

3.2.2: Eliciting Negative News

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the importance of feedback, even if it is negative.
2. Describe and demonstrate the effective use of open- and closed-ended questions.

How do you know when you are doing a good job? How do you know when, where, and how you could do a better job? What makes the difference between business or organization that is stagnant and one that is dynamic? Often the response to all these questions involves one key, but often overlooked, company resource: feedback. **Feedback** is the verbal and/or nonverbal response to a message, and that message may involve a company product or service.

Employee surveys, for example, may be completed online, in written form, in small focus groups, and can involve both oral and written communication. In the same way, customer satisfaction surveys may involve similar options and both provide a valuable opportunity to take a critical look at what we are doing, how it is perceived, and what areas we can identify for improvement. They often measure opinions, satisfaction, attitude, brand affiliation, preference, and engagement of customers and employees. In this section we will consider negative news as a valuable tool in self, team, company, product, and service improvement.

Across the years there have been extensive studies on how to improve businesses and companies, from Total Quality Improvement to the Six Sigma approach to excellence. Regardless of the theory, approach, or label, they all rest on a foundation of effective communication. One way that communication is often described involves **customer relationship management** (Bauer, J. E., Duffy, G. L., and Westcott, R. T., 2006), or the relationship between the organization (sometimes represented by the product or service itself) and the customer.

This leads us to our first point: who is the customer? You might be tempted to say the end-user, the purchaser, or the decision-maker, but customers are often categorized as internal and external. Employees themselves represent internal customers, and their relationship with the business, product, or service has value to the organization. External customers may include the end-user, but can also include vendors and related businesses that are part of the supply chain. This expanded, global view of communication and customer service relationships will guide our discussion as we explore ways to effectively elicit negative news, critical feedback, and praise for a job well done.

Positive news is part of feedback, and indeed the difference between positive and negative news often lies more in the interpretation of information than the information itself. For example, if a software product that your company has been testing for some time, scheduled for a release date in the near future, has failed several tests, the tendency to view the news as negative is understood. The fact that the problems and issues were identified prior to release, however, provides an opportunity to correct them before their impact is magnified by negative news in the press, customer rejection of an inferior product, and a diminished view of your brand, all of which could ultimately damage customer loyalty and even your stock value. The chain reaction doesn't stop there; these effects could in turn limit your ability to get additional financing as an organization, the perceived risk could elevate interest rates on your company debts, and this could reduce budgets across the organization, limiting the very research and development budget that gives rise to the new, innovative, or breakout products that will gain market share.

Viewed in this light, it could be a very positive development that the faults in the software were detected before release. In addition, by learning to view information in a dispassionate way, noting that there is more than one way to interpret much of what we gather as data, you as a business professional can enhance your ability to see new approaches to products or services.

Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996), (Kuhn, T., 1996) states that communities operate on a set of beliefs. These beliefs form the foundation of the community, business, and organization. Employees and customers alike become socialized, learning the values, meaning, behaviors, cultural customs, expectations for excellence, and brand associations through interaction with the community. In business, we can clearly see the example of new employees becoming socialized into the company culture; they are training, learning about their jobs, and getting to know their coworkers.

We can also see how a customer interacts with a product or service, and comes to associate feelings, ideas, and expectations with a brand or company. This foundation or set of actualized beliefs becomes the norm or the status quo, and can become static or fixed. If a certain process is successful and an individual or company is rewarded, the process is often repeated. If a customer buys a certain product that works as they anticipate it will, they are more likely to make a similar purchase decision in the future.

Kuhn discusses research and the scientific method as a process that can affirm the status quo, but can also produce an [anomaly](#), or something that doesn't fit, challenges the existing norm, or stands apart from the anticipated results (Kuhn, T., 1996). This anomaly can challenge the status quo, and may not be greeted with open arms. Instead, it may be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant, but nothing could be further from the truth. As Kuhn (1996) notes, this outlying information that challenges the norm is precisely the necessary ingredient for a paradigm shift, or a change in overall view. The view itself can be as simple as the new awareness that a product has more uses than originally anticipated, or as significant as a new awareness of the brand and the company focus.

Is there a better way to produce a product? Is there a new feature that customers want? You'll never know if you don't ask, and you'll never improve or change if you don't listen to the feedback.

One story that articulates this power of the anomaly, of unanticipated information that results in a change in view, involves a common business product. A research chemist for the 3M Company, Spencer Silver, was used to trial and error as he pursued his goal of a new superglue (Kuhn, T., 1996). By mixing simple organic compounds in unusual ratios, he tried to create this superstrong glue, but one result in particular was a spectacular failure. This particular result, a polymer, would stick to many surfaces, but it was also easy to remove, leaving no trace of itself. This odd substance was considered useless until Arthur Fry, a fellow 3M scientist, found a new use for it: removable paper notes that could be used to mark pages in his hymnal when he sang in his church choir. Minor modifications resulted in sample note pads that were passed around at 3M, and soon a new form of written communication and information organization was created: the now-famous Post-it brand note (3M Company, 2009). Silver and Fry could have dismissed the negative result as a failure to reach the established goal of inventing a super glue, but by undergoing a paradigm shift, they revolutionized business communication. Learning to be open to information that challenges your views is a key business skill.

This now brings us to the question of how we elicit negative news, critical feedback, and assessment information. How do you learn more about the people around you? You watch, listen, and ask questions. Asking questions while watching, listening, and learning is the foundation of eliciting feedback. We can ask questions in interpersonal interviews, in small groups, and even large groups in person. We can use technology to help gather and process information, categorizing and classifying it. We can also create surveys with questions designed to elicit specific types of information.

