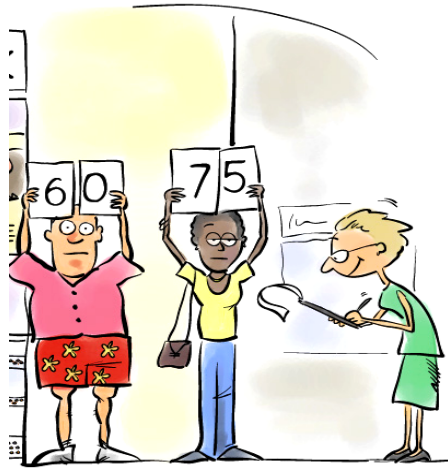# 40
Frequent
Feedback-Gathering Flaws
and How to Fix Them

Naomi Karten

Author:

Managing Expectations
Communication Gaps and How to Close Them
How to Establish Service Level Agreements

781-986-8148
naomi@nkarten.com

www.nkarten.com

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Introduction

You can't address customers' grievances if you don't know what they are. And not knowing can spell the difference between satisfied and dissatisfied customers. Nevertheless, most organizations have inadequate feedback-gathering processes — or none at all. Of those organizations that do gather feedback, many do so in a flawed manner that leads to distorted and easily misinterpreted results.

This guide describes what to do and what not to do in using surveys to gather customer feedback. Divided into four key categories of flaws — planning your feedback-gathering, designing your survey, conducting your survey, and interpreting and acting on survey results — this guide describes some of the most blatant feedback-gathering errors as well as some of the more subtle ones. Every one of them is a flaw I've encountered either in the surveys clients have asked me to review or in surveys I've observed or been asked to respond to as the customer.

These 40 flaws are not the only possible flaws, but my hope is that by reviewing these, you will significantly broaden your perspective of what to be on the lookout for in creating your own surveys or evaluating those you are already using. I predict you will also look with new eyes at surveys you're asked to fill out.

Note that although the focus of this Guide is the gathering of customer feedback so as to improve customer satisfaction, most of the flaws I describe pertain as well to the gathering of feedback for other purposes, such as improving employee satisfaction.

For additional information on feedback-gathering, see the chapter on feedback-gathering in my book, ***Communication Gaps and How to Close Them***, as well as articles from my newsletter, ***Perceptions & Realities.*** Several years worth of newsletters are posted for your use at http://www.nkarten.com/newslet.html.

If you have questions about managing customer expectations, delivering superior service, gathering useful feedback, introducing change, or other issues that affect customer satisfaction, please contact me at 781-986-8148 or naomi@nkarten.com. And if you'd like me to evaluate your surveys or feedback-gathering processes and provide detailed feedback by phone and/or email, get in touch and let's discuss the options.

Flaws in Planning Your Feedback-Gathering

Flaw #1. Assume that the absence of complaints signifies happy customers.

This false assumption opens this guide because it's such an easy — and dangerous — trap to fall into. The absence of complaints could signify supreme satisfaction, but it could also signify dire circumstances, such as extreme frustration with seriously slipshod service. One of my clients, a VP of a group with many dissatisfied customers, told me that things seemed to be on the upswing, given that customers rarely complained any more. When I interviewed several customers, however, I learned that they had had stopped complaining because they'd given up. "What's the point of complaining," one of them told me, "when it's doesn't seem to get us anywhere? We just put up with them and do the best we can."

Fix: If your customers rarely or never express grievances, do *not* conclude that they must be satisfied with your services. There are numerous possible explanations for why customers stop complaining or complain less. Don't presume to understand the reasons. Find out.

Flaw #2. Treat feedback-gathering as an event rather than a process.

Most organizations treat surveys as isolated events rather than as a component of a feedback-gathering process. As a result, when people think about gathering feedback, what they tend to focus on is conducting an annual survey — but gathering feedback just once a year is insufficient, and relying entirely on traditional written surveys may limit the quality of the feedback that you gather (though following the guidelines in this guide will improve the odds of conducting useful surveys).

Fix: To maximize the value of feedback, view it as an ongoing, continual process that takes many forms — some formal, such as periodic interviews, and some informal, such as small group meetings or one-on-one conversations. Given that written surveys are not well-suited to collecting in-depth feedback about customers' concerns, aim to include both spoken and written forms of feedback-gathering. Conduct an annual survey, if you deem it useful, but make it just one component of an ongoing process of gathering feedback.

Flaw #3. Don't clarify your feedback-gathering objectives.

