



Retaining current customers is cheaper than acquiring new ones, and new customers are the best source of advertising through the word of happy mouths. These are well-established principles of restaurant marketing, right up there in the “Thou Shalt...” category.

If we could succeed based on a good attitude and philosophy toward our customers, we would all be rich. To retain your customers, however, you must know your customers. What do they like most about our operation? What do they like most about our competitors? How can we make our customers happier?

A system for surveying guests is one of the pillars of a successful restaurant marketing program. In my consulting practice, I create these for restaurant clients, and almost invariably, the results are fascinating to all concerned. We almost always learn something we did not know and we’re certainly thankful when survey results illuminate a problem we didn’t really know we had. Even if guests give

high marks all around, it is good to verify that you please your guests as well as you hoped.

In short, guest surveys both gauge guest satisfaction and provide direction for initiatives that could improve the guest experience and sales volume. Practically speaking, the 10 main objectives of administering a customer survey are to:

1. Measure overall customer satisfaction.
2. Learn about the customer.
3. Identify buying habits and dining patterns.
4. Identify your competition and how happy (or unhappy) they make your guests, and why.
5. Find out why customers visit your restaurant.

QUESTION:
WILL YOU VISIT MY
RESTAURANT AGAIN?



SAYS

6. Learn what influences guest purchase decisions.
7. Learn what guests believe you do well and not so well.
8. Discover what you can do to improve operations.
9. Identify processes for change that will improve customer satisfaction.
10. Increase customer loyalty.

In this article, we'll examine each of these objectives and discuss ways to elicit information in your surveys

that will move you closer to achieving each. We'll also look at how to best administer surveys and analyze data.

Objective 1: Measure Overall Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the single greatest profit predictor and one of the most influential factors in purchase decisions so it makes sense to keep your eye on satisfaction levels among your guests. As with any other analytic metric, this is something to watch over time and in trends. Are levels increasing? Dropping? Remaining steady? Obviously, a drop in satisfaction levels, just like a drop in profit margin, warrants some investigation. General satisfaction scoring is a summary point that needs a great deal of qualifying to get to its foundation but is a great gauge nonetheless.

10 Objectives of a Successful Guest Survey

By Emily Durham

NOVEMBER 2007 | www.RestaurantOwner.com 39

Example:

Please rate your overall experience:

- Poor Average Good
 Outstanding

How would you rate the service at our restaurant?

- Poor Average Good
 Outstanding

Which best describe the food quality at our restaurant?

- Awful Fair Average Good
 Great Excellent

Objective 2: Learn About the Customer

This may sound basic but there are lots of operators out there who do not know their customer. This may be because of a shaded perception based on initial observations or intentions, or maybe it's because of a changing neighborhood. Whatever you find out, knowing just who the customer is helps a great deal with things like marketing and promotions, menu planning, and staffing. When we say "who" we mean the demographics of the customer base such as age, gender and familial status. You are not usually going to find that all of your guests fit the same mold, and you may find that you have different demographic representation during different day parts or days of the week.

In one case study, the marketing director for a large frozen dessert chain conducted a brief survey to find that he had his client profile totally wrong. He was operating under the impression that they were marketing to males over 40 when in reality the guests were mostly females under 40. He immediately put in place plans to change the colors in the stores, change portion sizes, and more. He was shocked by the results. Even though they had about 30 units in operation, they didn't know the customer. Similarly, I recently completed a survey for a barbecue chain and found that most guests were older than previously thought and without children in the household, to the surprise of the owner. Having this information dramatically changes, or should, where you place your marketing and product emphases.

Sample question:

Are you:

- Male Female

What is your age group?

- Under 30
 31-40
 41-55
 Over 55

Do you usually visit with children under 8?

