



# Show Me Some Love

Using Customer Surveys to  
Identify Your Most  
Loyal Guests

By Rhonda Rhodes

**W**ho are your best customers and what do they really think about your restaurant? It seems like a simple question that most restaurateurs can answer intuitively. While you should never ignore your gut, as it will never intentionally deceive you, you still have to ask yourself, “Can I really describe with confidence who visits my restaurant most often and spends the most money?” Can you describe with clarity and detail your most valuable customers — the ones who account for the *majority* of your revenue and are *loyal* to your brand?

Not only do you need to know your loyal guests, you need to know them intimately. Marketers describe customers through demographics, lifestyle characteristics and purchasing patterns. If you don’t know the average age, income, family status, education, race and ethnicity of your best guests, then you don’t really know the ones who love you and are the foundation of your business. Think of them in the same manner as your spouse or best friend. You should know where they shop, what radio stations they listen to and what they do for leisure and recreation, and their opinions and attitudes about you *and* your competition. That’s how you maintain any important relationship.

If you are going to acquire and retain loyal customers, this information is crucial, especially in today’s competitive economy in which restaurants battle for each and every percentage of market share. Customer surveys are the most effective tool for collecting the data you need to develop a customer profile and keep a close eye on your customers and your competition. It’s tough out there. Stay ahead of the game by knowing your customers’ opinions and attitudes before you start losing customers. And, hey, you can even take advantage of your knowledge to increase that bottom line.

In this article we will discuss the data you want to collect in your customer surveys, various methods for surveying customers and, most importantly, what you can do with the resulting information to grow your business.

### Seek and Ye Shall Find

At the very least, gather home addresses and/or demographic information. If you have a home address for your customer, demographic and lifestyle data can be appended or attached to the customer records based on the address. Many data suppliers and market research firms provide such a service and can develop a customer profile for you. To profile your customers even more accurately, ask them about their demographics and purchasing patterns; a robust profile can be built on that *actual* customer data.

Some of the basics include first and last name, home address, work address and e-mail address. This data is invaluable for ongoing marketing to your customers. If they frequent your restaurant then you want to keep them informed of all the specials and promotions you have to offer. Second, to build that all-important customer profile, you will ask questions about age, gender, income, occupation, education, race/ethnicity and household composition.

How do you determine who is a loyal customer? How many times per month do they dine with you, how much do they spend, when did they last visit and what is the typical size of their party? Those core customers, who dine the most often and spend the most money, will rise to the top. By combining the demographic and lifestyle information with the RFM data collected — “recency” data (when they last visited), frequency data (how often they visit) and monetary data (how much they spent) — you have defined your core customers. Again, you may have the capabilities to collect, compile and analyze such data in-house or you can engage with a professional firm to work with you to build your customer profile. Just make sure you make it a priority.

So you know your loyal customer; now, what do they think about you and your competition? What do they think today and what will they think next month or a year from now? It is so important to continually check the pulse of your core customers. How they rate your food quality, menu variety, value, service, atmosphere, price and overall experience is information you want to know. And, who is your competition, *according* to your customers? How do your customers compare you with your competition? By knowing what your customers love about you and where there might be room for improvement allows you to take action before your customers do. Give them more of what they love. Feature those areas where you excel in your marketing and advertising. If you need to modify your menu, customer service and so forth to make your loyal customers happy, do not let your ego get in the way. Your customers rule.

If you plan to launch a new product or service, modify or change your concept, collecting data on your customers’ opinions prior to taking action will ensure your new ideas will be successful and prevent you from making costly mistakes. Better to ask your customers what they think before making any significant changes. Perhaps your idea will be received well, maybe it needs to be tweaked or maybe they think you have lost your mind. With some effort on the front end to get input from your customers, you will ensure that you continue to grow your business in a positive direction.

### Survey Methods

There are a variety of methods for surveying customers and collecting data — in-store intercept surveys, online surveys and customer comment cards are a few of the key survey instruments for gathering valuable customer data. The survey objective should be clearly outlined prior to development and implementation of the survey. The goal may be to collect customer demographics, shopping and dining patterns. It could be you measure customer satisfaction or gather responses to new product or service launches. Clearly defining your purpose is integral to achieve meaningful results.

