



310 East 4500 South, Suite 450  
Salt Lake City, UT 84107  
(800) 634-5407  
[www.mshare.net](http://www.mshare.net)

# **If You Don't Survey Guests, You Won't Really Know**

(Version 2)

By Richard D. Hanks  
Mindshare Technologies

## If You Don't Survey Guests, You Won't Really Know

Those who love football will remember the following famous quote by Coach Woody Hayes. When asked why his team didn't pass the football more often, he replied,

**"Three things can happen when you throw a pass, and two of them are bad."**

In that vein of thinking, may I suggest:

**"There are four or five things that can happen when you upset a customer, and all of them are bad, but one."**

I believe that the best possible option is for an upset customer **to tell you** (either directly or through a survey) exactly what is causing their displeasure.

### Why is it good for customers to tell you?

Because it will provide you with the opportunity to (1) improve your business, and (2) recover a customer before they defect to a competitor. Besides, no one really keeps their negative service experiences to themselves. People talk. The problem is that between 50% and 70% (depending on which research study you read) of dissatisfied customers won't complain at the point of service. They will leave your establishment ticked off without telling you, but you can bet they will tell their friends and neighbors. Consider the irony – everyone may know you have a problem, **except you!**

So, the best option is to make it easy for guests to let you know exactly how their experience went, before they complain elsewhere and take their business to your competitors.

### Why guests don't complain

Why won't most customers tell you to your face that you've messed up? Several potential reasons:

- 1) I am conflict averse (it's hard for me to give you bad news to your face)
- 2) It's not worth the trouble
- 3) It won't do any good
- 4) I don't know where to complain
- 5) I'm worried you'll retaliate

Regardless of the reason, the large majority of people just won't proactively give you the feedback you need to improve. Occasionally, I encounter a client who tells me they don't believe this is true. They feel that their customers are "different," and that their customers are very willing to let them know about their shortcomings.

After investigation, I usually find that this just doesn't match the facts. It is important when evaluating your typical, average guest that you remember that you personally are **neither** "typical" nor "average." The simple fact that you are reading this article places you into the category of those-interested-in-customer-service. You probably **are willing** to speak your mind. You probably **have no fear** or

aversion to sharing your negative experiences and complaints. But you **are not** representative of your customers! You can't project your own tendencies to your guests.

## **Sure, complainers can be annoying, but...**

Nobody likes a whiner, right? Not so fast.

Handling complaints is not an easy or fun experience. Complaints can be uncomfortable. Sometimes customers can get downright hostile, and this can lead employees to dread them. Nobody likes unpleasant news.

Dealing with difficult customers can be a challenge for anyone. I've lived with my fair share of annoying, rude, and 'entitled' people who will treat a service provider worse than they would treat their nastiest enemy. But it's these very customers who you should be **grateful** for – at least they have the spine to let you know where you are falling short. Disgruntled guests will help you improve your future service and will give you insight into how you compare to your competitors. Customers who take the time to tell you are doing you a favor.

The sweet and kind guests that smile a gentle smile as they walk out the door dissatisfied are like the high blood pressure or carbon monoxide of service companies. They are the 'silent killers' who leave with a problem but don't have the guts to let you know.

## **So, how can you make certain you know what's really going on?**

You have to **ask** using real-time surveys. It's really that simple. Actively solicit customer feedback. Make it a point to let your employees know that you're not just tolerating customer complaints, you are **actively seeking** them. Make it easy for them to tell you what you're doing wrong. **If you don't ask, you'll never know.**

## **Why ask? Why listen?**

To some of you this is obvious – but let me list the reasons why you must be willing to survey your customers about their experience.

- Customers won't come back. You'll lose their revenue, their lifetime value, and their word-of-mouth marketing.
- Customers never forget. They'll repeat the negative press over and over. A customer, who can't remember what they had for breakfast, somehow will clearly remember a negative experience from 12 years ago.
- Customers need an outlet. If you don't provide them an easy means to give feedback, they'll express their frustrations elsewhere.
- Customers will go to your competitors. Bad, bad, bad.

- Long after the complaint, the emotions associated with complaining (e.g. upset, anger, embarrassment) will remain. You really want to see me mad? Ignore my feedback and give me no indication that my complaint has been heard.
- Customers should be your biggest source of product and service improvement and innovation.

