

Creating a Customer Satisfaction Survey

by Stacey Freed

The three biggest complaints about contractors, says Angie Hicks, founder of Angie's List, are "not returning phone calls, issues related to communications, and how the contractor handled unexpected things." If you surveyed your clients regularly, you might find out about problems like these and be able to make needed changes.

"I would request a survey from every customer and use third-party sources," says Hicks, whose bad experience finding a heating and cooling company spawned not only her website but a veritable industry of online complaint sites.

Customer satisfaction surveys, done correctly, are the best way to know what your clients want, why they like you (or not), whether your company did a good job, or how your company can improve.

"Surveys are a great way to measure quality and commitment to service," says Geoff Graham, president of GuildQuality, a company that specializes in customer satisfaction surveys in the building and remodeling industry.

What follows is a series of steps for creating a useful customer satisfaction survey so you can set benchmarks to measure your progress.

1 Define the Objective

"A customer satisfaction survey is not the objective; it's the tool to address the objective," says Grant Farnsworth, director of business development at the Farnsworth Group, a full-service research firm that serves the home-improvement industry.

Your objective might be to find out

why people like your company and hire you. Knowing this will help you organize your questions.

Key to Success: Survey regularly, depending on your volume and how often you change marketing or operations.

2 Create the Questions

"Think about what you'd ask clients if you were speaking with them," Farnsworth says. Rework questions so they're objective; give respondents all the possible logical choices. Don't ask loaded questions. "Which type of decking do you prefer?" is better than asking, "You like hardwood, don't you?"

Where appropriate, have an option of "other" and ask respondents to be specific. Keep questions organized by topic.

Ask clients about issues important to them. Asking if they are familiar with your warranty process may be important to you but not to them. You might re-frame the question to ask: "Do you have a clear understanding of how to resolve a warranty issue?"

Closed questions are quicker to answer and easier to use to get data. But include a few open-ended questions, too. Graham says he gets a lot of responses to open-ended questions: "When we put in an open-ended question after a [specific] closed question, [respondents] reflect on their experience and it makes it easier to answer."

What's the most important question you can ask? While many argue it's "Would you recommend us to others?" Farnsworth believes "it's really about *why* they would or wouldn't recommend you and not that they would or wouldn't. You may be able to communicate the

Response Rates

Happy customers are more likely to respond to surveys, as are those who have had larger projects done. Often mildly dissatisfied or extremely unhappy people "view giving feedback as ... prolonging a relationship they might not want to continue," GuildQuality's Geoff Graham says. "But the response rate may leave out the most important feedback you want — which is that from those who are unhappy." Without their perspective, you may not be able to draw meaningful trend information.

To make sure you get as much of that feedback as possible, make it frictionless for your customers to respond to your survey. "Every impediment you put between your disengaged customer and their reply is a reason they'll use to ignore your survey and leave you wondering," Graham says.

While Dave Supple of New England Design & Construction follows up diligently (see a sample of his survey on page 20), he also lets clients know upfront that they will be surveyed. "We cultivate it with the client in terms of our expectations and our appreciation of them, and we let them know why we do it," he says. He actually surveys clients three times — at the end of the design phase, mid-project, and end of project — and has an 80% response rate. Graham gets a 70% response rate for his surveys.

Sample Survey

Below is an abbreviated version of New England Design & Construction's 26-question end-of-project survey. Survey-experts Grant Farnsworth and Geoff Graham offer their take on the survey itself. "How NEDC uses [client] feedback — acting on trends — is what's most important," Graham says.

In Brief: The survey is brief, but it could be shorter, which Graham says "would drive up the response rate and compel a business to really think about what's important." He felt the flow — question text to scaled question to comment box — could be intimidating.

Touch Points: The survey hits the important facets of most remodeling experiences. NEDC could add a question about the punch list — a hot button — Graham says, and one on whether the project was completed on time, Farnsworth says.