What are you trying to accomplish with your feedback-gathering? Is your objective to assess customer satisfaction? Is it to determine how well customers understand your services? Is it to identify upcoming customer needs? Any one or more of these objectives, or any others, are fine, as long as you're aware of what they are. Too often, it's not till after a survey team has administered a survey and is reviewing the results that they discover questions they should have asked to gain a clearer picture of issues of concern.

Fix: Don't wait till it's too late to discover that your survey failed to gather some information that would have been valuable. Whether you have one objective or many, clarify them before you start so that you're clear what you're trying to accomplish and your survey will generate the information you're seeking.

Flaw #4. Don't gather feedback at the start of a project or relationship.

Feedback at the start? Absolutely, though you may prefer to think of it as feedforward. When you fail to gather feedback at the outset, even before you've initiated service delivery, you miss the opportunity to start customers on the path towards satisfaction with your services.

Fix: Gather feedback (feedforward) as early in the project or relationship as possible. View it as an opportunity to:
- build rapport
- identify your customers' criteria for success
- understand their expectations
- gain insight into their needs and concerns
- shape *their* expectations of your services and the terms and conditions of service delivery

Flaw #5. Don't gather feedback throughout the project or relationship.

People often defer feedback-gathering till after they've completed the project or finished delivering the service. Take this approach, and you learn about matters that are troubling customers only after it's too late to make adjustments that could have avoided the problem.

Fix: Gather feedback at intervals or at milestones throughout the project or relationship. View it as an opportunity to:
- assess the status of customer satisfaction
- detect any noteworthy changes in satisfaction over time
- learn about concerns that may justify service changes
- identify opportunities for improvement
- communicate that "we care"

Flaw #6. Don't gather additional feedback when you've received negative feedback.

A natural reaction to negative feedback is to ignore it, deny it, dismiss it or find fault with the customers who gave it. But seeking a more detailed explanation will ensure you understand the grievances and are not misinterpreting what customers meant.

Fix: If a feedback-gathering effort yields negative feedback, seek additional feedback. View it as an opportunity to:
- gain a deeper understanding of the customer perspective
- ask for examples of specific situations that led to the negative reaction
- provide an explanation if the situation was actually a customer misunderstanding
- demonstrate that you are interested in resolving the problem
- turn a negative situation into a positive one and an unhappy customer into a happy one
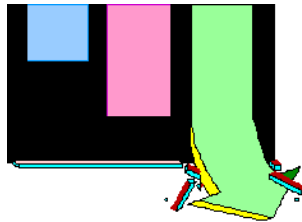
Flaw #7. Don't gather feedback when you change your processes or practices.

Organizations too often embark on changes that will affect their customers without seeking input from those very customers. Yet that customer perspective may lead to different, and perhaps better, ways of implementing the desired changes.

Fix: Gather feedback before you change your processes or practices. View it as an opportunity to:
- ensure that you understand your customers' needs, concerns and expectations as they relate to the changes you have in mind
- give customers a say about matter that concern them
- gain insight into the customer perspective that might lead you to make different changes than you might have otherwise — to the benefit of both parties

Flaw #8. Gather useful feedback and then do nothing with it.

This is an all-too-common occurrence, one that I've encountered in many of the companies I've consulted to. Groups invest a major effort in creating and administering a survey, and then take no action based on the findings. In one memorable situation, the director had not only not taken action based on the feedback, but — as of three months after conducting the survey — he had not even communicated the findings to the very staff whose service delivery was being evaluated. As a result, customers were continuing to receive the same (dreadful) level of service, with no reason to believe their views had been heard.

Fix: If you're not going to act on the feedback you get, don't bother collecting it. Obtaining feedback and doing nothing with the results not only won't raise customers' satisfaction; *it will lower it below pre-survey levels*. To avoid this kind of situation, build into your feedback-gathering process the commitment to take action on the findings. Decide in advance the time frames within which you will analyze the survey data, publish the findings, and communicate your plans for addressing key issues highlighted in the survey.

Flaws in Designing Your Survey

Flaw #9. Ignore service issues that are important to your customers.

In gathering feedback, service providers often ask questions about matters that are unimportant or irrelevant to their customers, while neglecting to ask about matters customers consider crucial. Whether it's up-time, availability, turnaround time, accuracy, speedy delivery, or some other attribute, if it's critical to the customer, it's critical, period. If you displease customers in ways they consider significant, it may matter little that they are satisfied with other aspects of your service. Therefore, it's vital that you know — not guess — what aspects of your service delivery are of greatest concern to your customers.

