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VARIETY

OVERRATED

“How are we doing? Could you fill out this survey? On a 1-to-10 scale? Unless, um, we’re not a 10.”

Story by KIM ODE • Illustration by MIKE RICE • Star Tribune

“Tell us about your recent customer experience.”

Once, those words sounded like opportunity. “Sure thing! Glad you asked!”

Wielding sharpened pencils, we etched Customer Comment cards with feedback about occasional purchases — buying a car or browsing refrigerators.

Today? We’re more likely to mutter, “What, again?”

That’s because we’re being asked to rate not only our Mazda, but our mocha. Also our dental exam, online shoe order — online anything, really — veterinarian visit, motel stay, mascara purchase, deck paint choice, Uber driver, ticket-buying experience.

“It’s a fad, and it’s backfiring,” said John Tschohl, president of Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis. “It’s creating a very high level of annoyance.

“Everybody’s jumped on the bandwagon. It’s like if you don’t have a survey, you’re not in the system, baby.”

Each year, millions of ratings are sought for various reasons: a desire to monitor satisfaction, a love affair with data, the increasing

ease of reaching customers, or the idea that loyalty grows when a company shows interest in consumers’ opinions.

Yet however well intentioned, companies now are facing “interview fatigue,” said Forrest Morgeson, director of research for the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which measures what its name says. “It started in the late 1990s, which was the first time in public opinion polling that you started to see response rates really plummet.”

Not only are consumers feeling overloaded with requests for feedback, but there’s a certain LOL aspect to what we’re being asked to rate. A mascara-buying experience? Really?

Customer service remains important, said Tschohl, who for 30 years has developed customer service training programs. But the ratings race has run amok. “It’s totally overkill,” he said, adding that he doubts that many companies actually use what they learn.

“I don’t think they look at the surveys,” he said. “I believe that 99 percent of companies believe they deliver great customer service, and I believe that 99 percent of customers believe it doesn’t exist.”

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OVERRATED

Studies bear him out. Gartner Inc., a technology research company, found that while 95 percent of companies collect feedback, one in three actually use it to make improvements. Here's the kicker: Fewer than one in 20 tell customers about the changes they've made.

Therein lies the peril of ratings surveys. Without evidence that feedback means anything, people may think, "Why do I waste my time?"

Facing the guilt factor

Mary Meehan, founder of Panoramix Global, a consumer research firm in Minneapolis, said she's not really bothered by frequent surveys. Then she remembered.

"Every time I sign off on GoToMeeting, a screen comes up wanting to know about my experience," she said of the videoconferencing program. "I mean, it was just a phone call. And it was the same as the last one. So I just ignore it."

So what's an earnest company sincerely seeking customer feedback to do?

Tschohl urges asking only every fifth or every 10th customer. "Now, it's every time you go anywhere, they ask you. Every single transaction. If they have your contact information, they want to do a survey."

Freewill abides, of course. It's not against the law to ignore a survey. There's a sale on Chill Pills in Aisle 4.

Sometimes, though, a salesperson, driver, hygienist, technician or barista asks (cough: begs) you to complete the survey because the rating "really affects my job review." Variation: "I really hope you can give us top scores. Corporate looks at these things."

"That should never happen," said Morgeson. "The person being rated should never be the one asking you to do the rating."

But it does happen, likely because the up-close-and-personal tactic works.

No one wants to get someone in trouble, especially when their service was fine.

Was it a 5 on a 1-to-5 scale? Well, geez, maybe not a 5. So was it a 4?

Shoot, I'm running late. All right, 5's across the board!

Talking 'bout a generation

One issue with the value of ratings is how to get broad and representative responses. Generational differences come into play, depending on how the survey reaches the customer.

For instance, young consumers are online a lot, but hard to reach on cellphones, Morgeson said, so they likely field more pop-up surveys than telephone follow-ups about service. Older consumers may still use landlines, but you lose them online "either because they're not as digitally savvy, or they just don't want to do those things online."

Of course, digital-savvy customers always find ways to give their opinions through sites such as Yelp or TripAdvisor, not to mention Twitter, blogs and Facebook.

"It's empowering, but you have to be careful because [such sites] are easier to game," Morgeson said. Self-selected feedback tends to attract two types of customers: the really happy or the really angry.

He cited the Amazon site and its bar graph for customer reviews. Almost invariably, the most common responses are five stars and one star.

Useful? Sure — if taken with a grain of salt.

Oh, and yes, there are two reviews, both five stars, for a 26-ounce container of Morton Salt.

Reads one: "OMG, so salty! Wow! Who could complain?"

A double-edged rating?

We rate because we can. But should we? And are there limits?

The perils of overrating are explored in the popular British TV series "Black Mirror," streaming on Netflix, which looks at the dark side of life and technology. In this view of the future, everyone is constantly rating each other — their social media posts, their personal interactions, their hallway conversations. How others rate you then affects the opportunities you're given.

In a word: Yikes.

Meehan said she's seeing how ratings are starting to cut both ways.

Sure, you can rate your Uber drivers. But they're also rating you. Rate too low and they may decline to pick you up.

Sure, you can rate a restaurant on OpenTable. But if you're a no-show four times in a year, your account gets bounced.

Sure, you can vent on TripAdvisor, but your rant may boomerang if it's over the top.

"The tables are being turned," Meehan said, noting several examples:

- An Italian restaurant in San Francisco began offering customers 25 percent off if they'd write a one-star review on Yelp. According to AdWeek, the owner claimed that Yelp badgered him to advertise, but when he stopped, his reviews turned negative. So he began courting one-star reviews, which were hilarious. The result, of course, was priceless publicity.
- A tourist at an Irish restaurant went on TripAdvisor to condemn its salad as "the worst salad I've ever eaten." The owner then posted a sign urging people to "come in & try the worst salad one woman on TripAdvisor ever had in her life."

"It's a social activism thing," Meehan said. "People are weaponizing bad reviews, turning them around to their benefit."

So who's a consumer to believe?

There's no clear answer, especially in a culture where social media have growing influence, and more people believe that their bad experience not only was undeserved, but universal.

"It's who's right and who's wrong," Meehan said. "It's not me; it's you."

Somewhere, there must be a Groupon for Chill Pills.