

Online Odyssey for Internal Insight

(or Net Scores for United Sponsor!)

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Setting the Scene

Vodafone is the largest mobile telecommunications company on Planet Earth. In Great Britain alone, with a surface area just 0.62% of the total world land mass, Vodafone has 12.3m customers and over 370 retail stores for the distribution of mobile telecommunication products and services, operated through Vodafone Retail. In 1999 Senior Management within Vodafone Retail Operations initiated the Store (Manager) Satisfaction Survey. The Vodafone Retail Operations division provides services and communications to all stores in Great Britain distributing Vodafone products and services. It is extremely important to Vodafone Retail that these stores are well managed and looked after, as staff loyalty and store efficiency ultimately dictates the success of this distribution channel!

The core ongoing objective of this research project is to measure satisfaction with internal operations and especially the services provided to these important stores and their management – in order to effect change and maximise the benefit of services provided to the stores by Vodafone Retail head office.

The Research

This research was previously conducted (in 1999) via postal self-completion questionnaires, all managed by and operated within Vodafone Retail. The survey achieved a maximum and indeed good response rate of 60%. However, Vodafone Retail grew to believe during 1999 that this process should be out-sourced to not only save valuable management time, but that other techniques and methods may indeed improve on the success they were achieving. In particular, they were keen to improve the credibility of the survey and research.

In the fourth quarter of 1999 The Market Research Solutions Limited (MRSL) Group, as existing suppliers to Vodafone, were approached and asked to bid for the year 2000 contract. Recognising that the project would benefit from an innovative approach, and considering the business sector, the bid and the subsequent work was completed by *i-magen*, the MRSL Group's new media and technology unit.

Business Objectives for Vodafone Retail

From the brief and detailed discussions with Vodafone Retail, i-magen were able to determine three core areas within which this research should succeed. These are: the Measurement, the Survey Process and the Business. The objectives of the project for 2000 were hence formally defined as follows:

The Measurement Objective

- *To provide ongoing accurate and interpretable measurement of store managers' (customer) satisfaction with key areas of internal service.*

The Survey Process Objectives

- *To improve response rates, speed and cost effectiveness of the survey process itself.*

The Business Objectives

- *To provide details of service areas (to store managers) requiring change/action.*
- *To maximise store manager satisfaction, motivation and effectiveness within retail operations - and hence maximise sales, profitability, and staff loyalty.*

In response to the brief, i-magen put together innovative plans for 4 waves of an Internet-Based Store (Customer) Satisfaction Study to be conducted in January, April, August and November (avoiding Christmas) in the year 2000*. This method was chosen primarily because all stores have reliable internet access – and because a web-based methodology is much more in keeping with the company image and culture.

The initial and on-going justification for our study is contained in the following sections.

We have also been re-commissioned to conduct this study in 2001/2002

How This Online Survey Works

The core elements of the previous Vodafone-managed self-completion study have been retained for this new online version, i.e. survey notification/invite and self-completion data collection. However, being online there is now no need for outgoing or return postage: notification is by email, including an embedded link to the internet site containing the survey, and data is entered direct onto the host survey server by the respondent.

In fact, Vodafone Retail handles email notification itself - this being 'sent' by the Retail Operations Support Manager, ultimately responsible for Store Management and Services. This ensures the importance of participation is not missed by the Store Managers. Further, costs are reduced because this approach means financial or other incentives are not required to motivate response. A copy of this email (from the August 2000 wave) follows:

> > Dear All,
> >
> > Continuing with our commitment to review the quality of service
> > provided to your stores by Head Office, it is time to run the
> > quarterly Store Satisfaction Survey
> >
> > The August survey is PC - based in exactly the same way as May,
> > which will make it **easier** and **more convenient** for you to complete
> > and return.
> >
> > As we are carrying out this research in order to help all store
> > teams going forward, we would like this to be completed and
> > submitted **5pm on Thursday 10th August**.
> >
> > It is important that we seek your opinions on how improvements can
> > be made within our Company and particularly so in Store, where any
> > improvements will generally provide more time for greater sales
> > opportunities.
> >
> > I believe that it is an important part of our business to work
> > together to make things better and I can assure you that there is
> > full commitment from Head Office and particularly the Management
> > Team to ensure that this happens.
> >
> > Please ensure that your Store participates in these surveys, the
> > results of which will enable us to maintain **our policy of continuous**
> > **improvement**.
> >
> > To enter the survey, please click on the underlined web address
> > below and ensure all details are complete. If you have missing data in
> > any section, you will not be able to move to the next until the current
> > one is complete.
> >
> > **<http://ukweb3.quantime.co.uk/projects/i-magen/vodaret>**