- Yes
 No

Objective 3: Identify Buying Habits and Dining Patterns

Along with understanding our guests' demographics, we want to also know what drives their buying and dining decisions. In general, it's helpful to know how often they come to our restaurant and also how often they eat out. We ask for the typical size of their party, how much they usually spend, and when they go. Asking some of these questions about us and their habits provides a good gap analysis in showing where we fit into guests' overall patterns so that we know if we have room to do better and get more of their business.

Sample question:

How many are usually in your party when eating here?

- Just me
 2 or 3
 4-6
 7 or more

How many times do you eat here per month?

- 1 or 2
 3-5
 6-10
 More than 10

How many times do you eat out anywhere per month?

- 1 or 2
 3-5
 6-10
 More than 10

Do you eat out more for lunch or dinner?

- Lunch
 Dinner

Objective 4: Identify Your Competition and How Happy (or Unhappy) They Make Your Guests, and Why

Asking guests where they go out to eat when they are not visiting your establishment is the best way to really identify your *real* competition. This is where we see a great deal of misperception regarding which restaurants owners consider their competition and which restaurants the guests actually visit.

Let's say you open an Italian restaurant with all of your family's best recipes passed

Muzak? Come on...get SIRIUS!

SIRIUS 
BUSINESS

67 channels from just \$24.95 per month.
No commercials. No contract.

Just \$19.95/month!*

800.741.AMTC(2682) www.amtc.com

* With purchase of SIRIUSBusiness Equipment Kit and 12-month prepaid SIRIUSBusiness subscription. \$19.95 for first six months, \$24.95 per month thereafter. Customer must submit a copy of this advertisement to receive offer. #RSG0207



All the tools you'll ever need to better run your restaurant.

Our Maitre'D POS and Back-Office solutions give you the tools you need to cut costs, increase profits and ensure top notch customer service. Easy to learn and use, Maitre'D offers instant alerts on voids, and food and labor costs so you can keep your restaurant running at peak efficiency. Quickly generate sales and profit reports, automate your staff schedules, and easily manage inventory. Count on Maitre'D software to serve you better. For more information, call 1-888-404-2662 or visit our website www.maitredpos.com.



Maitre'D[®]
Software that serves you better

Microsoft[®]
GOLD CERTIFIED

Partner

Ways to Administer Your Guest Survey

How you collect this data from your guests may hinge on your resources and the size of your business. Restaurants with a staff member who can dedicate half or more of her job to this task and which routinely seats 300-plus guests each night will attack this differently than a small bistro concept run by three people. In the former case, written surveys will be the only practical method to collect information, and will require a fair amount of data entry and analysis. In the latter case, the owners and staff may prefer to interview guests as they settle their bill.

Conduct an online survey. If you have a Web site with a large database of customers and e-mail addresses, and/or you have several units, it might be best to conduct a Web-based survey in which you send guests an e-mail and invite them to click on a link and take the survey on their computer. Answers are recorded and tallied for you. This is especially effective when there are several units for which you want to tally results by unit.

Perform guest intercepts, i.e., have an interviewer ask participants the questions and record the answers. In-person intercepts can be done by a staff member but it's always best to have an unbiased third party ask the questions. This way, there is no threat of people being unwilling to answer truthfully. This is most commonly done when outside companies are employed to conduct the surveys. It can be done via telephone or when the guest is exiting the restaurant.

Have guests take home the survey to be returned later. Much like a comment card, surveys can be handed to the customer with the request that they complete it while eating their meal or bring it back at their next visit. We've seen operators provide the means for the surveys to be mailed back. In any case, you want to make sure they have an incentive to return it.

