel were responsive and courteous. But information can be both consistent and inaccurate, and personnel can be responsive, yet boorishly bad-mannered. If it's useful to learn about both attributes, ask about them separately: Accuracy in one item and consistency in another, responsiveness in one item and courtesy in another.

Make the rating scale fit the survey statements. One survey I reviewed asked respondents to rate service delivery on a five-point scale from "dissatisfied" to "satisfied." But the items to be rated included statements such as: "The service agent was friendly" and "The on-site technician was competent" — statements that don't lend themselves to satisfied-dissatisfied ratings. To use this type of rating scale, provide a list of attributes to be rated, such as "Friendliness" and "Competence." Alternatively, leave the survey statements as is and change the rating scale to an Agree-Disagree scale or a Yes-No set of choices.

Request supporting information. When surveys focus exclusively on ratings, there's no way to know what, exactly, pleased or disappointed the respondents. Inviting respondents to "Please describe an experience [or please give an example] that helps us understand your rating" generates actionable information to support service improvements. This applies to both positive and negative feedback. One feedback form I looked at includes this item: "The information presented was valuable to me in my job. [Yes or No] If not, why not?" Great, but also ask, "If yes, how will it help?" That way, you'll know not only what needs changing, but also what should be retained.

Focus on relevance. A hotel feedback form asks guests to rate their satisfaction with staff service, the room, maintenance of the hotel, check-in, security, breakfast, dinner and the lounge/bar. Below this set of items is the following request: "Please provide us with any additional comments you have regarding food and beverage." Food and beverage? What about the staff service, the room, maintenance of the hotel, check-in, and security? This is a blatant Oops!

Get rid of glitches! In surveys I review, I often find misspellings, grammatical errors, missing words, confusing jargon, and puzzling acronyms. Leave these glitches in your feedback forms and you run the risk that respondents add an item of their own: The people who developed this survey are incompetent: [Yes] [Absolutely] [Positively].

Want some feedback on your feedback forms? Let me know.

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FEEDBACK GATHERING

No Cheese, Please

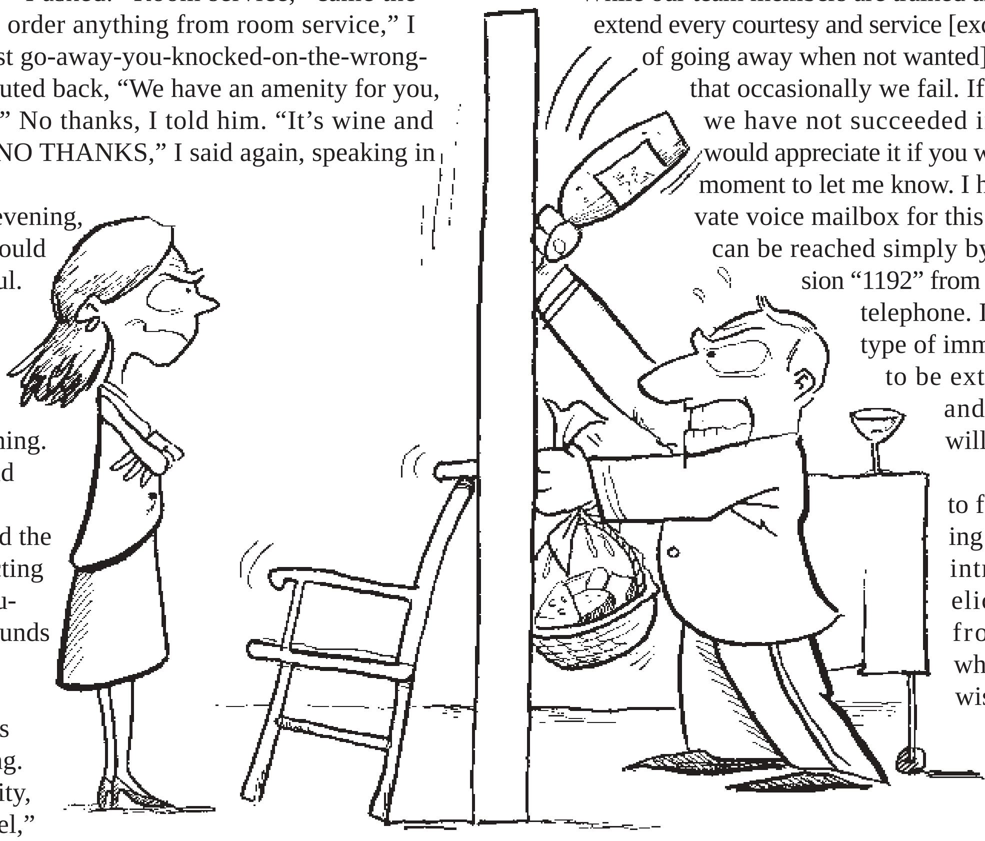
In conjunction with a keynote presentation I gave recently, my client generously arranged a room for me on the concierge level of the hotel where the conference was being held.

