

# AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF SCOPE AND FORMAT

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## ABSTRACT

The scope and technical quality of 312 customer comment cards from a variety of service and retail industries were analyzed. The findings revealed numerous differences in card design and usage, and identified common deficiencies in the preparation and utilization of this popular research tool. Suggestions for improvements are offered.

## INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction is central to the marketing concept and imperative to the long-term survival of any retail or service organization. An understanding of customer needs, preferences, expectations, and perceptions of service quality is the first step toward achieving customer satisfaction. While such an understanding may be aided by serendipitous informal contact with customers or with the occasional highly involved complainer or happy consumer, formal and systematic efforts to collect and analyze consumer satisfaction information will provide far better understanding of consumer reactions.

One vehicle for obtaining customer data, including evaluative feedback regarding the service experience, is the customer comment card -- utilized by more than 90 percent of U.S. hotel operations (Lewis, 1983), and rapidly gaining popularity with many other service and retail industries. To lay a foundation for the investigation of customer comment cards as a viable market research tool, this study will examine the scope and format of a sample of cards representing businesses from several service and retail industries.

## BACKGROUND

### (Dis)Satisfaction in the Service Sector

Services marketers and the growing number of scholars who have studied their efforts have recognized the marketing challenges posed by the special characteristics of most services (See Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1985). Each of

these characteristics, including service intangibility, service perishability, the inseparability of production and consumption, and the heterogeneity of service outcomes, potentially affects customer satisfaction, perceptions of service quality, and continued patronage. Given that the value added to tangible goods by retailers is largely service, these characteristics are generally relevant to retail stores as well.

These characteristics are particularly troublesome in the evaluation of consumer satisfaction, both by consumers and by the marketer. For example, prior to the sale the inseparability of service production and consumption prevents consumers from inspecting previously produced services and formulating realistic expectations of the service prior to consumption. If marketer controlled promotion and poor consumer recall of previous experiences have built unrealistic expectations, the consumer is likely to perceive a disparity between his/her expectations and perceptions of the rendered service.

Second, the actual process of evaluation by consumers is more difficult for services because of their intangibility. Consumers may have difficulty in perceiving or understanding precisely what benefits they have received in the exchange process. They may be unaware or not understand the range of value added services offered by the service or retail business. Further, the evaluation process is also more difficult because many services expire the moment they are created (perishability) and the evaluation must be nearly instantaneous. Clearly, it is difficult to adequately measure consumer responses to intangible service results which must be made immediately before the consumer loses clear memory of the experience. Service perishability requires immediate measurement of consumer evaluations.

Finally, the minimization of deviations from prescribed production standards by carefully controlling inputs and processes for every unit produced is nearly impossible and can result in considerable heterogeneity of service outputs. The actual range of output variation may vary more in the case of services than for tangible goods.

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Moreover, the range of outcome variation may contribute to an accompanying volatility of consumer expectations, perceptions, and hence, satisfaction.

In summary, it is apparent that the four special characteristics of services make the process of quality and satisfaction measurement uniquely challenging because of less consumer certainty in perception, greater variability in outcomes, and a shorter time frame in which expectations and perceived outcomes can be considered by the consumer.

### **Feedback Mechanisms: Listening to Consumers**

In many ways the consumer is much better positioned to evaluate service quality at the moment of its delivery than are managers and supervisors who experience neither the service nor the customer-employee interaction firsthand. Realizing this, astute service marketers have recognized that a wealth of information can be obtained from the consumer at or near the time of the completion of service delivery. Such feedback may be used to add or delete items from the product/service line, modify existing products/services, or improve upon the service delivery process.

A variety of marketing research tools and methods are available to businesses that recognize the value of cultivating customer feedback. Periodic surveys, focus groups, day-to-day contact with customers, analysis of consumer correspondence, and designation of "Customer Service" departments or employees represent a few traditional options (Martin, 1996). The use of consumer advisory boards (LaBarbera and Rosenberg, 1985), toll-free consumer hotlines (Bowers, 1989; Chadwick, 1991), and video-taping of consumers as they voice their comments (Sellers, 1988) are other approaches that have been utilized. Each of these approaches shares both relative advantages and disadvantages with respect to costs of implementation, timeliness of feedback, potential response and nonresponse biases, and other considerations. For a comprehensive overview of feedback mechanisms (particularly complaint handling) and their implementation, see the TARP studies (1979, 1985, 1986). Refer also

to Martin and Smart (1988) for unobtrusive (mystery shopping) data pertaining to how consumers' letters to businesses are handled, and to Martin and Smart (1994) for consumers' self-reports of their experiences calling companies' toll-free hotlines.