> > Alan Cole
> > Retail Operations Support Manager

The core elements of this e-mail invite (that make it work) are as follows:

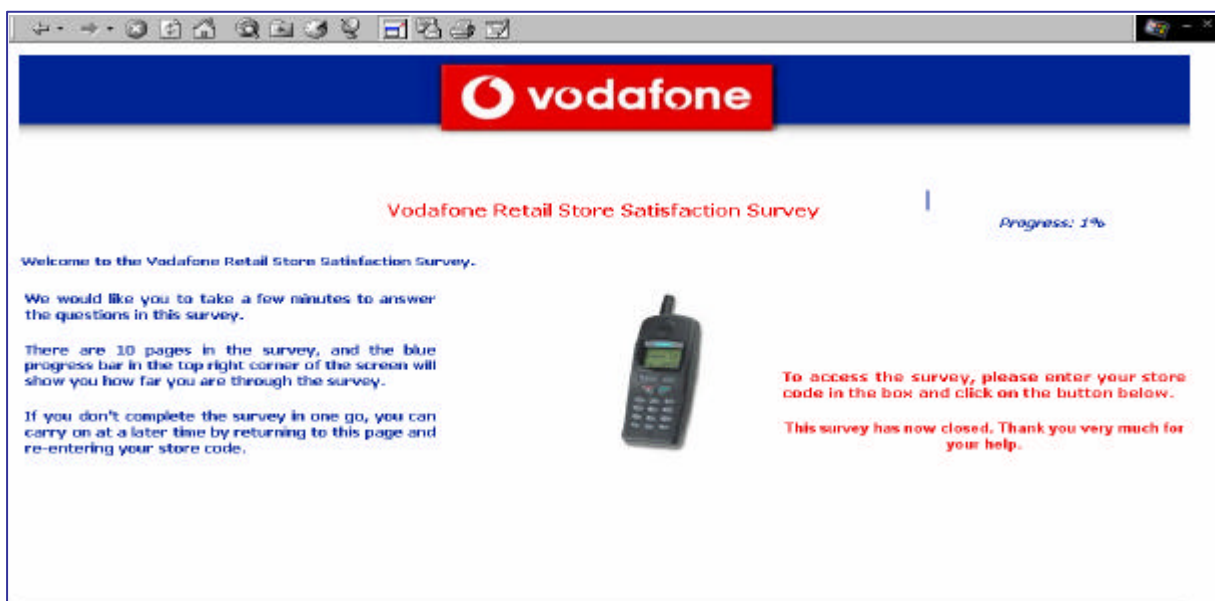
- ❑ *easy access to survey pages (embedded link),*
- ❑ *any necessary instructions,*
- ❑ *clear deadlines,*
- ❑ *outline of mutual benefits,*
- ❑ *and motivating messages.*

In addition, a notice announcing the survey is placed on the Vodafone Retail Intranet Bulletin Board for Store Managers, and a new reminder email is sent 2 days into the study to re-motivate response.

The survey questionnaire was designed by imagen in conjunction with Vodafone Retail, to ensure all key areas are covered in each wave. This survey tool is designed to be simple, relevant, and easy to complete - and to include a series of core sections and questions, as well as allow ad hoc questions on a wave by wave basis. Simple user instructions are also incorporated, in addition to page by page updates on progress within the survey process.

In order to ensure that we only receive one response from each store, and that only valid stores participate, we always utilise a password entry system to the survey. This password is actually the store's own unique store code, allocated by Vodafone Retail on store opening (or acquisition) and only known by the store itself. i-magen always strive to recommend a simple password mechanism, utilising existing data wherever possible (this avoids the complex set up of algorithms by the agency and feats of memory by respondents!).

An innovative save and return facility also ensures that these busy store managers can return to the study, should important matters arise during their completion of the questionnaire. This is activated by simply exiting the survey and re-entering the password (store code) on return to the survey site - whereby the respondent is returned to the point where they left off. This questionnaire was converted to Quancept Web and hosted by the SPSS Web Bureau [NB: it was decided not to place the survey on the Vodafone Retail intranet in order to promote the survey's independence and confidentiality]. A shot of the survey home page follows.



One aspect of internet research that is often declared as a major benefit is the speed of response. We concur, with our average live fieldwork period being just 4 days, from start to cut-off/close. Hence, raw data is available within one week of going live – and running totals (toplines) are also available during the fieldwork period for both the client and agency to view remotely. This benefits the client greatly as data is available in ‘real-time’.

