

Survey Says...

For the best answers, ask the right questions.

THE THEORY BEHIND customer satisfaction surveys is a sound one: Find out how your customers feel, and you'll find out how to grow your business. But if you don't ask the right questions in the right manner, the results of your survey will be seriously flawed—or even worthless.

David Futrell, a quality improvement consultant with QualPro Inc. in Knoxville, Tennessee, offers these tips for developing effective surveys:

❖ *Ask your customers what to ask.*

What's important to you may or may not be important to your customers. If your customer base is broad enough, conduct focus groups to develop your survey and test the effectiveness of your questions. If this isn't practical, ask the people in your company who deal with customers regularly for input.

❖ *Be sure the answer will tell you what to do.* Look at each question and ask yourself, "If my customers tell me I'm doing poorly in this particular area, will I know what to fix?" The question should be phrased in a way that tells you exactly what action to take to make any necessary improvements.

For example, if you ask a general question such as "How do you rate the quality of our merchandise?" and a customer gives you a "poor" rating, you won't know what to do unless you know which product was the culprit, how it was used, and exactly what made the customer unhappy.

❖ *Use a combination of different types of questions.* Most survey questions should be phrased in a way that allows them to be graded on a numeric scale. However, you should also include a few open-ended questions; customers may offer some ideas you haven't thought of.

❖ *Develop a user-friendly design.*

If your survey is in written form, consider enlisting the services of a graphic designer to give the document "eye appeal" and make it easy to complete. Ask what you need to know, but keep it as brief and simple as possible.

❖ *Avoid asking customers to rank lengthy lists of items.* Futrell says customers will generally rank up to four items, but 10 is too many: "If you're lucky, they'll rank items one, two and three, and leave the rest blank."

If you're doing a phone survey, don't use lists at all. Futrell says comparisons of two items can work but listening to longer lists is confusing.

❖ *Each question should address only one issue.* Avoid what Futrell calls "double-barrelled" questions. For example, a hospital survey that asks "Was your nurse competent and caring?" could be difficult to answer. "It's easy to imagine having a competent nurse who is fairly cold," Futrell observes. "It's equally easy to imagine a caring nurse who isn't competent."

Most of your customers want to help you do a better job of serving them. Thoughtful survey preparation makes it easier for everyone. E

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