The Power of Surveys to Increase Repeat Business
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Do you take the time to request feedback from your clients and customers? If not, you could be missing out on an opportunity to boost repeat business. Research has shown that merely soliciting a review from customer increases repeat business. This is known as the mere solicitation effect. While such effects were known, what had not been investigated was how the specific wording of the request for feedback can influence a customer’s repeat purchase behavior. In multiple field studies, we find that repeat purchases are boosted (above and beyond the mere solicitation effect) when companies ask for open-ended, positive feedback at the beginning of a customer survey.

Customer Feedback

Firms have long recognized the value derived from customer feedback. With the information customer surveys provide, businesses are able to alter their internal operations to provide a superior product or service that truly meets the customer’s needs. However, the effect of surveys goes beyond the internal improvement of the company. Research and analysis has led companies to understand that soliciting customers for feedback is an ideal opportunity to engage customers and promote loyalty.

A national study of 813 individual companies found that 86% of companies attempt to gather some form of feedback from their customers (MarketTools 2010). The majority of firms seek negative feedback (rather than compliments) so that they can identify areas in need of improvement. After completing countless surveys seeking negative feedback, the typical customer has been conditioned to think exclusively about criticisms of the company when providing feedback (Ofir and Simonson 2001).

A simple way to pose a positive, open-ended question is to ask something like, “What went well during our last interaction?” In contrast, traditional closed-ended surveys typically ask questions such as, “How well did we treat you as a customer?” with a scale from very poor to excellent. Asking an open-ended “what went well,” rather than “how well did we do?” promotes deeper
thinking and allows the customer the opportunity to expound on what they liked most about their experience.

When customers take time to complete a survey asking for negative feedback, they are reinforcing negative memories about their encounter with the company. Consequently, we wanted to know if companies could instead reinforce positive memories by soliciting positive feedback from customers, and whether this could ultimately enhance future sales.

**Psychological Measurement Effects**

Memory of an event is highly malleable; in fact “the process of remembering itself can rescript and reconsolidate our memories” (Sara 2000). The questions that initiate the process of remembering can alter our perceptions of the past (Loftus and Palmer 1974). By asking customers to specifically recall positive aspects of their past experiences, a new and more positive memory can be developed.

Asking an open-ended positive question invites customers to reflect on the best aspects of their experience. Once customers have retrieved positive memories, translating that memory into spoken word or written text creates an effect known as “memory persistence” (Yarbrough et al. 2013). With a newly reinforced positive memory, one would expect the customer to have a higher rate of repurchase from that company. This theory was tested in two field studies designed to observe actual repurchase behavior of customers.

**Study 1: The Effect of an Open-Ended Positive Solicitation**

In a telephone survey following a retail purchase, we asked a group of retail customers for positive feedback in an open-ended format (“Tell us what went well with your visit?”), followed by traditional closed-ended questions (“Now would you rate the quality of your service?”). We requested feedback from another group of customers using only the closed-ended prompts. Upon analysis of the customer’s total purchases in dollars over the next year, the customers who were first asked open-ended, positive questions on the survey spent 8.25% more than their counterparts. When compared with customers who were asked to complete the survey but opted not to complete it, the customers who received open-ended and positive questions spent 130% more.

**Study 2: Assessing the Increased Effect of Beginning the Survey with Positive Solicitation over General Solicitation**

In our second study, we used an online survey (on behalf of a new business) to assess the effects of written versus oral customer feedback in converting trial to actual purchase. In the online format, the survey measured the expected increases in purchase behavior resulting from mere solicitation, measurement, and the open-ended positive effect.
Mere solicitation of survey feedback (simply sending out a survey even if not completed by the customer) resulted in a statistically significant increase of purchases. An even larger boost in repurchase occurred if the customer actually completed the survey, supporting the mere measurement effect. By opening the survey with an open-ended positive question, repurchase further increased above the mere measurement effect. In total, customer spending increased by 33% from the traditional closed-ended survey to the survey that led with an open-ended positive solicitation.