Academic research often uses the terms "qualitative" and "quantitative" to categorize two types of information gathering. [Qualitative research](#) involves interactions, which by their very nature are subject to interpretation and, as a result, are less reliable and statistically valid. Their strength is in the raw data, the proximity to the source, and the possibility of unexpected results. The weakness in the results is often the inability to replicate the results the same way again. An example may be a focus group, where participants try a new beverage and report their experience in words and nonverbal expressions. By recording the group, we can replay and study their response to the new drink, and learn that many of the participants perceive it to be sour from their facial gestures. The written responses may not indicate this response to the same degree, and the recorded responses may portray a different story. If you replicate the focus group with new participants, you may very well have a different outcome.

Over time, patterns may emerge that produce reliable results, and indeed double-blind studies for many pharmaceuticals use a similar approach, but the number of participants has to be significantly increased while the [confounding factors](#), or factors that can alter the results, must be anticipated and controlled. All of this involves a cost, and not every product, service, or study needs this type of investigation.

[Quantitative research](#) involves investigation and analysis of data and relationships between data that can be represented by numbers. The categorization and classification from the moment the investigation means that some aspects of the raw data will be necessarily lost in the process, but the information that remains will have a reliability and validity that compensates for this loss. Indeed, quantitative measures and representations of data are increasingly the norm in business communication, and are used to make decisions at all levels.

If your company produces automobiles, you may want qualitative information from potential consumers on their impression of the placement of the cupholders, but you will probably prefer quantitative information when it comes to engineering and safety. As you stress-test the steel in crash tests, assessing the force of the impact, the displacement of parts of the car as the crumple zones deform to absorb the energy, and the relative location of the crash-test dummy driver to the crush zone, you will measure it in terms of numbers. Each time you repeat the test, you should see similar results. If you don't, you may need to test the welds and examine the production process to determine why there is an inconsistency. You may even need to test the steel itself to see if it is a materials issue, rather than a process and production problem. All this information would be measured in terms of numbers and symbols, representing velocity, tensile strength, and related factors.

Another factor in gathering feedback is confidentiality. Before you consider how to ask questions, you may want to consider to what degree you want identifying information in the process. If you are designing a campaign where employees submit suggestions to save the company money, increase production, or improve quality, and want to offer a financial incentive for ideas that are adopted, you will need to be able to identify the contributing employee for the reward. On the other hand, if you want a feedback system for employees to report coworkers who are under the influence or have substance abuse problems on the job, threatening the safety of all, then you would want an anonymous 1-800 number to give out, and to encourage its use by assuring employees that it carries no identifying markers.

Anonymous surveys can elicit information that would not be revealed otherwise, but they can also be a place for employees to vent, exaggerate, or invent responses. The validity is an issue, but the opportunity for insight may outweigh the risks. You can also provide an optional opportunity for the employee or customer to self-identify by providing a place where they could indicate contact information. A customer that completes a postpurchase survey may be offered a coupon if they register, and that contact information may be useful for follow-up contacts. Some customers will prefer, however, to write a direct complaint without identifying themselves. When designing a survey, brochure, or procedure to elicit feedback, you need to consider identification and anonymity.

In order to gather information, we often ask questions. For this application there are two types of questions: open and closed (Fink, A., 1995). [Open-ended questions](#) allow for interpretation and a range of responses in the respondent's own words. [Closed-ended questions](#) limit the responses to a preselected range of options or choices. Your choice of open or closed questions depends on what type of information you plan to gather.

Open-ended questions may sound like the following:

1. What do you like about the product?
2. How was the service today?
3. How does the product make you feel?
4. What does our brand mean to you?
5. Why did you choose our product?

In each case, the question can be answered many ways, depending on the word choice of the respondent. The value is placed on the personal response and the range of data gathered may well be quite diverse, presenting challenge to categorize and group. Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no response.

Closed-ended questions, however, can be answered with a yes/no response. Here are five examples of closed-ended questions:

1. Have you purchased our product previously?

___ Yes

___ No

2. Why did you choose our product?

1. Price/low cost
2. Quality
3. Reputation
4. Previous experience

3. How was the service today?

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Below average	Neutral	Good	Excellent

4. What do you like about the product? (Please indicate in rank order.)

___ Low cost

___ Quality

___ Reputation

___ Features

___ Low maintenance

5. Please indicate the year you were born.

The first closed-ended question is simply a closed question with its yes/no response options, but it is also an example of a categorical question. **Categorical questions** limit the responses to two categories. For example, you may ask a customer to indicate their sex in the response survey, allowing them to choose from two categories: male or female. **Multiple choice questions** allow for specific choices and limit the range of options. **Likert Scale questions** allow for the conversion of feelings, attitudes, and perceptions into numbers in a range. **Ordinal questions** request the respondent to rank order specific options. **Numerical questions** request a specific number, often a birth date or a serial number, that itself carries meaning. For example, age may be correlated to disposable income, and while the respondent may not be willing to respond to a direct question about their income level, they may be willing to indicate their year of birth.

To summarize the pros and cons of the two basic question types: open-ended questions are best when you want all possible responses in the respondent's own words. Closed-ended questions limit the responses to a few choices, and they can be categorized, placed in order, assess degrees of attitudes and feelings, and request specific information (Fink, A., 1995).

Key Takeaway

Eliciting negative news through feedback is an important way to avert problems, safeguard valuable relationships, and achieve paradigm shifts. Feedback may be qualitative or quantitative and may be requested through open-ended or closed-ended questions.

Exercises

1. Describe a time when you received negative feedback in time to correct your error. How did you feel about the correction at the time? Looking back, how do you feel about it in retrospect? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate.
2. Find a negative message online and write a brief review. Share and compare with classmates.
3. Prepare a sample customer satisfaction survey with at least ten questions. Make sure you include a couple of questions to learn more about your audience as well as their opinions of the product or service. Post your results in class and compare them with classmates.

References

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