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With the availability of inexpensive online survey tools, there's no excuse for not polling your print customers. I've found that today's customers are more likely to participate in an online survey than ever before — although you need to know some basic rules of thumb before jumping into your first one.

In this article, I'll discuss the value of doing a print customer survey, the top methods for a customer survey (and their differences), general guidelines for customer surveys, and tips for ensuring that your customer survey is worth your time and effort.

Where's the Value of a Customer Survey?

A company can learn so much by polling its customers from time to time. Printers can find out what they're doing right, as well as what might need improvement. If certain strengths tend to trend among your respondents, voila!, you have a ready-made list of "kudos" to brag about in your marketing efforts. You'll discover what makes your company different — and maybe even what makes it better than your competition.

Similarly, you could uncover weaknesses that you weren't aware of, which presents an opportunity to correct them. It's generally more comfortable for customers to air grievances about you anonymously. A survey lets them do that. There's no emotion all wrapped up in their negative comments.

Surveying customers shows an interest in what they think. There's inherent goodwill built into this. Feedback given to one's sales or service rep often isn't enough. There's a sense among print customers that your comments just "sit there" and fail to move up the corporate food chain. But when you send a survey to all of your customers, it's a new and different opportunity for them to tell you what's on their minds. Sharing honest feedback with a company, without being face to face with a rep is just easier.

Two additional reasons to do a survey: To refine your customer service procedures, and to find out what your customers want from you, their printer. By carefully developing the survey questions, you can easily get insights into both of these areas.



Margie Dana, Freelance Writer

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How Do I Survey You? Let Me Count the Ways

There are many different methods for customer surveys, each with different challenges and costs:

1. Mail a printed survey. Being a printer, you might prefer this method for the obvious reason. Printed surveys are fairly convenient for the respondents. Just keep them relatively short (a four-pager is my recommendation, if not limited to two sides of an 8 ½ by 11). Remember to include a self-addressed stamped envelope along with each survey; it shouldn't cost customers anything to return them. The problem with this method is what to do with the completed surveys. Compiling handwritten results is too cumbersome and will take forever. Someone has to input all of the data. Correctly interpreting handwriting is also an issue. Printed surveys can look great, but I don't recommend them — way too old school. It's easier for a customer to fill out an online form.

2. Survey customers by phone. Years ago I conducted customer surveys by phone for printer clients. The best thing about this method is that customers who have a lot to say will share everything on the phone. The key is having a third party make the calls to your customers. They're much more likely to open up to someone who's not affiliated with your company.

I recommend telesurveys if you're having specific problems with customers and need more detail. You still need to create your own list of questions — no generic customer survey will do. Phone surveys might be particularly beneficial if you've recently merged with or acquired a new company. Speaking with customers by phone gives them freedom to tell you more than they might in an online or printed survey.

The other benefit to this method is that it allows the person conducting the survey to dig deeper if the conversation warrants. (Make sure you hire someone who is familiar with the industry, making it more likely he or she can ask meaningful follow-up questions during the phone call, thereby gathering valuable feedback.)

This method is, however, the most expensive, as it involves hiring someone or some company to conduct the survey for you.

3. Send a customer survey with your deliveries. Some printers regularly include short printed surveys in their deliveries to customers. These tend to be more of a "How are we doing?" feedback card. You can use them effectively to get a pulse on a customers' satisfaction with your business. Again, as with any printed survey, you have to deal with capturing the results and analyzing them. That's a lot of work, and if you don't do it thoroughly and consistently, this kind of survey will be a waste of time.

4. Send your customers an online survey. Bingo! Sorry if my preferences are showing, but as a business owner who has conducted online surveys, I can't help but give this method two thumbs way up. There are different online tools available at great prices these days, and the products are excellent.

Online surveys are easy to create, test and distribute, and it's easy to compile the results. I use Surveymonkey.com for a low monthly fee, but there are many others out there, including Surveygizmo.com, Polldaddy.com and Constantcontact.com.

These online tools do all of the heavy lifting, especially when it comes to gathering responses. When I have a survey to distribute, I customize the URL on Surveymonkey to better reflect my company, and send it out numerous times via email, my weekly e-newsletter, my website and social media (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn).

You can create charts (different styles, even!) from your data and export them. I can't say enough about these online survey tools. They let you customize your survey template so it reflects your company, too.

General Guidelines for Your Print Customer Survey

I've conducted many surveys. Each time, I make notes on what could've worked better and what worked really well. With that in mind, there are 13 practical guidelines to follow when planning your customer survey:

1. Have a clear objective. Why are you doing it, and what are your goals? Your objectives will guide your content development and help narrow down your questions. Write them down.

2. Keep it short. You need to respect your customers' time. The survey shouldn't take more than 10 minutes — shorter is even better.

3. Let customers know it's coming. Tell your customers ahead of time about the survey, and why you need their participation. Send this "heads-up" in an email about two weeks before sending the survey itself. Remind them in a week. Have your sales reps tell all of their customers as well.

