



Five Tips on How to Create More Accurate Customer Service Surveys

by Gordon Graham, [eXplore](#)

In a competitive marketplace, what you don't know **can** hurt you.

If you don't know what your customers are thinking, how can you solve their problems, and keep them coming back?

For many organizations, the answer is to sponsor customer service surveys.

To help you set up your first customer survey, or review an existing one, we spoke with an acknowledged expert in the field, Dr. Fred Van Bennekom.

A Boston-based consultant and author who gives regular workshops on customer feedback management, Dr. Van Bennekom shared with *eXplore* five important tips on designing customer service surveys.

At the outset, he cautioned us against a one-size-fits-all approach. "Customer service is a huge area that generally breaks into two big

categories: customer support and ordering/fulfilment," he says. "So it's hard to make general statements that are directly applicable to everyone."

With that in mind, here are five best practices to should apply to just about everyone.

Survey design tip #1: Pay attention to all five dimensions of service.

In the 1980s, three academics did a rigorous study to determine the dimensions of service quality.

As shown in Table 1, they isolated five distinct dimensions of customer service:

- ◆ Reliability
- ◆ Responsiveness
- ◆ Assurance
- ◆ Empathy
- ◆ Tangibles.

Dimension	Definition	Typical Survey Questions
Reliability (weighted 30/100)	Did the actual work done address the core issue and fix the customer's problem?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did our service agents fix your problem? • How thorough was their examination? • How accurate was their diagnosis? • How well did our agents seem to understand our organization's products and services? • If your issue needed to be escalated, was it escalated in an appropriate way? • Overall, how satisfied were you with our service?
Responsiveness (weighted 30/100)	Did your organization respond to the customer's request quickly and thoroughly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long were you on hold when you called? • Did they fix your issue on the first attempt? • How many contacts did it take with us before your issue was resolved? • How long from the time you called until a technician arrived at your site?
Assurance (weighted 18/100)	Does the customer still have confidence in your organization as a supplier?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How likely are you to buy from us in the future? • Would you recommend our product or service to your colleagues or friends?
Empathy (weighted 17/100)	Did your team show concern for the individual and their issue?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well did our agents listen to you? • How professional were our agents? • How courteous were our agents?
Tangibles (weighted 5/100)	Did the customer receive some tangible reminder of the service?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you come away from the service experience with a better understanding of the product?

Table 1: The Five Dimensions of Customer Service

This table shows each dimension, how it's often weighted out of 100 points, a working definition, and some typical questions often used to elicit the associated feedback.

We use the generic term "service agents" here to refer to whoever on your team interacts with customers.

Van Bennekom says he uses this as a framework when developing surveys for clients. "I ask myself, 'Do I have questions that address all those areas?' And if I don't, I go back and re-think things," he says.

"Tangibles" is the least important dimension of all, especially for a service delivered by telephone or the Web.

But it's still worth creating a letter, an e-mail, or some physical token of your service. For example, auto garages often tag the door or windshield of the cars they service.

And if the customer comes to your physical site, "Tangibles" also refers to the environment where your people work.

For example, this includes the tidiness of the garage, the counter area, the uniforms, the washrooms, and anything else a customer can see or touch on their visit.

The bottom line is that whenever you design or review any survey on customer service make sure you have questions to gather feedback about each of these dimensions.

Survey design tip #2: Use internal brainstorming for an 80-percent solution.

“When I’m developing a survey for a client, there are two levels of effort—and there’s a big difference between them,” says Dr. Van Bennekom.

The first level is internal brainstorming to develop your survey questions.

“Always sit down and ask, ‘What do we want to learn from the customer? What kind of feedback do we want to get from them?’

“I can facilitate that, and develop a whole lot of questions for a customer survey. But it is important to consider if you have blinders on as to what’s really important to the customer.”

This is why Dr. Van Bennekom calls internal brainstorming the 80-percent solution. It will get you most of the way, but not all the way.

Survey design tip #3: Use focus groups for a 99-percent solution.

“When you think about a survey, it’s very high-level,” says Dr. Van Bennekom. “You’re getting a broad feel for the customer base, but not much detail about the customer issues.

“Contrast that with focus groups or interviews where you’re talking to a much smaller group, but capturing a great deal of detail from each of those individuals.”

A survey may show that you have a problem with the quality of your service. But it won’t likely reveal the specific problem.

In focus groups, on the other hand, you actually talk to respondents—whether they’re customers or employees—to find out what they see as the big issues in their interaction with your firm.

Doing this type of focus groups or one-on-one interviews helps cover any blind spots.

“This helps ensure that the survey you develop measures what is truly important to

your customer base, not just what you **think** is important to your customer base,” he says.

Survey design tip #4: Develop a balanced score card.

A balanced score card weighs the results from surveying customers with the internal metrics that you already track.

“The surveys tell how effective you are in the customer’s eyes, as opposed to how efficient you are at using resources internally,” says Dr. Van Bennekom.

After asking customers how long they were on hold, or how quickly your team responded, you should look at the related numbers from your call-tracking system.

“It’s sometimes interesting to compare the objective numbers with the perceptions. That may be enlightening, and it can show where you’ve got a communication problem with your customers,” says Dr. Van Bennekom.

For instance, if many customers think they’re on hold for 10 minutes, but your system shows it’s only three minutes, consider giving them audio feedback on their wait time—or some other tactic—to close that gap between perception and reality.

Survey design tip #5: Prevent “gaming” of your research.

The best surveys can still go awry if you fail to allow for the human tendency to subvert any system used to measure performance and calculate compensation.

In sales, this is often called “gaming the comp plan.” In other words, many salespeople will follow the precise letter of a compensation plan to earn the largest possible commission, even if it’s not in the company’s best interest.

“Anybody can beat any single measure,” says Dr. Van Bennekom. “That’s why you have to have complementary measures.”

He offers a humorous but poignant anecdote to illustrate.

“In one company, a technician won the award for handling the most support calls for three months in a row.

“Well, what he was doing was hanging up on people halfway through the call!”

The company only discovered this when they started monitoring the call quality, with other people actually listening in on the calls.

“You can game any one single measurement,” he says.

In another example, he retells how one customer service technician beat an IVR (interactive voice response) unit that had a survey programmed in.

Whenever the phone was answered, the IVR would ask, “At the end of this call, would you

like to take a survey about your experience on this call?”

“Well, if that technician had a bad call with a customer, he would never disconnect, so the customer would eventually just hang up. Therefore, he was eliminating any negative survey scores that he might have gotten.”

The bottom line

The bottom line for Dr. Van Bennekom is this: “Surveys do not tell you the truth, they give you an indication of the truth.

“But if you don’t develop and execute your survey program properly, surveys may actually give you misleading data, leaving you with delusions of knowledge.”

Following these five recommendations should help you get closer to the truth about your customer service.



Dr. Fred Van Bennekom

Dr. Fred Van Bennekom, principal of [Great Brook](#), conducts customer satisfaction surveys and teaches others how to create survey programs through his [Survey Design & Data Analysis workshops](#).

You can learn from this survey expert while advancing your project through Great Brook’s Survey Mentor products.

Fred teaches operations management and service management courses in Northeastern University’s executive MBA in Harvard’s Certificate in Management program.

He recently published “[Customer Surveys: A Guidebook for Service Managers](#)” and co-authored a major research report on “[Problem Prevention Through Design for Supportability](#).”