

Why do retailers need to listen to customers ‘in the moment’ of purchase?

Contributed by Danni Findlay, Marketing Sciences
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Ten years ago the most common market research method would involve an interviewer with a clipboard and pen in hand. These days, the general public are more likely to interact with research from the comfort of their laptop or mobile. There can be little doubt that technology has changed the nature of research, but while online surveys are ideal for many areas, face to face interviewing remains far from obsolete. In fact, our experience working in the retail sector shows that interviewing in person remains by far the best technique for capturing the all important ‘in the moment’ reaction of shoppers.

Time is of the essence

The further removed questioning is from the moment, the more prone it is to ‘clutter’ by more subjective influences such as varying perception, values and other memories, and retail experience appears to be particularly sensitive to time delay. Our studies have shown that it takes consumers longer to notice an alteration to in-store experience when they are interviewed online at a later date than if somebody asks them about it in person on the day. Perceptions of improvement also seem to be affected: when surveyed online, customers need to see an improvement on more than two occasions before they’ll change their view of your brand. However, when interviewed in store, consumers are more likely to admit something along the lines of ‘actually that was quite good today, it’s not usually’. Understanding how a customer views your store in the days following their visit is of course important in itself, since it has a significant impact on whether they choose to visit you next time, but it’s difficult to pinpoint how people actually feel about specific changes using this method.

Finding the middle ground

Although some retailers provide the invitation to give feedback ‘in the moment’ via an online survey link, often with the promise of vouchers or rewards – the reality is that this does little to reduce the delay in completing the survey and, if you are anything like me, good intentions translate into finding the receipt in the bottom of your bag weeks later. Would it be different if I’d had a terrible experience? Probably. Or a very good one? Maybe. But this still leaves the researcher with an unreliable image of the average consumer, and by presenting consumers with the less time-consuming and memory-dependent option of answering a few questions as they leave the store, you go a long way to reducing bias. It is vital that research takes into account those who occupy the middle ground, who may not feel strongly enough to fill in a survey at a later date. Feedback is a great way to improve – but it needs to be put in context or companies would spend significant time and budget trying to pacify overly negative consumers who are, in reality, unrepresentative of the average shopper. Interviewing a random selection of customers ‘in the moment’ can add context to both positive and negative scores, as advancing technology makes the inclusion of comment verbatim more viable.

Client concerns

So why does scepticism remain? The perception that online research is inevitably the most affordable option has left many suggesting that ‘in the moment’ research is not cost effective. However, in cases where research is particularly tailored or tactical it can actually be easier and therefore cheaper to find the best sample by working in-store: very few online panels, or even consumer databases, are large enough to access a sample of customers who have shopped in a specific store at a specific time.

Some clients worry that the presence of in-store interviewers may affect the customer experience if managers and staff adapt their behaviour when a researcher is in store. While problematic in some ways, this is also an opportunity for insight. Such ‘corrective action’ suggests that employees know they are not offering the best possible service, and asking customers if they would consider their experience that day as ‘typical’ is of course revealing in itself.

With the advent of online research in the early 2000s, people talked of the death of face-to-face interviewing. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that this description was exaggerated and premature. We feel strongly that face to face is important for retail, which is why we recently made the decision to equip our entire fieldwork team with tablets, something which has already paid off in a relatively short space of time. It has become clear that online surveys, while retaining their place in the industry, are no substitute for interviews conducted ‘in situ’ for retailers – still in the location, focused on the task in hand and with all the sensory cues that surround the customer.

Danni Findlay is a customer experience expert and director at Marketing Sciences Unlimited. Danni works with retailers to help them to listen and respond to the voice of the customer.