

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION BENCHMARKING

PRODUCED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

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Customer Satisfaction Benchmarking

For a growing number of support organizations, there are two top-level metrics that management watches most closely – financial results (costs, productivity, margins) and customer satisfaction. Financial metrics are relatively easy to track, but customer satisfaction is almost always a great ball of fuzz. *Something* is being measured, but it's rarely clear how the metrics translate into dollars and cents, customer loyalty, or competitive advantage. We know that "satisfied" customers are desirable, but even happy customers sometimes jump ship to a rival vendor.

So it's not surprising that customer satisfaction scores often raise more questions than they answer. And it's no surprise that chief executives often hesitate to commit to serious action – such as making capital investment decisions or paying performance bonuses – based solely on satisfaction metrics. Right or wrong, there's a pervasive feeling that customer satisfaction scores are "soft" data.

That feeling is especially troubling for support organizations that are trying to move away from the old cost-center model and demonstrate that they add tangible value to the company. The sales and product development departments routinely promise more revenue growth as a justification for more budget and headcount; the support department can only promise customer happiness. Guess who wins the budget shootout?

In fact, the link between customer satisfaction and cash in the bank is arguably a complex and often indirect relationship. But one way to start making this connection is to take some of the guesswork out of customer satisfaction measurement. There are certainly some basic industry benchmarks and best practices for tracking customer satisfaction trends, yet we continue to see companies that rely on homegrown methods and self-serving performance metrics. It may be nagging to say this, but the support world needs to do a better job of managing the basics of customer satisfaction measurement before it can expect top-level management to have confidence in the data that's being reported.

Toward this end, the ASP has surveyed its members and others in the support world about how they measure and act upon customer satisfaction data. We collected usable data from a total of 197 participants across a broad range of organization size and product price ranges (see Survey Demographics, page 10), and we asked questions about three categories of customer satisfaction measurement – relationship surveys, incident or transaction surveys, and Web self-service surveys. Here are some of the trends we found:

■ RELATIONSHIP SURVEYS

Relationship surveys are designed to take a one-time snapshot of customer attitudes toward a vendor. In theory, relationship surveys encourage customers to step back and take a broad view of the vendor's performance as distinct from individual support or service transactions.

We asked our respondents how often they conducted a customer satisfaction relationship survey, and the answers suggest that such surveys have become a relatively standard practice: 33% say they conduct a relationship survey "once a year," and another 30% say they conduct relationship surveys "several times a year." For some companies, in fact, an occasional relationship survey is the *only* effort to measure customer satisfaction; this group (15% of our respondents) track satisfaction with relationship surveys only but don't survey individual support incidents or Web support.

Best Practices: “The One Number You Need”

By Fred Van Bennekom

According to a well-known Harvard Business Review article by Frederick Reichheld, the “one number you need to grow” is the percentage of customers who are “willing to recommend” your product or service. Reichheld’s one-number measure of “evangelical loyalty” has become a popular approach to relationship surveys, and it often replaces more complex survey questionnaires. After all, why not cut to the chase and ask for the single data point that Reichheld tells us is the primary predictor of growth?

Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.

The first problem with Reichheld’s approach is that *willingness to recommend* depends a lot on how you ask the question, especially when dealing with corporate customers. Reichheld’s suggested wording – “How likely is it that you would recommend [Company X] to a friend or colleague?” – may work for consumers, but many businesses have strict policies that prohibit endorsements, testimonials, and other recommendations by their employees. A better way to ask the question is to make it more hypothetical – for instance, “If a colleague or friend should ask you for a recommendation, how likely would you be to recommend us?” – but even here, you’re asking a question that will literally make some customers feel nervous. They may love you, but they won’t go out on a limb to “recommend” you.

Even if your respondents aren’t feeling threatened, relying on a single recommendation question leaves a hole in your survey process big enough for a Mack truck. It’s always nice to know that your customers feel a sense of loyalty – but if they don’t, the loyalty data you collect tells you nothing about *why* they’re unhappy. And that’s the essential piece of information you need for actionable response. Is there a problem with your products? Your prices? Your service? Your sales reps? A negative score on willingness to recommend tells you absolutely nothing about these issues. You can’t recover because you don’t know what specific problems to fix.

