Collecting Customer Satisfaction Data With Web Surveys

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COLLECTING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION DATA WITH WEB SURVEYS

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Abstract

Objective

The objective of this Master's thesis project was to provide comprehensive suggestions that need to be thought over when constructing and distributing web surveys to collect international customer satisfaction information in a B2B environment.

Research methods

The literature review was conducted on a particular set of topics pertaining to the research question. From the knowledge and insight drawn from the literature review, a framework was constructed. The framework was then tested with three open-ended interviews of qualitative nature.

Findings

The four different components linking with the research question are the choice of customer satisfaction survey method, survey template, survey distribution, and survey results. The survey method in itself is linked with the corporate objectives set for the survey process. It defines what the web survey is essentially used for, and what approach the overall template structure will possibly follow.

The survey template considerations are linked with the survey method chosen, and provide the actual composition of the survey items. The survey template needs to consist of simple and precise questions, which leave little room for interpretation as well as are easily understandable.

The third component in the web survey process, the actual distribution of the survey, offers many benefits to companies using it. The most crucial element in distributing and marketing effectively the survey to recipients is the cover letter. The cover letter needs to be written clearly, with personal touches, and in a short manner when it is sent out. The cover letter is an integral component in distinguishing the survey to the recipient base.

Once the survey has been distributed, the results need to be analyzed. Customer satisfaction information needs to be used in ways that recognize its potential. Since the entire process centres on obtaining useable results that can then be analyzed into report form for management. These results should be compiled into a separate database that will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. Once the results have been analyzed, the process starts over, adding to continuous process improvement.

Keywords

Web survey, analysis of customer satisfaction, survey template, survey distribution

Tiivistelmä

Tavoite

Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli päästä tilanteeseen, jossa on tiedossa suosituksia yrityselämän pyörteisiin liittyen asiakastyytyväisyyskyselyn rakentamisessa ja jakamisessa web-kyselymuodossa.

Tutkimustapa

Tutkielma toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena. Akateemisen kirjallisuuden ja – artikkeleiden pohjalta rakennettiin kehys, jonka mukaan empiirinen tutkimus suoritettiin. Empiirinen tutkimus suoritettiin kolmen yrityshaastattelun perusteella, jonka jälkeen teoria (kirjallisuus) ja käytännön kokemukset (haastattelut) yhdistettiin analyysissa.

Havainnot

Neljä osiota, jotka linkittyvät tutkimuskysymykseen ovat asiakastyytyväisyyskyselyn metodi, kyselyn rakenne, jakaminen sekä tulokset. Kyselyn metodi itsessään linkittyy yritysten omiin asiakastyytyväisyystavoitteisiin, joka toimii aloituspisteenä prosessin alkupäässä. Metodi määrittää pitkälti lähestymistavan, jolla yritys lähtee rakentamaan kyselyn sisältöä.

Toinen komponentti kyselyprosessissa on varsinaisen kyselyn sisällön määrittäminen. Kyselyn kysymykset tulee olla lyhyitä ja tarkasti määriteltyjä, jotka minimoivat hämmennyksen vastaajan puolelta kysymyksenasettelusta. Kysymykset tulee olla helposti ymmärrettäviä, eikä niitä saisi olla liikaa. Yksinkertaiset ohjeet tulee sisällyttää rakenteeseen myös.

Kolmas osio on itse web-kyselyn jakaminen, jossa web-kyselyllä on taloudellisia ja käytännön hyötyjä tarjottavanaan sähköpostin liitteenä lähetettävään lähestymistapaan verrattuna. Olennainen elementti kyselyn jakamisen suhteen on saatekirje. Saatekirje tulisi olla kirjoitettu selkeästi, personoidusti, sekä mahdollisimman lyhyen kaavan mukaan. Kirje edustaa kyselyn prosessin puolesta mahdollisuutta erottautua positiivisesti muista kyselyistä.