Scale Able: While it's clear that 0 is "worst," Farnsworth suggests using a 1-to-5 scale where 1=strongly disagree; 2=somewhat disagree; 3=neither agree nor disagree; 4=somewhat agree; 5=strongly agree. "It's good to have a neutral choice in the middle."

Completed Project Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gain a more thorough understanding of how we are performing. Your feedback is vitally important to our ability to enhance the quality of our service to you and future clients. Please take a couple of minutes to rate us in the following categories.

0: Strongly disagree, **1:** Disagree, **2:** Somewhat agree, **3:** Agree, **4:** Strongly agree

Name:

Professional & Organized: NEDC was organized and professional
0 1 2 3 4
In your opinion, is there anything NEDC could improve about its organization and/or professionalism?

Communication: The NEDC staff communicated with me effectively
0 1 2 3 4
Is there anything you feel the NEDC staff could improve about how we communicate? If so, how do you think we could improve it?

Problem Resolution: The NEDC staff addressed and resolved problems effectively
0 1 2 3 4
Were there any problems that have not been addressed?

If you referred us, how strong would your referral be?
0 1 2 3 4 (0 = Would not refer – 4 = Giving rave reviews)

Areas of Improvement: In what area(s) do you think NEDC could improve?

Would you like to write a testimonial?

attributes [that determine why they'd recommend you] to the marketplace to generate more business."

Key to Success: Be brief — 20 to 25 questions — to encourage participation and elicit thoughtful answers. More questions also means more data to sort through.

3 Scale It

Farnsworth uses a 1-to-10 scale because a lot of his benchmarks are based on a 10-point scale, but he admits that 1-to-7 or 1-to-5 is less daunting, and there's a clear middle. Graham, on the other

hand, likes a simple 0-to-4 scale. Or you could use the five-star system, which many people are already familiar with. Angie's List uses A to F.

Key to Success: Graham includes a zero because, he says, many people "see 1-to-5 and think 1 might be the best. Everyone knows zero is really bad."

4 Deliver It

Although there are online survey companies, such as SurveyMonkey, Zoomerang (which is now part of SurveyMonkey), and LimeSurvey, most deck builders don't need this level of service since they

have a relatively small number of customers to survey.

Farnsworth suggests that you or your project manager hand-deliver a paper survey. "Always provide a self-addressed-stamped envelope," he says. But you could offer several response options — mail, email, or phone.

Dave Supple, owner of New England Design & Construction, in Boston, sends his surveys (see sample, above), created in Google Docs, to clients via email. "We get a better response rate with the computer because it's easy to use, but if they don't fill it out," he says, "I'll just keep following up with them."

Key to Success: “Direct engagement with your client soon after project completion helps deliver a solid response rate,” Farnsworth says.

5 Analyze Results

Tabulate results in an electronic spreadsheet. For handwritten responses, create a column for each question and a row for each respondent and input the data.

Look at your data by segments. “You want to understand which type of jobs your firm performs best,” Farnsworth says. You should get answers to these questions: What type of project was done? How long did it take to complete? How much was spent in total? “This way you can look at the data in different ways.”

Open-ended questions are trickier because you have to put a value on them to quantify them.

Key to Success: Find the story in the data. For instance, you might find that you consistently get the highest ratings from customers whose projects included decorative borders or other special features. In that case, you would want to make sure your sales and marketing efforts included examples of those.

6 Take It Further

Graham asks survey respondents if they’d like to share a review online. “We make it a seamless process” with the click of a mouse. He suggests using social media so that clients press a “like” button and share on Facebook with their friends.

Key to Success: Mind your clients’ time. Consumers are surveyed often.

7 Follow Up

Don’t let the information disappear; this is a big opportunity to improve your business. “If you acknowledge issues,” Graham says, “you can change or neu-

tralize the problem in some way and preempt a screed on Angie’s List.” Follow up with any customers who express concerns, and resolve any problems. Finally, send a hand-written thank-you letter to everyone who fills out a survey.

Key to Success: Be sure you have up-to-date client contact information. ♦

Stacey Freed is a senior editor at Remodeling magazine, in which the original version of this article appeared.