Direct mail or other form of mass distribution. You can buy mailing lists from different places and do a mass mailing to whatever area you consider to be your market. The risk here is that you are not capturing a wide enough cross-section of your market, while simultaneously casting too broad of a net and this would also likely be the slowest means for getting your survey results back. One time this does make good sense is when you are new to an area and are making some pre-opening decisions. Another scenario for mass distribution would be in an institutional setting like a university. If students were a significant portion of your customer base and you wanted to survey them then you could seek out the university newspaper or some other general reach vehicle to get your survey distributed. Here again, you need to provide a reason to bring it back.

down through generations and other countries. You take pride in offering your heritage through your menu and may consider your biggest competitor to be the other Italian restaurant in town who makes Southern Italian recipes using authentic ingredients and homemade sauces from scratch. Your guest, however, may in fact view your competition to be the Asian restaurant down the street because of its proximity, prices, and/or style of service (e.g., family or upscale). Knowing this information allows you to make adjustments in your marketing or operations that are meaningful to your guests.

For this question, the best thing to do is simply ask the survey respondents to write in all the answers that apply. In other words, make the question "open ended."

Sample question:

Where do you like to eat when you are not dining with us?

Objectives 5 and 6: Find Out Why Customers Visit Your Restaurant and Learn What Influences Guest Purchase Decisions

Combined with information garnered from Objective 4, this information can provide you a great deal of meaningful direction in what to change and what not to change. People decide where to go eat based on the meal occasion and here is where we define that occasion. Everyone has a reason for dining out, even if that reason is they didn't have time to shop for food. An occasion can be "I need a break" or "date night." And it is crucial that you understand the predominant reasons folks patronize your operation when tailoring your service, menu and pricing.

We had a client who would not have considered the addition of curbside pickup for his seafood restaurant in a million years, until he saw overwhelming evidence from our surveys and focus groups that his guests would come even more if they could quickly run in for food on their way home. They've since adopted the program and are doing well with it.

Once you determine "why" your guests go to your restaurant, you can really capitalize on those reasons. For example, if you found that one of the reasons people eat at your restaurant is that it is on their way home, you might next figure out what more you can do with takeout and even curbside pickup. We had a client who would not have considered the addition of curbside pickup for their seafood restaurant in a million years, until he saw overwhelming evidence from our surveys and focus groups that his guests would come

ATTENTION READERS:

The following spotlight advertiser is offering

FREE SAMPLES

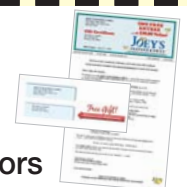
Of 3 Low-Cost Ways to Bring More Cash-Paying Customers to Your Restaurant

FACT: Powerful Direct Marketing is the #1 Choice of Today's Retail Experts for Pulling in New Buyers & Cash Sales



1

FREE SAMPLE: Moving Targets® New-Mover Mailing Service



Persuades New Residents to Visit YOU First... Instead of Your Competitors

Moving Targets® — the original, highly acclaimed retail marketing program used by over 20,000 merchants for over 15 years — sends powerful Customized Letters & Gift Certificates with your irresistible Personalized Offer to new residents in your neighborhood... *long before your competitors know they've arrived.* Their mailing list experts find hundreds of new movers in your area, primed to become loyal customers. You say what neighborhoods to mail... how many to send... how little to spend. **They do all the work.** Proven nationwide. **NO Contracts... NO Set-Up Fees... NO Minimums... NO Hidden Charges.**



CALL FREE SAMPLE HOTLINE ► 800-926-2451, ext. # 269
www.MovingTargets.com

2

FREE SAMPLE: Loyal Rewards® Customer Emailing Service



Uses the Power of Email to Turn Your Own Customers Into a Profitable Goldmine of Untapped Business... for Just 4 1/2¢ Each!

THINK FAST! It's 10 AM and you need more business TODAY. *What do you do?* Simply call, email, or fax **Loyal Rewards** and they'll help drive your own existing customers back through your door literally **within minutes.** This turn-key service registers your customers to receive money-saving Personalized Gift Certificates from you via email. And unlike other emailing systems, you don't need a computer or any technical knowledge. Plus they help you collect and input names... and they create and send your promotions for you. Impressive 10-20% response rates. **NO Contracts... NO Minimum Mailings... NO Hidden Charges.**



CALL FREE SAMPLE HOTLINE ► 800-309-7228, ext. # 503
www.LoyalRewards.com

3

FREE SAMPLE: Birthday Connections™

Turns Hundreds of Neighbors into Crowds of Buyers by Sending them a Greeting and Gift for their Special Day!