Kun kysely on lähetetty, tulokset tulee myös analysoida. Asiakastyytyväisyystietoutta tulee käyttää hyväksi niin, että siitä on hyötyä organisaation eri tahoille. Koska kyselyprosessin perimmäinen tarkoitus on kerätä hyödyllistä tietoa asiakkaiden tyytyväisyydestä, olisi hyvä kerätä tätä tietoa erilliseen tietokantaan, josta tietoa voidaan jatkojalostaa. Tulosten jälkeen asiakastyytyväisyyden mittaamiseen liittyvä prosessi alkaa uudelleen alusta, oppien edellisistä kierroksistaan.

Avainsanat

Web-kysely, asiakastyytyväisyyden analysointi, kyselypohja, jakaminen

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List of abbreviations

B2B   Business-to-Business

B2C   Business-to-Consumer

CRM   Customer Relationship Management

HTML   HyperText Markup Language

SLA   Service Level Agreement

URL   Universal Resource Locater

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Customer feedback is a hot topic in the international business environment, where companies continuously assess their performance. For companies it is crucial to be aware of how they are performing, with respect to their corporate customer base. If a company loses their touch of their customers, the situation is not heading towards a happy end. After all, by measuring customer feedback, companies are able to figure out why others enjoy their products and services, as well as successfully maintain quality. If this knowledge becomes outdated, so does the company's ability to successfully sell their expertise and product portfolio to existing and new customer candidates. New product and service development is also dependent upon the feedback of customers. (Fundin et al., 2003; Sampson et al., 1998)

Customer feedback is linked with corporate strategy. This feedback must be useful in strategic terms, i.e. provide the company management with important information regarding crucial aspects of their customer base. Strategies define how the process of customer feedback is essentially carried out. The reasoning behind collecting customer feedback is to ensure a corporation's ability to effectively obtain crucial information, implement best practices, and benchmark, since customers are the main deciders of future competitiveness, and its possible success stories. Consequently, customer feedback is capable of providing answers to many questions posed by corporate management, if the company has an on-going process in place that allows for the information to be continuously used effectively. (Wirtz et al., 2000; Chakrapani, 1998; Mohamed, 1992)

A central component of customer feedback is customer satisfaction, which relates to a companies' ability to produce portfolioes of products and services that meet the demands of the customers. For companies, it is essential to know what makes their customers satisfied. When companies area aware of this, they can supply their customer better with solutions that suit their desires. It can be stated that there is a direct link between measuring customer satisfaction and the quality of service a company is able to provide. By measuring customer satisfaction, companies can identify possible areas of improvement and possibly even future business ventures. (Bielski, 2008; Jamal et al., 2002; Kelsey et al., 2001)

The importance of this satisfaction is crucial for companies, and in particular to the systems that facilitate customers' transmission of feedback. It is not enough for companies to simply have processes in place, which should collect valuable customer satisfaction information, but rather, the process should be effective in what is does, primarily acting as an easy gateway of relaying said type of information between two companies. By measuring customer satisfaction, companies are able to perceive what they should change in their own processes, and portfolio needs. By applying the lessons gained from customer satisfaction feedback, companies are able to build competitive advantage over their competitors by changing, and adapting faster. The process must not be difficult to use, neither from the company's nor the customer's point of view. (Opoku, 2006; Wirtz et al., 2000; Legare, 1996)

Fundin et al. (2003) maintain that in today's increasingly competitive markets, it is vital to both delight and avoid disappointing the customer base. It is of value to have a systematic process for obtaining customer satisfaction information so that companies are capable of making corrective actions. According to Lin et al. (1997) customer satisfaction surveys have been used as the primary method in assessing satisfaction levels, primarily fulfilling two needs: Firstly, they provide valuable information that enables the company to compare the measure current operations. This notion pertains to a company's ability to assess what how it is currently performing, with regard to agreements, contracts, and competitors. Secondly, customer satisfaction surveys provide a rich source of information from the customer based, which in turn assist in generating continuous quality improvement in companies' product and service portfolios.