One feedback mechanism that has gained widespread popularity among service businesses since the early 1980s is the customer comment card, a short, written questionnaire, printed on heavy card stock, and which is continually available to all customers at the point of purchase and time of consumption. Although exceptions are not uncommon, customer comment cards are usually short, may be completed quickly, and are voluntarily self-administered. Despite their disadvantages giving rise to response and nonresponse biases (Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham, 1996) the popularity and apparent advantages of comment cards over many other feedback mechanisms would seem to justify some research attention. Surprisingly, however, the research potential of customer comment cards has been virtually ignored by marketing scholars. Two noteworthy exceptions include Lewis (1983) who asked hotel guests about their experiences with comment cards, and Robinson and Berl (1980) who investigated the differences between hotel guests who used comment cards to complain versus those guests who expressed flattering or complimentary remarks on the cards.

## **THE STUDY**

### **Objectives**

Research on consumer satisfaction measurement and complaining behavior has blossomed in the past few years but little attention has been paid to customer comment cards, a ubiquitous but possibly under-appreciated means of rapid consumer feedback. Given this lack of research, this study sought to explore the nature of customer comment cards utilized by service businesses for the purpose of immediate feedback. The informational content, as well as format and scope of the cards were of particular interest. The major research questions included: What physical formats do the cards use to gain attention? What methods are used to motivate consumer response?

What were the apparent data gathering objectives of the cards' designers? Are the customer comment cards able to elicit the type of information sought? Does the information quality, particularly that of the satisfaction measurements, meet generally accepted marketing research standards? How are the cards typically collected?

### Methodology

While on unrelated business and personal trips, the authors personally collected a convenience sample of 312 different consumer comment cards throughout 40 of the 50 US states. The cards represent a wide variety of consumer service businesses and retail stores as categorized in Table 1. Although the sample was large and not purposively drawn, it can not be considered random, and thus the findings should be interpreted as representing a broad range of comment card options rather than necessarily representing any larger population of comment cards, per se. Of course, a random sample of firms using comment cards would have been preferable, but no adequate sampling frame or adequate response solicitation method was available. The broad range of businesses represented and the researchers' opportunity to observe all sample members (no non-response) support the usefulness of the sample.

Next, dozens of characteristics of each card were recorded according to predetermined coding and classification heuristics. The objective nature of these heuristics, coupled with the fact that the authors coded the data personally, ensured coding reliability. Finally, the data were synthesized by using routine tabulation procedures and calculating descriptive summary statistics.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed in the sections that follow. It should be emphasized that the findings are merely descriptive of the comment cards that service businesses and retailers use. Even for items included on the majority of cards, one should not assume that the items are the most appropriate or that they accurately measure what the card designers intended to measure.

**Table 1**  
**Sample Membership by Industry Group**  
(n=312)

<u>Industry</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>(percent)</u>
Food Service (restaurants, fast foods)	124	(39.7)
Hotel/Motel	74	(23.7)
Department Stores	19	(6.1)
Aviation Services (airlines, airports)	12	(3.8)
Grocery Stores	11	(3.5)
Public Parks	7	(2.2)
Financial Services (banks, S&Ls)	4	(1.3)
Auto Repair Services	4	(1.3)
Miscellaneous Services	36	(11.5)
Miscellaneous Retail Stores	21	(6.7)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>312</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>

### Physical Characteristics of Comment Cards

The physical characteristics of comment cards define the initial stimulus which captures the attention and interest of the consumer at the point of service delivery. Because comment cards are almost always presented to the consumer in a passive way (on table tops, on counters, in small racks, etc.) they must have at least minimal attention attraction capability.

Table 2 provides a statistical overview of the physical characteristics of the 312 cards examined. Average cards measured a bit larger than a typical 5" x 8" index card, although there was considerable variation with five percent as large, or larger than a standard 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper.

