

Feedback

Dr. Rumack: Captain, how soon can you land?

Captain Oveur: I can't tell.

Dr. Rumack: You can tell me. I'm a doctor.

Captain Oveur: No. I mean I'm just not sure.

Dr. Rumack: Well, can't you take a guess?

Captain Oveur: Well, not for another two hours.

*Dr. Rumack: You can't take a guess
for another two hours?*

— quote from the movie Airplane!



Gathering feedback is more than simply asking questions. The art of eliciting useful responses is as elusive as it is important. (Just ask any parent of a teenager when inquiring about school!) Yet for the rural water district or small city, the endeavor is usually never even considered. With all the other urgent tasks looming for busy staff, it's no wonder it's overlooked. However, with a little thought, a little time, and a few hints, you can start a feedback loop with your constituents that is both educational and motivating.

To explore this art of asking questions, let's ask some first.

Why go to the trouble of getting feedback?

But first, is constructing a feedback mechanism worth any effort? After you read the results of your first survey, you're sure to answer with a resounding yes! Hearing directly from your users can become one of your most powerful tools to making decisions, justifying choices to naysayers, and creating positive perceptions. While the concern of hearing criticism – valid or not – is legitimate, it's easier to deal with these types of comments privately via email or phone call rather than in social media posts.

What questions should we ask?

We don't know what we don't know. The purpose of any feedback mechanism should center around that basic idea, and focus on gaining insight. Start with a clear and concise purpose for the feedback. Narrowing

down a purpose can sometimes take time and thought to develop, and running ideas by others can hone your ideas. While some events or future decisions have an easily identified purpose, such as follow up for a community event or polling support for a new water tower, getting feedback in regular intervals is important even when the purpose is less obvious. In those cases, make sure you take the time to write one sentence pinpointing the purpose to keep your questions on track.

Regardless of the purpose, make sure your feedback form only contains questions about things that are important to your constituents. Leave out anything unimportant. Also make sure the questions are phrased to be easily understood. Try the questions out first with a small internal test group to see if they are clear, and invite honest and open feedback. Build in ways for the feedback to measure expectations, as well as giving an open ended way for comments or concerns. In addition, keep the number of questions to a minimum, with five or six being a good amount. You are more likely to get better responses if you ask for feedback more often in smaller amounts than to ask a lot of questions infrequently. Most importantly, make it clear in your questions what you plan to do with the information you are gathering; this emphasizes the relevance.

Best practices: start with a short explanation of the purpose, make sure all your questions align with that reason, invite honest and open feedback, and let them know what you'll do with that feedback when you're done.

**Start with a clear
and concise purpose
for the feedback.**

How should we design the form and collect the data?

Good form design can invite better participation, so it's worthwhile to follow a few simple guidelines to encourage replies. Including some whitespace visually signals to your participant that the form is simple and will not take long to complete, hence worth their time. Labeling the form fields with a short yet effective description heads off confusion. Using mood icons or scales (i.e. from 1 to 5) are easy to complete and give you a good general impression. But also, make sure you have one or two text open ended questions, as verbatim responses are more informative than scales. If you construct an online form, make sure it is compatible with mobile devices and do not make any fields mandatory or required.

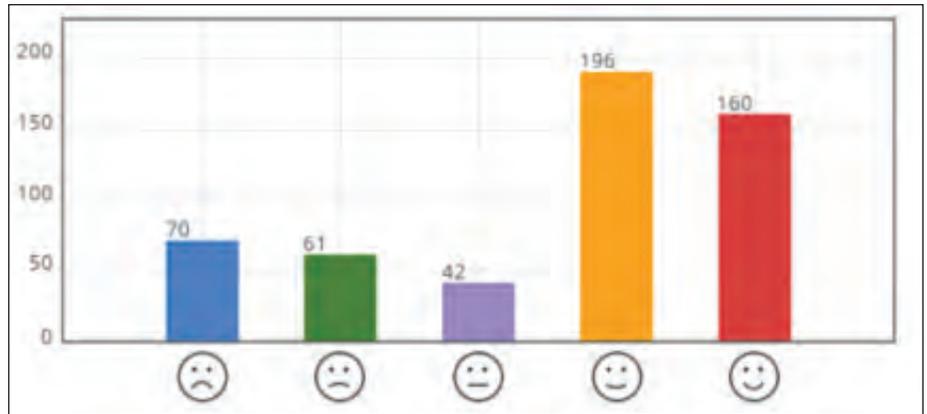
Data collection can be the old fashioned way, using post cards or the back of your water bill. Yet there are a couple of free easy-to-use online tools to help you both collect data and make visual sense of it. Google Forms has an easy form creation tool that is free to use if you create a gmail account. Asking open ended and scaled questions are very easy, and responses can be saved in a spreadsheet or viewed individually or as a group in the response tab which graphs results. Another easy free tool is surveymonkey.com available to anyone signing up. Like Google Forms, you can easily create various types of questions and visually see responses in collective graphs or individually. You can download into your own spreadsheet as well. With both services, you only need to specify the emails of those receiving the form, and no data is sold to third parties.

