

WHITE PAPER - FOOD FOR THOUGHT

After Years of Hammering Home the Benefits of Short, Open-ended Surveys, Some Companies Still Don't Get It



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One could rabbit on about feedback surveys until the cows come home. What's the right way to structure them? How often should you send them out? How long should they be? Who will read the results? And most importantly, will anyone do anything with the information given in them?

Not many of us have time to fill in page after page of survey. The world is almost at survey saturation point. But after all these years developing our expertise in the world of customer feedback, four things have become blatantly clear to us:

- 1 Customers want short surveys
- 2 Open-ended feedback has greater value than tick boxes
- 3 Text analytics is the most cost effective way to analyse large quantities of open-ended feedback but it's important to do your research to find the most suitable provider
- 4 If you don't act on your customers' feedback, there's absolutely no point in collecting it

To put our thoughts into context, consider this article which appeared in The Times seven years ago, on Wednesday January 23rd 2008:



THE TIMES

"It was only a coffee and a glass of indifferent wine, shared with a friend on last Thursday's soggy afternoon. Nevertheless, in order "to improve quality and service", we were presented

with a card bearing boxes, begging to be ticked, that invited us to grade every aspect of our "visit" that day - thus bringing to six the number of consumer surveys thrust my way during last week alone.

There had also been one from an airline, one from a hotel, two following online purchases and one from the NHS. Never have our opinions been so fulsomely solicited, as we are flattered into giving time, thoughts and energy to people and companies who care so ►

very much about us that they will put our efforts directly towards – oyez! – our future “customer satisfaction”.

The catch is, however, that even if you want to trouble yourself to join in, these ostensibly fruitful little nods to progress come with a built-in impossibility to express with any precision what you really think. Were our coffee and wine, for instance “good value”? I don’t know. I don’t know the café’s overheads, the mark-up on the merlot or the cost – to the owner never mind the planet – of the patio heaters on his Covent Garden terrace. Let alone can I calculate the “value” to my increasingly socially isolated smoker pal, of such a ciggie-friendly terrace being available throughout the chills of January.

The online purchases surveys wanted me to score my “shopping experience” with them ... before the goods arrived; a bit previous, my mother would have called that. And what would a statistician make of my answers to the airline; every box ticked “poor”, “poor”, “nol points”, but the killer at the end – “would you fly with us again?” – could only truthfully earn a “definitely”, a perfect ten out of ten.

Delta, your airline sucks but as long as it is the only one that flies to my most frequent destination, I am forced to use it. And even if there were such a box, if he knew I was trapped by route map, where’s the incentive for him to make the improvements that this questionnaire, by its very existence, infers he might?

The NHS survey on GP standards, which is still sitting on my desk, nearly had me properly worried. It offered a list of six possible reasons for being dissatisfied with the local quack, but insisted that only one be ticked. In fact, all six reasons apply, several with knobs on – so by picking just one, am I not slewing the results with an implication that I’m happy with the other five?

Then reason kicked in; how foolish to worry. It’s one thing to buy into the soothing con that at least we get to have our say, thereby cleverly reducing our urge for complaint and the purveyors costly need to respond. It’s quite another to buy into the rather bigger con; the one that pretends that when all those wretched boxes are finally ticked, someone somewhere will actually give a monkey’s what we say.”

Yes, times have changed since 2008 and nowadays we are seeing more companies moving to shorter customer satisfaction surveys and reviews. However, we don’t need to look far to find many organisations still using ridiculously long, overly-complex tick-box surveys to find out what their customers think. ▶

Shorter surveys



Our lives are busy. We are bombarded with emails, text messages, Facebook posts and tweets every single hour of the day. Do we really have time to spend 10 – 15 minutes filling out a survey or speaking to someone on the phone about what we thought of their product? For the vast majority of us, the answer is no. But if we let customers know that giving their feedback will not take any more than a minute of their time, we have much more hope of gaining some insight into their experience.

Open-ended feedback versus tick boxes?

