

Building Respondent Panels From Online Communities

Overview

Building respondent panels from online communities represents an invaluable source of feedback from customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders. Such panels can provide companies and government agencies 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 a survey could be composed, published to a community panel, and results collected for analysis in hours, providing the feedback needed to act swiftly and seize important business opportunities.

Looking for a Better Way for Feedback

The process of collecting and analyzing feedback has undergone a rapid and dramatic transformation over the past five to ten years, driven by multiple factors such as changing regulations, emerging technologies, and the evolving behavior of consumers, including:

- The way consumers shop and communicate have undergone a massive transformation, making traditional survey techniques—face-to-face surveys, mall-based surveys, direct mail—obsolete.
- The “Do Not Call” registry regulation deeply affected consumer sentiment towards phone surveys. While the regulation does not prohibit market research calls, the general population does not differentiate between solicitors and researchers, which results in extremely low complete rates for phone surveys.
- The mass adoption of the mobile phone as the consumer’s primary phone has reduced the need to own a traditional “land line” phone, further diminishing the effectiveness of phone surveys.

While traditional survey methods fell from favor, the Internet emerged as a convenient, cost effective, and ubiquitous platform for collecting feedback. In 2001, 10% of surveys were managed through the internet. That number now exceeds 60% and continues to rise. There are numerous survey tools on the market. Register receipts from stores ranging from big box retailers to coffee shops containing web site URLs inviting customers to take online surveys.

But broad adoption of online surveys has not solved many of the basic problems that researchers have faced for years. Response rates still are often very low and hard to reach demographics are equally reluctant to participate online. And the online world has introduced new problems. Wide availability of survey software have spawned poorly designed or confusing surveys and the abundance of people seeking feedback has caused survey fatigue from over-surveying. These issues have created reluctance for participation leading to low response rates.

Online Communities and Feedback

The emergence of the online community has created a new opportunity for collecting meaningful and consistent feedback. While many associate the term community with social networking communities, like MySpace® and Facebook, companies and government agencies have seized the concept to create online communities of interest consisting of key stakeholders such as customers, constituents, employees, and partners.

These communities represent an enormous potential for insights and information and the best way to realize that potential is to create respondent panels from the community members. The net effect is simple: the organization has at its disposal established groups of its most important stakeholders, profiled and ready to respond to surveys. The cost of building these panels is roughly equal to the cost of one market research project, but the panel is available for regular, consistent, and ongoing feedback.

Organizations can opt to build broad panels and use profiles to do more targeted research, or build multiple panels that represent specific areas of interest. Panel members are asked to double opt-in to ensure they have a clear understanding they will be asked to participate in feedback activities. The result is a statistically reliable sample of the much larger stakeholder population. Specific demographic and interest sets can be recruited as necessary, and careful management of survey frequency should eliminate survey fatigue and eliminate drop-outs.

Developing respondent panels from communities of interest also helps these 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 understands the impact they have, as a collective body, in shaping the organization. Organizations communicate on a one-to-many basis with the community through numerous communication channels, and many-to-many communication exists through the indirect feedback and peer-to-peer communication inherent through blogs and forums. But a true community voice—the previously missing many-to-one communication back to the organization—is established when there is regular and consistent feedback. When community members see real evidence that the community has influence, it deepens their commitment to the process and encourages involvement.

Online Communities and Feedback

The advantages of building respondent panels from online communities are many:

- **Agility.** Once a community panel is established, organizations can engage these panels in real time to obtain rapid insight on critical issues. Results can be obtained in 24 to 48 hours instead of days or weeks. This level of agility is crucial, when faced with short response times, to react to rapidly evolving market conditions and other external factors.
- **Consistency and Continuity.** The advantage of building a panel from online communities is that the organization can gather regular and consistent feedback. This keeps the organization current with the thoughts and concerns of the community and provides the ability to spot trends and evolving customer sentiments over time. While point-in-time surveys are valuable, regular feedback across a particular lifecycle provides a whole new depth of insights.
- **Cost Effectiveness.** Using community panels is extremely cost effective because once the initial start-up process is complete the cost associated with each incremental survey is extremely low.

Recruiting Respondent Panels

An obvious first step in successfully leveraging community panels is to recruit panel respondents that are willing participants in the feedback process. While the first requisite is to have a sample population that is statistically significant, having a larger population of respondents brings a tremendous amount of flexibility to the research. The combination of a large panel base and a deep profiling of that base enable targeted research based on specific demographic and behavioral information. Furthermore, a large population allows for better management of survey fatigue because regular surveys can be alternated to blocks of respondents. For example, a large population allows for quarterly surveys that touch a given 25% of the population only once a year.

Online recruiting leverages the various touch points with the target population such as the corporate web site, customer forums, and support sites. Open invitations on the home page or other highly trafficked pages invite customers to join the community and participate in the survey process. As customers discover online support processes and forums, educating them on the benefits of being an active community member represents a logical transition.

Offline recruiting takes many forms. Many organizations have aggressive campaigns that leverage point-of-sale messaging, invitation language on paper receipts, and signage at retail locations. Community recruitment has been integrated into many of the regular touch points within the organization—ranging from the warranty enrollment process to interaction with the call center. More proactive methods include recruitment through email and direct mail campaigns. Organizations now are putting press and advertising muscle behind high profile campaigns that turn the public announcement of a new community into an event with the dual goal of creating goodwill and driving community recruitment.

Lastly, organizations can purchase a panel from one of the many panel companies in the market. These panels seed the community during the start-up process, provide access to a specific demographic profile that would be hard to recruit from the community, and supply contrasting research against broader populations to provide a baseline to gauge if the feedback of specific communities is representative. The obvious benefit is that these panelists already have opted into the feedback process, making them willing participants in research.

