

Survey Questions You Must Ask

Knowing your members' needs is vital for associations, or for any business for that matter, because meeting customers' needs is the surest way to retain them. Satisfied customers will not only buy more of your products and services but they will also tell their colleagues about their wonderful experience with your organization. Satisfied customers are your best marketing tool.

Appreciating the perspective of your customers remains the key to creating satisfied customers. Asking the right survey questions provides you with the insights to understand your customers' needs.

Confirmation

Many customer surveys focus largely on confirming that customers are satisfied with the services and products that are currently being offered. This strategy is understandable because everyone wants to know that what they are currently offering meets their clients' needs. It is also understandable because there tends to be an emotional commitment to current services and products. Staff and managers have invested time and energy to ensure that their organizations provide their customers with excellent products and services.

However, focusing your surveys on confirming that your current services and products are satisfactory can be perilously limiting. This strategy will blind you to your ever-changing customers' needs. It is imperative in your surveys, therefore, that you ask your customers questions that will provide you with their perspective.

Perspective

There are several types of questions that will provide you with insights into your customers' current needs and desires. You need to include these types of questions in your survey appropriately to ensure that you have a comprehensive understanding of your customers' current and future needs.

A. Scaled Questions

Scaled questions usually define the beginning and end of the scale. The most common type of scaled question used in hospitals and in the government is the 1-to-5 scale, with, for example, the 1 being defined as "very dissatisfied" and the 5 as "very satisfied".

The advantage of these scaled questions is that they are sensitive to shifts in your customer' perception, so it is simple to chart progress. If over time you are moving up the scale in a statistically significant manner, it means what you are

doing to address your customers' needs is effective; conversely, if over time you are moving down the scale in a statistically significant manner, it is time to reassess what you are doing because it is not meeting your customers' needs.

Surveys must be repeated to ensure that you are making ongoing progress in addressing your customers' needs, and one of the most effective ways to monitor your progress is to use these scaled questions in appropriate places throughout your survey.

While scaled questions will help you monitor your progress in meeting your clients' needs, they will not provide you with insights into how you can better meet their needs. To do this you need to use different types of questions, like the following ones.

B. Value Questions

Value questions help you learn what your customers "like" about the services and products you provide. The typical question that is used asks, "What one or two services we offer do you like most?"

These types of questions provide you with a perspective on why your customers remain members of your organization and use your services and products. They provide you with critical insights into what you must continue to offer to keep your customers coming back, to keep your customers loyal.

C. Improvement Questions

Improvement questions provide you with the customers' perspective for where you need to focus your efforts to improve the services and products that you offer. An example of such a question would be "What is the one thing we must do to improve a specific product or service?"

You can make multiple improvements to the services and products that you offer. The challenge with limited resources is to identify where to make improvements that will be most significant for your clients. These improvement questions help you to focus your improvement efforts most effectively and meaningfully.

D. System Questions

Along with improvement questions, you need to ask some system questions. These types of questions complement your improvement questions. An example of a system question would be "What one or two systems do you find difficult to use?"

A system question provides you with the client's perspective on where they are experiencing difficulties using your services or products. Improvement questions while useful are limited by the scope of experience of your customers.

For example, at one time if you were to ask bank customers how to improve response time, they might have suggested that adding more wickets and tellers would speed up service. While this was a credible option, it would have been expensive and would not have improved response time dramatically. However, knowing that bank customers wanted quicker response time, banks added automatic teller machines (ATM's), phone banking and internet banking. These systems improved response time and customer convenience dramatically, and they were much less expensive options than adding more banks and staff.

An analogy for associations could be the renewal process. In a survey, members might suggest that to improve response time during the renewal process more staff should be added. To address this problem, however, an association could opt to offer the option of paying electronically which would improve response time dramatically. And it makes fee payment simpler. Not only would such a system meet members' needs more effectively, but it would also provide significant savings in staffing costs, savings that could be used elsewhere.

System questions provide you with the awareness and perspective to consider bringing in appropriate experts to make significant changes to address clients' needs.

E. Quantify your Open-ended Questions

Quantify your open-ended questions to make them easier to complete and more meaningful. Ask for 1, 2 or 3 suggestions, for example, for how to improve service.

You want to know your customers' common concerns, not their unique concerns. For example, if you were to ask your customers for one suggestion for how to improve your web site, they might identify making the web page simpler to follow. However, if you were to ask for all their suggestions, they might suggest a unique background colour for the web page. While you could redesign your web page to make it simpler to follow, how would you meet the unique needs of your customers if many suggested different background colours for the page?

Asking for a specific quantity for the responses to your open-ended questions offers you the following advantages:

- Customers are much more likely to identify common concerns which you can address, rather than unique concerns which are much more difficult to address.

- Customers are much more likely to respond because it is less demanding to offer a specific number of suggestions, rather than to provide as many as they can think of. And with a better response rate, what you receive will be more representative of what customers think.
- Customers' expectations are more likely to be met. Surveys always set expectations, and if you ask for all suggestions, then customers rightly expect that you will address all their recommendations.

F. Prompting Questions

Prompting questions help you engage your customers to sell your services and products. An example of a prompting question would be “How likely are you to recommend our services and products to your colleagues?” using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 being labeled as “very unlikely” and 5 as “very likely”. This question should be followed up with “What is one more thing that we could do to increase the likelihood that you would recommend our services and products to your colleagues?”

These prompting questions are very useful not only because they help encourage customers to recommend your services and products to their colleagues but also because they give you clearer insights into what are your key services and products.

Often the suggestions to these prompting questions are similar to the responses that customers provide to the questions about what services and products they value and to what services and products they feel need to be improved. When you see this type of clustering, you know that these are the vital few services and products you need to excel at to keep your customers loyal and to attract new ones.

Summary

Asking the right questions to obtain your customers' perspective on what services and products they need stands as paramount for any business. The answers to these types of questions will provide you with the information to design the services and products that your customers need. Meeting customers' needs prompts them to become advocates for the products and services your organization offers. And there is no more effective marketing tool than satisfied customers who praise your services and products to their colleagues!