At 9:30 the evening before my talk, as I was mentally preparing to speak in a ballroom large enough to hold several small cities, I heard a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" I asked. "Room service," came the response. "I didn't order anything from room service," I bellowed in my best go-away-you-knocked-on-the-wrong-door voice. He shouted back, "We have an amenity for you, a gift of the hotel." No thanks, I told him. "It's wine and cheese," he said. "NO THANKS," I said again, speaking in all caps.

Earlier in the evening, wine and cheese would have been delightful. I might even have enjoyed it at 9:30 if I didn't have a speaking engagement the next morning. But at this hour, and given my need to concentrate, I found the interruption distracting and intrusive. Fortunately, after two rounds of No Thanks, the fellow went away.

Not 30 seconds later, the phone rang. "We have an amenity, courtesy of the hotel," said Mr. Persistent, who must have been paid based on the number of guests he annoyed while delivering his amenities. "And it won't cost you a thing." Great — I wouldn't be charged for a gift I didn't want. My answer remained the same, if you don't count the increase in decibels, "NOOOO THANKS!!!"



Perhaps this sort of attention was customary on the concierge level of this hotel, and perhaps it had never occurred to the management of the hotel that anyone would turn down their gracious offer. That would have been enough of an issue to justify an article in this newsletter. But . . .

The next day, when I returned to my room to prepare to leave, I found a note from the hotel general manager that said, in part (the comments in brackets are mine):

"I trust that we met or exceeded your every expectation [Well, no, actually you didn't.] and that your stay with us was an enjoyable one. If we did indeed satisfy you, I would be pleased to hear from you through our guest comment card, which is available at the front desk in the lobby. [Enabling you to advertise that 100% of all comment cards report satisfied customers?]

"While our team members are trained and motivated to extend every courtesy and service [except the courtesy of going away when not wanted], I do recognize that occasionally we fail. If, for any reason, we have not succeeded in this regard, I would appreciate it if you would take a brief moment to let me know. I have set up a private voice mailbox for this purpose, which can be reached simply by dialing extension "1192" from your guest room telephone. I have found this type of immediate feedback to be extremely helpful, and I do hope you will use it."

This approach to feedback gathering struck me as an intriguing way to elicit complaints from customers who might otherwise just go away angry. It was a clever way to ensure that grievances reached someone in a position to rectify the situation. I called extension 1192 and left a detailed, amenity-specific description of my complaint. I assumed the general manager would immediately call me back. When he didn't, I assumed he'd contact me shortly afterwards. Wrong! I never heard back. I have no idea if he received my complaint, listened to it, cared about it, or made any adjustments based on it.

In terms of building customer loyalty, soliciting evidence of dissatisfaction and then not following up with the dissatisfied customer is worse than not requesting the feedback at all. This hotel will not be my first choice next time I'm in that city. But if circumstances dictate that I must stay there, I'll ask to stay on a cheese-free floor.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

The Perception of Improvements

When an organization with a bad case of customer dissatisfaction takes major steps to reverse the situation, customers ought to be happy — or at least less *un*happy. Yet, often, customers continue to grumble and grouse. Why? Because of what I've dubbed the perceptual lag. That is, the perception of an improvement often lags far behind the reality of that improvement.