Birthday Connections introduces neighbors to your business — and turns them into immediate cash sales — by sending them a Personalized birthday Greeting and your Gift Certificate to celebrate their special day. Their greetings generate high response rates and send streams of new customers through your door. **They do everything for you...** for **LESS** than the cost of a store-bought card itself. That includes: a fully customized local mailing list... complete Birthday Card and Gift Certificate design, personalization, postage, and mailing. Tell them how many greetings to send... the types of customers you want... and your offer. Takes just minutes. **NO Contracts... NO Set-Up Fees... NO Minimum Mailings... NO Hidden Charges.**



CALL FREE SAMPLE HOTLINE ► 800-875-1522, ext. # 706
www.BirthdayConnections.com

All 3 services shown above are offered by Moving Targets® of Perkasio, PA, one of the largest and most successful direct-to-the-consumer, retail marketing companies in the United States.

Timing is Everything

It is very important that you get a representative sampling of your customer base. You must survey people during weekdays and weekends and all the different day parts you serve. If you only conducted surveys for dinner but are open for lunch, you would miss a large constituency of your customer base and would not likely get meaningful results. If you do an online survey, it is best not to shoot out the e-mail over the weekend or first thing Monday morning, as people tend to do a lot of their e-mailing at work and have the most e-mail — much of it may be junk mail — stacked up on Monday mornings. It would be better to send it out on a Tuesday or Wednesday when they may have less jamming up their inbox and can take the week to reply if needed.

even more if they could quickly run in for food on their way home. They've since adopted the program and are doing well with it. If you establish that your restaurant is very popular for couples out on "date night" you might create some wine tasting dinners or rethink your seating to create more tables for two or rearrange your seating to create more intimate seating areas. You just don't know unless you ask. Once you know the key factors in making the decision to purchase from you, you can begin to focus operational and marketing efforts in those directions.

A good way to try and establish the meal occasion is to provide multiple-choice answers and ask people to pick as many as apply.

Sample question:

Which of the following best describes the reason you come to our restaurant? (Check all that apply.)

- Special occasion (birthday, holiday)
- Regular meal
- "Date night"
- Business lunch
- Just for the food

Objective 7: Learn What Guests Believe You Do Well and Not So Well

We can approach these two different ways. The first is to provide variables for the guests to rate us on, on some quality scale, as you've probably seen many times. The second is providing another "write in the answer" question that simply invites the guests to tell us what they think; to give us their opinion. If there is one thing people generally do not mind doing, it is giving you their opinion; nevertheless, when eliciting this information, it must be worded the right way. This is where we tell our guests that we really care about what they think and really value their opinion and do in fact plan to act on survey results. Of course you will get more suggestions than you can possibly put in place and many that you would not care to use but, here again, we look for trends and commonality in responses and begin to dig deeper into those areas that a significant portion of our customer base really care about.

Sample question:

*On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate each of the following for our restaurant?
1 = Poor and 5 = Excellent*

- a. Value (price for the portion size and presentation) _____
- b. Service _____
- c. Variety of menu _____
- d. Food quality _____
- e. Cleanliness _____
- f. Overall atmosphere _____

*On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate each of the following for the service you receive at our restaurant?
1 = Poor and 5 = Excellent*

- a. Product and menu knowledge _____
- b. Friendliness and hospitality _____
- c. Politeness and courteousness _____
- d. Speed and accuracy _____
- e. Appearance _____

Objectives 8 and 9: Discover What You Can Do to Improve Operations and Identify Processes for Change That Will Improve Customer Satisfaction

If you have been diligent in collecting information to fulfill the previous objectives, you will get ideas on how you might adjust your operations. Here is how we test ideas and new products. We simply list things we're considering and ask if it would make the guest come more often and enhance their experience. If you think about it, what would be better than asking your customers ahead of time if they would like to hear live music before you spend the money to book the band or if they would like to have a cold beer with their meal before you bring in the inventory? Of course you will not do this in a vacuum and will probably already have a feel for how your guests will receive new ideas and products but this becomes your vehicle to validate your plans and ideas.