## Typical Customer Comment Card

Thank you for visiting us today! Please complete the following based upon your visit so we can better serve you.									
1. Host/Hostess:		Poor			Good		Excellent		
a. Courtesy of host/hostess		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
b. Accuracy of wait time for table		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Comments:	_____								
2. Server:									
a. Courtesy		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
b. Promptness		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
c. Attentiveness		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Comments:	_____								
3. Food									
a. Appearance		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
b. Taste		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
c. Quality		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
d. Portion Size		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
What items did you order?	_____								
4. Overall									
a. Service		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
b. Food		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
c. Value		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
d. Experience		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Comments:	_____								
5. How likely are you to recommend this restaurant to a colleague or friend?									
		Definitely will not			May or may not		Definitely will		
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Why did you answer this way?	_____								
Name	_____								
Address	_____								
City/State/Zip	_____								
Telephone	( ) - _____								
Date	_____ Time of Day _____								
Number in party	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8+	

**Intercept surveys.** Customer intercept surveys take place in your restaurant on different days of the week and at varying dayparts depending on your concept category. The goal is to collect data from all types of customers frequenting your restaurant at all dayparts. There are many research companies that are experts in customer surveying, or you can survey using your in-house staff, or a combination of both. Customers are typically more than happy to share their thoughts and information. It is always a good idea to give them something for their participation, such as a T-shirt (they will be advertising for you), a coupon for redemption on their next visit, a free dessert or anything that shows you appreciate them and their time.

If you have a lunch business, a happy hour, dinner and late night, all of those dayparts are important and the customers in all segments should be included in the survey and sampled accordingly. You might guess that your typical late-night customer is not a loyal patron who accounts for a significant portion of your revenue; however, after the survey analysis you'll be able to quantify your guess, and move more proactively how you market to that individual.

On Page 36 are examples of a simple short survey and on Page 37 is an example of a longer in-depth survey, both of which accomplish the same goal in different levels of detail.

**Online surveys.** Online surveys are like intercept surveys, but the survey implementation is conducted electronically through e-mail invitations or via a link on your Web site. There are many companies that have online survey tools, such as SurveyMonkey and Constant Contact. Whichever tool you use, or if you develop your own, the concept is the same. Again, be sure to survey all types of customers who visit your restaurant on different days of the week and at varying dayparts. Since you are not implementing the survey in your restaurant, you will need to make sure your respondents include all of your customer segments. One of the major benefits of using online surveys is that you eliminate the data entry aspect found in hard-copy surveys or customer comment cards and they can be carried out quickly and cost-effectively.

**Customer comment cards.** Customer comment cards are a great way to collect data on an ongoing and nonintrusive basis. Comment cards are typically found on the table at all times or the server leaves a card with the check at the end of the meal. Wait staff competition to collect comment cards can assist in building a robust customer database. The data collected on a customer comment card is typically less than you might collect in an intercept or online survey, but is used for the same end and compiled and analyzed like intercept surveys. Customer comment cards are an inexpensive way to measure customer satisfaction over time and keep your eye on the ball. On this page, we provide an example of a typical customer comment card.

Regardless of the technique used, it is very important that you get a representative sampling of your customer base, according to restaurant consultant Emily Durham. You must survey people during weekdays and weekends and all the different dayparts 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. 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.

### You Know What You Can Do With That Data?

Once data is collected, research methods are used to aggregate like customers together and to develop a customer profile. The objective is to define your customer so you can look for

## Simple Short Survey

### SHORT SURVEY EXAMPLE

#### CUSTOMER SURVEY

**Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. The information that you provide will aid us in our quest to deliver the highest level of customer service!**

1. How frequently do you visit Main Street Cafe? (Check the box that best describes your visit frequency.)

- Once a month or less                       Twice/Three times a month  
 Once a week                                       More than once a week

2. Where were you before coming to here?

- Home    Work    Shopping    Church    Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. Where will you go after leaving here?