Fix: Don't presume to know what's most important to your customers. If you don't know, ask. Some organizations do this as a pre-survey step: talking with customers about what attributes of service delivery are of greatest concern to them. Alternatively, you can use the survey itself to find out. For example, ask these two questions:

> ➢ What aspects of our service are most important to you?

> ➢ In terms of those aspects, how are we doing?

Flaw #10. Fail to request demographic information.

When you neglect to acquire relevant information about survey respondents, you lose the ability to analyze responses from different perspectives.

Fix: Effective surveys seek information about relevant aspects of the respondent's background, such as the level in the company, years of service, or length of experience with a particular product or service. For example:

> ➢ **Your Division: ____AAA   ____BBB   ____CCC   ____DDD   ____ EEE**

> ➢ **Years of Service: _____Less than 1 year   ____1-5 years   ____More than 5 years**

This type of information enables you to analyze survey responses from multiple perspectives, such as whether satisfaction levels vary among different divisions of a company or among people with different levels of experience with a product. To ensure that you solicit the most useful demographic information, think carefully about how you'll want to analyze the survey data once you have it.

Flaw #11. Don't frame requests to encourage balanced feedback.

Surprising though it may seem at times, many people don't like to complain. Some worry that if they do, they will create problems for you. Some fear repercussions if they complain. Some just prefer not create a fuss. When customers such as these withhold their feedback so as not to feel they are complaining, you miss learning about concerns and dissatisfactions that may warrant attention.

Fix: Frame requests for feedback so as to encourage people who might otherwise be reluctant to describe dissatisfactions. To do so, refrain from asking about dissatisfactions or grievances per se. Instead, ask for sources of improvement or opportunities for change, such as:

➢ What are two things we're doing well and two things you'd like changed?

or

➢ Based on your experience, what would you most like us to do differently?

Flaw #12. Don't request open-ended comments.

Survey ratings may suggest that customers are relatively satisfied or dissatisfied with various aspects of your service. But it's a serious mistake to assume you understand what led them to give any particular response. In fact, ratings alone tell you nothing about what, specifically, pleases or displeases them.

Fix: If you truly want to understand your customers' concerns, invite them to offer their comments. For example, ask them to "Please describe a situation or experience you've had that led to your rating." or, "Please add any comments you'd like to help us understand your rating." Open-ended comments are invariably more detailed, more specific and more focused on customers' experiences than feedback limited to ratings.

Flaw #13. Make the survey too long.

Most people don't jump with joy at the prospect of completing yet another survey. Therefore, if your survey is too long, in terms of number of pages or number of survey items, many people simply won't bother to complete it.

Fix: Keep survey length in mind as you design it and make it as brief as possible. As a rule of thumb, aim for a survey that people can complete in ten minutes. For web-based surveys longer than a single page, state the number of page (or number of questions) right up front.

Flaw #14. Make respondents take unnecessary steps to respond.

If you require people to take extra steps in order to respond to your survey or to submit it, such as by mailing a paper-based survey or following each of several links in a web-based survey, many will just ignore the survey or toss it out.

Fix: Keep ease-of-use in mind as you design the survey, and make it as effortless and free of extra steps as possible. Try it out with a test audience to gauge reactions to the effort required to complete and submit it.

Flaw #15. Use jargon in the survey items.

Survey items sometimes incorporate abbreviations, acronyms, or technical terminology that customers are unfamiliar with. Some customers may respond anyway, casting doubt on how to interpret their responses.

Fix: Review the survey for potentially unfamiliar terminology and either replace it with an English language alternative or define it if its presence is deemed necessary. In addition, have a sampling of test survey takers review the survey to identify any such terminology.

Flaw #16. Use ambiguous terminology.

Many of the surveys I've reviewed have had instances of terminology whose meaning is vague or subject to either misinterpretation or conflicting interpretations. One survey, for example, asked customers how often they "used" the Help Desk. But if a customer had to contact the Help Desk several times to resolve a given problem, do those multiple contacts count as one use or several? Many surveys ask customers to rate provider responsiveness, a highly ambiguous term that can mean anything from acknowledging a call to resolving a problem to sounding friendly.

Fix: Examine terminology carefully to determine what needs clarification or adjustment. The best way to trap ambiguities — preferably *before* conducting the survey — is to get feedback from a sample of respondents about what they see as potential pitfalls.

Flaw #17. Use misleading yes/no items.