In the end, customer relationships are complicated. A healthy degree of loyalty is likely to accompany sales growth, but loyalty by itself doesn’t cause growth. Instead, loyalty and growth are both the result of many deeper relationship factors. And if you want to know more about how these factors affect your relationship – well, you have to ask more than a single survey question.

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An important benchmark for relationship surveys (and satisfaction surveys in general) is the response rate. Survey experts point out that a below-average response rate is itself a warning sign of a deteriorating relationship with the customer. When virtually all of your customers decline to offer feedback, the reason is likely to be deep displeasure with the company’s performance or a feeling that feedback is pointless because the company probably won’t take any follow-up action. (Poor response is also a symptom of bad survey design, too many irrelevant questions, or a transparent attempt to generate “good” scores.) Conversely, a high response rate suggests that customers are still loyal, even if they may feel some temporary unhappiness about the relationship.

According to our respondents, the median response rate for relationship surveys is currently 20%; half of our respondents report response rates that fall between 10% and 33%. Although we found a substantial number of companies that conduct relationship surveys more often than once a year, this approach does seem to create “survey fatigue”: The median response rate for annual surveys is 25%, compared to only 15% for surveys that are conducted several times a year.

Since vendor relationships tend to be more important for expensive, support-intensive products than for lower-cost tools and desktop applications, we expected to see response rates rise along with product prices. We did find that response drops for products selling below the

\$1,000 price point, but otherwise the customer's investment doesn't seem to have much effect on survey response rates:

Price of best-selling product or configuration	Response Rate
\$100,000+ (20 companies)	20%
\$10,000-\$99,000 (40 companies)	20%
\$1,000-\$9,995 (20 companies)	22%
Under \$1,000 (18 companies)	13%
All responses (98 companies)	20%

■ INCIDENT SURVEYS

Relationship surveys have a major shortcoming: Scores tend to reflect a so-called "halo effect" (the company's overall marketplace reputation) rather than actual performance. The halo effect cuts both ways: Even if service quality has been declining, relationship scores may continue to reflect a previous aura of good feeling; at the other extreme, a negative reputation in the past may cause customers to overlook (or even disbelieve) large improvements in the present.

To collect performance data on more specific aspects of service delivery, many technology companies survey their customers (or a sample of their customers) immediately after closing individual support incidents. The responses to our survey indicate that 68% of companies (133 respondents) currently conduct per-incident surveys of some kind.

Since per-incident surveys measure a single support transaction, it's not difficult to connect the results to specific products or even to individual support reps. Thus, these respondents say they analyze their per-incident data in several ways:

How do you report and analyze satisfaction data?

Report average satisfaction across all product lines (61 companies)	46%
Report satisfaction by specific products or product lines (67 companies)	50%
Report satisfaction by individual support agents (99 companies)	74%

These results suggest that per-incident satisfaction scores are being used much more often to track *individual* agent performance (74%) than to measure overall performance of the support organization (46%). In fact, using per-incident data only to measure the whole organization is relatively rare; we found only 16% of these respondents (21 companies) look just at overall satisfaction levels; everyone else segments their scores by product or by agent, or by both.

Response rates are another important benchmark for per-incident surveys, and we found that 159 respondents were able to report the percentage of customers who respond to per-incident surveys. The median response rate we found is 17%; half fall in the 10%-26% range. Response rates seem to be generally independent of product prices, though there is a curious uptick in the \$1,000-\$9,995 group:

Price of best-selling product or configuration	Response Rate
\$100,000+ (33 companies)	15%
\$10,000-\$99,000 (57 companies)	14%
\$1,000-\$9,995 (39 companies)	20%
Under \$1,000 (30 companies)	15%
All responses (159 companies)	17%

Best Practices: Measuring Web Support Satisfaction at the Tool Level

Juniper Networks tracks customer satisfaction on its Web support site in a variety of ways – with embedded surveys, with a feedback link in page footers, and with in-depth surveys to users every six months. But e-support program manager Sean Kelly says his group also tracks the relative *importance* of individual site features (at right), which provides an essential frame of reference for acting on the raw satisfaction scores. “We pay a lot more attention to a low satisfaction score on a tool that customers tell us is very important to them,” he says. “And if we’re getting an 8 or a 9 in satisfaction for a tool that’s only a 4 in importance, that’s probably a signal that we’ve over-invested in that area.”