There are different mediums of conducting surveys. With relation to the web survey, research suggests that the estimated response rates are lower for web surveys, when compared to other mediums (Converse et al. 2008; Manfreda et al. 2008). This is mainly due to the web survey's ability to reach a wider, international audience, thus resulting in lower response rates. The response rate for the web survey can be e.g. 60%, which can be very acceptable. The level of acceptability links with a company's own perception of an approvable response rate. As Smee et al. (2000, p. 124) concluded, the best results, in terms of response rate and response speed, and with completion and error rates similar to those in an email survey, was achieved using a web survey.

According to Hill et al. (2003, p. 36), there are four basic options for conducting surveys:

- Personal interviews

- Telephone interviews

- Postal surveys

- Electronic surveys

In a perfect world, where time was not of the essence, personal interviews would be conducted but because of their strenuous use of time and money, they are often opted for other mediums. Telephone interviews are also excluded, due to the low hit rates in B2B markets (Converse et al. 2008) and higher expenditures (Braunsberger et al., 2007). According to Hill et al. (2003, p. 41) the traditional medium of sending out surveys, via post, have given way for the taking advantage of using electronic means of distributing the surveys to customers. This is why traditional, postal surveys are also excluded from this research.

Since online solutions have become increasingly used, a lot of potential has been realized through this medium as to the way customer feedback can be gathered. Many people wondered how Internet technologies might transform the means of gathering and using customer feedback to a more automated process that is able to send out, collect and analyze data. The electronic surveys can provide all this, ultimately serving a company's need of sending out surveys and being able to analyze the results in report form. The other electronic survey, the email survey, is sent typically in the form of file attachment, which is then sent back by the customer for analysis, but will not be studied further in this research, namely due to its lower level of applicability. An example of an applicability constraint is that email surveys cannot be automatically submitted to a database for further analysis. (Alvarez et al., 2003)

Due to the potential in conducting surveys in electronic form, this research will focus on the increasingly automated solution, namely web surveys (Hill. et al., p. 41). It has grown into an apparent medium of measurement in electronic form (Alvarez et al., 2003;

Solomon, 2001). According to Grant et al. (2005), there are substantial technological and methodological improvements to be gained through the use of web-based surveys. Perhaps the greatest benefits offered to companies implementing the web survey are the savings in both time and money, access to a large recipient base, decreased cost for data collection and data entry, and the ability to present survey information in different formats (Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Duffy, 2000; Schmidt, 1997).

Since surveying customer base satisfaction is not a new phenomenon, companies have constructed ways of collecting this information. For a multitude of years companies have collected customer satisfaction feedback with other electronic mediums, such as email attachments, but a new trend is emerging, where the web survey is taking over as the prominent tool for collecting customer satisfaction information. (Grant et al., 2005; Hill et al., 2003; Solomon, 2001; interviews)

The email attachment mode has been in use for a number of years, but has been increasingly favored by the web survey approach. The web survey in general provides the surveying company and the respondent alike a smoother mode for distributing and filling out the survey. In the end, the method a company chooses as their mode for survey distribution, will determine their ability to automatically analyze the obtained data. The email attachment approach, which is manually sent back to the sender, requires much work to open every single document separately, and then comprise the data into, e.g. an Excel spreadsheet for further data mining.

With the web survey, opportunities of constructing an automated process increase. Web tools may be implemented, and the surveys may be distributed following the basic guideline the B2C environment has been doing for a multitude of years. The companies offering services and products to the B2C customer segments have been able to adopt early on the web survey approach, where the company sends non-personalized for their customers, all of which have agreed to receive email notifications, e.g. when signing their value customer agreement. These surveys usually include opportunities for winning prizes and gift certificates, if the respondent takes part in the survey.

