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So...How'd it Go?

Using Real-Time Feedback to Enhance the Guest Experience

(Version 2)

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Henry Ford was on to something when he said “A business absolutely devoted to service will have only one worry about profits. They will be embarrassingly large.”

Sounds about right to me. Companies that are focused on giving their customers what they want always 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.” That’s something created when a company commits from the top down to listening to their customers, responding to their feedback, and crafting an operation that focuses on meeting their needs.

Let Them Tell You – In Their Own Words

The first step is finding out what customers want. I’ll use a hotel as an example. Feedback gathering systems come in all shapes and sizes, from in-room comment cards to front-desk checkout surveys, to lengthy guest satisfaction surveys. These can give you a general overview of what the customer went through during their stay. But comment cards are slow, and face-to-face surveys aren’t accurate for the large majority of guests, who are conflict avoiders. And, most lodging guest satisfaction surveys have become so long and detailed that I worry that they’ve become routine and impersonal 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 “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.

These are simple and unobtrusive systems that walk customers through a short, automated phone or web survey with questions that go 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?”

What really makes this technology useful is that it gives guests a private forum to express themselves through both quantitative responses, and open-ended recorded comments - they can type their remarks on a web survey, or leave a “voicemail” on the phone survey. While quantitative results are extremely useful, it is in their recorded open-ended comments that 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. I liken quantitative survey responses to the play-by-play announcers in sports broadcasting, and guest’s recorded voice comments to the second announcer calling the game. Listening to a college football game would be significantly more

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boring if we never had the second announcer to provide the “color” comments, pointing out the nuances of the players and the teams. Similarly, guest surveys that collect only quantitative analysis without letting you actually hear the customer’s voice and emotion are sterile and stale in their presentation.

Another benefit is in the specificity that can be programmed into this type of survey. For example, a number of lodging companies supplement their lengthier 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. For example, our company provides over one hundred very specific food and beverage surveys (from actual guests) for about the cost of one external mystery shop.

The true benefit is **knowing**, not guessing, what your customers want, **every day at every property**. No matter how good your existing market research or CRM system is, none of it is as useful as the customer telling you directly about their experience.

This real-time guest feedback can be fed into a CRM database that will track and highlight both complaints and praises over periods of time, so you’ll know precisely what’s working and what isn’t.

Act Accordingly, Act Fast

Once your guests have told you what they want, you need to act on it. Quickly. Take your positive responses and use them to emphasize your strengths. You can also use them to motivate and reward your staff - everyone likes to be patted on the back every once in a while. (Plus, a happy staff goes a long way toward customer happiness and loyalty.)

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But what to do with the bad comments? Oddly enough, they present the perfect situation to win back a loyal customer. Research over the last 20 years has conclusively shown that guests who have their problems appropriately resolved are more loyal than those who had no problem to begin with.

The general state of customer service today is not pretty, as evidenced by the number of blogs and websites devoted to corporate bashing. This has led to a culture in which people don’t expect companies to even acknowledge their displeasure. It’s an embarrassing state of affairs, but your company can earn loyalty and repeat guests if you know how to respond to both positive and negative feedback properly. If you don’t act on their feedback, then why even collect it at all?

The problem with most feedback systems is that there are no urgency mechanisms in place to sound the alarm when a negative comment comes through. “Customer Service Excellence” is not earned by taking negative criticism slowly or lightly. When something goes wrong, a quick response, on the local level is always the best way to win back a customer. It is in “Service Lapse Recovery” that some of your most heroic customer service experiences can occur.

The best automated feedback systems available have built-in logic that triggers an alert to be sent to both the local offending parties and their supervisors as soon as the feedback arrives from the guest.

These systems give the manager notice that a problem with service has occurred. They provide the contact information for the customer, along with the customer's feedback, so that the manager can understand the situation, and make restitution immediately by contacting the guest and offering an apology (plus a free night's stay, or a similar reward).

The next time the guest comes in and sees their complaint addressed, they'll know you appreciate their business and will become loyal to your company. All you had to do was respond, offer restitution, and make good on promised improvements.

Football Hall of Famer Roger Staubach hit the nail on the head when he said, "There are no traffic jams along the extra mile." You have a chance to really stand out from your competitors by creating a culture in which negatives are turned into positives, and customers are shown that they're truly valued.

Make Excellence a Habit

People value quality, service, and speed, and studies have shown they're willing to pay more to receive a high level of performance. But you have to "be on your game."

Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit." The Greek philosopher would have clearly recognized the challenges in using customer feedback data to drive improvement. It's not easy to change your operation, and it's even harder if customer tastes are constantly changing. But with the right feedback and reporting system, it will be clear to you what they're experiencing, and how they feel about their experience with you, all the time.

If you commit to service excellence as an organization, you will take advantage of the benefit of both positive and negative customer feedback – that is, both can be used to drive guest loyalty and make for a better overall service experience.

The rewards you'll reap include recurring revenue and positive word-of-mouth marketing. The only thing better than a happy customer is one with a big mouth, who will surely tell colleagues and friends the way your hotel delighted them and encourage them to stay there as well.

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. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.