Real Estate Implications

While real estate agents do not typically deal with small purchases, they do rely heavily on repeat clients, referrals, and their overall reputation for excellence. Traditional surveys are excellent at providing insight for you to improve your service for future clients. Surveys that solicit positive feedback can also enhance a client’s perception of you, so take the time to ask for positive feedback via a formal survey or a casual conversation at closing.

By creating a simple questionnaire that you distribute after completing your service, great benefits can be realized. Simply mailing or emailing a survey to your client can groom the client’s perceptions of you via the mere solicitation effect. Once the client completes the survey, the mere measurement effect solidifies lingering memories in the client’s mind and increases his/her likelihood of repeating business with you. To realize the greatest benefit, simply begin your survey by requesting positive feedback in an open-ended format, starting with questions like, “What went well in our interactions?” or “What did you enjoy most about your home search process or working with me?”
One important caveat: find an opportunity to listen to your customers to find out if there is anything you need to improve about your service. If you are not currently surveying prior clients, you are not alone. However, you are missing out on the opportunity to enhance perceptions of your services that can boost repeat clients and referrals.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Bone (PhD – Oklahoma State University) serves as the Director of the Huntsman Sales Academy at Utah State University and teaches courses in professional sales and marketing. His research focuses on enhancing customer experience through voice-of-customer, voice-of-employee, and mystery shopping programs. His research has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Consumer Research, Journal of Service Research, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, Harvard Business Review*, and other notable journals. He currently
serves on the Arizona State University Center for Services Leadership research faculty network, and the editorial review boards of the Journal of Service Research, Journal of Public Policy & Marketing and the Journal of Business Research. His research has been featured or highlighted in the Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, Bloomberg Businessweek, on NPR’s Marketplace, and numerous other media outlets. Prior to his academic career, Sterling worked as a residential and commercial real estate agent.

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Dr. Voorhees’ (PhD – Florida State University) research focuses on the explanation and management of the dynamics of social exchange and social influence. Within this theoretical umbrella, he focuses on projects related to customer experience management and loyalty, often in service contexts. His research has been published in the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of the Academy of Science, Strategic Management Journal, Journal of Retailing, and Journal of Service Research, among others. In 2016, Clay received the "Best Services Marketing Article" award from the American Marketing Association, and in 2015, he received the Emerging Service Scholar award from the American Marketing Association’s Services Marketing Special Interest Group. In addition, his research has received the 2011, 2012, and 2015 Industry Relevance Awards from Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research and has been featured in media outlets such as Wall Street Journal, TIME Magazine, BusinessWeek, USA Today, U.S. News & World Report, and numerous other domestic and international periodicals. In addition to research, Clay teaches a range of courses at the masters and doctoral levels focused on innovating and launching new goods and services, insights and analytics, and marketing management.

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Dr. Fombelle’s (PhD – Arizona State University) current research interests examine customer feedback management, customer loyalty and relationship marketing, service innovation, and service experience management. His research has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing Research, the Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Service Research, Journal of Interactive Marketing,* and *Journal of Business Research.* He currently serves on the editorial review board of the *Journal of Business Research.* Paul's global research partners span a variety of sectors including technology, financial, health, food/fine dining, retail, and entertainment services. Prior to earning his Ph.D., Paul worked in branding for Ogilvy and Mather in New York, where he helped managed such brands as American Express and Post Cereal.

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Dr. DeTienne’s (PhD – University of Southern California) research examines the interdependent behavior among organizational employees, leaders, and external constituencies, such as customers. Her work extends the current understanding of the impact of behavior on organizational outcomes such as profitability. In 2010, she received the “Outstanding Paper Award” for her article in *Competitiveness Review.* Her monitoring legislation article was selected for Best of the American Bar Association. Her research was awarded outstanding article of the year by the Association for Business Communication, and she won the Best of Conference Honors at the Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference. DeTienne has also published over 70 peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings.

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