You can't always be sure what a respondent means by a "yes" or "no" response. One survey, for example, asked:

  ➢ Do you understand your division's password-resetting procedures?

Yes/no items can be deceptive. In this example, numerous "no" response suggest the procedures need to be clarified. But do "yes" responses mean that the respondents understand the procedures — or rather that they believe they do, even though they actually don't? In this example, "yes" reflects a self-perception, which may differ from the reality.

Fix: Examine survey items for Yes/No items in which the response could lead you to draw the wrong conclusion. Using the above example, if it's important to know if people *do* understand the procedures, it may be better to avoid Yes/No choices, and instead ask people to answer specific questions about the procedures. Their responses would determine whether and how well they do, in fact, understand.

Flaw #18. Use misleading "and" or "or" conditions.

Consider this survey item, which used an agree/disagree scale:

> ➢ The information was accurate and consistent.

This type of wording creates problems because information can be accurate without being consistent or consistent without being accurate. Similarly, consider this survey item:

> ➢ Rate how informative or enjoyable you found the material.

But the material could have been informative without being enjoyable or enjoyable without being informative.

Fix: Use a separate item for each attribute you'd like rated, such as:

> ➢ The information was accurate.
> ➢ The information was consistent.
>
> ➢ Rate how informative you found the material.
> ➢ Rate how enjoyable you found the material.

Flaw #19. Focus only on the negatives, ignoring the positives.

Surveys miss the point if questions focus only on grievances, complaints and dissatisfactions. For example, in one survey I reviewed was the item:

> ➢ The class met my expectations.   Yes   No
> If not, how did it fall short?

Fix: The purpose of feedback is to understand both what's working successfully and what's not — both satisfaction and dissatisfaction — so that you can retain what's working well and change what isn't. Therefore, using the above example, it would be appropriate to ask about both what pleased and what displeased the respondent:

> ➢ The class met my expectations.   Yes   No
> If so, how did it do so? If not, how did it fall short?

Flaw #20. Seek feedback that's too vague to act on.

Gathering feedback that leaves you clueless about what a complaint means wastes your respondents' time and your own. For example, consider this survey item:

	Low						High
➢ Please rate the quality of the food	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

No matter how people respond to this item, you've learned nothing about what's positive or negative about the food. Therefore, you don't know what action is called for, if any.

Fix: Be specific about what you're asking customers to rate, so you can take action based on their responses. For example, ask people to rate each of several contributors to food quality, such as:

➢ Please rate your satisfaction with food quality in terms of the following:

	Low						High
Served at an appropriate temperature	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Attractively presented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Offers a variety of food choices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Space for comments would generate additional information about the pros and cons of the food.

Flaw #21. Use both numbers and labels in a rating scale.

Rating scales sometimes use both words and numbers, presumably to make the information requested as clear as possible. For example:

Outrageous	**Poor**	**Fair**	**Good**	**Unbelievable**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

The problem is that people interpret words differently. For example, not everyone equates "poor" with a 2 on a 5-point scale. Furthermore, some customers might view "unbelievable" as the best possible outcome while others might interpret it as the worst possible outcome.

Fix: Omit words from your rating scales and stick to numbers. It's sufficient to simply indicate the high and low end of the scale, such as: "Please rate your satisfaction with staff competence":

Low				**High**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

Flaw #22. Include irrelevant choices.

One survey I examined asked business personnel how many times during the past 3 months they had called for technical support. The choices offered were:

- ➢ Unknown
- ➢ Never
- ➢ 1-3 times
- ➢ 4-10 times
- ➢ More than 10 times
- ➢ Other

In this example, "Other" is superfluous and irrelevant. The previous choices encompass all possible choices.

Fix: Examine survey items to ensure all responses are meaningful and useful and that there are no redundancies (such as 1-4 times and 4-10 times).

Flaw #23. Create unsightly or error-filled surveys.

In surveys clients have asked me to review, I've found a shocking number of typos, grammatical errors, extraneous words, and missing words. I've also seen surveys with misaligned items, uneven spacing, tiny type, shading that masks the text, and other flaws that make it unattractive. Glaring errors suggest incompetence on the part of those who administer the survey and could give already dissatisfied customers one more thing to be dissatisfied about.

Fix: Proofread, proofread, proofread. But don't depend on your own ability to catch all the glitches yourself. Have several other people review it, and ask them to be on the lookout for errors and eyesores. In creating a survey, pay attention to its look as well as its contents.

Flaw #24. Don't pilot the survey before rolling it out.