White was the most popular card color (55.4

**Table 2**  
**Physical Characteristics of Comment Cards:**  
**Descriptive Statistics (n=312)**

Color	Frequency (%)
White	173 (55.4)
Other color	139 (44.6)
Size (square inches)	
Median	32.0
Mean	44.9
Std. dev.	27.8
Perforated	48 (15.4)
Folded (1 or more folds)	192 (39.5)
Typeset	296 (94.9)
Combinations of Type Styles and Sizes	
Median	4.0
Mean	4.1
Std. dev.	1.9
Point Size (smallest)	
Median	8.0
Mean	8.3
Std. dev.	2.0
Artwork/Pictures	
Logo	258 (82.7)
Borders	232 (74.4)
Person(s)	87 (27.9)
Other	31 (9.9)
	52 (16.7)

percent), followed by an array of beige or brown colors (18.3 percent). With only a few exceptions, color shades tended to be light or pastel which clearly enhanced their readability. A few card designers (7.2 percent) created a multi-color effect by screening one or more card sections with colored ink. Apparently, color plays a minor role in attracting consumer attention to the cards.

About 15 percent of the cards were perforated and many (39.5 percent) had one or more folds. Typically, perforated cards were larger than non-perforated cards, often designed so that the company's explanatory comments or promotional messages could be detached from the feedback section of the card before mailing. The folds

appeared to assist in attracting consumer attention as folded cards often placed attention-getting artwork or creative teasers on the outer surface to entice prospective respondents. The questions remain concealed until the cards are unfolded, after interest is piqued. Some folded cards erected as "tents" also serve to capture the attention of prospective respondents.

The vast majority of the cards were professional in appearance, with almost 95 percent typeset and many cards using several type faces and sizes. While the type size on most cards was adequate for customers with normal vision, sixteen percent of the cards included five and six point type, likely too small for patrons with poor vision to read comfortably.

Most cards (82.7 percent) included artwork such as pictures, drawings, and decorative borders, all of which supported the card designers' apparent objective of gaining attention, although the artwork also served to illustrate and personalize the service, as well as to educate consumers about the service and the process of completing the card. Business logos, found on 74.4 percent of the cards, were the most prevalent type of artwork. Decorative borders were next (on 27.9 percent), followed by pictures of individuals, usually executives or employees (on 9.9 percent of the cards).

### Response Solicitation

Once attention has been drawn to the card, something must motivate the consumer to read it and respond. Consumers who are satisfied or who feel no immediate significant disconfirmation of expectations will likely be uninterested in the card unless some interesting stimulus or benefit encourages them to react to it. As a result, some card designers appeared to devise physical attributes of the comment cards to motivate participation. Beyond these physical characteristics already discussed, a number of additional factors surfaced and are statistically described in Table 3.

First, creative and attention-getting headlines or teasers on over half (55.1 percent) of the cards attempted to arouse prospective respondents' curiosity. For example, the cover of the Federal Express card asked, "How Do We Measure Up?" accompanied by a picture of a tape measure shaped

**Table 3**  
**Response Solicitation Characteristics of**  
**Comment Cards: Descriptive Statistics**  
**(n=312)**

	Frequency (%)
Creative Headlines	172 (55.1)
Explanation of Card	222 (71.2)
Value/Importance of Consumer Comments	120 (44.9)
Request to Complete Card	254 (81.1)
Signature Accompanying Introductory Comments	122 (39.1)
Executive	93 (29.8)
Title only (e.g., "Your Server")	16 ( 5.1)
Dept. name only	6 ( 1.9)
Specific employee	3 ( 1.0)
Business name only	4 ( 1.3)
Response Appeals/Incentives	
None offered	102 (32.7)
Customer benefit (e.g., "help us help you")	135 (43.3)
Altruism (e.g., "help us")	78 (25.0)
Other (e.g., gift, coupon, entry into lottery)	21 ( 6.7)
Number of Closed-Ended Questions (excluding demographic and other personal information noted in Table 5)	
Median	6.0
Mean	9.5
Std. dev.	11.6
Number of Open-Ended Questions (excluding demographic/personal)	
Median	1.0
Mean	2.0
Std. dev.	3.0
Line Inches Designated for Misc. "Write-In" Comments	
Median	13.0
Mean	16.3
Std. dev.	17.9
Cards with no such designation	65 (20.8)
Appreciation Expressed	221 (70.8)
For response	117 (37.5)
For patronage	37 (11.9)
For both response and patronage	26 ( 8.3)
For unspecified reason	41 (13.1)

as a large question mark.

