

Even Your Best Friends Won't Tell You

Yesterday, a man with a valuable service called me, and fell on his nose.

He started educating me about marketing. He instructed me that each element in a plan is just "part of the overall marketing mix." He actually repeated this statement three times.

I might be easily insulted, but his pitch made me hope that my clients never needed his service, a service with real value. That salesman did more than fail to sell me. He lost any chance of *ever* selling me.

Did I tell him his sales pitch was bad?

No, I didn't. It wasn't worth a prolonged discussion. And I was afraid to offend him back. So how will he pitch his next prospect? *The very same way.*

People won't tell you what you're doing wrong. Your prospects won't tell you. Clients won't tell you.

Sometimes, even your spouse won't tell you. So what do you do to improve your service? **Ask.**

But They Will Talk behind Your Back

I recently was left speechless after I told a client, "The first step to marketing a service is getting the service right. So find out if you have it right. Survey your clients. *Ask.*"

I wasn't ready for her response:

"I don't want to do that," she said. "I'm afraid to hear what they think."

Actually, it was good that she didn't want to hear, because I didn't want her to send the surveys anyway. I wanted an independent third party to send t them.

A basic principle in life applies to surveying clients:

Even your best friends won't tell you. But they will talk behind your back.

Make it so your clients *can* talk behind your back, and that you can learn what they're saying. Have your clients send their completed surveys to a third party. Have the third party assure your clients that they can leave their names out, and that their names won't be revealed. Your clients will give far more candid answers.

Have a third party do your surveys.

Why Survey?

Your customers will appreciate it. They'll see that you are trying to improve your service. (One respondent to a recent survey said, "This survey is a good example of why I use this company. They are always looking for ways to serve me better.")

You can have customers score you in different areas, then publicize your high scores in your marketing materials. It gives credibility to your statements about your service quality.

It gives you an opportunity to sell something or to make an offer.

It keeps contact with your clients.

It lets you learn from your mistakes.

It helps you flag possible problem areas and clients.

It keeps you from coasting.

It keeps you from wondering what you are doing wrong.

It tells you what business you are in, and what people really are buying. *Survey, survey, survey.*

The Letterman Principle

How should you conduct a survey-with interviews or written questionnaires?

Skeptical of written surveys, and looking for a vivid illustration of why written surveys often work so poorly, I got lucky one night. I turned on *Letterman*.

David's guests that night included Helen Thomas, a veteran political commentator. After some light banter, Letterman asked Thomas a serious question:

"Who do you like in the ninety-six election?" Many viewers thought Thomas would say "Bob Dole." Others waited for her surprise prediction that Bill Clinton would rebound and win reelection. But Thomas did not answer "Dole," "Clinton," or even "Quayle." She gave an even more surprising answer:

"I don't like *any* of 'em." Thomas was not going for laughs. She had misinterpreted Letterman's question-just as Letterman had misunderstood how Thomas would interpret his question. Sports fans knew what Letterman meant. "Who do you *like* in the Super Bowl?" for example, means "Who do you think'll win?" But to many other people, particularly women, "Who do you like?" means something completely different.

Ambiguous words such as "like" fill the air. Random House's dictionary offers twenty-six definitions for "read," for example. But no written survey can clarify every word or use words that need no clarification, and no researcher can accurately interpret each word a person being surveyed writes down.

A good case in point: A research firm recently asked adult homeowners to rank the importance of different characteristics of remodeling services. "Quality" naturally scored very high. But what did "quality" mean to those people answering? Did it mean the level of finish and luster? Quality to the eye-or quality as an experienced craftsman would see it? Quality as how well the finished product would function for its intended purpose? Or did they mean the quality of the customer service-the responsiveness of the contractors and the friendliness of the receptionist?

This survey illustrates the problem with all written surveys. The surveyors interpreted the answers based on what *they* meant by their questions-even though the people answering meant many different things by their answers.

When you conduct written surveys, you cannot correct this problem; too often, you cannot even see it. But when you conduct oral surveys, you can clarify your questions and ask people to clarify their answers.

So whenever you are tempted to conduct a written survey, remember David Letterman and Helen Thomas.

Unless you are confident that you can interpret them, beware of written surveys.

Frankly Speaking: Survey by Phone

An editor from *Business Week* and another from the *Orlando Sentinel* telephoned me recently for background on stories. After I hung up each time, I was amazed by how frank I had been with two strangers.

I wondered why. Then I read how Lincoln Caplan got hard-to-get information for *Skadden*, his revealing book about New York's largest law firm. Caplan would call the possible source rather than meet in person. He learned that when the lawyers could not see him, they were more willing to talk openly. The lawyers knew that Caplan would never recognize them if he ever encountered them.

That's why phone surveys usually produce more revealing results than in-person surveys. On the phone, people will open up and reveal the information you need.

When you call to ask for an opinion from someone, it says you value their opinion. When *Business Week* and the *Orlando Sentinel* called, that's what they were telling me; they valued my opinion. Flattered, and anxious to live up to the editors' favorable impressions of me, I told them *everything*.

My chattiness was typical, I knew. When I conducted my first background customer research, I was so amazed by how much time customers spent talking with me that I started recording the lengths of those talks. They averaged twenty-four minutes.

Time after time, oral surveys work better. Why? For one thing, it's physically easier to talk than write. So people say more in oral surveys than they write on written ones. (My agency's average oral surveys produce five pages of text; our average written surveys produce less than two pages.) Oral surveys produce more information.

An experienced interviewer can be more conversational and relaxed with the subjects and can go outside the script to probe even deeper. All of this helps produce more information.

Typically, 40 percent of people will respond to a written survey. (The response can fall well below that.) In oral surveys, you often can get almost 100 percent response.

An oral interviewer makes a personal contact on your behalf. This shows a greater interest in the person responding, and conveys a stronger service message about your company. Finally, a person's voice conveys feelings that her written words often obscure. (A perfect example: The president of a national collection agency felt confident his agency was satisfying its clients because he had just read the verbatim written responses of seventy-five clients. I read those responses, and they did seem pretty good. Still dubious, I called the woman who had conducted the interviews and asked, "How do you think this collection agency is doing?" "Awful!" Why then, I asked, didn't the responses *sound* awful? "Well, many *did* sound awful," she answered. "It wasn't *what* the clients said; it was *how* they said it. When you *hear* their words, you can hear their anger and frustration. ") Oral *surveys* more accurately show exactly what the person being interviewed thinks and feels. *For a dozen reasons, conduct oral surveys, not written ones*