How to Respond Faster to Customer Feedback

A Special Report for Customer Service Managers

In any business in a fast-moving, competitive sector, the customer service department is often hard-pressed to keep up with customer concerns.

But responding quickly to any issues can mean the difference between keeping a customer, and losing them.

This special report describes a new way to respond faster to customers, save staff time and effort, and provide better intelligence for company executives.

These benefits flow from the next generation of surveying software: automated data-driven feedback systems.

Perhaps the best way to start describing these new systems is to look at how they differ from conventional feedback management systems, and how these differences overcome the typical problems associated with the traditional approach.

The problem with traditional customer surveys

Traditional customer surveys can be collected in many ways: through the Web, e-mail, direct mail, or by phone, at pre-determined intervals.

However these surveys are taken, without any automation they demand a lot of staff time to manage, analyze, and publish.

And the results are often not available until months later. This lag time makes life more difficult both for customer service managers at a tactical level, and for C-level executives at a strategic level.

On a tactical level, customer service departments often don't get the data they need to deal with customer problems fast enough. They may not even get enough feedback to tell if the firm's offerings are still in line with what the market needs.

On a strategic level, executives may not hear about customer issues until they grow into serious problems that threaten the company's future. With no advance warning, like the Titanic steaming towards the iceberg, the firm may have no time or space to manoeuvre.

The benefits of automated customer feedback management

The term "automated data-driven customer feedback management system" does sound like a lot of technical jargon. But the underlying concepts are straightforward.

These systems are designed to do five important things:

1. **Gather** detailed customer feedback at any desired customer touch-point, such as an inquiry, a purchase, return, or complaint.

2. **Trigger** e-mails to pre-determined lists with recommended action items.

3. **Analyze** feedback and generate detailed reports.

4. **Convey** action items and reports to anyone who needs to see them, in any department.

5. **Share** high-level score cards and key strategic indicators with executives.

Once this type of system is set up, it will continue to do all this without ongoing staff time. For example, the surveying in step 1 is automated to happen continuously with no need for human intervention.

The e-mail in step 2 is automatically triggered by certain patterns in a completed survey.

The analysis and report generation in step 3 also happens continuously and automatically.

The information flow in step 4 is automated, so that no one can forget or neglect to keep others informed.

The circulation of high-level results shown in step 5 is automated, so these take place with no need for further staff time or effort.

The parts of a system

A next-generation automated customer feedback system includes these parts:

◆ an ongoing customer survey, designed to run continuously over months and years

◆ customer records that cover all significant touch-points: inquiries, purchases, returns, complaints, or any other

◆ a workflow for routing any customer feedback that requires quick follow-up

◆ links to an existing executive dashboard (optional)

◆ survey automation software that ties all these pieces into a working whole.

Traditional survey cycles are driven by the calendar. But the ongoing surveys in a data-driven system are driven by any desired customer interaction such as an inquiry, purchase, return, or complaint.

To make all this more concrete, let's consider the real-life experiences of one customer.

Jane Smith's complaint in a traditional surveying scenario

Suppose business owner Jane Smith decides to change her telephone service to VoIP to save money. She gets the new equipment for her premises, but it takes her service provider an extra month before her service works.

She pays for her traditional phone service for an extra month. But then she gets a bill from her VoIP provider for the first month of service, when her service was not working.

Naturally she calls customer service to complain. The customer service rep says he has no authority to issue a credit. Jane is unhappy and asks the rep to escalate the matter to his manager.

The rep agrees, but comes back on the line to say his manager is busy but will call Jane back within 24 hours.