Over 81 percent of all cards directly requested response. In addition, almost three quarters (71.2

percent) of the cards introduced their questions with an explanation of the purpose of the card, and 44.9 percent praised the importance of customer comments. The remarks on 39.1 percent of the cards were signed by a company representative, mostly executives.

In addition to the tactics used to give credibility to the requests to complete the cards, a large number of cards (43.3 percent) suggested that a response to the card could benefit the consumer directly (e.g. "Help us to serve you better.") The motivational potency of such intangible incentives is questionable. Only 6.7 percent of the cards actually offered any tangible reward for responding to the card's request for information. Although a few service firms reinforce consumers' decisions to respond by rewarding them with unexpected gifts, coupons or personal follow-up after comment cards are completed, this number could not be determined. Such reinforcements may motivate some consumers to comment again in the future. Nevertheless, the majority of card designers offered no tangible incentives, an indication that they believe the costs of incentives to be prohibitive relative to the value of improved customer response rates.

Ease and convenience of response are known to influence survey response rates and also should be considered when encouraging response to comment cards (Lewis, 1983). For this reason, card length and question type were considered. Most cards were short enough to be completed quickly, and three quarters asked twelve or fewer fixed response questions (not counting demographic items, discussed later). The majority of these questions required respondents only to mark one or more preprinted response categories. Although these closed-ended questions are convenient for both respondent and analyst, they rarely capture the full range of possible consumer comments. Most card designers recognized this disadvantage, and 79.2 percent of the cards included space for consumers to add additional comments, although there was considerable variation in the amount of space provided.

Finally, the majority (70.8 percent) of the cards attempted to reinforce consumers' patronage, response, or some other behavior by expressing the company's appreciation. Given the positive

effect that simple "thank you's" have on customer attitudes and repeat patronage behavior (Bergiel and Trosclair, 1985; Carey, et al, 1976; Martin, 1990), the expressions of appreciation are quite appropriate.

### Consumer Satisfaction and Service Quality

As stated previously, one of the most important uses of customer comment cards is the assessment of consumer satisfaction or perceptions of service quality, although quick and convenient measurement approaches are often found lacking (Devlin, Dong and Brown, 1993; Peterson and Wilson, 1992). For example, satisfaction scales often do not have enough categories to enable respondents to make fine distinctions, especially at the high (positive) end of the scales toward which ratings tend to be biased. Furthermore, responses to satisfaction scales may also suffer from biases attributed to the mode of data collection, question form, question context, measurement timing, and the mood of respondents (Peterson and Wilson, 1992). Nonetheless, the sample of cards was examined to determine the satisfaction and quality measurement approaches used as well as the content of the actual measurement items. Although distinctions between satisfaction and service quality have been made (e.g., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry, 1986), little distinction was made in the present analysis, because the precise measurement objectives or intentions of the card designers could not be determined with certainty. For example, asking respondents to rate attribute X as either "excellent," "satisfactory," or "poor" is not clearly classifiable as either a satisfaction measure or a quality measure, but would appear to be an attempt to measure one or the other.

At least one of two direct measurement methods were utilized by 82.5 percent of the cards -- one was a global post-hoc rating and the other an attribute-specific post-hoc approach. The global approach asked respondents to evaluate their overall impressions of their experience with the service business. Slightly less than a third of the cards (32.1 percent) requested global ratings with questions such as "Did we satisfy you today?" or "Please rate your overall impression of us." A number of cards also measured behavioral intentions which could be considered by some to

be surrogates for direct global ratings by tapping general attitudes based on satisfaction levels. For example, about 24 percent asked respondents if they would patronize the business again in the future and almost eight percent asked if the consumer would recommend the business to others. Of course, some respondents are likely to respond negatively for reasons that have nothing to do with satisfaction. For example, satisfied patrons from another community may indicate that they do not plan to patronize the business in the future, but may respond this way because they do not anticipate ever being in the vicinity again.

Ratings of specific dimensions of satisfaction or service quality were requested by over three quarters of the cards (78.2 percent). These 244 cards asked respondents to rate or rank a mean of 8.95 specific attributes of the service business or experience. Respondents were most often asked to evaluate specific aspects of employees, physical facilities, and products/services, although some cards also included questions pertaining to price, information, convenience, and some attributes that tended to be business- or industry-specific.

