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In a service discipline like facilities it is vital that the service provider gathers feedback from their customers to measure satisfaction with the service being provided and identify improvement opportunities. Such feedback should be captured in a variety of means both formal and informal to ensure a complete picture.

Of the formal methodologies one of the most useful approaches is to use questionnaires as they can be designed to produce both qualitative and quantitative data and can be repeated at set intervals to enable trend analysis and forecasting.

Developing a strategy for the use of questionnaires in facilities management can be tricky as the typical FM team provide such a wide range of services. Each of the service lines would like feedback but are all dealing with the same customers. Building occupiers can easily be irritated by constantly receiving requests to complete long questionnaires, first by the catering team, then the mail room, then the cleaners and so on.

If a help desk is used then a simple automated feedback request limited to little more than a question of the "Were you satisfied?" kind can produce meaningful statistics for the whole FM service team that can also be broken down by service line. This also enables a swift follow up in the event of an unhappy customer.

More detailed questionnaires to all customers should be infrequent although distribution to a sample of customers can be more often as long as there is a system in place to ensure the same customer doesn't get receive them all.

Apart from complaints about receiving too many questionnaires the most common complaint is that the survey takes too long to complete. This may be because there are too many questions or that the questions asked are difficult and take time to think through. In either case the results suffer as a result. In the first case, they end up being rushed and not properly considered; in the latter they are interpreted differently by different respondents rendering statistical analysis useless.

Deciding which questions to leave out is difficult as everyone has questions they would like to ask. First get rid of the plain obvious questions that you already know the answer to – "Which department do you work in?" Then cut out the nice-to-know but strategically irrelevant "Which is your favourite pudding?" Focus instead on the questions that will be of use when asked repeatedly over a five-year period such as "How satisfied overall are you with the service provided by our copy room team?"

The Institute of Customer Service provides a wealth of material to support organisations that are seeking to understand and improve their customer service performance www.instituteofcustomerservice.com