Scenario #1: Traditional Customer Service Surveys

Scenario #2: Automated Customer Service Feedback
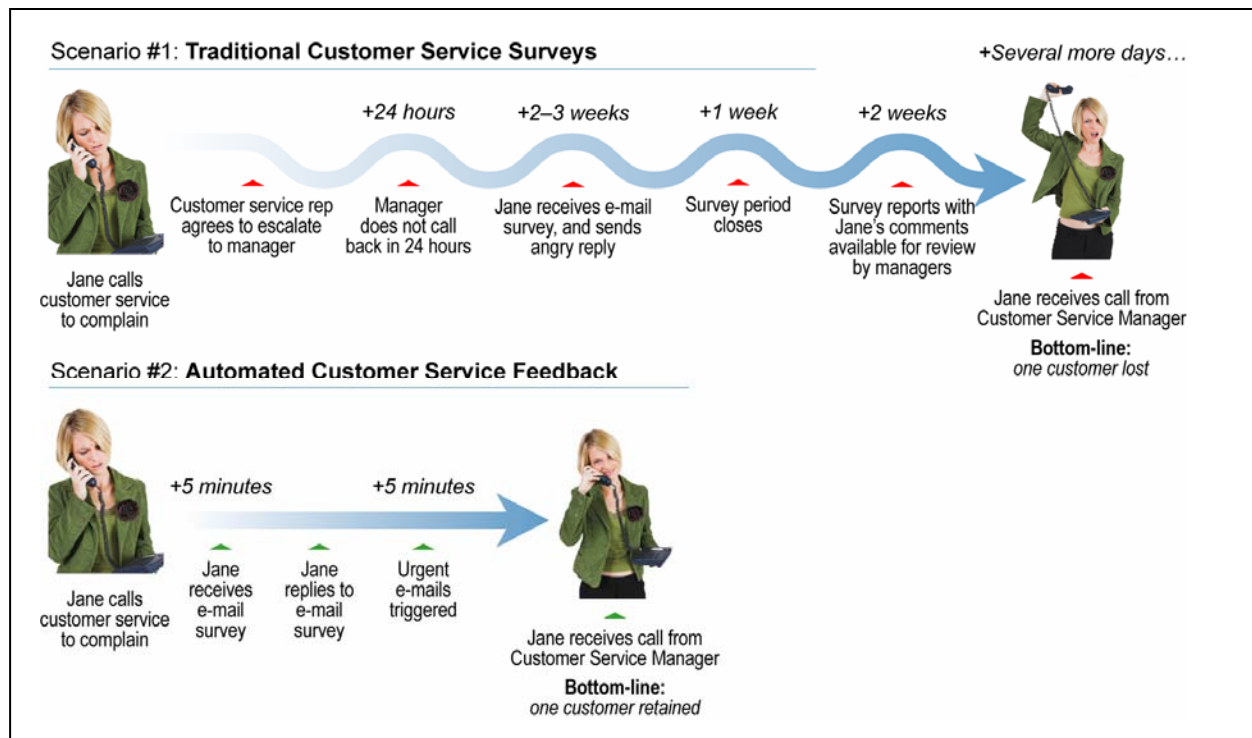
Jane never hears anything back.

In traditional surveying, a tiny percentage of customers are selected every cycle. If Jane's name happens to be picked up for the next survey, she receives an e-mail form sometime in the next one to three weeks.

So she sends the survey back, with her unhappiness showing in her comments. Clearly Jane requires immediate attention, or she may not be a customer for much longer.

But the survey must remain open for another week, and after that it takes two more weeks to generate the reports. In the best case, Jane's comments may be on someone's desk within four weeks from the time she sent them.

At that point, managers still have to look at the overall results, and probe to find dissatisfied customers like Jane.

By the time she gets a call from a customer service manager, it is more than four weeks since she made her comments. By then, she has already switched to another provider. Jane's poor impression of the company is been confirmed by the slow reaction.

Bottom-line: one customer lost.

And this is the best-case scenario. It could easily be 45 days, 60 days, or even more, before Jane's comments are addressed. How many customers like Jane will remain loyal after such a long delay?

Jane's complaint in an automated customer feedback scenario

On the other hand, suppose Jane is dealing with a different organization using a more advanced, data-driven feedback system.

The service starts a month late just the same. But this time, when Jane calls customer service, something very different happens.

Within five minutes of her hanging up, a survey is e-mailed out to her.

The survey questions include:

◆ Did our service agent fix your problem?

◆ If your issue needed to be escalated, was it escalated in an appropriate way?

◆ Overall, how satisfied were you with our service?

Jane's responses indicate her clear dissatisfaction. This pattern trips a software trigger, and within five minutes of receiving Jane's survey, an automatic e-mail goes out to the customer service manager, asking her to speak with Jane ASAP.

Also within five minutes, the system sends an automated e-mail to Jane to say that she will hear from someone soon.

Within a matter of minutes, the customer service manager makes the phone call and resolves Jane's problem by offering her two month's credit for her inconvenience.