Customers invariably interpret survey items in unanticipated ways. Nevertheless, some survey planners presume to know how respondents will interpret the survey items and neglect to seek feedback about the survey before conducting it.

Fix: Plan a survey pilot as one of the steps in creating an effective survey and adjust the survey based on what you learn from the pilot. A couple of different pilot groups may be helpful. Have one pilot group take the survey and then talk with them about anything they found unclear or confusing. Ask a second pilot group to examine the survey in detail and identify anything that seems unclear, ambiguous, irrelevant or confusing. In addition, if you're conducting a web-based or online survey, test it for technical bugs, such as the failure to accurately capture submitted replies.

Flaw #25. Have your surveys designed by people unfamiliar with survey design.

People who lack survey expertise tend to design their surveys based on either an intuitive sense of what to ask or a recollection of what they observed in another survey (often a survey that was itself faulty). The resulting surveys often result in misinterpretations and misdirected action.

Fix: The most professional surveys are those designed by experienced survey developers, such as survey companies or corporate personnel with survey design skills. For example, marketing communications departments sometimes prepare surveys for corporate departments. If you choose to create your own survey, have it reviewed by survey experts so as to weed out flaws and improve the odds of a successful feedback-gathering effort.

Flaws in Conducting Your Survey

Flaw #26. Don't notify customers in advance about an upcoming survey.

Send a survey with no advance notice and some people will simply toss it out. Many of those who do respond will do so quickly, giving their ratings and comments less thought then they might if they anticipated receiving the survey.

Fix: If you notify customers a few days or a week in advance of a survey, more of them are likely to respond and their responses will be more fully thought out. In this notification, let customers know when they'll receive the survey. Briefly explain why you are conducting it, how you will use the results, and how they will benefit. In addition, you can use this notice to encourage people to reflect on their service experiences over the past year (or since the last survey); that way, their responses will be more likely to represent their experience over time rather than only their most recent experience.

Flaw #27. Don't permit respondents to see the survey items in advance.

Surveys are not intended to catch people by surprise, but that's exactly what often happens, particularly in face-to-face or phone surveys. When people don't know what's going to be asked of them, they are less able to give specific, targeted feedback that will help you improve service delivery and quality.

Fix: If feasible, enable people to see the survey questions before you actually conduct the survey. Giving people time in advance to reflect on their responses leads to responses that are more meaningful.

Flaw #28. Don't provide a cover note.

A survey distributed without a cover note deprives people of an understanding of the purpose of the survey. People are less likely to bother with the survey if they don't understand why you are asking them to respond to it.

Fix: Provide explanatory information in either a cover letter or an introductory paragraph. Explain why you're conducting the survey, what it will help you accomplish, and how survey respondents will benefit by participating. The best cover note is brief, easy to read, free of technical or survey-specific jargon, and written so as to sell the value of the survey. (Note: the word "respondent" is a jargon term used by survey givers, but not familiar to most survey-takers.)

Flaw #29. Don't indicate how long it will take respondents to complete the survey.

People are busy, and completing a survey is hardly their top priority. As a result, the first reaction of many people, upon being asked to complete a survey, is "I don't have time." Some assume the survey will take much longer to complete than it actually will, and they decide not to bother.

Fix: You can up the odds that people will take the time to complete your survey if you state right up front approximately how long it will take them to do so. How do you know how long it will take? By testing it, first on yourself, and then on other people who are representative of the target population. If feasible, strive for a survey that people can complete within 10 minutes.

Flaw #30. Don't provide a deadline for submitting the survey.

The "I'll do it later" syndrome is common among people asked to respond to a survey. And often, later turns into never.

Fix: Providing a deadline lets people know your timing and improves the odds that they will respond. In organizational settings, two weeks is usually a reasonable time period in which to ask to have the survey completed and returned. Longer than two weeks, and people will forget about it. Less than two weeks, and they may be unavailable or too busy to complete it. If you send out a reminder a few days before the deadline, a few more people will respond who might otherwise forget.

Flaw #31. Don't give respondents enough time to consider their responses.

In face-to-face or phone surveys, respondents often feel rushed to give their opinions. Feeling forced to quickly respond leads people to give any response at all, rather than offering a well-considered response that reflects their actual experience.

Fix: A survey isn't a test, and rushing people (or leading them to believe feel rushed) defeats your purpose. Some people need more time than others to recall their service experiences and consider their responses. Encourage people to take their time; allowing extra time for those who need it will result in higher-quality feedback.

