



# Listening to far-flung customers

John Coldwell, InfoQuest

*Editor's comment: Understanding your customers has always been at the heart of marketing but, too often it seems, companies have paid lip service to this rather than genuinely listen. However, it is not always easy or straightforward to obtain genuine, valid or actionable feedback, especially when the customer base is highly fragmented. These two case studies illustrate how a customer feedback mechanism can be built to help obtain real insight.*

Some of Britain's exporters have an unusual approach to customer satisfaction surveys. Businesses that succeed in totally satisfying their customers are ahead of the game in terms of customer retention and are likely to be far more profitable than those businesses that don't focus on customer satisfaction. Recent trends, however, clearly show that traditional survey methods are suffering from falling responses. And when exporters have customers scattered around the globe there is an obvious problem in how do they find out how their customers are feeling?

One of Britain's more unusual companies working overseas is TRL Limited (the Transport Research Laboratory), based on a purpose-built site at Crowthorne, Berkshire.

TRL, an internationally recognised centre of excellence in all issues relating to land transport, is the UK's leading provider of innovative transport solutions. Well known for its work relating to road safety, the European New Car Assessment Programme (NCAP), pedestrian safety and child restraint systems, TRL has

built a global reputation second to none for its knowledge, technical application and professional integrity. Working with consultants, contractors and product suppliers worldwide, TRL provides appropriate and effective solutions to problems of road infrastructure and management, road safety, public transport, undertaking transportation studies and economic analysis, environmental assessments and institutional strengthening.

TRL has worked in over 100 countries throughout Asia, Africa,

Latin America and the Middle East, with a dedicated team working exclusively on international projects. In order to maintain its standard of excellence, TRL decided to survey the opinion of their clients to their business processes. To do this, they engaged the services of InfoQuest Customer Relationship Management Limited.

InfoQuest uses a unique methodology, which is neither paper, web nor interview-based. Instead it relies on a game-like box and a deck of cards. Between 40 and 60 questions and statements appear on the cards, chosen from an extensive library, which are replaced into particular segments within the box depending on how the customer wishes to respond. This game-like procedure, which has been applied in more than 50,000 surveys, works in any language in any part of the world.

TRL, whose customers include the World Bank, chose to ask questions about their business processes; management interactions; the quality of their research; their bidding and tendering processes; communication; and flexibility. InfoQuest's special boxes were packed with the question cards and then sent out to key customers as far away as The Philippines and Tanzania.

Within a few weeks 83% of the boxes had been returned. The high response rate that InfoQuest normally achieves means that those who use this research method can confidently target whom they want to survey.



Within a few weeks 83% of the boxes had been returned. The high response rate that InfoQuest normally achieves means that those who use this research method can confidently target whom they want to survey.

In a business to consumer (b2c) environment most organisations have plenty of customers to choose from if they want to conduct a survey. I have maintained for many years that the best way of listening to the (b2c) customer is for the Chief Executive and their team to regularly spend time at the point of sale and do literally that. Listen to the customer.

However, in a business to business (b2b) environment many firms have far fewer customers and the relationship is not built on a

point of sale contact - more likely it will be a complex matrix, with a number of people on each side of the customer/supplier divide having an input to the smooth running (or not) nature of an ongoing relationship.

Traditional methods for collecting survey data fall into two camps: - paper-based and interview-led surveys.

Paper-based surveys typically have a response rate of between 5% and 15%, which means that the vast majority of the people who are asked their opinion don't join in.

There are two types of interview-led surveys: - face-to-face or using the telephone. Employing an agency to undertake face-to-face surveys in a b2b context is a very expensive undertaking, in that the agency will be doing exceedingly well if it can arrange to see more than one decision-maker at different customer locations in one single day. Telephone-based surveys have two serious inherent problems. The first is that the interview can be led, albeit unwittingly, by the interviewer's tone of voice and flirtatiousness (or gravitas). The second problem is that the integrity of the responses tends to drop dramatically after the fourth or fifth question. This means that a sound telephone-based survey should ask no more than five questions and the most important question should be asked first.

TRL's questions were chosen carefully to reflect what the business was trying to achieve and to ensure that the results were actionable. Too many surveys fail because of poorly designed questions. In a b2b environment the management team are often passionate about the product. Normally this is no bad thing. But as most b2b companies now have some form of quality assurance programme and are not operating in a monopoly situation, a more holistic view is needed when conducting a customer satisfaction survey. The review needs to consider people and processes, the drivers, rather than the quality of the product itself. These drivers are, after all, where businesses succeed or fail.