With design and collection so easily accomplished, the "how" is answered with a few simple guidelines and free online tools.

When do we ask?

Have you ever visited a website and before you can scroll to see any content, a big modal popup fills the majority of the screen asking for feedback? What do you do? Immediately search for the close button and try not to be too annoyed.

Asking for responses when your users are responsive is an easily controlled way to get better participation. The best time to ask for feedback is when a customer has a few moments they have already set aside to deal with your service, for example when paying their water bill online or by mail. You can also ask for feedback from in person



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visitors. If you have an event, you should ask for feedback at the end of the event if on paper, or within 24 hours if by email.

According to research* by SurveyMonkey, feedback forms sent out on Mondays received 10 percent more responses than average, and surveys sent out on Fridays received 13 percent fewer responses than average. In other research, sending email surveys during times you know your users will check email, such as first thing in the morning, is also more likely to insure wider participation.

* <https://www.surveymonkey.com/blog/2011/08/16/day-of-the-week/>

WHEN DO YOU SERVICE YOUR WATER STORAGE TANK?
IF THE ANSWER IS "AFTER A PROBLEM"
...YOU'RE SPENDING TOO MUCH

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- WET or DRY INSPECTIONS
- REPAIRS & ACCESSORIES
- SERVICE & REPAIR
- CHLORINE RETENTION

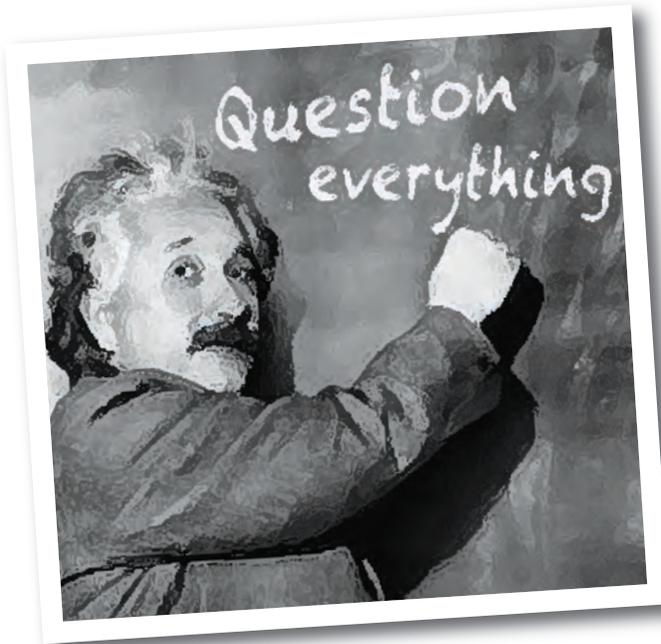
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Who sees the results and what do we do with what we learned?

Although this is dealt with last, you may want to consider it first, in conjunction with defining your purpose. In general, the more open you are with your results, the more willing users are to share their thoughts. Everyone loves giving their opinion, but they equally enjoy hearing how their voice aligns with others in their community. Best practice is to share all data collected, but in the most anonymous, grouped way to protect individual responses.

If a customer is informed that the results will be shared, given a timeframe for when, and a place to view, they will feel confident their comments will be acted on. Otherwise, they may feel they are wasting their time and choose not to participate. Sharing with everyone also improves morale and facilitates learning about each



other, as often surveys reveal sentiments previously unknown. If your survey is online, make every effort to display a continuously updated, live view of results. If you cannot make the data live real time, follow up with your participants via email, giving them a link to the results as they become available.

It is equally important that you publish information helping viewers make sense of the results and what actions you plan to take based on them.

Overall, asking questions may be something two year olds can do, but doing it well takes some thought and planning. With these hints, you can gather feedback often, quickly, purposefully, and inexpensively. After all, as Albert Einstein remarked, "It's not that I'm so smart, but I stay with the questions much longer."

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.



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