On the other hand, the web survey offers many opportunities for companies within the B2B sector as well. As Vavra (1999, p. 29) mentions, the first benefit is that once an

organization has invested in a software tool, the survey costs are minimal. Staff time is still required, but the increasingly automated process decreases the overall human capacity the survey process requires. The web survey also gives a multitude of incremental opportunities to collect different kind of collateral data such as response time on each question, e.g. mean value of response time per sample.

Secondly, web surveys are quick; introductory emails can be sent automatically, and people who respond to them usually do so swiftly. Thirdly, data entry is eliminated, since the software tool automatically enters the results into a database, from which data can then be analyzed into report form (Hill et al. 2003, p. 41). Finally, current technologies enable organizations to set up web surveys to capture customer feedback in real-time and afterwards, route the feedback by topic to the appropriate department for corresponding actions (Chan 2008, p. 29).

This thesis project will be focusing on customer feedback, and more precisely on the customer satisfaction feedback process. Customer satisfaction is an interesting component of the entire feedback entity, since knowledge of what makes customers feel satisfied is important for companies (Opoku, 2006; Fundin et al. 2003). The web survey will also provide the medium by which the customer satisfaction data would be gathered from the customer base ((Hill et al. 2003; Vavra, 1999).

1.2. The managerial problem

Research has been conducted in the area of customer satisfaction surveys, with a portion focusing on the actual construction of the survey (Alvarez et al., 2003; Vavra, 1999; Dillman, 1998; Hayes, 1998). This research topic is still lacking in providing managers in the B2B sector a comprehensive viewpoint into what is relevant to consider when compiling the survey template. There are multiple things a customer satisfaction template can include, but they all need to follow a certain rationale and contribute to the ultimate objective; provide useable information for enhancing the current customer-related operations.

Another area that is lacking in research is the medium companies use to send out the surveys, i.e. the cover letter that contains the web survey link. It is not sufficient enough to

construct a proper survey template, it also needs to be distributed and marketed sufficiently so that the recipients actually respond to the cover letter's call-to-action points. The use of the web survey as a medium for collecting customer satisfaction information has been researched slightly. It is consequently beneficial to research the potential web surveys possess in the process of measuring customer satisfaction.

The two components, the survey template and distribution mode, both account for obtaining customer satisfaction data from the parties the survey is sent to. It is important for companies to realize that a certain amount of sales skills are required when sending out the cover letter. The role of the cover letter is sell the concept of sacrificing 5 minutes of office work time to fill out a survey. The cover letter needs to be simple, concise, and straight-to-the-point. Emails that are vague in their purpose will easily be deleted.

The second component, the distribution mode, needs to be capable of being easy to use for the recipient as well as providing automated solutions for processing the data by the sender organization. It is my viewpoint that the web survey is capable of both things; it can provide a facilitated medium for providing satisfaction information by customers as well as it being linked with tools that allow for the web survey data to be analyzed further. For the companies sending out the survey, the primary need drawn from the customer satisfaction information is for it to be simply put into report-form, where success and failure can be identified.

1.3. Research problem and objectives

In competitive B2B markets, it is essential for companies to have a systematic process for obtaining feedback from its customer base, not only to make corrective actions relating to services they provide, but also as a vital input to new service developments (Sampson, 1998) and even organizational survival (Nicholls et al., 1998). The process of surveying a company's customer base is thus an essential ingredient in knowing what do develop, how to sell, what to sell and what customer-valued benefits the company is able to offer through its service and product portfolio.

For companies dealing in the international business environment, the need to be aware of cultural and language-related issues is a substantial one. A well-constructed survey

template may fall flat, if its wording or translation is not properly thought through. Even if the survey possesses great possibilities in providing companies with valuable information, it can also be a source for misleading information, if the survey template or cover letter are not aligned with the specific aspects of the cultures and language regions it is distributed to. (Harzing, 2002, 2004, 2006)

