

Measuring Consumer Attitudes¹

The Importance of Consumer Attitudes in Commercial Success

By J. DAVID HOUSER
President, J. David Houser & Associates, New York

I KNOW it sounds pretentious to use the expression "measuring consumer attitudes." Measurement, like everything else in the world, is comparative. In this connection I was very much interested in a conversation which I had with Dr. Person a few minutes ago. He said the Taylor Society had always maintained that if a time-study job was to be done in a mine and there was no stop watch available, an alarm clock should be used. There are, of course, certain types of jobs in which only a stop watch can be used, and in those cases the alarm clock would not do. I make no professions at all of presenting to you a method which is as yet in the stop-watch stage, nor a method which any more than approximates the accuracy of measurement possible with physical things and with the physical properties of things.

I think it is a matter of general admission that to a large extent the modern industrial commercial organization is in the hands of consumers. That is especially true in a buyers' market and the buyers' market is, statistically speaking, the mode in our civilization. It seems that it is only at unusual times, such as war or other critical periods, that the market becomes a sellers' market. The degree of adequacy with which the responsibility for filling the needs and desires of consumers is met is the degree of success of the modern commercial organization.

The biggest point to realize in that connection is that the only definitions of this responsibility, or the only elements of it, that have any significance or meaning are the consumers' own definitions. What I mean by that perhaps bald statement is simply this: that service is "satisfactory," or merchandise is "good" not as the person that sells defines "satisfactory" or "good," but as the consumer defines these terms.

That looks like a truism, does it not? The world is chock-full of truisms that somehow or other are not being used as the basis for decisions. It is true that

it is the consumers' definitions of good and bad, satisfactory and unsatisfactory, that in the long run control commercial success. Those definitions are arbitrary; they are autocratic; they are compelling; they are imperative. There is not any appeal from them; they do govern.

If the importance of consumers' attitudes is admitted, the next question looks like a simple question, and the answer looks like a simple answer. What are these attitudes? Obviously, the sensible way to find out is to ask the consumer directly what they are; but it is not quite as simple as that. If we stop there, we shall perhaps be in danger of oversimplification.

How should the consumer be asked? What should be the method of asking? Well, there is, for instance, a great deal of asking him by mail, and a great deal of money and energy is spent in doing this. But more significant than the amount of money and energy spent is the fact that many vital decisions are made upon the consumers' answers to the questions asked by mail. Right away we run across a very grave danger, and that is the danger involved in bad "sampling." There is a constant error operating in the mail-questionnaire process.

I suppose it might best be illustrated by referring to the well-known *Literary Digest* study concerning the much-mooted problem: Shall the country be wet or dry? Please, at the beginning understand me correctly: I do not say that the *Literary Digest* results were false; I merely say nobody knows yet whether they were false or true. I do not mean to say that the country is dry instead of being wet, as the *Literary Digest* showed; as a matter of fact, the country may be a great deal wetter than the *Literary Digest* study showed, or it may be dry. Nobody knows as a result of that study whether a larger percentage of the wets answered that questionnaire than of the dries. Nobody knows whether the dries are more vociferous than the wets; which of the two urges, the wet urge or the dry urge, is stronger; which of those urges will be better represented by a tendency to send in answers to mail questionnaires. So much for the direct-by-mail

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inquiry. That is one way in which people can be asked what they want.

Of course, if you do not get the truth, you have wasted your money; but in several cases recently I have seen a much more serious thing than the waste of money. Important decisions are made on the basis of those responses, and a great deal of effort is misdirected as a result of them. The cost of the thing is not so serious as the possibility of making tremendously important decisions or groups of decisions on fallacious evidence. One case that I remember very vividly involved the expenditure of many thousands of dollars on the basis of such evidence, and the loss of three valuable men in an organization because the mail questionnaire seemed to show that they were wrong.

The other alternative is face-to-face inquiries: Get people who can best meet the types of people from whom you want answers, and train them to ask people what they want, and what they like, etc., etc. You can do that. But there are then considerations as to the questions to be asked. You can say, as was done in one survey not long ago, "Which is more important to you, price or quality?" And, you are apt to get 95 per cent of the customers saying quality is more important than price.

At the risk of seeming dogmatic, I will say that such a result simply is not true. At least, it is not true in the ratio of 95 to 5. Such questions are "face saving"; they either lead people to claim credit or to avoid discredit by the way they answer.

"Do you properly train your pupils to take care of a gas stove?" was asked of a group of domestic-science teachers recently. Almost 90 per cent said they did. On the other hand, the question could be asked: "What are the things that you try to emphasize with your pupils as to the proper care of the gas stove?" From that you can construct a proper sort of check-list, and you can check or enumerate the things they do and get at least a rough score which will measure the activity.

Questions can be asked: "Why do you buy at this place?" or "What impels you to buy this?" or "Why do you shop here?" or "Why is your habit of so-and-so?" Even though there is not any face saving in answers to such questions, they are unreliable. If there is anything that modern psychology has demonstrated, it is that people cannot analyze why they do a thing. It is too difficult a task.

But perhaps most important is the fact that answers

to questions can vary from 20 per cent up to 60 per cent according to the phrasing. A question can be asked about a department store: "Is the service reasonably good in that store?" Here you find 60 per cent of the people say, "Yes." But if the question is, "Is the service all that one could expect?" you might get only 20 per cent to say, "Yes." It is a much more severe phrasing of the question. Which of the two questions should then be used for purposes of administration?

In order to avoid weakness inherent in a mere "head count," there should be a second dimension which can indicate the influence or significance of different answers. For problems of management, it is essential to know what difference it makes when people feel one way or the other, in making decisions as to what money and what effort to spend. If you do not have a means of showing this difference, you will be at the mercy of the particular phrasing of the question; you will not know, for instance, whether the 20 per cent or the 60 per cent represents the relative importance of "service."

There is need then for a second dimension: There is need for what is somewhat technically known as a "criterion"—some means for judging what consumers do and what effect upon action the attitudes which they represent have. Not very long ago a study was made in a certain section of the United States, and two questions were asked about gas. One was about the cost of gas and the other about the possible danger in the use of gas. The same percentage in each case—about 20 per cent—said gas cost too much, and that it was dangerous. A good deal of money was spent on that basis with an equal amount of attention to each of those two objections.

A year or two afterward another study was made, and curiously enough the same percentage cropped up: 20 per cent who thought the cost of gas was too high; another 20 per cent who thought that the use of gas was dangerous. Then the question was asked, "Customers complain about cost, but what difference does it make in gas usage?" "And what difference does this danger idea make?" The results were defined in an attempt to discover how much gas the people used who thought the cost of gas was too high, and how much gas the people used who thought the use of gas was dangerous. The endeavor was to find the relative importance of the two objections. It was discovered that the people who were complaining about the cost of gas being too high used just about as much

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