Flaw #32. Don't allow respondents privacy to respond.

Many people feel uncomfortable or awkward about completing written surveys in the presence of the survey-giver (or any other onlookers, for that matter), especially if they have complaints. This reaction may lead them to withhold useful feedback.

Fix: To generate high-quality feedback, enable respondents to complete and submit the survey away from peering eyes.

Flaw #33. Require respondents to identify themselves.

Many people prefer to remain anonymous when giving feedback. In fact, I've encountered numerous instances in which people withheld their names even when their feedback was enthusiastically positive. This suggests that people required to identify themselves may either refuse to respond to the survey or water down their feedback.

Fix: Unless circumstances require you to know who submitted each survey, make signatures optional. Provide a space for their name, indicate that it's is optional, and if appropriate, explain that having their name will be useful in case you'd like to follow-up to seek additional information.

Flaws in Interpreting and Acting on Survey Results

Flaw #34. Misinterpret responses.

The significance of a rating — any rating — can easily be misinterpreted. A low rating on responsiveness, for example, could mean that reps withheld information, sounded arrogant, took too long to respond to messages — or any number of other things. Certainty that you understand what customers mean by low ratings could lead you to invest time and money in inappropriate, unwarranted, or irrelevant changes. Meanwhile, you'd be failing to address what's really bothering customers, ensuring a continuation of problems that will lead to more low ratings in the future.

Fix: Be extremely cautious in interpreting survey findings. Minimize the potential for mis-interpretation by clarifying ambiguous terminology, using action-oriented survey items, and inviting open-ended comments, such as by asking, "Please explain what led you to give this rating." If feasible, follow up with selected respondents to request additional information.

Flaw #35. Offer to contact respondents about their complaints and then don't do so.

Some surveys ask respondents to describe their complaints and then ask,

> ➢ Would you like us to contact you about your complaint?   Yes ___   No ___
> If yes, please give your phone number _____

Offering to contact customers who report grievances is an excellent idea. This gesture conveys your desire to understand their grievances and make things right. Numerous service providers, however, make this offer and then don't follow through. Caution: if you offer to contact respondents and then fail to do so, you'll be driving customer satisfaction even lower.

Fix: If you offer to contact customers, do so. Conversely, if you're not going to contact them, don't include such an offer in your survey.

Flaw #36. Fail to close the feedback loop.

When you conduct a survey, the message you are communicating to customers is that their views matter. If you don't follow-up with them to let them know what you learned, that message changes to "We were only kidding."

Fix: To round out the feedback process, give respondents feedback about their feedback to you. Following a survey, send customers a detailed write-up of the findings or, at minimum, a summary of the findings. It's also advisable to describe your plans for addressing issues that the survey highlighted so that customers can see that you're serious about using their feedback.

Flaw #37. Wait too long to take action on survey feedback.

It's not enough to close the feedback loop if you take too long to do so. Wait too long, and customers conclude that you've ignored their feedback. Those who have expressed grievances about service delivery become cynical about ever seeing improvements.

Fix: Most customers are unfamiliar with the effort that goes into collecting, analyzing and interpreting feedback, and preparing findings for dissemination. Therefore, it's a good idea to let them know approximately when they'll hear back from you about the results. In fact, consider letting them know both in the survey cover note and in a message shortly after the dead-line for survey submission. But if you make a commitment to a particular time frame, be sure to meet it — or at least communicate a revised date if you find you need more time, so customers won't mistake the delay for a decision to withhold the results.

Flaw #38. Fail to thank respondents for their participation.

You've asked respondents to take time from their busy schedules to respond to your survey. Thanking them for doing so is a basic courtesy. More than that, it's a way to emphasize that you take their responses seriously.

Fix: Send a note of appreciation to everyone you invited to participate in the survey — whether or not they responded. You can word it as "For all of you who responded to our recent survey, we'd like to thank you for your time and effort." Sending a thank you note shortly after the survey deadline also offers an opportunity to remind both those who responded and those who didn't of the timeline for analyzing responses, organizing results, and making these results available for them to review.

**Flaw #39. Don't anticipate the perceptual lag.**

This term "perceptual lag" is one I coined several years ago to capture the fact that customers' perceptions of an improvement often lag far behind the implementation of that improvement. What this means is that if you implement improvements after an initial survey and then conduct a follow-up survey six months or a year later, ratings may not reflect an equivalent increase in customer satisfaction. This disappointing outcome often occurs in groups that fail to publicize their improvements.