Sample question:

Please rate each of the following from 1 to 5 for their ability to get you to come in to our restaurant more often than you do now:

*1 = It would not make a bit of difference.
5 = Great idea! I would visit a lot more.*

- a. Sunday brunch _____
- b. More seafood items _____
- c. Kids activities and programs (face painting, play area, toys) _____
- d. Live entertainment _____
- e. More daily specials _____
- f. Themed events (murder mystery dinners, wine/beer tasting) _____
- g. Curbside pickup _____
- h. More wine and alcoholic beverage offerings _____
- i. Family-style portions _____

Objective 10: Increase Customer Loyalty

If you study and apply the data that you collect through this survey, this objective should take care of itself. In this regard, execution is everything, as described in "Ways to Administer Your Guest Survey" on page 42.

Final Pointers

Now that you know what to look for, and if you have not decided by now that surveying makes a lot of sense but you are definitely going to call in consultants to do it, there are some final points to keep in mind when constructing your survey.

Explain why you are administering the survey. We like to start a survey with a nice note from the proprietor explaining what we're doing and why. You tell them that you are trying to improve things and really care about how they think you're doing and that you really need their input to do that.

The survey should not be more than one or two pages. The more you can establish in the least amount of questions, the better. Generally, you should not ask a lot more than about 15 questions, maybe 20 if your customers really like you. There is a direct correlation between people's willingness to take a survey and the amount of time they have to commit to doing so. Figure out what you most want to know and ask about those things only.

Every question must be easy to understand and to answer. Try not to use

restaurant business jargon, or ask more than one question at a time. If people are confused about what you want to know, they may just skip it. The answers must tell you something useful, so when creating multiple-choice questions make sure the answers are not vague or nondirectional. Too many fill-in-the-blank questions will get you a lot of opinions but maybe not enough of the answers you were looking for.

Make sure you avoid leading questions or those that are otherwise biased. This is hard because you are positively biased. But keep things objective and nonleading.

Do not ask about things you cannot or do not want to change. This should be obvious but if you are not interested in working on Sundays and don't think you can get anyone else to do it either, don't ask if they would like for you to open on Sundays. If you are legally restricted from serving hard liquor for whatever reason, don't ask if guests would like to see more alcoholic beverages on the menu.

Always reward the customer for taking the survey. You really need to provide some

incentive to entice people to take the survey, to get them to bring it back, and simply to thank them for their time. The incentive should be something that makes sense for you, such as a free dessert or a cookie, a soft drink, or some percentage off their next meal.

Information is Power

These are the nuts and bolts of surveying your customers. Imagine how much easier decisionmaking would be with all this information available to you, how much happier you could make your customers. Even the best of us needs to stop and ask for feedback and nobody's feedback is more important than that of your guests and your employees. Share the results with your employees, get them involved and talking about the results. It's a great idea to solicit their help when creating the survey in fact. Remember, they hear it all first when dealing with your guests. In addition to all the other ways you "listen" to the guests, doing this a couple of times a year will tell you what you need to know to make good decisions about your business.

RS&G

Turbo air
Your satisfaction is our business.

HIGH QUALITY Stainless Steel Ergonomically Designed Energy Saver Turbo Cool

REFRIGERATOR MANUFACTURER
Turbo air
www.turboairinc.com
800-627-0032

The advertisement features a chef in a white uniform and hat, smiling and chopping vegetables on a wooden cutting board. In the background, there are several Turbo Air refrigerators and display cases. The text "Your satisfaction is our business." is prominently displayed in a stylized font. The Turbo Air logo and contact information are at the bottom.