Does “80% good” or “15% poor” really tell you anything about what your customers think about their experience with your organisations? Or do you need a bit more insight about what gets under their skin? Why they behave the way they do? What really drives dissatisfaction and defection?

“Morgan our salesperson deserves 5 stars. She went above and beyond our expectations to find the right vehicle for our family. There was a constant flow of communication from our initial phone conversation. However, I was surprised that on a Saturday there was only one finance person working. Experienced a 3hr wait, longer than I would expect as on average we purchase a car every year.”

Give customers a chance to say what they really think and you'll certainly hear some things you never knew and some which you didn't even know to ask them in a tick-box survey! They are what we call “the unknown unknowns” – things that can help you improve your customer experience and really drive improvements to your customer satisfaction scores. ►

“Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know.

We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.

But there are also unknown unknowns; the ones we don't know we don't know”

Donald Rumsfeld, February 2002



As one of our valued clients said: "Fundamentally we work on the basis that you can ask the customers as many structured questions as you like, but they will tell you what's most important to them in the verbatim comments. If you can't effectively analyse this then you are missing out on customer gold!"

Text analytics makes sense of the open-ended comments

Text analytics has changed the way we analyse verbatim comments with automatic text analysis engines doing all the heavy lifting. Although the results will never be 100% accurate, they are accurate enough to report what it is that your customers are saying and feeling and to establish the key detractors and motivators.

Just three brief words of warning:

- Some companies profess to 'do' text analytics when in fact they don't. Don't be seduced by colourful word clouds!
- When talking to text analytics providers, check whether you are required to set up and manage your own bespoke coding. This is an extremely time-consuming task but some providers will take this complex workload off you.
- The basic Natural Language Processing analytics systems are very commonplace – however there are more sophisticated engines out there which use human interpretation as well as automated analysis. The more human interpretation involved, the more accurate your results will be.

Do you act on your feedback?

What do you do with the information you receive from your customer surveys?

- Do you do the bare minimum just so you satisfy regulatory bodies or senior management requirements?
- Do you analyse the tick-box answers and avoid the issue of dealing with the open-ended commentary because it's too difficult / time-consuming to analyse?
- Do you analyse the insight accurately and in a timely fashion and then present all manner of graphs and statistics to the powers-that-be and then file the results?
- Do you use the feedback to make strategic and operational decisions? Do you ever thank your customers for giving up their valuable time to give their feedback and let them know that you were acting on it? ►

Here is an example of how one of our clients, Eurocamp, has increased re-bookings of unhappy customers by 400% simply by contacting these customers:



Eurocamp has adopted a customer-centric approach to their operations and the regular team meetings at head office focus solely on meeting the customer's needs. The senior management team meets regularly to discuss the feedback received the previous week. Operational action plans are formulated and distributed to the respective teams within 24 hours.

For example, any customer who expresses negative sentiment about any part of their holiday, but who have not already been contacted through the Hot Alert programme, is promptly contacted by customer services. They acknowledge and empathise with the customer. The customer is reassured that their comments are listened to and acted upon.

This activity alone has resulted in an uplift of more than 400% in re-bookings from this group of "unhappy" customers. This is a clear demonstration of the power in listening and empathising with your customers.

So what is to be done?

When you next review your customer feedback survey, put yourself in your customers' shoes. Sit down and complete your own survey. Then ask yourself whether completing it was "an enjoyable experience"? Were you able to answer all the questions accurately? Were some questions irrelevant to you? Did you have enough space on the survey to say how you really felt? How did you feel at the end of the survey? ►



And finally, imagine the customer who wrote to The Times back in 2008 was your customer. Would he/she be saying any of the same things about your survey now, seven years on?