Fix: Anticipate the perceptual lag and plan for it. If you implement improvements based on the feedback you've gathered, minimize the perceptual lag by regularly publicizing both the improvement process and the specific improvements you've made. In doing so, emphasize that you've made these changes as a result of customer feedback. This is a public relations function that most organizations fall short in addressing, but that can serve you well if you pay attention to it.

Flaw #40. Forget the power of the naked eye.

Clearly, feedback-gathering is a key to customer satisfaction. But keep in mind that you are fully able to recognize signs of many problems as they are occurring. Don't wait till you gather formal feedback to take action on matters that are blatantly evident.

Fix: Remember the power of the naked eye to detect important issues that warrant your attention.
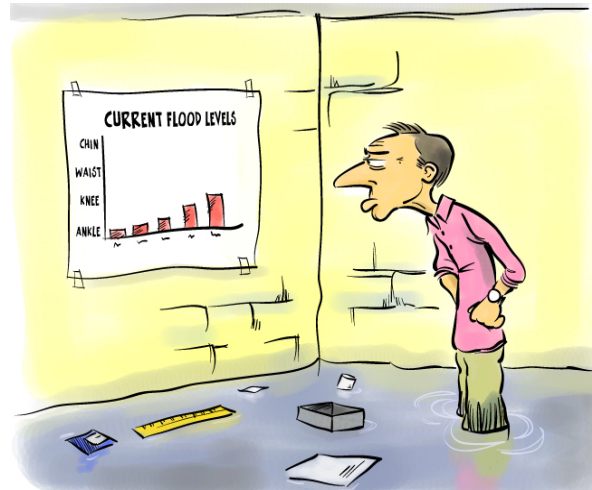
Checklist for Doing Things Right

Here is a checklist to help you avoid the 40 flaws listed in this Guide and do things right in planning, designing and conducting your survey, and interpreting and acting on survey results.

Planning Your Feedback-Gathering

- ☐ 1. Recognize that the absence of complaints could signify unhappy customers.
- ☐ 2. Treat feedback-gathering as a process, rather than as an isolated event.
- ☐ 3. Clarify your feedback-gathering objectives.
- ☐ 4. Gather feedback (feedforward) at the start of your project or relationship.
- ☐ 5. Gather feedback throughout the project or relationship.
- ☐ 6. When you've received negative feedback, seek additional feedback.
- ☐ 7. Gather feedback when you change your processes or practices.
- ☐ 8. Gather useful feedback and then act on it.

Designing Your Survey

- ☐ 9. Make sure the survey addresses service issues that are important to your customers.
- ☐ 10. Have your survey request relevant demographic information.
- ☐ 11. Frame requests so as to encourage balanced feedback.
- ☐ 12. Request open-ended comments.
- ☐ 13. Make the survey as brief as possible.
- ☐ 14. Make sure the survey requires no unnecessary steps to complete or submit.
- ☐ 15. Avoid the use of jargon or define it if its use is necessary.
- ☐ 16. Check carefully to minimize ambiguous terminology.
- ☐ 17. Guard against the use of misleading yes/no items.
- ☐ 18. Avoid the use of misleading "and" or "or" conditions.
- ☐ 19. Focus on the positives as well as the negatives.
- ☐ 20. Ensure that the survey requests feedback specific enough to act on.
- ☐ 21. Use numbers or labels in your rating scales, but not both.
- ☐ 22. Avoid irrelevant or meaningless choices.
- ☐ 23. Proofread and review to eliminate unsightliness and errors.
- ☐ 24. Conduct a pilot before rolling out the survey.
- ☐ 25. Have your survey reviewed by people familiar with survey design.

Conducting Your Survey

☐ 26. Notify customers in advance about an upcoming survey.

☐ 27. Allow respondents to see the survey items in advance.

☐ 28. Provide a cover note or opening paragraph describing the purpose of the survey.

☐ 29. State approximately how long it will take to complete the survey.

☐ 30. Provide a deadline for submitting the survey, and a reminder prior to the deadline.

☐ 31. Allow respondents enough time to consider their responses.

☐ 32. Ensure that respondents will have privacy in which to respond.

☐ 33. Invite, but do not require respondents to identify themselves.

Interpreting and Acting on Survey Results

☐ 34. Take extra care in interpreting responses so you don't draw the wrong conclusions.

☐ 35. If you offer to follow up with respondents, be sure to do so.

☐ 36. Be sure to close the feedback loop by informing respondents of the survey findings.

☐ 37. Let respondents know when they can expect to hear from you about their feedback.

