

Finding What Customers Want, and Delivering It

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First of a series of articles on tools to meet customer expectations, improve services, sales and the bottom line in on-site dining service.

To paraphrase Freud, what do customers want? That's a question asked with some urgency whenever sales and customer counts decline. It should be asked – and answered – regularly and routinely, in good times as well as bad.

There are several means for determining customer preferences, which evolve continuously. Ideally, they are all used because combined, they create a full picture of customer preferences and suggest means for keeping customers patronizing your dining center and spending profitably.

- *Customer satisfaction surveys* give you a broad overview of the attitudes and preferences of your customer base, students or employees, the alternatives they are using to your dining service – and why.
- *Focus groups* let you interact with representative customer groups to flesh out the results of your surveys.
- *Sales data* tells you what customers are buying – and avoiding.
- *Observation* tells you what customers are actually doing, which may differ from what they are saying.

When all these tools are used, you will be able to identify and provide the right services, menus and innovations that will increase participation, check averages and profitability or a lower subsidy.

Customer Satisfaction

When structured properly, the customer satisfaction survey can be an important and valuable tool. With Survey Monkey, Zoomerang and similar electronic platforms, surveys are easy to launch, complete and obtain results quickly and accurately, if your audience has ready access to computers.

When the audience doesn't – in an industrial plant, for example – paper surveys are useful, but time-consuming to distribute, collect and compile and typically have a smaller response rate.

What makes a good survey? "Careful and informed design," says Palmer Morrell-Samuels, president of Employee Motivation and Performance Assessment, writing in *Harvard Business Review*.

What Do You Want to Know?

The first step is to decide what you want to learn. "Once you have a purpose in mind, it helps how you will construct [the survey], the questions and who you're going to send it to," advises Roger Addison of the International Society of Performance Improvement, quoted in *HR Magazine*.

Morrell-Samuels offers these tips for good survey construction.

- *Ask questions about observable behavior, rather than thoughts or motives.* Ask whether service is efficient and pleasant, rather than about the staff's "attitude."
- *Include some items that can be independently verified.* If you ask about the popularity of various menu items, for example, you can match responses against actual sales records.
- *Keep sections of the survey unlabeled and uninterrupted by page breaks.* These and other interruptions to the survey's flow "can skew responses subtly and even substantially."
- *Design sections to contain a similar number of items and questions of a similar number of words.* Maintaining fairly equal question and section lengths increases the chance you'll receive compatible responses across all questions. Long questions result in higher ratings.

- *Place questions about demographics last.* Respondents are more likely to answer after they've invested their time taking the survey.

- *Create a response scale with numbers and words only at each end, and an odd number of options.* Eg., 1 = "poor" and 5 = "excellent."

- *Make surveys anonymous and demonstrate they will remain so.* Respondents are unlikely to be candid otherwise.

- *Respondents should be able to complete the survey in 20 minutes or less.* Shorter surveys have a higher completion rate.

To demonstrate to respondents that they were heard, adopt any suggestions you receive that are actionable as quickly as possible. Your customers will notice and spread the word to your non-customers.

The next article in this series will discuss the use and value of focus groups.

Clarion will help you design, administer and interpret customer surveys, and take action as needed. Contact Tom Mac Dermott, president, 603/642-8011 or Angela Phelan, vice president, 973/544-6223, or visit our website, clariongp.com.