If you're striving to improve customer satisfaction, you might reasonably consider this perceptual lag to be unfair, and you'd be right. But it's a fact of life, and once you become aware of the lag, you can take steps to minimize or prevent it. One of the best ways to do this is to publicize the improvements to the customers who've agitated for them or will benefit from them.

A lag lesson

Consider, for example, a company I'll call HodgePodge Corp. whose customers had been contending with service snags, slips and snafus. These customers were internal business units, and they would have gladly obtained the services on the outside if they had that option. But they didn't. They felt trapped and were very unhappy.

At length, inspired by the determination of new management to right the wrongs, the service group undertook a major series of improvements. Over the course of a year and with significant effort, they accomplished a great deal. They were justifiably proud of the changes they'd made and badly needed a pat on the back from their customers.

Yet, when they ran a customer satisfaction survey, the ratings barely surpassed the ratings in the previous year's survey. In reviewing the results of the two surveys, I could see how unhappy many customers still were. Even customers who felt that service was on the upswing rated it far from optimal. HodgePodge service personnel were devastated. Despite all they had accomplished, their customers seemed to neither notice nor appreciate their efforts.

Although customers may be swift to complain, they're usually much slower to notice changes made as a result of those complaints. As in HodgePodge's experience, what customers saw wasn't what was fixed, but what was still broken. Actually, that's not surprising: If customers have endured an extended period of shoddy service, they adopt a "prove it" mentality and require an even longer period of consistently good service before they believe it's real and enduring.

A lag avoidance strategy

A major reason that customers don't notice service improvements is that provider personnel have done a lackadaisical job of publicizing the improvement effort and the benefits of the implemented improvements. In most organizations, this public relations function falls short or, more often, is non-existent. As a result, even if customers recognize that things have gotten better, time has passed and they don't associate the improvement with the complaint they had voiced.

To minimize the perceptual lag, start by identifying customer grievances. Use surveys, customer interviews, a review of service records, and other methods of your choice. Summarize the grievances into a small number of categories. Identify specific actions you can take for each category, or at least those deemed highest priority. Then put on your public relations hat and notify customers about your proposed plan for making improvements. Involve key customers in evaluating and finalizing the plan, so they'll have a stake in your success. Let them know the part they can play in helping you help them.

Make sure customers are aware of the improvements you're working on. Report your progress regularly, and keep making the linkage between their grievances and the action you're taking. When you've made a change, inform them, remind them, then tell them again. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Don't let them not know. And while you're at it, be forthcoming in acknowledging that there's much left to do.

Above all, communicate your concern

Supplement these activities with as much face-to-face contact with customers as possible. When service has slipped, what customers often want as much as anything else is to know you take their needs seriously. Visiting them is time-consuming, but it pays great dividends. In fact, personal attention often leads to higher ratings in subsequent surveys, even in the absence of service improvements. And if on-site visits aren't feasible, make the phone your friend. Resist the urge to rely entirely on email for maintaining contact with disgruntled customers.

If you have deliriously happy customers, the perceptual lag is a problem you'll never face. But if you're still working toward that goal, learn the lesson of HodgePodge Corp., and do everything you can to limit the lag.

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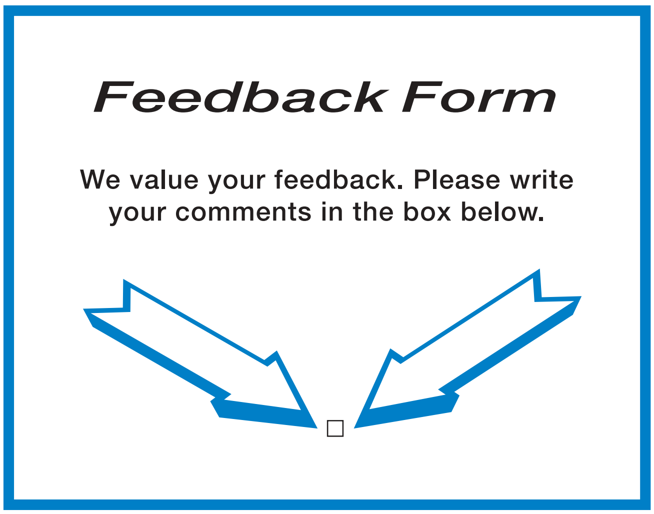
FEEDBACK GATHERING