- Home    Work    Shopping    Church    Other \_\_\_\_\_

**The following information will be used to determine how far our customers travel to the restaurant. The information provided below will remain confidential.**

4. What is your work address?

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---

5. What is your home address?

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DO NOT WRITE BELOW THIS LINE – TO BE FILLED OUT BY SERVER

Date: \_\_\_/\_\_\_/09      Time: \_\_\_\_\_ PM/AM      Number of People in Party \_\_\_\_\_  
Estimated Total Bill \$ \_\_\_\_\_

other potential customers that match your high-value loyal customers. You can then target your marketing and expansion efforts to geographic areas with densities of these customers. A customer profile may look like this:

- ✓ *The typical household has adults between the ages of 25 and 54, who attended some college; many went on to graduate school or higher. The majority of households have children. Adults in this group work primarily in management or white-collar jobs and have income that is midscale or higher.*
- ✓ *These households like to travel and shop at stores such as Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Nieman Marcus and Ethan Allen. When they go out to eat, they dine at California Pizza Kitchen, Au Bon Pain, The Cheesecake Factory and Romano's Macaroni Grill.*
- ✓ *These people read The New York Times and financial, travel, parenting and cultural magazines.*
- ✓ *They drive BMWs and Mercedes and listen to talk, sports and rock radio.*

Once you have defined your target customer, you are ready to acquire and retain the big spenders. You have a customer database and customer profile; now you can execute targeted

marketing programs to reach those high-value current and potential customers. Direct mail, e-mail marketing, loyalty programs, television and radio advertising, grassroots marketing, print advertising — you have all the information necessary to place your marketing dollars wisely and get the biggest bang for your buck. Instead of using the shotgun approach to marketing, you can isolate and target your best customers and prospects — and increase your return on marketing dollars spent.

By continually checking in on the satisfaction of your core customers, you will improve customer retention and keep them coming back. And happy, loyal customers will tell their family and friends about your restaurant. Word-of-mouth is free advertising and it is priceless. Customer satisfaction surveys give you insight on what your customers want and expect. If the information indicates that some expectations are not being met, you will know exactly the areas where improvement is needed. Typically, if changes are necessary simple modifications to products or service can be made to make sure your customers continue to prefer your brand over the competition. You can measure customer satisfaction over time — find problems that may be sneaking up on you before it hits your bottom line.

Planning to launch a new menu item(s)? Considering modifications or changes to your concept? Find out what your customers think about your ideas before spending significant resources. They will probably love your idea, they might have thoughts to help you improve on it or maybe they will give you two thumbs down. Better to know before launching how a new product or concept will be received. The data gathered from customer surveys can include qualitative and quantitative information. From a qualitative perspective, what do they think of your idea and how might you improve on it? From a quantitative angle, how much more money might they be willing to spend or how more often will they visit your restaurant? You can then actually measure the return on your investment before launching your new idea.

### The 10 Goals of an Effective Customer Survey Program

According to restaurant consultant Emily Durham, the 10 primary goals of an effective customer survey program include ways 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.
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-Depth Survey

## LONG SURVEY EXAMPLE

**TO SERVE YOU BETTER, WE'D LIKE TO KNOW YOUR OPINION ABOUT US. PLEASE TAKE THIS SURVEY HOME WITH YOU AND RETURN COMPLETED VIA REGULAR MAIL OR FAX. AS A TOKEN OF OUR GRATITUDE, WE WILL SEND YOU A COUPON REDEEMABLE FOR A FREE APPETIZER FROM OUR MENU.**

- How often do you come here?  
 Once a week or more  2 to 3 times a month  Once a month  Once every 2 to 3 months  Once every 4 to 6 months  Less often than that  First visit
- In general how often do you eat at this type of restaurant?  
 Once a week or more  2 to 3 times a month  Once a month  Once every 2 to 3 months  Once every 4 to 6 months  Less often than that  First visit
- Are you a/an...?  
 Local Resident  Local Worker  Seasonal Resident  Business Traveler  Area Visitor/Tourist  Other
- How long did it take you to get here?  
 Under 5 minutes  5-10 minutes  11-15 minutes  16-25 minutes  26 or more minutes
- Where did you come from **prior** to visiting us today?  
 Shopping  Home  Work  School  Recreation  Other
- Where are you going **after** visiting us today?  
 Shopping  Home  Work  School  Recreation  Other
- Including you, how many people are you dining with today?  
 One  Two  Three  Four  Five or More
- How much did you spend today? \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- Of this list, what is the **MAIN** reason you visited us today?  
 Recommendation  Close to Work  Special Occasion   
 Passing By  Service  Atmosphere/View   
 Ad or Coupon  Food  Regular Customer   
 Close to Home  SOME OTHER REASON \_\_\_\_\_