The cover letter that introduces the web survey link also needs to be well constructed. The survey can provide a good "breather" between work assignments, allow for the recipient to do something refreshing. And the way people decide whether or not they will actually fill the survey out depends heavily upon the cover letter that introduces it. Matters relating to the cover letter, such as the level of personalization, the ability to attract the reader's attention, and the structure of the letter, all act for or against the survey being filled out. (Heerwegh et al., 2007; Feiertag, 2007; Couper et al., 2007; Penttila, 2005)

Due to these reasons, the purpose of this research is to investigate what kind of considerations there are in the B2B environment, when web surveys are used as the mode of choice for collecting customer satisfaction information. In this thesis the emphasis in distribution will be in obtaining data. The actual survey template will be investigated, with an emphasis on determining what items need to be included in the actual survey so that it is suitable to send out to an international respondent base. International considerations are also focal aspects, as culture and language both affect the results.

Distribution will be identified as the other major component in this research, with a focus point on the different effects that need to be taken into account when sending the web survey letter to the business environment. The results obtained from the first two components, the survey template and means of distributing it, will be also researched, but rather as an end result. The qualitative and quantitative aspects of the obtained survey results will be directly influenced by the template and the channel of distribution, but will be researched only in terms of how they should be collected, so that the company is able to use them in further analysis and intra-organizational development.

The research problem in this research is therefore formed as being:

How can web surveys be constructed and distributed to collect international customer satisfaction information in a B2B environment?

A general problem in customer satisfaction surveys is the level of non-responsiveness, meaning that the survey is sent out but answers are never obtained. The reason for this is mainly due to the fact that the web survey allows for a wider respondent base to which the survey is sent out to, and transversely as the number of respondents' increases, resulting in lower response rates. This problem can possibly be solvable; if research emphasis is put into the way companies present the survey to recipients. (Manfreda et al. 2008; Chakrapani 1998, p. 220; Lin et al. 1997)

Companies could potentially increase the level of responsiveness by linking corporate strategic goals to the surveying process.. This ultimately means the company sending out the survey needs to figure out what they want to accomplish with it and what information they need. A survey needs the backing of corporate strategy, since the survey is simply a tool that is used to revise how well the company currently performing in strategy implementation.

The survey process may also be cluttered with a non-performing way of distributing it. The primary method of selling the notion of the survey is the cover letter, and the case may be that the actual survey template is aligned with corporate strategy, but it is not well received from the customer base simply due to an information-glutted, non-personalized cover letter which is easily deleted because the benefits offered by the web survey are not clearly stated.

The following research questions have been formed to divide the research problem into smaller segments:

1. *How can the customer satisfaction survey be constructed?*

2. *How should the survey template be compiled?*

3. *What an efficient cover letter comprises of?*

These research questions will be analyzed throughout this thesis. They are in place to guide the research remain surrounding the critical elements under investigation. Answers to these questions will be partly analyzed in different stages of the thesis, and a compiled analytical answer will be presented in the final chapter.

1.4. Definitions

Customer satisfaction is a term by which it is defined if a specific product or service has met the expectations of the customer base. Web surveys provide a medium through which such customer satisfaction data can be collected. The web survey is conducted online by logging onto a specified site. To participate in these surveys, respondents are usually required to visit a particular web-address or URL. If the company has internal customers, the company's intranet may also be used. Before the online survey may be taken into use, the respondents need to be made aware of the survey by email. Once the email with the corresponding information and link has been sent, the customer is able to fill in the survey. (Hill, 2003)

The cover letter that introduces the actual web survey link is an essential component in the web survey distribution process. For the recipients, the cover letter acts as the introductory letter that entices them to become interested from the web survey. The cover letter consequently needs to appeal to the respondent to complete the questionnaire by highlighting the importance of the respondents' answers. It does so by being concise, personlized and informative. (Couper et al. 2007; Feiertag, 2007; Heerwegh, 2005; Kaplowitz et al., 2004)

1.5. Limitations of the study

Since this research will solely focus on the B2B environment, the widespread research relating to the B2C web survey applicability will be used as a means to interpret the overall situation on what works and what does not, in relation to the survey template and proper means of distributing it. Naturally, the results that are obtained from the B2C web surveys indicate a different usefulness; they are directly linked with products, services, promotion and other ways of increasing sales figures.

