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Beating the “Do Not Call Registry”

(Version 2)

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Sorry folks. Some of you are going to be disappointed. This isn't a primer on skulking around with a new secret formula to get inside peoples' heads at dinner time. Nope. Nothing here about skirting the rules on the FCC's dictum to leave Bob and Judy Q. Customer alone and let them finish their meatloaf and green beans in peace without a phone call from you to break the silence.

So, what's the secret sauce? How do those of us who love our customers and want to know what they're thinking find out without a phone call? We don't. In fact, some of us believe we *never should have called them in the first place*.

The better solution is ... (*drum roll please*) ... to let them call us. That's right. Let the customer **volunteer to call us** on the phone and *choose* to share their thoughts and feelings with us. In research jargon it's now often being described as “letting the customer ‘opt in.’” And, while it may have been given a fancy new name, it's really an incredibly old idea - let's ask our customers *to tell us* what they feel and experience. Let's capture their customer experience, so we can understand what they are experiencing and then we can adapt our service or product to better meet their needs.

So what's new? Not the concept. It's been around for ever. Maybe the way we've been trying to solve the problem isn't right. We decided that customers must want to share their thoughts with us, so we bombarded them with comment cards, mailers, and hotlines. Responses began to trickle in. We loved the information, so we expanded to three-page, fill-in-the-little-circle surveys. Then someone with a PhD in research pointed out two problems with our data: 1) our sample size was too small, and 2) the surveys were biased toward customers at the far ends of the spectrum (really, really happy or really, really sad.)

One way to try and solve these two problems is to call the customer at home. We were told that this would lessen the bias, (because we were calling a random sample of the population.) That may be technically true, but come on, who are we kidding? There will always be bias. You think there isn't any bias in the results when folks are called at home? What about the bias of those who don't want to be disturbed at home? I love the Seinfeld¹ episode where Jerry gets a call from a telemarketer, and the conversation goes something like this ...

Seinfeld: “Oh, gee, I can't talk right now. Why don't you give me your home number and I'll call you later.”
Telemarketer: “Uh, sorry, we're not allowed to do that.”
Seinfeld: “Oh, I guess you don't want people calling you at home.”
Telemarketer: “No.”
Seinfeld: “Well, now you know how I feel.”

Others suggest that we revert back to the days of “mystery shopping,” where we have an outside third party pretend to be a customer and send us a report. Good info, but now we have a sample size of what, 1 or 2 responses a month? Mystery Shopping is hardly representative of the customer experience, and not only that, the results are filtered through someone else's eyes, rather than directly from the customer.

So what's a business to do?

Try this. **Ask them to call you on the phone.** That's right. Approach your customers, at the point of service, and ask them to share their insights with you. Give them an incentive (something meaningful to them, but less costly to you) if they will provide feedback. Make it easy, non-invasive, and rewarding. Print the survey number on the point-of-sale receipt and ask them to call. That's where Mindshare Technologies comes in. It's what we do for a living. In our experience, we've found that customers want to help, they want to talk, and almost everyone has access to a phone.

How about web surveys? They too are better than traditional methods, but not surprisingly, we've found that a number of customers prefer to use their phone when given a choice. Plus, the phone allows customers to leave recorded messages, in their own voice and emotion, which is unbeatable for later operations training with front-line associates. So, we recommend offering both methods of survey collection – automated phone and web.

Do collecting automated phone and web surveys solve both problems completely? No, but it comes pretty close. The incentive you offer them will help reduce bias and will provide for a more random sample of the population. Using a phone survey and a printed offer on the receipt will generate hundreds of responses for each store, increasing the sample size and reducing the margin of error to single digits.

Is it really as simple as having customers call you? Well yes, and no. You'll still need an expert vendor to help you because your process must be: (1) simple to the customer, yet (2) still sophisticated enough to provide meaningful information to your operations. Just be sure to choose a vendor with the technical skill and products that provide flexibility and reporting for all levels of management, including the front-line employees.

The best way to beat the "Do Not Call Registry" is to **have your customers call you**. Its existence shouldn't affect your ability to capture the customer experience at all. There are better, non-intrusive ways to capture customer feelings. Do you agree? Call me and let me know.

This is how I see it.

About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare

Richard D. Hanks is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, a leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is an author and frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings. Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: www.mshare.net. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.

¹ (www.seinfeld.com)