

The Power of Real-Time Electronic Customer Feedback

By Rob Rush, co-Founder, LRA Worldwide

In this space, on this very website, not too long ago a contemporary of mine painted a bleak picture of the landscape of paper-based customer feedback. Literally. He described a cavern of an office filled with stalactites and stalagmites made of comment cards. Meetings held peering around the Leaning Tower of Feedback. Sunlight choked from the atmosphere by stack upon stack of rave reviews or scorching rebukes.

And those were just from last month.

Despite the ecological obstacles posed by this method of listening to the "voice of the customer," operators - across industry - still cling to their stacks of paper like an infant to his favorite blankie. Apparently, someone must have written in one of those ubiquitous business best sellers that customer feedback was worth its weight in gold...and everyone took the author literally.

Not that the comment card doesn't have its benefits. Easy to implement and relatively inexpensive, paper-based systems offer a shortcut for operators to quickly create a method to let customers vent or exalt. (Though I'm not convinced how cost-effective they are long-term given the hours that are wasted manually tabulating results. Unless you're Willy Wonka with an army of Oompa Loompas to do your bidding, chances are there are more constructive ways to use your personnel or financial resources.)

Likewise, the low-tech option can provide you with useful operational nuggets, letting you know when a light bulb is burned out in Room #1492 or that the drink holder is busted in Golf Cart #1492. However, it doesn't take Christopher Columbus to discover that you probably want to have some better systems in place to detect those deficiencies before your customer does. Especially if the comment card, survey or interview form was sitting at the bottom of a suitcase or golf bag for a month before it was even returned. At that point, you could have an entire hotel of guests sitting in the dark or a course full of golfers spilling drinks all over their Foot-Joys.

To better react to your customer needs...and begin to gather more meaningful, actionable data on their experiences with your company and brand, savvy operators are switching from real-slow to real-time, web-based customer research. Now, I realize that the power and reach of the web isn't exactly a newsflash; however, that doesn't change the fact that there is still widespread resistance out there - in the hospitality industry and beyond - to abandon the stacks of paper and embrace an e-feedback system. For those still set on cutting down trees, I offer you these arguments.

Statistical Validity

For those of you who have sifted through the comment card detritus over the years, you know that aside from the occasional useful tidbit, chances are that you're getting a number of responses that look like either one of the following.

A. *You guyz were great. My cousin Paul at the front desk is the best - u should give him a raise!*

Or

B. *U suk! I wouldn't stay here again even if it wuz for free! P.S. - Any chance of free breakfast next time - I'm pretty mad...*

Soooo, those might be a little bit extreme, but you get my point. That, my friends, is called probing the outermost ends of the bell curve, where your customers either love ya' or hate ya'. Not exactly the most productive way to gather usable, actionable statistically valid data. Listening to your "voice of customer" by electronically soliciting feedback ensures a random sample that will "smooth" your data to the point where it's safe to analyze and draw some high-level, strategic conclusions. To further ensure the "smoothness" of your data, incent everyone who receives an invitation to participate with a token of your appreciation; in other words, give the free breakfast to everyone who gives you valuable feedback, not just those you've angered.

Best of all, you're not going to lose the operational feedback either. Chances are, if your "electronic comment card" is administered soon after your customer interaction, you're going to find out why "U suk" in a lot more timely fashion than with a paper-based method. This leads me to my next point...

Timeliness and Problem Resolution

As a customer, have you ever been contacted by a company that you patronize so quickly post-experience that you immediately thought "hmmm...they care," whether your initial experience was positive or negative? Well, trust me, it has that effect. By reaching out to your customers in that fashion, you're gaining the double-benefit of reaping their insight immediately post-experience and of letting them know you care in a proactive, but unobtrusive way.

Comment card sitting in the room, stuck between the salt and pepper shakers or wedged into the tray table currently in the upright and locked position? Very passive. Phone call - post-stay, post-meal, post-flight? Hugely obtrusive. (How do they always know when I'm eating dinner?) An e-mail invitation issued promptly post-experience is less obtrusive, more impressive. When it is sent from the properly impressive corporate representative, with the properly impressive explanation of your part in the company's future success, along with the properly impressive incentive to participate, the whole process feels....properly impressive.

And should the customer in question actually reveal a tangible problem or issue that they encountered during their stay/meal/flight, then the power of real-time electronic feedback grows exponentially. The moment that customer hits "send" on their computer, their dissatisfaction races to the desktop of a.) all of the people who can make the source of the problem go away, and b.) all of the people who can begin the crucial process of customer recovery. The longer this customer discontent is left untended, the longer it spends growing like a weed, infecting not only that customer, but any current or future customers he or she happens to encounter.

When the problem is registered in real-time and addressed even faster, the weed of dissatisfaction, defection and denunciation is nipped in the bud. Fast.

"But My Customers Aren't Online..."

That way of thinking is soooo 2001. It's almost like wondering if your customers are ready to adapt to using credit cards, cell phones or electric cars. (Uh...scratch that last thought.) The reality of 2005 is that customers of all shapes, sizes, incomes, colors, ages and origins are logging on.

According to a recent Nielsen study, internet usage of the 55 and older set is growing anywhere from 15 - 25% annually, making seniors the largest web growth demographic. In another recent article, Elizabeth Lloyd points out that the early-adopters of new technology are no longer just the highly-educated and affluent - there are a substantial number of users in "third world" countries, China, etc., making the internet a truly global communications tool. The number of global internet users is placed at 934 million today; by 2007, that number will have grown to 1.35 billion.

Still think your customers aren't logging on?

Other Benefits

Don't forget all of the ancillary benefits of going real-time. The personnel and dollars that were directed towards manual tabulation of comment card data can be redirected towards actually serving the customer. E-mail addresses gathered for the benefit of administering a survey electronically can be used for the dual purpose of marketing, should the customer be amenable to the concept.

So cast off the shackles of paper comment cards, free yourself from the dust-gathering, quarterly tome-like reports that were outdated before they even hit your desk, and be released from the bonds of manual tabulation and standardized reporting cycles.

Be dynamic. Be proactive. Identify trends as they are happening. Find out how the power of a real-time customer research tool can wow your customers by how much (and how quickly) you care.

And when you switch, don't forget to recycle.

[Http://www.netratings.com/pr/pr_031120.pdf](http://www.netratings.com/pr/pr_031120.pdf)

[Http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/4451.asp](http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/4451.asp)

Rob Rush is CEO of LRA Worldwide, a leading consulting and research company specializing in Customer Experience Management. LRA offers an integrated suite of services designed to measure and improve service quality, employee performance, customer satisfaction, retention and profitability. Clients include Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc., Hyatt Hotels, the PGA TOUR, Indianapolis Motor Speedway and others. You can contact him at rob.rush@lraworldwide.com