

Using Online Communities to Gain Feedback

Best Practices for Building an Online Community

Online communities offer a huge potential for building respondent panels that can be an invaluable source of feedback to customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders. Such panels can provide a source for deliberate, consistent, and regular feedback that can have a dramatic affect on shaping policy and influencing critical business decisions. Best of all, these respondents are literally a click away—making the feedback immediate and extremely cost effective. It is conceivable that you could compose a survey, publish it to your community panel, and have results in the same time it would take to begin a discussion with a marketing research firm to start a custom research task.

Developing respondent panels from your communities of interest also helps your communities grow and flourish. One important element for a community to thrive is the shared sense of presence and influence. This is achieved when the community has the perception that the collective body has a say in shaping the organization. Indirect feedback and peer-to-peer communication is inherent to the process through blogs and forums, but a true community voice is established when there is regular and consistent feedback. When community members believe that the community has influence, it deepens their commitment to the process and encourages involvement.

The key to the process is taking the view of the respondent to promote participation and maximize the value of feedback initiatives. The first step is the recruitment process, where you must be able to clearly articulate to the prospective respondent the benefit of taking part in the process and how much time they will be asked to invest. Managing survey fatigue is a key element to making these panels effective, and respondents need to know that you will respect their time. Once a respondent agrees to be part of the process—a double opt-in is best to ensure that they are aware of what they are agreeing to—the next step is to build deep profiles of each respondent. This will allow for much more targeted feedback initiatives, providing the organization better data and eliminating the need to invite and then disqualify panelists.

After the respondent is engaged and profiled, you need to provide them visibility into the process. Studies have shown that 50% of respondents feel properly incented to participate in exchange for visibility into the results of the survey in which they participate. A respondent portal or dashboard that shows a summary of their surveys along with the results provides a view into the process. If you choose to use incentives for participation, a respondent should also be able to view their earned incentives and consume them as appropriate.

When the panel (or panels) has been properly built, the feedback process can begin. To maintain or increase response rates and continued participation you must protect the respondent's rights. Taking a survey is an act of trust between the respondent and the surveyor and violation of that trust will have negative implications. Standards should therefore be set to ensure that the respondent is treated properly:

- No survey should take longer than 15 minutes.
- There should be a visual indication of the progress of completing the survey.
- Because the respondent has already provided a profile, they should not have to re-enter the same standard demographic data for each survey.
- All possible care should be taken to leverage the respondent's profile to avoid inviting the respondent to a survey where they may eventually be disqualified.

The final step for the respondent is demonstrating to the community that their voice is not only heard, but that the organization is taking action based on their feedback. This truly reinforces the sense of influence and ensures that the community members believe their time providing feedback is time well spent.

The advantage of building a panel from your online communities is that you can gather regular and consistent feedback. This not only keeps you current with the thoughts and concerns of the community, it provides the ability to spot trends over time.

About Vovici:

Vovici's Enterprise Feedback Management solutions represent 25 years of industry leadership, and our software is the established leader in providing a comprehensive view of customer, partner and employee feedback. The combination of Vovici's software-as-a-service model and the most open feedback platform of any feedback tool on the market make it easy to integrate feedback processes directly into systems and applications. We deliver the enterprise-class requirements demanded by the world's largest organizations in a secure, reliable and efficient hosted environment.