9b. Are there any other reasons you visited us today? (PLEASE CHECK ALL OTHERS THAT APPLY)

- Recommendation  Close to Work  Special Occasion   
 Passing By  Service  Atmosphere/View   
 Ad or Coupon  Food  Regular Customer   
 Close to Home  SOME OTHER REASON \_\_\_\_\_

10a. If this restaurant were closed today, where would you have gone to eat instead?  
 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Gone Home  Nowhere Else

10b. Please name 1 or 2 other restaurants you would have considered.  
 2. \_\_\_\_\_ 3. \_\_\_\_\_

11. On a scale from Excellent to Poor, please rate this restaurant on:
- |                     | Excellent                | Good                     | Average                  | Fair                     | Poor                     |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 11.a Overall Rating | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.b Food Quality   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.c Service        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.d Atmosphere     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.e Menu Variety   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.f Value          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11.g Price          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**IF ANSWERED "GONE HOME" OR "NOWHERE ELSE" IN QUESTION 10A, PLEASE SKIP QUESTION 12**

12. Now, please rate us again but this time compare us with the **FIRST** competitor you mentioned earlier: (SEE QUESTION 10A)

- |                     | Excellent                | Good                     | Average                  | Fair                     | Poor                     |
|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 12.a Overall Rating | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.b Food Quality   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.c Service        | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.d Atmosphere     | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.e Menu Variety   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.f Value          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12.g Price          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

13. How likely would you be to **return** to this restaurant in the next 30 days? (PLEASE CHOOSE ONLY ONE)

- Definitely  Probably  May or May Not  Probably Not  Definitely Not

14. How likely would you be to **recommend** this restaurant to friends, family, and associates? (PLEASE CHOOSE ONLY ONE)

- Definitely  Probably  May or May Not  Probably Not  Definitely Not

15. Were there any problems today that might cause you not to visit us again? Please let us know so we can correct any problems: (LIST PROBLEMS ONLY IN SPACE PROVIDED)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

16. What is your sex?

- Male  Female

17. What is your age?

- 18-24  25-34  35-49  50-64  65 and Over

18. What is your racial/ethnic background?

- Caucasian  African-American  Hispanic  Asian  Other

19. What is your current occupation?

- Professional  Manager/Business Owner  Clerical/Staff Worker  Transportation & Material Moving  Machine Operator  Service Worker  Technical Support

20. Including you, how many people live in your household? (PLEASE CHOOSE ONLY ONE)

- One  Two  Three  Four  Five or More

21. Into what range does your total household income fall? (PLEASE CHOOSE ONLY ONE)

- Less than \$25,000  \$25,000 to \$49,999  \$50,000 to \$74,999  \$75,000 to \$99,999  \$100,000 or more

22. What day is it today?

- Monday  Tuesday  Wednesday  Thursday  Friday  Saturday  Sunday

23. What time is it now?

- 6am-11am  11am-2pm  2pm-5pm  5pm-8pm  8pm-Midnight  Midnight-6am

**Please remember that the following questions are for classification only. You will not be mailed anything or be called on the telephone based on the information below.**

**THANKS - YOUR HELP IS APPRECIATED**

24. What is your ZIP code? (FILL IN EACH NUMBER INSIDE THE BOX ONLY)

HOME       WORK

25. What town and state do you live in? (PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY)

TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

26. What is your street address? (PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY)

\_\_\_\_\_

**If you are not comfortable providing your exact street address, please answer Q.27 below:**

27. What is your work address? (PLEASE WRITE CLEARLY)

\_\_\_\_\_

**PLEASE RETURN TO:**

**BLUEFISH GRILL  
123 MAIN STREET  
ANYTOWN, USA**

**FAX: 555-555-1212**

Additionally, if you think about expanding and opening new locations, one of the most important elements for identifying great locations is to find densities of your core customers. You now know where they live, work and play. Simple mapping technologies can isolate “hot

spots” of where to find your target customers and potential high-performing new restaurant locations.

By taking the time and effort to conduct ongoing customer surveying, you will increase customer retention and loyalty. The survey results will

also provide you with the tools you need to successfully attract new, loyal and profitable customers. With this information at your fingertips, you are prepared to take the next steps to ensure the success and growth of your restaurant concept.

**RS&G**