Please rate your satisfaction with (10 = Completely Satisfied) and the Importance of (10 = Very Important) each item in the categories below

	Satisfaction										Importance									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Case Manager	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Software Downloads	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Knowledge Base	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Documentation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Net Community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Software Licensing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
J-Security Center	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Quality of Search	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ease of Navigation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Juniper’s feature-level analysis is also especially useful during the beta-test period for new support tools or major feature enhancements, says Kelly. “We used to do a launch of a new tool when *we* thought it was ready. Then we’d get hate mail for three months from customers who didn’t like what we’d done.” The solution: Kelly’s group now implements a “soft launch” of most new tools and feature upgrades, with a prominent feedback invitation that delivers satisfaction data and comments directly to the development team.

“We’ve found that feedback from beta is offered in a much more helpful manner than we usually see with production features,” Kelly notes. The beta period is usually scheduled to last six to eight weeks, he adds, “but now we make a go/no-go decision to launch only when our customers say the tool is ready.”

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Naturally, there are a great many variables that affect per-incident survey response rates; literally, whole books have been written on this subject. However, we suspect one of the easiest ways to boost response rates is to drastically prune the number of questions in the survey questionnaire. We’ve seen a lot of support satisfaction surveys, and the majority are far too long. Researchers have found over and over again that response rates drop with every additional survey question, especially when the information being collected has little apparent connection with the service that was delivered. But survey discipline is hard to enforce against the promise of “more free data!” – and so we get more long surveys and more low response rates.

■ WEB SUPPORT SURVEYS

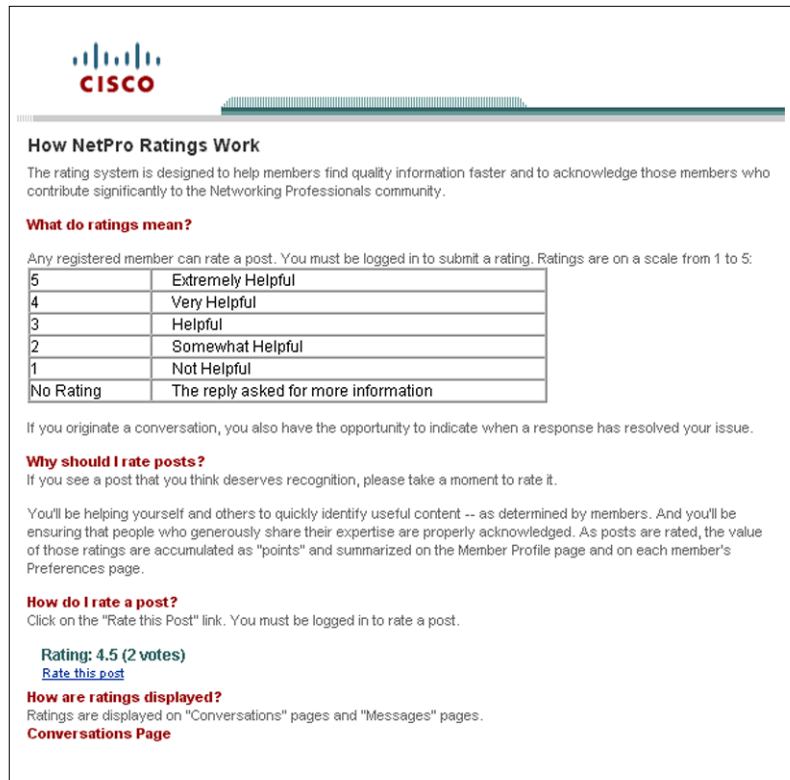
Measuring “customer satisfaction” with self-service support is always problematic, if only because much of the personal chemistry of a one-on-one support transaction isn’t present. But instead of wrestling with this problem, Web survey efforts typically focus on measuring call deflection or resolution rates rather than satisfaction – which are often not quite the same metrics. (For instance, customers may end up feeling seriously annoyed at bad navigation and poor search capabilities even though they eventually find an appropriate answer.)