It's time to do more than just tick the box and show your customers you really DO give a monkey's. ■



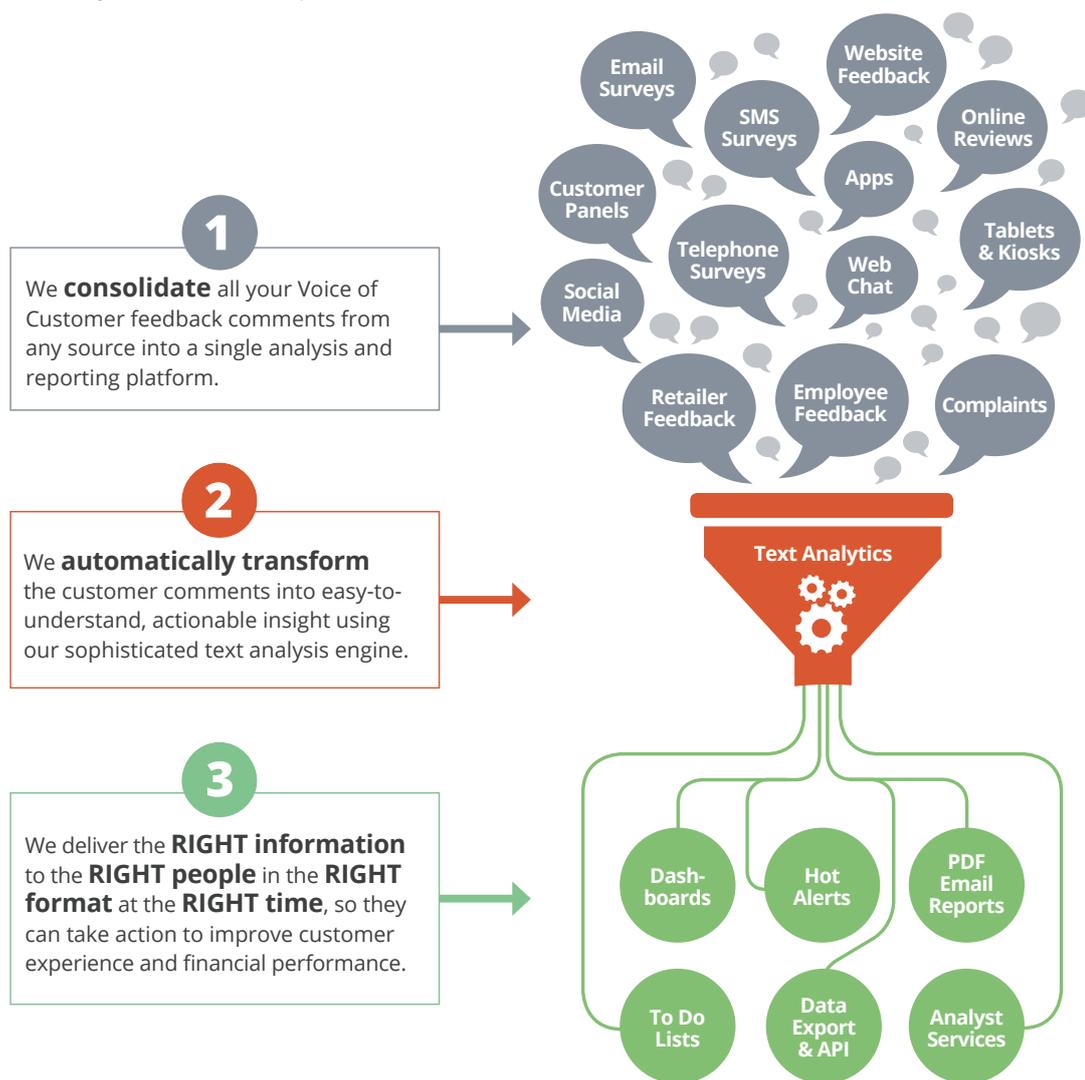
For more information about surveys, please see our Ferret Guide "The Perfect Survey".



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Feedback Ferret – Experts in Customer Feedback

Using text analytics, Feedback Ferret transforms customer feedback comments into actionable insight. We make it easy for you to improve your customer experience.



All our technology and services have been developed by, and are operated by, Feedback Ferret Ltd. The technology is our own intellectual property, designed specifically to address the needs of extracting insight from customer feedback.

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