Under the traditional model of surveying, the same complaint took four weeks just to land on the desk of a manager. An automated system reduces that delay to a few minutes.

In this case, Jane is so impressed that someone calls her back so quickly to sort out her issue that she signs on with the company for another year.

Bottom-line: one customer retained.

How an automated system helps

This kind of automated customer feedback system safeguards against breakdowns at any customer touchpoint. It helps companies on two levels, both on the tactical/departmental and on the strategic/executive levels.

On a tactical level, the system helps the customer service department become aware of more issues, and resolve them faster. If Jane's experience is repeated many times a day, dealing with all these issues more effectively can truly help boost customer satisfaction and reduce customer churn.

On a strategic level, the system helps by rolling Jane's issue into the overall customer satisfaction rating shown in the score card and key strategic indicators for executives.

Any executive who drills down for details may spot a telltale pattern: many similar complaints about billing mistakes.

Further investigation may reveal that the billing system can't cope with a recent surge in new subscribers. Or there may be coding errors in the invoicing software.

Whatever the cause, with this much advance notice, executives have a better chance to deal with this issue before it generates bad word of mouth, and drives away many customers.

The traditional survey: too many delays and too much effort

Why can't a traditional survey process deliver the same kind of results? Why should anyone invest in an automated data-driven system?

The key answers are shown in the two following tables. These tables sum up the delays and effort involved in the traditional vs. next-generation surveying systems.

TRADITIONAL SURVEY	DELAY (days)	EFFORT (days)	CYCLE (weeks)
Gather	5 to 10	3 to 5	2 to 4
Analyze	15 to 30	5 to 7	2 to 4
Act	30+		

Table 1: Traditional Survey Process
(Source: eXplorance typical survey project)

As shown in Table 1, traditional surveys create many delays and require a lot of effort. And much of this effort must be repeated each time a new survey is prepared or analyzed, likely every two to four weeks.

Results compiled manually are often not ready for 30 days after the survey is taken, or even longer. Managers can then try to act on urgent issues, but a dissatisfied customer may be lost.

By the time a traditional survey runs two or three cycles, to make sure what's being seen is not a statistical spike, executives can easily be looking at data gathered as long as 90 days ago. This is like trying to drive by looking in the rear-view mirror: not a reliable technique.

A data-driven approach: faster results and better intelligence

As shown in Table 2, an automated data-driven feedback system generates results with far less time and effort.

AUTOMATED FEEDBACK	DELAY (days)	EFFORT (days)	CYCLE (weeks)
Gather	5 to 10	3 to 5	once
Analyze	immediate	5 to 7	once
Act	minutes		

Table 2: Automated Feedback Process
(Source: eXplorance typical survey project)

The first time a survey is implemented, the delay is the same, about five to 10 days. So is the effort, perhaps three to five days.

By creating a permanent survey to be used continuously, though, this effort never needs to be repeated. Notice how this saves three to five days of effort for every two- to four-week cycle in implementing a survey.

Automation also saves time in the analysis and reporting process. Setting up the reporting process requires about the same effort as running it once, three to seven days, depending on the scope and complexity.

From then on, reports are automatically generated any time a customer responds to the survey.

This saves another three to five days of effort for every survey cycle, compared to the traditional approach.

An even more important benefit, though, is how much faster a customer service department can act on any issues from the customer's perspective.

The deadly lag a customer comment and any follow-up action falls from 30+ days to one day or less. This is a significant drop that

should spell better customer satisfaction and perhaps less customer churn.

Not only does a customer service department receive automated e-mails alerting them to issues like Jane Smith's, but executives see an ongoing summary of high-level results and key strategic indicators to help support their decisions.

This effect can be as significant as giving the captain of the Titanic a radar screen to show him the approaching iceberg.

With enough advance warning, there is ample time and space to steer around it or any other threats.

In this way, an automated data-driven customer feedback system delivers significant value on both a tactical/department level and a strategic/executive level.

Tips on selecting a vendor

If you are interested in moving from a traditional surveying system to an automated data-driven feedback system, there are system vendors who can help.

Of course, the success of this project will depend on selecting the best vendor for your particular enterprise.

To help you select the best vendor, here are some key criteria you should look for:

- ◆ previous experience working with enterprises in your sector
- ◆ field-proven software with reference sites you can call
- ◆ easy access to the existing information in your company databases or CRM system
- ◆ unlimited scope for future expansion
- ◆ iron-clad security provisions
- ◆ support for all mainstream technologies from enterprise CRM and ERP vendors
- ◆ flexible pricing, with either a software-as-a-service or licensed model.