Five Frequent Feedback Flaws

If organizations really want customer feedback, why do they make it so difficult for customers to provide that feedback? Here are some examples of common flaws and how to avoid them:

1. Requesting feedback about the wrong attributes. At a hotel I once stayed at, I was satisfied with all the items listed on the feedback form in my room: quick check-in, clean room, and so on. However, the peephole in the door was over my head. *Way* over my head. When you're my height, such things are important. How am I to follow the hotel's advice to look out the peephole before opening the door to visitors if I can't *reach* the peephole?



Customers can give top ratings to the attributes *you* consider important and still be dissatisfied because you've fallen short on the attributes *they* consider important. If you want satisfied customers, find out what *they* consider important, and invite them to rate your service on those attributes.

2. No space for feedback. In addition to asking customers to rate the items listed, many feedback forms invite customers to add their comments. Some of these forms provide plenty of space for comments — provided customers write in a one-point typesize!

A request for customer comments is a key element of a well-designed feedback form. Given lots of blank space, customers often provide extensive amounts of high-quality commentary. However, it's pointless to request comments and then not provide space for them.

3. No time to think about feedback. I got a call from an office supply store I often shop at. The caller said he was conducting a survey, and asked what I liked and didn't like about his store. I told him I could give him better feedback if I had some time to think about it, and asked him to call back the next day. He said he would, but he didn't. I guess he wanted feedback only from those who'd provide it on the spot.

Some people can instantaneously retrieve information from their mental databases. Other people prefer time to cogitate. Whatever method you use to solicit feedback, give customers ample time to reflect on your questions. The quality of feedback you get is likely to be worth the extra time.

4. Inconveniencing customers. One of my favorite feedback forms is from a restaurant whose form is a postcard that requests responses to several questions. The instructions on the postcard state how important the feedback is — followed by the reminder: "Don't forget to affix a stamp before mailing." Instead of returning the postcard, I saved it and now offer it into evidence as Exhibit A in my presentations on feedback gathering.

Few enough people fill out feedback forms to begin with; most won't bother if they have to pay for the privilege of doing so. To maximize the amount and quality of feedback you receive, make it as easy as possible for customers to respond. If you ask dissatisfied customers to inconvenience themselves to inform you of their complaints, you've just given them one more thing to complain about!

5. Not responding to feed- feedback as promised. I received a mail survey from a furniture store shortly after making a purchase there. One item in the survey asked if I had any complaints. I did, and used the space provided to elaborate. Another item asked if I'd like someone to contact me about my complaints. I checked the "yes" box. It's been about four years now, but I'm waiting patiently.

It's a measure of sophisticated service to offer to contact customers about their grievances. Doing so tells customers that you value their feedback and want to set things right, and this evidence of concern can keep customers who might otherwise take their business elsewhere. But by not calling me as promised, this furniture store fell lower in my estimation than if no such promise had been made. Don't offer to contact disgruntled customers unless you really mean to do so.

As for me, I'm still waiting.

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FEEDBACK GATHERING

Customer Feedback Through Discussion

Surveys and focus groups are formal ways to assess customer satisfaction. But to generate feedback that's more timely, lively, and to the point, hold periodic discussions with small groups of customers. *Periodic* means once a month for about 90 minutes. *Small group* means 6 to 12 participants. *Discussion* means that everyone has a chance to get a word in edgewise.

Planning the discussion

Issue invitations. Send personal invitations to specific customer contacts. Explain that the purpose of the meeting is to solicit feedback to help your organization assess and improve its service effectiveness. Ask these managers to choose someone to attend who is familiar with your services. This personal attention will improve the odds that those who attend will participate fully and constructively.

Assign pre-work. A week before the meeting, ask participants to think of two or three things they've been satisfied with about your services and two or three things they'd like to see improved. This assignment will take almost no time, yet will start them thinking and help them focus on specific issues.

Plan seating with a view. Use a large conference table or a U-shaped set-up so everyone can see everyone else. These configurations stimulate discussion and feel friendlier than a classroom-oriented, raise-your-hand-to-speak type of arrangement.