4. Make it easy for them. Multiple-choice questions are easier for respondents than open-ended questions. Your results are easier to calculate with them, too. Questions designed as "Comments," where the respondent types into text boxes, make for a ton of individual responses to wade through and deal with. That being said, you'll need a few of these if you want respondents to share their comments in their own words. For example, if you have a question like, "What's the one thing we could be doing better?" or "Is there anything about our service that needs tweaking?," you'll want a Comments box to capture the answers.

5. Offer an incentive. Everyone is really busy. Even though your survey might only take five minutes, customers aren't sitting there waiting for the chance to share feedback. People love getting a gift or even the chance to win a gift, so either offer everyone a token of appreciation, or raffle off a small number of bigger gifts. Make sure they're of value to your audience. I've seen surveys that give every participant a gift card to Starbucks or to Amazon, and surveys that raffle off gifts of bigger value — say, an iPad or iPod, a Kindle or even a copy of software a print customer would use.

6. What else is in it for them? If you're asking customers for feedback, they need to know what you'll do with the feedback you collect. When you solicit their participation, make it clear why you're doing the survey and what it means to you. Offer to share with them the highlights of what you learn.

7. Protect customers' privacy. Customers might love giving their opinions, but they usually prefer anonymity. It increases the likelihood they'll be honest and open in their comments. You can ask for their contact information if they want to get the results of your survey and/or prefer to speak with you privately. Otherwise, do not require respondents to supply their contact information. Promise anonymity and respect this promise.

8. Make your questions specific. A general question such as, "How's our service?" won't yield any actionable insights. Better to slice up the service question into different parts, so you can ask about the sales rep, the service rep, customer communications, delivery history, conflict resolution and so on. (This is a good reason to have friends and colleagues take your survey when it's ready to be tested. Any ambiguity usually comes up in the testing phase. Perfect the content, and you'll be ready to roll.)

9. Use multiple channels to distribute the survey. People have different preferences for getting in touch. Some may favor email. Some react faster to text messages or a LinkedIn message. Some only respond to a phone call (though this is hard to believe in 2013). Regardless of their preferences, one request to take your survey is not enough. Expect to remind customers to take your survey several times, using all of the channels you currently use to contact them. With each request, remind them of the gift/reward they could win by participating.

10. Proofread your survey like your life depends on it. Print customers are notoriously good proofreaders. You'll be judged by any typos and grammatical errors in your survey.

11. Invite candid comments. I like to end my surveys with one question. "Is there something we should've asked you, but didn't?" You'll be surprised how many people use this question to either give you a compliment or ask a meaningful question.

12. Ask respondents' permission to use their comments publicly. Obviously, this is for complimentary comments. By asking something like, "May we quote you?" in a question about why they are a customer, and then giving them space to check Yes/No and fill in their name/company, you can then turn the kudos into testimonials to use in many ways later. Some customers will say yes, but may prefer to be quoted anonymously. Either way, you win.

13. Test your survey before it goes live. You'd be surprised how many glitches find their way into the survey, so test it a few times to perfect the experience and fix problems with the process or the content. Pay attention to which questions are mandatory and which you deem to be optional. Ask colleagues to take it as well, and if you have a few favorite customers willing to test it — go for it!

Making Sure Your Customer Survey Is Worth Your Time & Effort

If you divided up the effort of doing a customer survey, the breakdown would fall to 40 percent developing the content, writing the survey and testing it (pre-survey); 20 percent collecting the data (survey); and another 40 percent analyzing the data and compiling your internal report (post-survey). You want your efforts to be worth it. Writing a solid customer survey will take time and require several revisions. Count on it.



The data you collect will provide a detailed picture of what your customers think about your company, as well as examples of what they love about you and what could be better. I guarantee you'll learn things that will help you serve them better. You'll also get information you can use to help promote your company.

When you download or otherwise compile and categorize your survey results, share these with management as well as sales and service employees. These are the "front line" with your customers, and they need to know how customers feel. You might even share the results with all of your employees — I can't think of a good reason to not.

The critical thing post-survey is to do something with the information you've collected. What can be fixed, if it's broken? What did you learn about customer perception that surprised you? What additional service or product offerings might you consider? Has your company's "brand" been better articulated by these customers?

Once you have made changes recommended by a lot of customers (trends will surface, trust me), let them know. Get back in touch by email and/or in a blog post to inform your customers that you respect their participation and comments and that you've made changes accordingly. Award the prizes you promised. Extract any and all testimonial-type comments you collected and decide how, when and where to use them. Contact any respondent who's asked to be contacted personally. Follow up is key — you've invested a lot of time in this survey, so make sure you take advantage of all you've learned and all the good will it's generated for you.

That's it: A guide to conducting a print customer survey. Make it an annual commitment, asking many of the exact same questions. In that way, you can chart just how far you've come, and hopefully, you'll see negative comments dwindle away into oblivion.

Long regarded as a print buyer expert and trade writer, Margie Dana launched her new business in 2013 as a marketing communications strategist with a specialty in printing and print buying. She's as comfortable working in social media as she is in traditional media, and she works to help clients build customer communities through carefully crafted content. Dana publishes her popular Print Tips newsletter. For details on all of her services and to sign up for her newsletter and marketing blog, visit www.margiedana.com.