☐ 38. Thank respondents for their participation.

☐ 39. Anticipate the perceptual lag and conscientiously take steps to avoid it.

☐ 40. Don't forget the power of the naked eye to see what needs attention!

About the Author

Naomi Karten has always been fascinated by human behavior. Drawing from her B.A. and M.A. in psychology, and extensive experience in technical, customer support and management positions, she has delivered seminars and presentations to *more than 100,000 people* internationally.

Naomi's services have helped organizations and groups

- Manage customer expectations,
- Improve customer satisfaction,
- Strengthen communications and consulting skills, and
- Manage change

Naomi is the author of **MANAGING EXPECTATIONS: Working With People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!** and **How to Establish Service Level Agreements**.

Her book, **Communication Gaps and How to Close Them**, offers guidance for using communication as a tool for **gathering feedback**, delivering superior service, building relationships, managing change, and strengthening teamwork. In addition, she has published three other books and more than 200 articles.

In addition, Naomi is the author of **Perceptions & Realities**, a newsletter posted at www.nkarten.com/newslet.html that offers ideas and advice on delivering superior service and managing expectations. Readers have described the newsletter as lively, informative, and a breath of fresh air.

Naomi is an avid downhill skier, who has taken numerous trips to the Rockies and the Alps. She and her husband enjoy helping friends and colleagues plan ski trips to faraway places.

To order **Managing Expectations** and **Communication Gaps and How to Close Them**, contact Dorset House Publishing at www.dorsethouse.com**.**

To order **How to Establish Service Level Agreements**, contact Naomi at naomi@nkarten.com or download an order form at www.nkarten.com/book2.html.

Newsletters and articles on customer satisfaction, teamwork, communications, and related topics are available for your use at www.nkarten.com.

Additional Resources by Naomi

Books, Handbooks and Guides

- **Book**: *Communication Gaps and How to Close Them*: A book that provides practical advice and techniques for managing change, delivering superior service, building strong relationships, strengthening teamwork, and coping with everyday miscommunications. Features a chapter entitled "Gathering Customer Feedback"

- **Book:** *Managing Expectations: Working with People Who Want More, Better, Faster, Sooner, NOW!***:** A book that offers guidelines and recommendations for effective communication, information-gathering and service delivery**.**

- **Handbook:** *How to Establish Service Level Agreements*: A 165-page handbook that provides detailed information on the elements of an SLA, the process of creating it, and recommendations for avoiding the flaws and failures that many organizations experience. Includes numerous examples and two sample SLAs.

- **Guide:** *Why SLAs Fail and How to Make Yours Succeed***:** A guide that describes key reasons SLAs fail or fall short, and what to do to improve the odds of success.

- **Guide:** *An SLA Template and How to Use It.***:** A guide that presents an SLA template and offers guidelines and recommendations for turning the template into a completed SLA.

- **Guide:** *How to Critique and Strengthen Your SLAs***:** A guide that describes and explains evaluation criteria to use in assessing and enhancing your SLA documents.

- **Guide:** *How to Survive, Excel and Advance as an Introvert***:** A guide for introverts — and extroverts who would like to understand them better.

For tables of contents, excerpts and an order form: http://www.nkarten.com/book2.html.

Articles

- Articles on feedback-gathering and related topics: http://www.nkarten.com/indepth.html

- My newsletter, **PERCEPTIONS & REALITIES**, which you can view or download **at:** http://www.nkarten.com/newslet.html.

Training and Consulting Services

- Seminars and presentations on Managing Customer Expectations, Establishing Service Level Agreements, Introverts and Extroverts in the Workplace, The Psychology of Customer Satisfaction, and more: http://www.nkarten.com/sem2.html and http://www.nkarten.com/pres2.html

- A customized on-site, client-specific seminar on Gathering, Interpreting and Benefiting from Customer Feedback. Description: http://www.nkarten.com/sem2.html

- Consulting at your location or by phone and email to assist you in your survey efforts. To discuss, contact me at 781-986-8148 or naomi@nkarten.com.

- A review of your draft or operational survey with detailed feedback and recommendations by email. For details, contact me at 781-986-8148 or naomi@nkarten.com

Need help???

If you have quick questions about gathering feedback, contact me and I'll answer them if I can.

If you'd like me to review your next survey (or your last survey) and provide detailed feedback and recommendations, contact me and let's discuss the options.

Good luck!   ☺

Naomi

781-986-8148 (Boston area)
naomi@nkarten.com
www.nkarten.com