Holding the discussion

Manage talking time. Make sure all participants have a chance to state their views. Some people just naturally speak out more than others; ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute.

Watch your wording. The specific words you use in requesting feedback will influence the type of response you get. If you ask for feedback on what you're doing wrong, some people will clam up, unwilling to gripe to your face. Other people, when asked the same question, will vent vociferously. To avoid either extreme, ask not what you're doing wrong, but how you could do better. If you set the stage for constructive feedback, you're more likely to avoid relentless ranting and raving.

Ask questions. Be careful not to misinterpret what customers mean by what they say. If a customer says it takes too long to get a problem fixed, he may mean that you're not responding quickly enough. Alternatively, he may mean that he needs more status updates or that he's unhappy with your priority-setting mechanism. Whether customers offer positive or negative feedback, ask follow-up questions so that you'll understand what they mean.

Involve co-workers. Have some of them join you at the meeting. A lot of ideas will fly back and forth, and it's helpful to review the proceedings with co-workers afterward to ensure that no critical information is overlooked. It's also a good idea to have a note-taker present to record recommendations — someone who can focus totally on capturing the ideas presented.

Ensure confidentiality. Emphasize to participants that you won't reveal names in any discussion or written material that may follow. And stick to your word on this; blabbing about who said what is a sure way to stifle all further feedback and to damage your reputation in the process.

Request suggestions. Your customers understand their needs better than you do and they might have some solutions that are more creative and effective than what you'd come up with yourself. If you ask for help in devising ways to better help them, they're more likely to feel like active players in their own support. Never underestimate their ability to help you help them.

Following up after the discussion

Listen — and then act. As quickly as possible, take some specific action based on the feedback you've received, and notify participants of what you've done. Even if you can't immediately implement changes, identify and announce some changes you intend to make. Then be sure to publicize the changes when you've made them. Doing so will give your feedback session credibility and demonstrate that it's a worthwhile use of participants' time.

Express appreciation. Don't forget to thank the participants. In fact, do it at the start of the gathering, at the end, and in a written note afterwards. But don't stop there: also express appreciation to participants' managers for their willingness to have their employees take time out of their busy schedules to participate. Explain how helpful the session was, and emphasize any specific steps you'll be taking as a result. This kind of follow-up is a little thing that can make a big difference in relationship building and in making the feedback-gathering process work.

SURVEY SAVVY

Chocolate! Chocolate!

The candy shop beckoned me. Unable to resist, I went in. From display cases, shelves, bottles and jars, delectable chocolate treats drew my attention. Oh, how I wanted to taste a little bit of everything. Or even a little bit of anything.

Actually, this is an article about surveys. Many of the surveys I've seen in my travels and many of those I've reviewed for clients are flawed. This is unfortunate, since surveys can be a great tool for learning how customers experience your products and services.

One of the most common types of flawed surveys is the ratings-only survey. This type of survey asks respondents to rate a particular product or service in terms of various attributes, such as responsiveness, accuracy, and ease of use. But the survey doesn't ask them to explain their ratings. As a result, the people who sponsor the survey have no way to know what led a respondent to rate an attribute as "2," "6, " or even "10" on a ten-point scale. Clearly, a "2" suggests a serious problem, and a "10" suggests a happy customer. But in the absence of explanations, these ratings offer no clue about what to change so as to increase customer satisfaction — or what *not* to change so as to avoid reducing it.

Which brings me back to those delectable morsels and my encounter with a ratings-only survey while visiting a client recently. Just down the street from my hotel was a Great Big Shopping Plaza, with jewelry shops, pottery shops, stuff-you-don't-need-at-great-prices shops — and, oh yes, the aforementioned candy shop.

At various spots around this plaza were people administering shopping-satisfaction surveys to willing passersby. When a Survey Taker approached me, clipboard in hand, I agreed to participate. Thus followed a series of questions that called for numerical ratings. Not once was I asked to explain the high ratings I gave in response to some questions or the low ratings I gave in response to others. And not once did the Survey Taker ask me what differences in my shopping experience might have resulted in higher ratings.