In the B2B environment a similar type of approach needs to be taken; ultimately companies aim for the same end result by knowing what their customers value, and what satisfies their needs and wants. The difference is the overall tone of the environment. One is not able to emulate the same informal tone in the survey template or in distributing the survey by means of a highly sales pitch-like cover letter. Informality and a more conservative approach needs to be maintained, but without loosing a sight of the overall objective; how to obtain the results.

The empirical data used in this study was collected during 2008, so the limiting fact is not the newness of the interviews but rather their limited, numerical amount. This research was conducted with a survey mentality, consequently focusing on the quality not the quantity of interviews, which provide higher amounts of information in a narrow, limited user base. Three interviews were conducted with respect to this thesis. This will affect the ability to generalize the implications discussed in the latter parts of this document.

1.6. Method of the research

This thesis was conducted as qualitative research. More specifically, three company representatives were interviewed on the basis of the insight obtained from the literature review in chapter 2. This way theory and empirical data could be formed into analysis, and lastly managerial implications. The aim was also to produce new managerial suggestions towards business situations, i.e. what aspects relating to customer satisfaction web surveys need to be considered. (Mason, 1996; Denzin et al., 1994; Robson et al., 1989)

The empirical data was collected by qualitative interviews. These fall into three types: Structured and standardized; guided and semi-structured; and unstructured, informal, open and narrative interviews. The structured and standardized approach comprises of interviews that have same standardized questions for all participants. The second approach on the other hand relies on outlining topics, issues or themes, with varying wording and sequence. The third and final qualitative interview type uses some guiding questions or core concepts to start with, but allows for increased freedom to move the conversation in any direction of interest that may come up. (Eriksson et al. 2008; Mason, 1996; Denzin et al., 1994)

It was my decision to choose the most appropriate interview type, and I picked the guided and semi-structured approach. I consequently conducted interviews that were open-ended in nature. They were situations where respondents were asked about facts and personal opinions regarding the customer satisfaction survey process. The aim was to interview business professionals who are in contact with electronic surveys on a weekly basis, and can challenge the aspects presented in the end of chapter 2. More information on methodology pertaining to this research can be found in chapter 3.

1.7. Motivation towards the topic

A primary objective in writing my thesis has been to find a topic where I would be able to combine the knowledge I have gathered from both business and academic surroundings. This objective was fulfilled, when the concept of researching the potential electronic surveys possess in collecting B2B customer satisfaction results was introduced to me. The topic became more defined once I got a comprehensive grasp on the actual topic I felt was suitable for conducting my thesis on.

I have been involved in B2B sales work for the past years, from which I have been able to perceive what works and what does not, when it comes to distributing information between international companies, as well as between two opposing sides in sales; the seller and the buyer. I have noticed that selling involves specifically having the proper email template that is concise, easily approachable, and entices the receiver to respond and react to the seller's point of views. The message also needs to have a call-to-action point (Feiertag, 2007), that makes for a beneficial end result for both parties involved, i.e. the sender and respondent.

My B2B sales background got me excited about a topic where I could indirectly use my own expertise on a crucial aspect in the web survey process, the cover letter. Knowing what works and does not in real life, it was fun to conduct research into the very topic that has taught me much through trial and error: how to conduct an email letter that entices the respondent to act according to the instructions and sales pitch presented in the email.

Referring to particular HSE courses, I've gradually become acquainted with the importance of customer feedback in the operations of international companies. The topic of involving

my work experience with the proper academic framework gradually came to mind, once I realized the importance of the applicability of web surveys in the international B2B setting. Referring to my work experience, it has become apparent that the future of satisfaction surveys and other concepts, such as sales letters, will be gradually shifted towards online versions.

1.8. Structure of the thesis

| 1. Introduction | 2. Literature review | 3. Research methods | 4. Analysis | 5. Conclusion |

Figure 1. Structure of the study.