Moreover, it’s often hard to define what kind of transaction is being measured. A call to tech support is a reasonably well-bounded experience: The customer has a problem, the support agent resolves it in some fashion, and a survey goes out. On the Web, there’s a lot more open-

Best Practices: Community Ratings

A few companies—for example, Cisco—have given their user communities a greatly expanded voice in satisfaction ratings, especially with online forum contributions. As Cisco’s Web site explains (at right), users who ask forum questions are encouraged to “Rate this post” according to a five-point scale. Aggregate scores are shown on each posting, so other users can immediately see a public satisfaction score for all answers—including those contributed by Cisco engineers. In addition, top forum contributors accumulate points and their average ratings become part of a public profile.

A valuable aspect of this system is that participants are encouraged to correct or improve low-scoring answers; as a result, Cisco’s technical content undergoes a constant peer-review process by top network experts.



How NetPro Ratings Work

The rating system is designed to help members find quality information faster and to acknowledge those members who contribute significantly to the Networking Professionals community.

What do ratings mean?

Any registered member can rate a post. You must be logged in to submit a rating. Ratings are on a scale from 1 to 5:

5	Extremely Helpful
4	Very Helpful
3	Helpful
2	Somewhat Helpful
1	Not Helpful
No Rating	The reply asked for more information

If you originate a conversation, you also have the opportunity to indicate when a response has resolved your issue.

Why should I rate posts?

If you see a post that you think deserves recognition, please take a moment to rate it.

You'll be helping yourself and others to quickly identify useful content -- as determined by members. And you'll be ensuring that people who generously share their expertise are properly acknowledged. As posts are rated, the value of those ratings are accumulated as "points" and summarized on the Member Profile page and on each member's Preferences page.

How do I rate a post?

Click on the "Rate this Post" link. You must be logged in to rate a post.

Rating: 4.5 (2 votes)
[Rate this post](#)

How are ratings displayed?

Ratings are displayed on "Conversations" pages and "Messages" pages.
[Conversations Page](#)

ended exploration; visitors may browse through a group of tech notes, check out tools and forums, and might end up deciding to come back later to learn more. Thus, it's not always clear *when* to poll customers on their "satisfaction" or even on whether they "found an answer."

These difficulties translate directly into low survey response rates. Only about half (54%) of the respondents who track Web customer satisfaction seem to know their average response rate; the median response rate for this group is 10%, with half of the responses in the 5%-25% range.

In fact, more than half (54%) of the companies in our sample say they do little or no surveying of customer satisfaction with their Web support sites. Of those who do measure Web satisfaction, by far the largest number (37%) say they measure satisfaction "for the support site as a whole," compared to a smaller group (18%) who collect data on "individual tech notes or articles" and a handful (4.5%) who drill down to "specific contributors or forum participants."

The relative popularity of surveys that look at satisfaction for the "site as a whole" suggests that this is the most useful data, even if it's limited in terms of specific strengths and weaknesses. Site-wide satisfaction surveys are especially valuable during major Web support makeovers, when before-and-after scores can be a quick indicator of the new site's success. It's less evident what overall satisfaction scores measure on an ongoing basis, but giving users a channel to offer feedback is valuable by itself.

