



## Hoping For A Top Score? Customer Surveys Gone Bad

by Bill Fonvielle

We bought a new car recently. The sales representative was courteous, attentive and reasonably knowledgeable — basically all the things he was supposed to be — until the deal was concluded at which point he became a supplicant, begging for perfect scores on the customer survey that would follow. Anything less than perfect 10's on all questions, he assured us in a somewhat whiny voice, would reflect badly on the dealership and would have dire consequences for him.



That brought to mind a similar experience at the conclusion of a cruise ship voyage. The crew and entertainers appeared on stage in front of the assembled passengers and pleaded for tips and “10's” on their customer survey. I found the whole affair demeaning; it reeked of whatever the opposite of customer focus is. Filling out the proffered survey caused a dilemma as I didn't want the hard working staff penalised by honest but less than “top box” scores, but neither did I want to accede to the demand that I help game the system by being less than candid in my responses. The staff was not at fault; management was.

An even more egregious instance of a survey gone bad was some years ago when I would take my car to the dealer for service. The same conversation ensued each time I returned to pick up the car. The clerk whom I paid for the service would shove a paper survey at me and say “Please complete our service satisfaction survey” suggesting with her body language that my keys would be held hostage until I finished the thing. “But,” I would protest, “How do I know whether I am satisfied or not until I have driven the car for a while?” Impervious to my logic, she would shrug and tell me that she needed it done now because that was their process, and if I didn't know how satisfied I was, I should guess.

These point of purchase customer surveys are becoming almost ubiquitous in service industries whether administered on the spot or later via email.

On a positive note, they probably have led to improved service levels in some industries although the gains are hard to see in the generally declining composite company customer satisfaction scores reflected in various national and international surveys.

But whatever the positives, the negative effects may outweigh them. One such negative is the risk of alienating the very customers whose satisfaction the survey is attempting to gauge. Another negative is reflected in employees attempting to game the system for their own benefit.

Not least is the distortion in customer metrics caused by asking respondents to inflate their scores or asking them to rate aspects of the customer experience about which they are ignorant. Finally, using results from these surveys to directly punish or reward employees is certain to have a corrosive effect on company morale and performance.

Getting customer feedback about transactions and service quality is both good and necessary. Feedback can and should be used to inform and educate employees, guide individual and team development, and improve systems, procedures and processes. Done well, surveys will provide data that can be used to increase customer intimacy, build loyalty, and improve business results. So please, don't let your customer surveys go bad.

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