As shown in Table 4, the service attributes on which the comment cards collected information were further categorized according to the "determinants" of service quality advanced by Parasuraman and his colleagues (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1986; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990). This categorization reveals that the cards place heavy emphasis on the tangible attributes associated with the services provided. It is noteworthy that so many cards fail to request information on less tangible service characteristics about which consumers are frequently dissatisfied.

### Personal and Behavioral Consumer Characteristics

Comment cards typically included one or more questions concerning a wide variety of possible respondent characteristics (shown in Table 5). Most noteworthy is the neglect of data commonly used by businesses to segment their markets and analyze their customers who are involved enough with the service experience to submit comment cards.

**Table 4**  
Satisfaction/Quality Attributes of Comment  
Cards: Descriptive Statistics (n=312)

	Frequency (%)
Global Evaluation of Service Experience Requested	100 (32.1)
"Would You Return?" asked	74 (23.7)
"Would You Recommend?" asked	24 ( 7.7)
Evaluation of Specific Attributes	244 (78.2)
Number of Specific Attributes Evaluated	
Median	5.0
Mean	7.0
Std. dev.	8.1
Service Quality Attributes or "Determinants"	
Tangibles	241 (77.2)
Responsiveness	128 (41.0)
Reliability	19 ( 6.1)
Assurance	
Competence	22 ( 7.1)
Courtesy	101 (32.4)
Credibility	115 (36.9)
Security	5 ( 1.6)
Empathy	
Access	41 (13.1)
Communication	46 (14.7)
Understanding/knowing the consumer	52 (16.7)

**Demographic Characteristics.** Fewer than ten percent of the cards asked for customers' gender, age, occupation, income, education level, marital status, or family size.

While marketers have long recognized the usefulness of demographic data in classifying research responses and in developing subsequent market segmentation strategies, the noticeable absence of demographic characteristics on the cards implies that few service businesses are interested in using comment card data in this way.

The omission of demographic data also highlights a significant problem in the interpretation of comment card data. Robinson and

**Table 5**  
Personal and Behavioral Consumer  
Characteristics of Comment Cards:  
Descriptive Statistics (n=312)

	Frequency (%)
Demographic	
Gender	19 ( 6.1)
Age	13 ( 4.2)
Occupation or title	11 ( 3.5)
Income	2 ( 0.6)
Marital status	2 ( 0.6)
Family size	1 ( 0.3)
Education	1 ( 0.3)
Other personal information about consumers	
Name	268 (85.9)
Address	251 (80.4)
Phone number	172 (55.1)
Zip code	170 (54.5)
Name of company/employer/business of employer	24 ( 7.7)
Distance or travel time between home and business	8 ( 2.6)
Distance or travel time between job and business	2 ( 0.6)
Number of years lived at residence	1 ( 0.3)
General buyer behavior issues	
Media usage (e.g., "How did you hear about us?")	47 (15.1)
Frequency of travel (air and other)	3 ( 1.0)
Frequency of generic product/service usage	1 ( 0.3)
Number of sellers patronized	1 ( 0.3)
Transaction/relationship information	
Items purchased	101 (32.4)
Previously patronized this business	72 (23.1)
Reason for visit to the firm	40 (12.8)
Type of service delivery (e.g., carry out, drive thru)	17 ( 5.4)
Party size	12 ( 3.8)
Details of trip during which business visited (e.g., length of stay, travel dates, name of hotel, destination, etc.)	10 ( 3.2)
Member of a frequency program?	6 ( 1.9)
Specific account number or identifying ID	4 ( 1.3)

Berl (1980), Lewis (1983), and Kotler and Andreason (1987) note that data from customer comment cards are not representative of the average customer. In fact, they may actually understate the degree of dissatisfaction among a firm's customers. Merwin (1985), for example,

attributed part of the failure of the Howard Johnson hotel chain to adjust to the market to its sole reliance on customer comment cards to judge consumer satisfaction with its products. In light of this, it is surprising that most customer comment cards do not make a better effort to identify the characteristics of the customers volunteering information.

In some cases the apparent lack of interest in demographic data may be misleading. Businesses can use comment cards to identify already known consumer data in their data bases without requesting such information on the cards. In this study, for example, almost all of the hotel cards solicited guest room numbers, which allows these hotels to identify respondent address, employer and sometimes reason for travel. Retailers also can locate customer names or phone numbers in data bases which contain demographic information and data on previous purchases.