## Some of you don't believe in surveying

A few of you don't believe. You've got concerns. Your operation is somehow "different." In all deference to you, you're wrong. Please put on your bullet-proof vest while I address your concerns:

**"I'm in my store(s) every day. I know what my customers are thinking."**

No, you don't. Re-read this article.

**"Surveying costs too much."**

No, it doesn't. Automated systems can provide survey collection for a fraction of the cost of paper or live surveying. The survey invitation is on the POS receipt. Customers are offered a small incentive in exchange for spending a few minutes answering an anonymous, automated survey about their experience. These systems are designed with the quiet customer in mind, and all that's required of them is a few minutes on the phone or a short web survey. The best of these systems give customers the option of leaving verbal comments on the phone and open-ended text input on the web. This is where she'll likely say the things she'd never say to the manager face-to-face.

**"I'll just let my stores (units) choose if they want to get customer feedback."**

Big mistake. One would be hard-pressed to find a corporate executive that didn't advocate customer loyalty as an important part of their strategy. However, the implementation of that customer strategy requires a **demonstrated commitment of resources and processes**. Companies that present customer feedback measurement as an "optional" part of being a franchisee or manager are sending mixed messages to their operators. (I.e. "We want happy, loyal customers – but we just don't want to pay anything to get their feedback.")

**"I don't know what to do with the feedback."**

Think local. Gathering feedback is a meaningless exercise unless you **do** something with it. The real trick is to drive **accountability** and **response** down to the level where the service lapse occurred. Local service lapses are best remedied by **local response**. Because most problems originate in a local store, it is the local unit manager that should be held accountable for customer follow up.

**"My guests hate surveys."**

This may be true. Most satisfaction surveys have become so long and detailed that they're boring to the guest. What we really need is a solution that provides enough research sophistication to perform the needed analysis, but one that is simple enough to build on the kind of accurate information we gather when we simply ask a friend, "Hey, how was the hotel or restaurant?" or "So...how'd it go?"

If you're looking to collect real-time, unbiased, inexpensive guest experience information, an automated feedback system – with a guest verbatim component – is your best bet. Questions

beyond “Were you satisfied?” or “Would you recommend us to a family or a friend?” and into **“Why** do you feel the way you do about your experience?”

### **“But the survey scores rarely change”**

So, listen to their voice. What really makes automated surveys useful is that they give guests a private forum to express themselves through both quantitative responses, **and** qualitative, open-ended recorded comments - they can type their remarks on a web survey, or leave a “voicemail” on the phone survey. While quantitative scores sometimes change slowly over time, verbatim comments are changing constantly. In their open-ended comments you will find the “meat” of a guest’s true feelings; for example, “The food was late and cold,” as opposed to a simple “2” rating on a scale of one to five.

Another benefit lies in the specificity that can be programmed into automated surveys. For example, a number of companies supplement their more lengthy guest satisfaction surveys with targeted, automated surveys aimed at outlets like casual restaurants or room service. The inexpensive nature of these surveys allows them to be used to flesh out detailed customer feelings without incurring huge cost.

I am amazed at the number of reasons operators give for not wanting to collect feedback from their customers. There are a lot of excuses why you shouldn’t survey your customers...but no good ones.

## **Summary**

Companies that are focused on giving their customers what they want usually do well. But what defines “customer service excellence?” Far too many companies think it’s as simple as doing what *they think* their customers want; others do what *they want* their customers to want. Neither of these is even close to the meaning of the term “customer service excellence.” It’s something created when a company commits from the top down to **listen** to their customers, **responds** to their feedback, and crafts an operation that focuses on **meeting their expectations**. This all begins with surveying your customers to understand their experiences and needs. No matter how good your existing market research or CRM system is, they are not as useful as the customer telling you directly about their experience. The true benefit is in **knowing**, not guessing, what your customers want, **every day at every location**.

This is how I see it.

### **About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare**

**Richard D. Hanks** is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company’s individual needs. For more information please visit: [www.mshare.net](http://www.mshare.net). To reach Rich directly, contact him at [rhanks@mshare.net](mailto:rhanks@mshare.net) or (801) 263-2333.

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