Measuring individual Web support transactions, however, is more dubious, which probably explains why fewer companies even try. (Note the striking difference between the number of companies that track individual agent performance in their live support surveys vs. those that measure contributors and forum participants on the Web.) Ultimately, trying to use Web surveys

to measure call deflection or satisfaction may be a wasted effort; instead, it may make more sense to collect feedback on the *quality* of individual tech notes – content, writing, etc. – and use that feedback to improve the site’s usefulness.

■ **COMPENSATION AND BONUS PRACTICES**

Do high customer satisfaction scores have any impact on the pay levels of support and services employees? For half of our respondents (50%), the answer is yes: Employees do get at least some extra pay for higher levels of customer satisfaction. It’s also interesting to see *who* gets bonus payments for high scores: Among the 98 companies that pay bonuses, “individual agents” are most often the recipients, while “senior support or services executives” are the least likely to be rewarded:

Who receives a bonus for high satisfaction scores ?	Companies that pay a bonus to this group
Individual agents (65 companies)	67%
Dept. managers/supervisors (53 companies)	54%
Senior support/services executives (44 companies)	45%
All three groups (24 companies)	24%
Executives and managers only (31 companies)	32%
Executives only (13 companies)	13%
Individual agents only (29 companies)	30%

It should be noted that there’s a persuasive argument against linking pay too closely to satisfaction scores. “If you reward employees for high satisfaction scores, they’ll start to ask survey questions that *only* produce high scores,” argues Dennis Frayne, CEO of Hostedware, a developer of survey-based assessment software. Instead of paying people for high satisfaction scores, he says, they should be rewarded for using the data to identify bottom-line operating issues. “If we’re getting high marks on satisfaction but retention rates are down, there’s clearly a problem.”

Best Practices: The Follow-Up Process

Quest Software sells tools for software developers, a customer segment that's notoriously grumpy about poor tech support. But Jennifer MacIntosh, who oversees Quest's customer satisfaction metrics, says that the company's satisfaction scores are "really high" – in large part because of a formal follow-up process that makes sure the support team takes remedial action every time a customer reports a low level of satisfaction with a support call.

MacIntosh says the Quest follow-up process reflects several basic principles:

- **Act fast:** "These are transactional surveys, so time is of the essence," she says. When a survey response returns a low score, Quest's support tracking system automatically assigns a trouble ticket to one of 30 front-line manager. The manager is responsible for *promptly* finding out what went wrong. If the ticket is still open after seven days, the system sends a report to a director; after 14 days, a report goes to a vice-president. "Trust me, you don't want to be on that 14-day list," MacIntosh says.
- **Insist on live contact:** Managers are required to have an actual telephone conversation with unhappy customers – an e-mail doesn't count, MacIntosh says. "The point is to have a real conversation, to get at the root causes of the problem."
- **Train managers on root cause analysis:** Quest's emphasis on identifying root cause issues uncovered an unexpected problem: Some managers have trouble understanding how to identify a root cause issue. "You can't just show people a flow chart," MacIntosh says. "They have to learn how to make assumptions from the data and back up from dead ends." Quest now gives managers customized training in root cause analysis, and this seems to make a difference, she notes.
- **Focus on a few key metrics:** Although Quest's surveys ask many questions about satisfaction, satisfaction scores for many of these – for example, response time – are largely "self-explanatory," says MacIntosh. "We focus on two issues: the customer's overall satisfaction with our support, and their satisfaction with the individual support engineer who helped them."
- **Pay attention to survey errors:** MacIntosh points out that personal follow-ups sometimes uncover customers who weren't unhappy at all – they'd just made errors in filling out the survey. In the past, a fair number of customers were confused about which end of Quest's 1-5 satisfaction scale represented "good" or "bad" performance, so now the scale is marked with a red-to-green color spectrum. "If that didn't work, we were ready to add smiley faces and sad faces, which would have been pretty cheesy."
- **Analyze successes:** "If a customer is highly satisfied, we call them, too," says MacIntosh. "That's helped us identify a couple of reasons why people are enthusiastic. One seems to be fast response time – specifically, over-achieving on our promised turnaround time. We find we also get high scores when an engineer shows a lot of empathy toward the customer and demonstrates that they care about the problem. These two factors really stand out."
- **Collect data on product satisfaction:** "We also ask customers how they feel about the *product* they using, and we send those results on to the president and to product managers, who now have their own process for calling unhappy customers. It's been really educational for the product managers to get this kind of data about satisfaction, and it certainly raises the visibility of what we're doing throughout ther company."