**Other Personal Information About Consumers.** The majority of cards asked for respondents' names, addresses, and/or phone numbers. This information enables businesses to follow-up customer comments, e.g. to thank customers for taking the time to comment, to apologize for possible mishaps prompting the comments, and to solicit additional information or clarification. These data are needed to contact customers, but they also provide a basis for tracking the frequency of comments submitted by individuals or households, and for monitoring the effectiveness of follow-up efforts. Such specific data also are useful in verifying the authenticity of consumer comments, thereby reducing the phenomena of "ballot box stuffing" by personnel with a vested interest in the content of consumer comments. Finally, in an era of direct marketing, the names, addresses and phone numbers of customers serve as fundamental cornerstones in company data bases -- facilitating a direct line of marketing communication with valuable consumers who have already begun the process of establishing an ongoing relationship with the business. Telephone numbers are one of the most important items of information collected, since they often do not change when consumers move locally.

One disadvantage of soliciting respondents' names, addresses, and phone numbers is that some

consumers may feel uncomfortable providing such information and prefer to remain anonymous. Apparently recognizing this, and not wanting to stifle comments, approximately one-third of the cards requesting name, address and phone number indicated the information was optional. Other cards asked respondents to initial the card if they wished to remain anonymous, to indicate their zip codes if not their full address, or they explained that the information was needed for follow-up purposes and that the information would be kept strictly confidential.

A few card designers recognized that respondents may represent businesses as well as households. Consequently, they asked for the name of the company or employer the customer worked for. A few probed further to learn the distance or travel time between the customer's job or home and the business. Like the demographic and other personal information about consumers, employment-related information may be used for a variety of purposes including follow-up and market segmentation.

**General Buyer Behavior Issues.** A few cards solicited general buyer behavior information. Of these, the most frequently visited issue pertained to media usage (47 cards). For example, these cards asked, "How did you hear about us?" or "What is your favorite radio station?" (or favorite section of the newspaper, or favorite television show, etc.). Obviously, these data could be used to assess the effectiveness of alternative media and promotional campaigns.

**Transaction/Relationship Information.** A number of cards attempted to ascertain specific details or circumstances pertaining to the specific store visit that prompted the customer to fill out the card, and/or requested information regarding the customer's past experiences with the business.

Of these variables, the specific items purchased was the most frequently addressed issue, included on almost one-third (101) of the cards. Presumably this information would be useful in classifying responses to customer satisfaction and quality questions, and ultimately in modifying the line of product/service offerings.

Among the variables probing customers' past experiences or their relationship with the business,



simply asking whether they had previously visited the business was most frequently asked, included on 72 (23.1 percent) cards. Six cards asked if the customer was a member of the firm's frequency program.

Inquiry about customers' patronage history with the business is quite relevant and extremely valuable. First, feedback from newer customers provides fresh perspectives as to how these customers may be made to feel more comfortable or served more effectively. Second, comments from established customers are extremely useful, given that these customers have previously gauged their expectations and garnered experience in recognizing instances when service or merchandise quality deviates from those expectations. Moreover, given the higher revenue and profit potential that existing customers represent in most service industries relative to that of new customers (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990), it would behoove service businesses to listen attentively and seriously consider the comments of these customers.

A noteworthy number of cards solicited data for three additional variables likely to be associated with variations in service quality, customer expectations, and customer perceptions. First, forty cards (12.8 percent) asked customers for the reason for their visit. In hospitality businesses, for example, the service experience sought by business travelers may differ considerably from that sought by tourists.

Second, a smaller percentage (3.8) of cards inquired about party size. Such information is useful in developing an understanding of how consumer perceptions, preferences, and behaviors vary across group sizes (Iacobucci, 1996). Marriott's restaurant operations, for example, have learned that single patrons prefer tables located near windows and table settings that include newspapers (Anonymous, 1988).

Finally, 5.4 percent of the cards asked customers which type of service they received (e.g., in store, drive-through window, ATM, catalogue, etc.). Because the processes and technology involved in these alternative delivery systems can be quite different, it follows that customers' expectations and experiences may differ as well. For example, a bank customer may expect a friendly smile and a "hello" from a human teller,

but not from the bank's ATM. Understanding these variations would seem to be a critical step toward satisfying customer requirements, improving operations, and developing appropriate marketing communications.