Yet, just one difference would have led me to give a higher rating. When I went into the candy shop, I gazed longingly at the magnificent munchies. But a wave of common sense stimulated my subconscious calorie counter, and after several yearnful moments I left, candyless. If, however, the shop had offered me a few tiny tasting samples from its scrumptious assortment, I (being a chocoholic at heart) would have been so delighted as to rate my entire shopping experience superlative. I'd probably also have purchased some Goodies To Go in case my evening needed sweetening. But the Survey Taker didn't ask.

It seems pointless to run ratings surveys if you won't know what the resulting ratings signify. Therefore, when you request ratings in your own surveys, aim to get supporting information as well. For example, in face-to-face or phone surveys, ask respondents for both their ratings and the reasons for their ratings. In printed or web-based surveys, follow items that request a rating with "Please explain your rating" or Please describe what led you to give this rating." Certainly, not everyone will supply this added information, but many will, and you'll find the resulting information invaluable.

Whether the ratings are poised at the high end of the scale, slithering off the bottom, or somewhere in between, ask respondents what one or two differences in their experience would have driven the ratings higher. In my case, the answer would have been simple: Chocolate! Chocolate!

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FEEDBACK GATHERING

More Oatmeal Raisin, Please

Service providers, take note: Many customers don't bother responding to your requests for feedback because they don't believe anyone pays attention to it. So if you truly want their feedback, demonstrate that you *are* paying attention. How? By providing feedback to them about their feedback to you.

Consider, for example, the approach used at a large cafeteria at a major university. It was there that I came across a delightfully low-tech approach for collecting meaningful feedback on a timely basis and sharing it with not only those who provided it, but all other patrons of this dining establishment as well.

In the center of this cafeteria was a small table on which was a stack of small slips of paper. A large sign invited people to provide feedback on the slips of paper and to post their comments on the adjacent bulletin board.

Among the numerous posted slips were complaints, compliments and questions. Complaints included the scarcity of clams in the clam chowder, delays at the cash register, and the out-of-applesauce condition at the salad bar. Compliments focused on the quality of the desserts and the cheerfulness of some of the cafeteria employees. And questions concerned whether a certain brand of jam could be provided and how the recently featured soup was made. Oh, yes, and when oh when would they ever serve oatmeal raisin cookies again?

Posting these comments publicly was clever because it enabled people to learn what pleased, bugged or puzzled their fellow diners, and encouraged people to post their own feedback. It also gave cafeteria management quick access to concerns and grievances, without the cost, effort and time-consuming hassle of a formal survey.

But what made this feedback-gathering process most valuable was that on the lower part of each slip, below the diner's input, was a response from cafeteria management. Responses ranged from "Thanks for letting us know" to "We're looking into it" to "See me for the recipe" to "Sorry, we can't please everyone."

Plus the response that said, "We'll start offering them again if there is sufficient demand." That was the response to the oatmeal raisin fan. Although it may not have been the response that person had hoped for, it implied that if enough other diners indicated a similar preference, they might all get to feast once again on the cookies of their choice. And (reading between the crumbs), this response suggested that management had stopped offering these cookies because too few diners partook to justify continuing to offer them.

This bulletin board approach to feedback gathering abounds with benefits: It provides a continuous and ongoing method of collecting and sharing feedback. It lets management know what's working and what's not, and helps them improve service quality. It invites participation and communicates to customers that management cares about their opinions.

In addition, it provides an outlet for people to voice grievances about matters that are less than earth-shattering, yet nevertheless deserve a response. And it provides a readily available forum for explaining to cafeteria diners why certain of their gustatory cravings can't be fulfilled.

Finally, it provides a way to call attention to other options that cafeteria patrons might not have considered. After all, if management can persuade oatmeal raisin fans to switch to those luscious, freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies, everyone wins.

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And for more on this subject . . .

If you have quick questions about gathering feedback, contact me and I'll answer them if I can.

If you'd like me to review your next survey (or your last survey) and provide detailed feedback and recommendations, contact me and let's discuss the options.

And for information on my eBook,

40 Frequent Feedback-Gathering Flaws
and How to Fix Them

www.nkarten.com/feedbackguide.html

Good luck! ☺

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