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■ FOLLOW-ON ACTIONS

Data on customer satisfaction should, at least in theory, lead to some kind of tangible reaction by the support organization. We polled our respondents about the actions they take if their scores decline, and found that the most common response is to contact individual customers who are unhappy:

Response to declining scores	Respondents who take this approach
Follow up with customers who are unhappy (145 companies)	74%
Review data to identify problems/remedies (139 companies)	71%
Report scores to senior managers for decisions (55 companies)	28%
Invest in additional agent training (52 companies)	26%
No formal process (32 companies)	16%
Replace/reassign low-scoring agents (16 companies)	8%

There's definitely a mixed message in these numbers. The good news is that almost three-quarters (71%) of our respondents review their satisfaction data to figure out what's wrong and to find ways to fix the problem, and that another large group (26%) routinely invest in agent training to improve satisfaction scores.

The not-so-good news, however, is that many companies seem to be using customer satisfaction data in a rather haphazard, unmanaged way. Many (16%) have no formal process at all for responding to declining scores and another 16% follow up with unhappy customers but apparently take no other action; 28% pass the problem of low scores on to a higher-level manager (a likely sign of empowerment issues). This lack of a formal response process tends to devalue customer satisfaction data as a guide to process improvements, and ultimately leads to a classic "not my problem" attitude throughout the support organization.

We also took a look at response patterns for the 99 companies in our sample that drill down to the individual agent level when they report and analyze satisfaction scores (see page 4). Presumably, these companies have very granular data that helps them identify specific employees who are creating problems—and they seem to be using that data for pinpoint solutions. About a third (37%) of these companies provide remedial training for individual agents, and a good many (13%) often replace or reassign low-scoring agents.

■ PEER GROUP BENCHMARKING

One of the hardest challenges for customer satisfaction analysis is that scores usually exist in a vacuum: Relative comparisons against industry averages or peer companies are almost impossible to make. And even when companies share scores with each other, they almost never use the same scoring methodology – so the results are a classic apples vs. oranges comparison.

To learn more about how our survey respondents deal with this challenge, we asked if they “benchmark customer satisfaction scores against peer companies.” Two-thirds (68%) do little or no satisfaction benchmarking with peers in other companies; another 18% “occasionally compare notes informally,” and only 14% “take part in a formal benchmarking program.”

We also asked how the benchmarking companies make sure they get “accurate comparisons,” and the results suggest that even self-reported formal efforts are often limited. Some companies, mostly large firms, look at satisfaction ratings by outside customer analysis firms (e.g., KLAS in healthcare, Keynote for search firms, Technology Business Research, and Prognostics), but most of these metrics are based on either relationship surveys or relatively small numbers of customer transactions. Similarly, a few companies have hired consultants to conduct competitive analysis exercises – again, based on relationship surveys across a common sample of users. This kind of benchmarking is helpful to identify large differences in customer satisfaction among competitors, but the data is unlikely to help track satisfaction trends at the transaction level – the kind of data that’s essential for fast mid-course corrections. Clearly, this is a benchmarking challenge that remains to be solved.

■ SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

This survey reflects data collected during December 2006-February 2007 from ASP members and other support organization managers. Total sample base was 197 usable responses.

- ★ **“Total number of employees, including managers, in your support organization”:** Median headcount for the participating support organizations is 36 people. A hundred and six (55%) have 30 or more support employees, 48 (25%) have 10-29 employees, and 37 (19%) have less than ten.
- ★ **“Average price of your best-selling product or configuration”:** A total of 161 respondents provided pricing information. For the sample as a whole, the median product price is \$10,000. Thirty-three companies (20%) sell products priced above \$100,000, 57 (35%) have products in the \$10,000-\$99,950 range, 39 (24%) sell in the \$1,000-\$9,995 range, and 32 (20%) price their best-selling products below \$1,000.

