stupid satisfaction surveys

Reading that your customers are satisfied might give you a warm-fuzzy feeling, but what do you really learn? *Katie Harris* thinks that to improve your business, you need to hunt down *dissatisfaction*.

Customer satisfaction. You want it. You need it. Perhaps your Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) demand it.

"Already onto it!" you say. "Covered that in our customer satisfaction survey, with some questions asking our customers how satisfied they are."

Maybe. But maybe not.

I want to talk about measuring satisfaction. The issue begs attention because, in many cases, measurement that could – and by all rights should – be useful, is not. I'd go as far as saying that customer satisfaction surveys, for the most part, are a complete waste of time, effort and investment. But before I explain why they're missing the mark so widely, here's some context.

I'm a market researcher, and a market of particular interest to me is my own, i.e. the market research industry. To this end, I mystery-shop market research tools. I sign up to do market research surveys on the web. I pick up customer satisfaction feedback forms in stores. I ask friends and family to keep any surveys and feedback forms they get, and to hand them over to me. I then scrutinise them with great interest. Finally, when they've been duly examined, I file them in folders with labels such as "Questionable Questionnaires" or "Stupid Surveys (and Farcical Feedback Forms)". You get the gist.

Right now, my "Stupid Survey" folder is overflowing. Positively brimming with ill-considered customer satisfaction surveys. This is the very issue I hope to address with this discussion. I'd like to do away with the "Stupid" folder altogether (save myself a trip to IKEA, and the expense of a Swedish storage solution for the overflow).

What lands a survey in the "Stupid" folder?

Typically, this: *the survey doesn't define satisfaction from the customers' point of view*. Without defining satisfaction from the customers' point of view, the information captured by these surveys is, quite frankly, stupid. Stupid and useless.

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While knowing that customers are satisfied may generate warm-fuzzy feelings, it's hardly going to help identify what to do more of, so that customers *remain* satisfied. And it's not going to help identify which initiatives will increase customer satisfaction.

Even more importantly, however, knowing that customers aren't satisfied isn't going to provide information about exactly what it is that needs fixing.

For a customer satisfaction survey to be useful, it must capture and measure the dynamics and dimensions of satisfaction *from the customers' perspective*.

This is where qualitative research comes into its own. Qualitative research can tell you exactly what it is that you should be measuring: a very important piece of the puzzle. How do customers describe satisfaction? What does satisfaction feel like? What does satisfaction depend on? And so on. Answers to these questions should guide survey development if there's any intent to use the research findings with meaningful effect.

The above, of course, assumes that you actually want to measure customer satisfaction with your customer satisfaction survey.

I mentioned KPIs earlier because interesting things can happen to customer satisfaction surveys when KPIs are linked to customer satisfaction levels. In some cases, a high customer satisfaction score *is* the end goal. "Did we get high satisfaction scores? Good! The team get to keep their jobs." Customer satisfaction itself is somewhat incidental.

And not surprisingly, when KPIs are linked to customer satisfaction scores there's always the possibility that the survey questions will be purposefully designed to achieve a favourable outcome. It's not too difficult to craft questions to shape, and deliver, the desired response – to feed the KPI beast, so to speak.

And thus, I possibly open a whole can of worms. But is it a research issue? Or is it a KPI issue? Or is it, in fact, a toxic mix of both?

I think I need a new folder. I'll call it "Satisfaction guaranteed".

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http://zebrabites.com