One final area of innovation is the inclusion of a ‘survey satisfaction and improvement’ question at the end, designed to ensure continual improvement and maximise the effectiveness of this mechanism for research. Analysis of responses to these questions is regularly undertaken by i-magen, and relevant and actionable improvements to the survey process identified to ensure maximum respondent satisfaction (as of course, this survey itself is one of the elements of service provided to stores by Vodafone Retail head office).

The Questionnaire

The main areas of coverage for this survey are as follows:

- *Overall service from Head Office*
- *Service from specific departments/divisions:*
 - *Airtime Operations division*
 - *IT Helpdesk*
 - *Logistics and Stock Control/Merchandising department*
 - *Customer Services*
 - *Property Services Helpdesk*
- *Any other comments/suggestions*
- *Comments/suggestions for this web survey*

The questionnaire itself was designed to match the rating scales and attribute statements used in Vodafone’s other research conducted with direct customers. The results of the survey are examined on a national as well as a broad regional basis (usually North v South stores). Newly acquired stores are also examined separately from the others.

In the next section we evaluate the success of the project against each of the defined business objectives (see earlier).

Evaluation of Project Success

v. The Measurement Objective

- *To provide ongoing accurate and interpretable measurement of store managers' (customer) satisfaction with key areas of internal service.*

This internet-based method has achieved all aspects of the measurement objective, providing ongoing measurement of store managers' (customer) satisfaction with key areas of internal service for Vodafone Retail. This survey system is adaptable enough, such that we could if required roll-out an interim wave within a week or less of go ahead (for instance to assess the success of Christmas preparations at this peak seasonal time). Equally, core questions remain constant so as to allow the determination of trends (e.g. improving satisfaction), as well as to pinpoint areas requiring improvement (e.g. the new intranet). As previously mentioned, data is also available in 'real-time' during the fieldwork period via a web-based reporting system.

Vodafone Retail have themselves commented that this objective has been achieved because it provides:

- *A method to produce quick, informative feedback, on critical areas of our business,*
- *An easy to understand presentation of questions for stores to complete, which is impactful, and not time-consuming for each store,*
- *A method which will become a regular feature of the Vodafone Retail business.*

They have also commented, however, that some gentle persuasion by way of communication has sometimes been needed, to ensure all stores completed the survey on time. Vodafone Retail have stated that feedback from stores about the style and content of the survey has been positive.

v. The Survey Process Objective

- *To improve response rates, speed and cost effectiveness of the survey process itself.*

This new web-based method of measuring Store Manager Satisfaction for Vodafone Retail has proved an undoubted success. Over 75% of all Vodafone Store Managers in Great Britain took part in each of the 4 waves conducted in the year 2000, an increase in response of over 15% from the maximum of 60% achieved via the 1999 postal method. This huge increase is due to a number of contributing factors.

The first is the appropriateness of this method for this audience. All Store Managers have internet access, including access to a proportion of the World-Wide Web (our site is in fact granted specific access through the Vodafone security firewall, allowing all store managers to view it and interact with it). All Store Managers are by definition technology-inclined, making this method much more attractive to them than a paper-based questionnaire received through the post. Utilising a familiar, constantly accessed medium, ensures we reach our high response rate targets.

Another factor contributing to the success of the survey process is the motivating email distributed by the Retail Operations Manager. Coming from someone who is
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charged with specifically ensuring the best service to stores, and continual improvement, respondents have great faith that their comments will be acted upon, which hence increases their willingness to participate. This faith is reinforced after each wave by the actions initiated and communicated to stores by the Retail Operations team (see later). We have worked with Vodafone Retail to ensure the systematic feedback of results and actions to all parties, including the Store managers themselves.

The online questionnaire has a number of important and successful features, all designed to maximise respondent motivation and engagement and hence maximise the proportion of full survey completions. These include: utilisation of very simple, easy to complete question types with clear, concise user instructions (that are repeated if necessary); a save and return facility allowing these busy managers to come back to the survey at a later time should something more important arise whilst they are undertaking the study; and page updates on progress – a very important feature as our research on this technique has highlighted to us the significance of managing expectations in order to not lose a respondent part way through the process. When respondents exit a web survey part-way, this is most usually due (in our experience) to a lack of knowledge of how much longer the survey is going to take (we of course have no interviewer to reassure the respondent on this aspect, as is the case with more traditional forms of research).

One more innovative inclusion on the questionnaire is a request for comments about the survey mechanism itself, and especially how it could be improved. These comments are collated and analysed by i-magen after each wave, so that any pertinent changes can be made to the process in the next (however, changes to the questions themselves are considered very carefully first, as we require consistency here for tracking purposes).

