

What Customers Really Want

Every petroleum-convenience retailer seeks to read its customers' minds—to know what attracts a consumer to a specific store. Service Intelligence is back to answer these questions by cultivating the connection between consumer intelligence and business opportunities in the third annual CSP-Service Intelligence Mystery Shop.

To delve further into customer perception and find out customers' needs and expectations, this year's mystery shoppers were asked subjective as well as objective questions. The answers give retailers a great blueprint for capturing customer loyalty.

A Positive Experience

Customers judge an experience as positive when they receive quality service from a friendly clerk in a timely manner. When asked why their experience was positive, shoppers overwhelmingly named quality and friendliness of service (36%). Second was speed and efficiency of service (21%).

▶ **Excellent customer service is achievable with appropriate checks and balances,** which can be facilitated by a customer experience evaluation program. Such a program allows you to hire, retain and effectively train employees, allowing your brand to stand out to consumers.

Shoppers who replied that they were very satisfied with the service received again emphasized the employee's friendliness (55%) and speed of transaction (43%). "Satisfied" is a golden word for retailers: When customers are satisfied, they return. Knowing the components that cause a customer to feel satisfied help leverage opportunities.

▶ **Shoppers were also asked what factors make a chain a leader.** Top factors were the accessibility and layout of the store (34%), cleanliness of the store's interior (23%), product selection (22%) and store atmosphere and décor (20%).



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COVER STORY

These may seem like common responses, but this consumer intelligence sheds a light on what attracts customers.

This question introduces three more concepts to target, by looking at how customers are able to move around the store, what items are most out of stock, and if promotions and signage are properly displayed.

▶ **Another recurring theme for stores is cleanliness,** and not all chains come out looking shiny. When shoppers said a location was either dirty or very dirty, they cited two major areas: restrooms and parking lots. When dirty, these areas reflected very poorly on the customer experience and had the potential to affect customers throughout their visit. Concentrating on these areas can improve a customer experience; this variable can be gauged to identify improvement or decline.

Timing Is Everything

This year's survey also concentrated on service levels of different days and time periods. Analysts pinpointed Friday, Saturday and Sunday as the weakest-performing days. This may be caused by more part-time staff or less-tenured staff on the job, or the lack of managerial presence.

The data also revealed a correlation between time of day and inferior service: The hours between 3 and 5 p.m. received the lowest ranking. This could be the result of shift changes, when a decrease in attention to cleanliness, merchandising and customer service can occur.

▶ **So what does it all mean?** This year's study results again emphasize areas that customers most value when choosing a chain: friendly service, quick transactions and cleanliness. Stressing these three areas seems to imply greater customer loyalty, the objective of any brand.

Now that you know what customers really want, the question becomes how to move toward solutions and improvement. Initiating a customer experience evaluation program to measure these variables is the first step, because what gets measured gets done. The process, however, is more than gathering data; it's what happens next that makes the difference. Analyzing data to spot peaks and trends, to then provide tangible recommendations, causes the change. Then you can give customers what they really want. ■