Since 1990 InfoQuest has included four overall questions and statements in every one of its 50,000 surveys.

"On an overall basis, how satisfied are you with our company?" is the last card in the deck. The available responses to this question are Totally Satisfied; Somewhat Satisfied; Insufficient Information to Evaluate; Somewhat Dissatisfied; and Totally Dissatisfied. The best Totally Satisfied score ever seen was 90% and the worst was just 2%. InfoQuest's own extensive research revealed, "A Totally Satisfied customer contributes 2.6 times as much revenue to a company as a Somewhat Satisfied customer". Put another way, the Totally Satisfied customer will be fiercely loyal, will recognise the value of the relationship over and above the cost of the product,

and will not be tempted by the overtures of your competitors. The three other standard questions are: -

"How satisfied are you with the ease of doing business with our company?" (highest score 93%, lowest ever score 3%).

"I would purchase products or services from your company again" and

"I would recommend your company to an associate."

The last two statements are a counter balance. It is possible to have a score that reflects the sentiment "I am happy that we have a good working relationship but I'm not sure whether I should risk my own personal reputation by recommending you to a friend".

The results of TRL's survey were compared with InfoQuest's database of world-class benchmarks and then delivered to TRL's executive team, headed by Chief Executive Dr Susan Sharland.

Another exporter of excellence, Airedale International Air Conditioning Ltd., with offices in the UK, Germany, France, North America and South Africa, was keen to find out what its international customers really thought about their business processes. Established in 1974, Airedale is still run by the two founders, and has won both the Queen's Award for Export Achievement and the CBI Award for Manufacturing Excellence.

Airedale manufactures a wide range of air conditioning products. It also provides service, maintenance and training to its customers. The company exports to more than seventy countries and regularly supplies air conditioning systems to some of the world's most prestigious high-technology manufacturers. A recent project involved the installation of air conditioning systems at the VESTAS wind turbine factory in Denmark, where Airedale equipment now maintains comfortable conditions in the areas that produce and assemble the massive turbine blades.

As part of a continuing strategy for growth through excellence, Airedale needed to determine the opinions of its international customers in countries as diverse as China, Hong Kong, Latvia, Bulgaria, Poland and Russia. One very important consideration was the language to be used in the survey.

Traditionally most communications between Airedale and its customers have been in English, but the etiquette and public relations aspects of this customer satisfaction survey demanded that, on this occasion, local languages should be used.

Using local languages might not be as straightforward as it first appears, as the following example clearly illustrates. If an English-

speaking supplier corresponded with a Malaysian customer in the Malay language, it could cause offence; the customer may well think that the supplier believes him incapable of fully comprehending an English survey.

InfoQuest issued the Airedale's customers with special boxes in the appropriate local language, used native language speakers to validate the surveys and translate the written responses to 'open' questions back into English. Again the world-class benchmarks were used as comparators to help Airedale to not only maintain, but also improve, its high standard of excellence. In this instance 75% of the surveys were returned.

Customer satisfaction surveys are playing an ever-increasing role in quality-based companies. The revised international standard ISO 9000 version 2000 now promotes this practice, and the EFQM (the European Federation of Quality Management)'s Excellence Model, which is separated into nine business process, promotes Customer Results as the most important single element, giving it a rating of 20%.

As a final thought, Alan Duttine, Joint Managing Director of Airedale, states, "At the end of the day, the report itself is not important. What is important is that, as a company, we do something about it." It is this sort of driving force that makes the difference between a good company and an excellent one.

© John Coldwell / Through the Loop Consulting 2002

### ***John Coldwell***

InfoQuest Customer Relationship Management Limited, based in the U.K., has an international network that conducts comprehensive customer and employee satisfaction surveys, using such pioneering techniques as the ConSensor Survey Device, Neural Network Analysis (ProfitMaxsm), and our proprietary Revenue Index. InfoQuest has delivered over 43,000 surveys in 47 countries in 17 languages. It is seen by its customers as being the most cost-effective, efficient and actionable business-to-business customer satisfaction survey technique available.

### ***Further Contacts***

[jc@infoquestcrm.co.uk](mailto:jc@infoquestcrm.co.uk)

<http://www.infoquestcrm.com/>

Pool is published quarterly by  
Through the Loop Consulting  
([www.throughtheloop.com](http://www.throughtheloop.com))