Some comments about our web-based survey process from ‘users’ have included:

POSITIVE

“a very easy system to follow”

“a very effective and user friendly way of presenting the questionnaire”

“pretty impressive”

“much better this way!!!”

“Very easy to navigate and the % of progress is great!”

“gives the retail stores a chance to get their points across”

CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

“The survey is very general, so that on occasions specific incidents tend to spring up that cannot be reflected in the opinions expressed in the survey”

[Remedy: An open-ended question has been included to allow for respondents to comment on such issues]

“Very difficult to tell how many times we call customer services and airtime (depts.). Even approximations may be out”

[Remedy: Instructions at this question reassure respondents that estimates are all we are after. The question itself is just for analysis purposes]

v. The Business Objectives

- *1/. To provide details of service areas (to store managers) requiring change/action.*

Vodafone Retail have provided the following summary describing their views of the survey in identifying problems:

- *This research has highlighted, by way of scoring, areas of the business that weren't supporting stores to an acceptable standard.*
- *We have hence discussed with stores the scores given, plus enabled stores to give suggestions/ideas on how to improve The Business.*

Vodafone are, of course, communication experts. This is reflected in the desire amongst the Retail Operations department not only to strive for continual improvement in their service to stores, but also to ever increase the effectiveness of their communication of the changes and improvements to the store managers and staff. Active and passive/push and pull methods of communication are both utilised to ensure that essential information is given to those that need to know (active/push), and that other information is available to those that require it (passive/pull). For instance, summary reports of actions taken are sent to Store Managers by those undertaking and responsible for the important changes.

The example memorandum that follows was put together by the Vodafone Intranet Manager and highlights the key changes made between August and November 2000, the new intranet having received a largely critical reaction in the August wave of research. This reporting will continue until the intranet (which was changed just before the August 2000 wave of research – and was previously receiving good scores) sees satisfaction levels return to pre-August levels.

- 2/. To maximise store manager satisfaction, motivation and effectiveness within retail operations - and hence maximise sales, profitability, and staff loyalty.

To evaluate success against this objective, we present below a chart that clearly illustrates how satisfaction (very/quite satisfied combined) with the service from Retail Operations dramatically improved over the course of the 4 waves of research during the year 2000 (and Q4 1999). The levelling off of satisfaction in Q3 2000 can mostly be attributed to the introduction of the new intranet just before this wave (which showed stronger dissatisfaction than usual). Over the course of the year between Q4 1999 and Q4 2000 the satisfaction score rose from 62% to 77%, an increase of some 15%.



Conclusions

Where there is 100% reliable net access, a simple method of survey completion, and sufficient motivation, the net is the perfect channel for internal (and external) customer satisfaction research (and undoubtedly will increase to be so). Ensuring timely feedback of the information (both results - and increasingly actions, based on the research, taken and planned) to respondents/staff ensures that they remain involved in the process and motivated to take part on an on-going basis. The increasing store manager satisfaction over time, coupled with the continued high rate of survey response, is exacting evidence of the research working wonders in providing actionable measurements, but also in effecting successful business change.

Vodafone Retail themselves have commented:

With other departments now looking at improving support to stores, Retail Operations and Sales can focus more clearly on delivering better sales volume (and quality), by way of greater market awareness and improved sales communication and training.

Vodafone Retail have seen and declared ultimate success of this survey through:

- *Greater 'Business' awareness of in-store support requirements,*
- *More focus from other business areas in delivering better support to stores.*

Looking Ahead

In 2001, i-magen have already started to plan online feedback of results and communication of actions taken and planned, via the Vodafone Retail intranet. We are also enhancing the 2001 user experience via an improved look and feel of the survey site. Changes for the 2001 survey site include:

- *a new more modern font,*
- *the break-up of all instructions so that they are better communicated,*
- *an emphasis in the introduction on the actions and feedback that will be a result of the respondent taking part,*
- *a core as well as ad hoc survey section,*
- *new graphics and images.*

Other possibilities also exist for the future, including an anonymous and independent 'added value' research area for stores. This could be called, for example, vr-research.com or i-magen.co.uk/vodafone. This project extension would be designed to increase loyalty with these 'customers'; utilising online chat areas and notice boards to create an online community of store managers that ultimately continues to 'involve' these important employees, and hence increase their effectiveness and loyalty.

In ways such as this, i-magen will continue to work with Vodafone Retail to provide insights based on sound research and the most appropriate communication techniques and channels.