It’s interesting to note that the demographics of this survey are almost identical to the sample base of our 2001 customer satisfaction survey, even though other surveys have shown major changes in the size and pricing characteristics of the software industry.

We should also point out that all of the organizations in this sample base conduct some form of customer satisfaction survey; thus, the respondents are not a purely random sample of all technology companies, many of which have no satisfaction measurement programs of any kind.

Best Practices: A Peer-to-Peer Template

Benchmarking is a valuable way to measure performance, but benchmarking only works when there's a common yardstick for comparison. Company A's customer satisfaction score of 4.7 may seem like a solid accomplishment compared to Company B's 4.2, but what if the two companies are asking radically different survey questions?

What if one survey is weighted toward areas where the company knows it performs well, while the other tries to identify issues that need immediate fixes? What if one survey asks three questions and gets high response rates and the other asks 30 and few customers bother filling it out? It's hard to see what anyone might learn by comparing the two sets of scores.

One way to generate more meaningful comparisons is to make sure everyone who takes part in a multi-company benchmarking effort uses the same set of questions and the same methodology. With the help of an advisory group of support managers and survey experts, the ASP has put together a survey template that is tailored for multi-company benchmarking purposes. (It's also a good template if you're setting up a satisfaction survey just for your own company.) The questionnaire addresses six satisfaction issues that our research shows tend to be most important to customers, and the questions use language and scale points that are carefully designed to be neutral.

To use this template, benchmarking group members don't have to replace their existing transaction surveys; instead, they just need to send out this questionnaire to *some* of their support customers every month – though more is better, of course. At the end of each month, each company reports its average scores for each question to a neutral third party (an accountant or consultant, for example), who plugs these numbers into a spreadsheet and reports back a set of average scores for the group as a whole – the benchmarks. The data for individual companies should always remain confidential, and group members should probably agree not to use their scores for competitive marketing. Result: a satisfaction benchmarking program that's inexpensive, simple, and statistically valid.

– Jeffrey Tarter

The HTML code for the ASP Customer Satisfaction Survey template is available at <http://www.asponline.com/CSatBnchQ.html>

[NAME OF COMPANY]
Customer Satisfaction Survey

Incident #: [AUTOFILL] Date of incident: [AUTOFILL]

Dear [CUSTOMER NAME],

Thank you for offering feedback about your recent experience with our tech support services. As I mentioned, your evaluation will help us improve our overall support performance and identify any areas that need improvement.

When you finish answering the questions below, simply click the Submit button.

NAME OF MANAGER
TITLE OF MANAGER
COMPANYX

1. How would you rate the **ease of access** to the agent who was primarily responsible for resolving your problem?

Poor Not Very Good Fair Good Very Good
 1 - 2 3 - 4 5 - 6 7 - 8 9 - 10

2. How would you rate the **total time** it took us to provide a solution for your problem?

Poor Not Very Good Fair Good Very Good
 1 - 2 3 - 4 5 - 6 7 - 8 9 - 10

3. How would you rate your primary support agent's **professionalism** and **willingness to listen**?

Poor Not Very Good Fair Good Very Good
 1 - 2 3 - 4 5 - 6 7 - 8 9 - 10

4. How would you rate your primary support agent's **technical** knowledge?

Poor Not Very Good Fair Good Very Good
 1 - 2 3 - 4 5 - 6 7 - 8 9 - 10

5. How would you rate the help we gave you as a **satisfactory solution** to your problem?

Poor Not Very Good Fair Good Very Good
 1 - 2 3 - 4 5 - 6 7 - 8 9 - 10

6. Based on this experience with our support services, what **recommendation** would you make to other customers?

I'd advise others to avoid your company.
 I'd say other companies do a better job.
 I'd say you're about average.
 I'd be positive but not enthusiastic.
 I'd be enthusiastic.

Comments (optional)