

How Happy Are Your Customers? Ask Them

The customer isn't always right, but the customer's always worth listening to.

Dining Insights, Winter 2014

Adapted from an article by Tom Mac Dermott published in FM Newslinks, online newsletter of Food Management magazine.

There are many ways to listen to the customer – one-on-one, focus groups, hearing what customers say as they're being served, for example.

While these and other means are good in keeping the pulse of an operation, the broad-based customer survey provides the best means for learning the satisfactions, irritations, wants and preferences of a wide cross-section of the population served.

Well-crafted surveys serve multiple useful purposes. Food service contractors use them to identify levels of successes and shortcomings at individual operations; measure the success of new menu items, concepts and services, and to compare results among operations in a multi-unit client, a district or other grouping.

Some clients incorporate survey results into their formula for financial incentives – rewards or penalties – for the contractor.

Learning About Loyalty

Aramark Corp. conducts annual customer satisfaction surveys at all its corporate food service locations “where the client approves,” says Salli Darden, vice president for marketing. “These are electronic and voluntary, reaching users [of the staff café] and non-users.”

The information is used to gage “frequency of use and loyalty,” she explained. Loyalty is measured by answers to a question familiar to anyone who's received a survey from a hotel, airline or retailer: “How likely are you to recommend this [facility, product or service] to a friend?”

Aramark's surveys ask about customer preferences and their interest in health and wellness. They also ask “concept-testing” questions when the company is planning new menus, features and ideas. By utilizing the same or very similar survey formats, Aramark is able to identify trends. “We routinely get 80,000 returns nationally,” Darden says.

District managers and regional vice presidents use survey results in “customer-facing presentations,” she says, such as quarterly performance reviews. Survey results at a location help operations managers identify weak spots in their services and implement solutions.

At corporate food service contractor Guckenheimer, customer satisfaction surveys are a part of the management toolkit.

“We like our clients to do surveys once a year,” says Karla Lacey, Chief Marketing Officer. “When we do something different we also like to take a read.” Something different might be a new concept or newly renovated facility.

'A Richness in Comments'

Guckenheimer surveys typically seek information on customer habits, such as how frequently they have breakfast or lunch in the staff café. “We ask about food quality and service and about a [café service] station, if it's liked or not and if not, why not,” Lacey says. “It's important to ask questions in a neutral way.”

In surveys, “there's a richness in [narrative] comments that's very helpful to the operator.”

- Karly Lacey
Chief Marketing Officer
Guckenheimer

“We include space for narrative comments,” she adds. “There’s a richness in comments that’s very helpful to the operator.”

“At the corporate office we create a report [of survey results] and send it to the unit manager and area manager,” Lacey explains. “It’s up to the operator to review the results with the client.” Usually, the survey results are incorporated into a quarterly client review report.

“We try to keep some questions the same for comparison among accounts,” she adds.

At the International Monetary Fund headquarters in Washington, DC, the client does the surveying. Customer satisfaction surveys are performed annually, according to Heather Leanna, the IMF’s Food Service Officer.

The survey asks respondents to rate their satisfaction with features and services of the Fund’s two staff cafes and two bistros.

“The focus is on comments and suggestions,” she says. “We market the survey in advance using posters and notices on the intranet and send reminders during the survey. The results are posted on the intranet for all employees to see.”

“We consider the overall customer satisfaction level as a KPI (key performance indicator) for the food service contractor (Sodexo). It’s a scorecard measurement.”

Aramark’s Darden, Guckenheimer’s Lacey and the IMF’s Leanna all agree on one important point in conducting surveys. In Leanna’s words, “Keep it brief.”

Three Keys

What makes a good survey, effective enough to yield actionable information?

There are three key elements, according to Tom Newcomb, president of the consultancy Corporate Dining, Inc. His firm conducts the IMF’s surveys.

- Reduce ambiguity. The best question is, ‘Is “x” important to you?’ The best response option is ‘yes’ or ‘no’.
- Know your audience. The questionnaire has to be developed around the components of the group being surveyed.
- Understand what’s important to the group. Newcomb utilizes “gap analysis.” His surveys focus on five or six topics and asks about them in two ways: How important is a component of the operation to the respondent, then how satisfied is the respondent with that component.

For example, when responses are high for importance and low for satisfaction, “that shows where to target the action plan, what and how to make changes,” he says.

“That’s where focus groups come in,” he adds, providing further insights into the issue and ideas for implementing improvements.

i-Pads and Intercepts

Broad-based electronic surveys are often supplemented with other means. Guckenheimer has begun installing an i-Pad on a stand in the serverly to invite customers to answer a few questions. “We hope responding on an i-Pad would be fun,” Karla Lacey, chief marketing officer, says, “the jury’s still out on whether it’s the better format.”

“The I-Pad response rate is typically 25% to 35% of the available population,” she reports. “Participation in an e-mail survey can range from 5% to 45%.”

Aramark utilizes intercept surveys, where a survey-taker questions customers at random in the café to ask a few brief questions, for example, “to test the acceptability of a menu item,” Darden explains. They also use focus groups. “We need multiple formats to get feedback, including concept testings as needed”

Don't Overdo It

The same factors that make electronic surveys easy to create creates a danger – overuse. Anyone with a computer and internet connection sees a survey from somebody pop up in his/her in-box once or twice a week – sometimes more often.

The delete key may be the response unless your survey is, like the IMF's, promoted in advance and asks about topics that touch the respondent's interests. Surveying the same group with the same questions too often, say, semi-annually or quarterly, will get diminishing responses.

The most effective way to achieve improved customer satisfaction and maintain or increase participation and sales is to respond quickly and visibly to the concerns, comments and complaints received.

Clarion conducts customer surveys as a key part of our operations evaluations. To learn how we can benefit your services, contact Tom Mac Dermott, 603/642-8011 or Angela Phelan 973/544-6112 or e-mail us at info@clariongp.com.