### **Administrative and Control Characteristics**

Several aspects of the comment cards contribute to management's ability to centralize and systematize the data collection process and to identify precisely the personnel whose behaviors or neglect may have prompted consumers to comment. These findings are summarized in Table 6.

More than one-third (37.2 percent) of the cards clearly instructed consumers how to return the comment cards upon completion. The most frequent approach, used by 35.9 percent of the cards, was to ask respondents to mail the card. Another 80 cards (25.6 percent) did not specifically ask consumers to mail the cards, but were preprinted with the company's address and usually postage paid. Having consumers mail their comments offers the advantage of a centralized collection process which is especially useful to multi-unit operations. Other advantages of mail collection include possible consumer perceptions of convenience and confidentiality.

Of the 184 cards (59 percent) that were preaddressed, almost half (84; 45.7 percent) were addressed to the Chairman of the Board, to high ranking executives, or to line managers. This probably conveys to customers a sense that the business greatly values their comments and places a high priority on consumers who take the time to provide feedback. Unfortunately, 32 cards (10.3 percent) were preaddressed but were not postage paid; they may convey a completely opposite message.

Recognizing that some consumers might feel inconvenienced or constrained when asked to express themselves in writing, 8.3 percent of the cards offered consumers a telephone "hotline" as an additional or alternative feedback channel. In fact, the rapid growth in the use of 800 numbers suggests that such hotlines have already replaced the use of customer comment cards in some businesses (Rice, 1990).

Most cards asked respondents to provide

**Table 6**  
**Administrative and Control Characteristics of**  
**Comment Cards: Descriptive Statistics**  
**(n=312)**

	Frequency (%)
<b>Instructions for Completed Card Submission</b>	
No instructions given	116 (37.2)
Mailing of card implied	80 (25.6)
Specific instructions	116 (37.2)
Mail card	112 (35.9)
Drop card in designated box	60 (19.2)
Return to service counter, check-out area, etc.	18 ( 5.8)
Give card to employee or to supervisor	36 (11.5)
Other	34 (10.9)
<b>Preaddressing and Postage</b>	
Neither preaddressed nor postage paid	128 (41.0)
Preaddressed and postage not paid	32 (10.3)
Preaddressed and postage paid	152 (48.7)
<b>Addressee</b>	
None	128 (41.0)
Company name only	60 (19.2)
Specific manager or top officials	84 (29.9)
President, C.E.O., or Chairman	54 (17.3)
Other executive	24 ( 7.7)
Unit manager or supervisor	6 ( 1.9)
<b>Others</b>	
Customer Service, Consumer Affairs, etc.	20 ( 6.4)
Specific individual, title not specified	9 ( 2.9)
Misc.: other depts. or management firms	11 ( 3.5)
<b>"Hotline" Number Provided</b>	
Toll free number	14 ( 4.5)
Toll number	12 ( 3.8)
<b>Accountability/Tracking</b>	
Date	222 (71.2)
Business location, address, or unit number	187 (59.9)
Time of day	134 (42.9)
Name of service provider	76 (24.4)
Name of outstanding employee	44 (14.1)
<b>Follow-Up</b>	
"Would you like a reply?" asked	31 ( 9.9)

information that could be used to track comments over time and to hold specific employees, supervisors, or franchisees accountable for

consumer comments. For example, more than two-thirds of the cards (71.2 percent) asked consumers to indicate the date, while 42.9 percent requested the time of day. About six of ten (59.9 percent) asked the store number, location, or specific address of the business, although often this information was already preprinted or stamped on the cards. About one-fourth (24.4 percent) inquired about the name of the specific employee or employees who served them, while 14.1 percent asked respondents to identify outstanding employees.

Clearly, this type of accountability information helps management to track comments over time, associating fluctuations in consumer perceptions with personnel or operational changes, with marketing programs, or with environmental concerns such as actions of competitors or changes in the economy. In addition, employee knowledge of the presence of comment cards may improve employee performance by creating a Hawthorne effect. Simply put, employees may be more service-oriented if they are aware that customers may conveniently use comment cards to evaluate employee performance and then relay the evaluations directly to management.