You may already have an automated surveying system in place, without the benefits of a link to an executive dashboard.

If you are interested in these benefits, the last section of this special report describes a step-by-step approach to building a customer satisfaction dashboard.

These nine steps will help you gain executive buy-in for this project, and build a solid system that will deliver real strategic benefits.

This process will take a number of months to implement. By then, your executives will be comfortable with the new dashboard they helped design, and ready to act on the advanced intelligence it shows them.

How to find out more...

This special report is brought to you by eXplorance, creators of the Blue Web-based enterprise-class software for customer feedback management.

Never before have surveys and reports been easier to implement, and so perfectly adapted to your enterprise environment.

To find out more about how Blue can help your organization respond faster to customer feedback, please visit **www.eXplorance.com/blue.htm**

Nine steps to building an automated customer feedback system

These nine steps will help you gain executive buy-in for the project, and build a solid system that will deliver real strategic benefits.

Step 1: Develop key strategic indicators.

Create a list of six to eight key strategic indicators (KSI) that your executives likely want to see. These could include:

- customer satisfaction
- competitiveness of your product(s)
- competitiveness of your service(s)
- likelihood of customer attrition.

Step 2: Get the KSIs endorsed.

Ask your executives to review your list and arrange the suggested KSIs in priority. Which is the most important? Least? Which do they absolutely need to see? Which could be cut?

Step 3: Develop long-term questionnaire.

Think about how to phrase questions that will draw out each of your indicators, perhaps:

- Did our service meet your needs?
- Did our product meet your needs?
- Are you looking at other suppliers? Who? Why?

Weight and score each question to feed into a KSI. Develop a draft survey that is flexible enough to run for many months or years.

You can always change your survey in the future. But remember: The more changes you make, the weaker your baseline for analysis.

Step 4: Define triggers and routing.

Think about the feedback you may get from your survey, and who should see it. For example, if a customer says that they're unhappy with your service and considering another supplier, this message should go to a customer service manager for immediate follow-up.

Set appropriate triggers of this kind, so that your system responds automatically to customer feedback. Develop message routing, so that the right people quickly see what is going on. Set up special e-mail addresses, if required, to forward survey results to.

**Step 5: Validate your survey manually.**

Run your new survey manually with your existing system for two to three cycles. Review the results and tweak your indicators, survey questions, and triggers as required.

Step 6: Attend to your databases.

In parallel, make sure your existing customer data is clean, and that new information is gathered in real-time.

Collect useful customer information, most of all e-mail addresses.

These will enable you to drive the new system using automated e-mails.
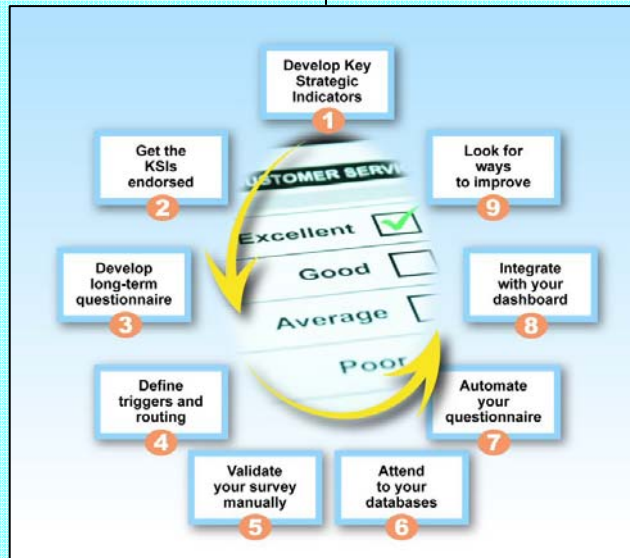
Step 7: Automate your questionnaire.

Run your new survey for one or two cycles with your automated system, review the results, and tweak if needed.

Step 8: Integrate with your dashboard.

Link the results from your new system to the dashboard from your business intelligence vendor. Your executives will then be able to see the KSIs at the heart of your system.

Step 9: Look for ways to improve.

Review your system regularly. Make any refinements to improve it. Completing these nine steps will take some months.