

# RestaurantNews

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## SPOTLIGHT ON BUSINESS

### Beyond comment cards

By Scott Griffith

Customer feedback systems are becoming increasingly sophisticated, helping restaurant businesses find their way in a crowded and demanding industry.

Crafting a satisfying customer experience is the key to prospering in today's restaurant industry. Competition is intense, and expectations are very high. If guests are not satisfied, they probably won't come back. After all, they have plenty of alternatives. For this reason it is absolutely essential that restaurants pay close attention to what their guests are thinking. Customers see the entire business from the point of view of its final result; they possess the roadmap to a restaurant's success.

In the past, customer input has been difficult to collect and manage, therefore many organizations have overlooked it as an opportunity to secure a substantial advantage over competitors.

Feedback has traditionally been collected through informal networks that distort communication between customers and decision-makers. Front-line employees are far too pre-occupied with other tasks to collect, record and manage customer feedback information in a way that it can be used effectively. Certainly there is no incentive for them to forward complaints that reflect poorly on their performance.

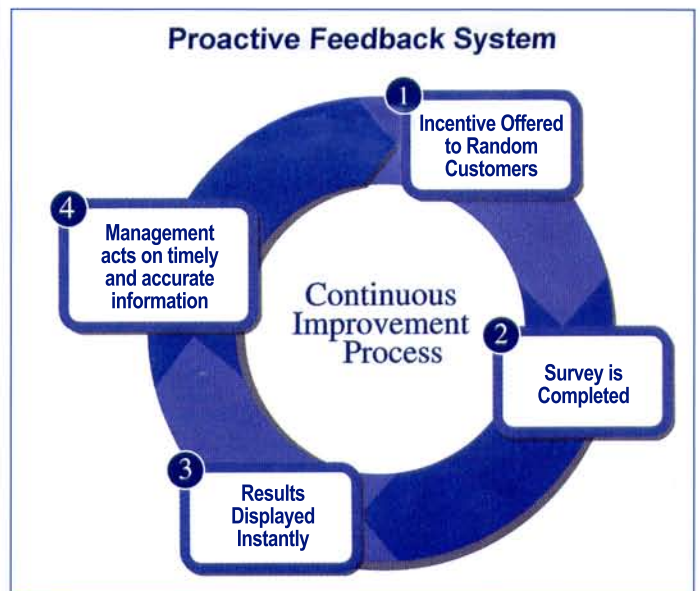
Another major disadvantage of the informal approach is that most customers typically keep quiet about their experience, even when asked. Consultant Brian Bluhm says that only one in 27 guests will actually speak out about their experience. So if they did have a negative experience, there's a good chance you won't hear about it.

These shortcomings have encouraged many restaurants to pursue more formal feedback gathering methods, including comment cards and 1-800 customer support numbers. Until recently, feedback gathered using either of these methods was still quite difficult to refine into useful information. The process

was expensive and time-consuming, so most of the data was never analyzed or acted upon. Fortunately, advances in technology are making it easier to collect and report information than ever before. As the systems become more sophisticated, they have evolved into two distinct but complementary types: reactive and pro-active.

Reactive systems use live operators who are specially trained to manage customers. The software they use enables them to track issues from the time the call is answered, right through to resolution. Depending on how the program is customized, managers can be notified by phone, fax or e-mail so they can resolve the problem as quickly as possible. Most customers simply want to feel as though someone is listening to them, and acknowledging a mistake is often enough for them to give you a second chance.

As helpful as live operator services can be, they still only represent half of a complete feedback solution. Proactive surveying technology fills in the rest of the picture by gathering information from typical customers, rather than just the ones that call in to complain. People are offered small incentives to take part in a survey, and responses are collected quickly and painlessly using the phone and the Internet. This degree of accessibility makes it possible to get feedback from across the entire spectrum, offering management an accurate cross-section of customer satisfaction at each restaurant. The collection process also has the advantage of recording all information digitally, so it's automatically entered into an online database.



Once the information has been stored online, there is virtually no limit to the type of analysis that can be done with it. Reactive and pro-active feedback is often managed on the same platform, where it can be integrated with financial data and other business metrics. The same online platforms provide managers with 24-hour access to basic summaries that are capable of drilling down to the smallest details.

This sophisticated yet user-friendly approach has proved to be a winning combination, with a growing number of restaurants embracing the opportunity to learn from their customers. Indeed, in an industry where expectations are higher than ever, restaurants can't afford to manage without regularly consulting the roadmaps laid out on the tables in front of them.

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