Finally, a few card designers seemed to recognize that acting upon consumers' comments should extend beyond possible personnel, marketing, or operational modifications to include recognition of customer comments and reinforcement of each respondent's decision to offer feedback. Toward this end, 31 cards (9.9 percent) specifically asked respondents if they would like a reply to their comments. Of course, it is likely that many businesses which omit this type of question actually do send replies to respondents.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Soliciting feedback from consumers has always been a central component of the marketing concept. And in the service sector, consumer feedback is especially critical because of the unique vantage point from which consumers evaluate both services and their delivery.

While there are numerous approaches to gathering data from consumers, customer comment

cards represent an alternative that has gained considerable popularity during the last decade. Despite the widespread use of customer comment cards, however, little is known about these research instruments. The study reported here lays the foundation for such a knowledge base by documenting the content of comment cards. By understanding the status quo, practitioners are better positioned to evaluate their comment card program vis-a-vis those of other service businesses in general, and those of competitors in particular. Similarly, practitioners who have hesitated to implement comment card programs will benefit from this research as they search for guidelines and insights in developing future comment card programs.

The findings suggest that few service businesses are fully tapping the potential that comment cards offer. Analysis of the cards in this study suggests some preliminary recommendations for improved practices. These primarily concern the variables measured, measurement procedures, the motivation of consumers to complete these cards and the identification of respondents' characteristics.

First, while many customer comment cards are carefully prepared, a large proportion appear poorly conceived and haphazardly developed. Customer satisfaction is arguably the most important variable measured by the cards, but while 82.5 percent of the cards requested ratings of attributes, the real meanings of the scales utilized were often difficult to determine. For example, does an attribute rated "average" mean that the consumer is satisfied or not? It would be difficult for the data user to determine what the ratings really indicate. Far greater attention to the validity of the questions employed is required before the resulting data can be trusted.

Although it seems apparent that the intent behind most of the cards was to measure customer satisfaction or service quality, it is evident that only the most obvious and tangible dimensions are typically measured, i.e. tangible characteristics of the service and service delivery responsiveness. Issues pertaining to service provider competence, reliability, accessibility, safety, and knowledge of the consumer are particularly badly neglected. (Refer again to Table 4)

More demographic data must be collected by

the cards so that the representativeness of the respondents can be judged. Limited evidence from other research indicates that volunteers of information are atypical, often better educated, younger, and have higher incomes (Kotler and Andreasen, 1987). However, with fewer than ten percent of the cards collecting such standard demographic information, little can be said to adequately characterize the respondents. In addition to the correction of the paucity of demographic information, more emphasis on the collection of patronage history would greatly assist the marketer in interpreting the strategic importance of the data.

Two special characteristics of services, perishability and heterogeneity, require that services complained about be identified in place and time. Surprisingly, only 21 percent of the cards asked for information on both the service/item purchased and the date of the purchase. This information is obviously vital to the managerial follow-up of service complaints and should be regularly requested by cards.

Finally, businesses need to reassess their methods of encouraging comment card response. The majority seem to leave response to chance, possibly believing that consumers angry or happy enough to respond are the only ones worth knowing about. This approach is almost certain to produce highly unrepresentative samples of customers which may erroneously be treated as though they represent the universe of consumer experiences.

Still, there are numerous issues left to future research. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is the evaluation of the appropriateness and effectiveness of customer comment cards relative to that of alternative research tools. Second, while experienced practitioners and researchers may be able to evaluate the pros and cons of comment cards on an intuitive basis, an experimental approach to comment card evaluation is needed. This type of investigation would lead to a richer understanding of a number of tactical research issues. For example: What is the optimum length and format of comment cards? What are the ideal physical characteristics such as card size and color? How can consumers best be motivated to respond? Further, what are the differences between paper and pencil, hard copy comment cards,

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versus those increasingly being found in electronic form on companies' internet web pages?

Questions about the proper administration of comment card programs also require research. For example: Who should be responsible for implementing comment card programs -- Marketing, Operations, C.E.O.'s Office, or some other department? How should customer comments be synthesized, tracked, and reported? To whom should customer comments be distributed within the organization? How should businesses respond to customers who complete comment cards? Who should be responsible for instituting organizational change based upon customer comments?

Although this study lays a foundation for understanding customer comment card usage by service and retail businesses, it is clear that there is much work to be done both for practitioners and researchers interested in capitalizing upon the potential that these feedback devices offer.

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