Engaging Respondent Panels

A key element in engaging the community, promoting participation, and reducing attrition is a commitment to respecting the rights of the individual respondent. Taking a survey is an act of trust between the respondent and the surveyor and violation of that trust will have negative implications. Establishing and enforcing rules that protect and respect the rights of the respondent will have a direct affect on maximizing the feedback opportunities associated with online communities.

Proper expectation setting is critical to creating an open, long-term dialogue. The first step occurs during recruitment, where the benefits of taking part in the process and “required” investment of time associated with participation must be clearly articulated to the panel prospect. In return, the candidate should understand that standards have been created to protect the time they do spend providing feedback. For example, as a company, you can pledge to your panelists that no survey will take longer than 15 minutes to complete and there will be an accurate visual indication of the progress of completing the survey, (e.g.: markers indicating 20% of survey complete, 60% of survey complete, etc.).

Once expectations are set, the candidate can become part of the survey process by actively electing to be a respondent. To ensure the candidate fully understands to what they are agreeing, a double opt-in process is recommended. Once a respondent opts in, the next step is to build deep profiles of demographics, needs, attitudes, and behaviors. This will allow for much more targeted feedback initiatives, providing the organization better data and eliminating the need to invite and then disqualify panelists. Avoiding disqualification is another element of respecting the respondent’s time.

After the respondent is engaged and profiled, steps should be taken to provide visibility into the feedback process. Studies have shown that 50% of respondents feel properly incented to participate in surveys in exchange for visibility into the results. A respondent portal or dashboard that shows a summary of their surveys along with the results provides a view into the process. If incentives are used to drive participation, a respondent also should be able to view their earned incentives and redeem them as appropriate from the same portal.

Gathering Feedback

Vovici has best practices and other white papers around the subject matter of writing successful surveys, so this document will not cover the subject in depth. But there are some high level concepts that bear discussion.

It is a proven fact that well-written surveys bring the double benefit of gathering quality information and generating high response rates. To engage the community successfully, it is imperative that care be taken to write surveys that are concise, well constructed, and make use of the advanced functionality that an advanced tool like Vovici can provide. As discussed earlier, the respondent should be reasonably able to complete the survey in 15 minutes and the experience should leave the respondent with a positive impression that will incent future participation.

A 15 minute target also implies that the survey must be focused on what information is being collected. It is not uncommon for survey authors to fall into the trap of attempting to gather a wide range of information in one sitting. Remember that a benefit of having community panels is that the survey process will be ongoing—there is no need to extract everything the panelists know in one survey. Each survey should focus on a specific theme with a specific set of information to be gathered. A series of short, well designed surveys will prove to be far more successful than less surveys of onerous length.

Survey authors should make extensive use of the profiles created for the respondents. Care should be exercised to determine the targets of the survey and the profiles used against those targets to pre-qualify who is invited to participate. This eliminates the need to disqualify panelists after they have worked well into the survey, effectively wasting what they value highly—their time. The actual survey should pull demographic data from the profiles and omit the standard 5-10 demographic questions at the beginning of most surveys. By jumping directly into the meatier elements of the profile, the respondent is more likely to feel engaged.

Best practices should be applied to ensure that questions are well constructed, and potential answers are free of confusion, bias, and ambiguity. Well crafted survey questions are pointed, concise, single-minded in focus, and well ordered. They should avoid technical jargon or other terms that may be familiar to the author but unfamiliar to the respondent community. It is important to have an unbiased third party review the survey to ensure that questions are clear and that responses are balanced and easy to understand.

Turning Insight Into Action

Using community panels as a source for feedback will provide many truths in the form of real information and insights. Benefits are realized when these discovered truths are not simply recognized but are put into action and made available to the people and systems that can impact important business indicators such as customer satisfaction and loyalty.

On the people side of the equation, the information gained through the feedback process must become a reusable asset that is shared across the organization. This means that executives should have easy access to results, with the information put into actionable business terms. Knowledge workers should be made aware of the surveys being done and the available results so they can apply the information to their specific work. Companies that take a deliberate and structured approach to survey initiatives can compare and merge information across the enterprise as a result of the consistency of the applied survey methodology.

On the systems side of the equation, the feedback process needs to be integrated back into the applications and systems that touch the customer experience. For example, feedback from a community member could be recognized and trigger activity by sending data back to the sales force automation system. The data creates an automated alert to reach out to the specific customer and provides the necessary context for the customer representative alerted to make the call. Since humans tend to look at surveys at the summary level, such integration eliminates the need for human recognition of the problem and promotes rapid contact with the customer in question.

Closing the Loop

Keeping communities engaged and turnover low requires a continuous process of presenting new ways of 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 know their time providing feedback is time well spent.

Organizations need to take this into consideration when making business decisions and not miss the chance to tell the community that their feedback helped drive and shape such decisions. Steps should be taken to ensure that the dialogue between the organization and the communities remains a two way process and that the information gained from the feedback process is made available to the communities. A community with a shared sense of influence will remain engaged in the feedback process and the reputation that the community voice is heard will incent new people to come on board.

Conclusion

The ability to actively and easily obtain timely feedback from respondent panels of an organization's key constituent communities provides an obvious business advantage. Such panels create a win-win scenario where the organization receives tremendous value from their online communities and the communities are strengthened by the sense of influence that is gained by providing their collective feedback. The end result is timely, consistent, and regular feedback data gathered in a cost effective way to maintain a close understanding of these key constituent groups and influence critical business decisions.

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.