The illustration of the thesis outline (figure 1) shows how this document has been divided into different sections. The thesis starts off with the introductory chapter, which presents the background of the study, research gap, research problem and objectives, definitions, limitations of the study, methodology, motivation, and the structure of the study. The following section of the thesis will be the literature review.

The literature review has been divided into four parts. The literature review will aim to provide answers to the research sub-questions, which were presented in chapter 1.3. An illustration of the literature review's structure can be found in figure 2. Once the literature review has been compiled, the framework for the framework of this thesis will be presented. This framework will be based solely on the secondary research material, and will guide the interviews presented in greater detail in chapter 3.

After chapter 2, the second big component of the research will follow. The interviews conducted on the basis of the literature review and the framework presented in the end of chapter 2. Empirical studies were briefly discussed in chapter 1.6. and will be further elaborated in chapter 3. This chapter will consequently describe the used methods for

conducting and gathering data and the justification for these methods. Chapter 4 will present the collected data, and provide an analysis into the interviews and reviewed literature. The final chapter will consist of conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Figure 2. Structure of the literature review.

2. Literature review

This section has been divided into four different segments: Customer satisfaction survey methods, survey template, survey distribution, and survey results. The review will start off by identifying what are the different approaches available to start constructing the actual template. The second section will present aspects related to the survey template. The third section will research how the web survey can be distributed, and what different aspects need to be taken into account when doing so. The fourth section involves the survey results and discusses how the information can be put into useable form by having the prior components of the customer satisfaction web survey process in place.

2.1. Customer satisfaction survey methods

Regarding the different methods of customer feedback and their respective result analysis methods, three methods can be found to be the most fitting in customer satisfaction surveys. They are gap-analysis, performance-based analysis and the conjoint method. Two popular methods which have been in use are gap-analysis of expectations minus performance and the performance-based method of linear regression of the overall satisfaction rating between the individual attribute ratings. The conjoint method is the one of these three, which combines different approaches of survey methods. (Danaher, 1997)

2.1.1. Gap-analysis

Customer satisfaction has been traditionally measured with two different ways, which are a gap- and performance-based analysis. The first method measures the gap between customer's service expectations and the actual service. The survey template consists of duplicate questions that are the expectations and experienced service. Gaps can be calculated separately and the biggest gap gets most attention from the company sending out the survey. There are two major problems in the gap analysis model. First, the gap analysis does not take into account the interactions between attributes. Secondly, there might be large gaps, which are not important to the customer. (Hemmasi et al., 1994)

2.1.2. Performance-based analysis

Another way of measuring customer satisfaction is to measure performance and exclude

the expectation variable. Performance level survey (the linear regression method) can be implemented e.g. with the Likert-scale. The Likert-scale is a five-step scale that uses numbers to distinguish between different possibilities (e.g. 1 being the lowest level of satisfaction, 5 being the highest). The attributes that get lowest or highest results from survey will be focused on and so the service provider can act quickly to repair possible problems. The problem with the performance level survey is that it does not necessarily reflect the actual service, and might therefore mislead management to make incorrect decisions. (Gillin 2006; Danaher, 1997)

2.1.3. Conjoint method

Almost all satisfaction/quality surveys ask respondents to evaluate the service they have just received. Gap-analysis and performance-based method evaluates one single group of attributes whereas the conjoint analysis asks the respondent to measure different possible service scenarios. The value of conjoint analysis is that it measures several different opinions from one person, and thereby gives a better understanding of the relative importance of attributes that are measured. Therefore, the conjoint analysis reflects the respondents' expected satisfaction from service (e.g. worse than expected, about the same as expected, and better than expected service) to the already experienced service. Because of the expected and experienced service satisfaction attributes, conjoint method is basically a hybrid of gap-analysis and performance level survey. It also narrows down the "gut feeling" in answers by giving a mean value from the sum of questions. (Danaher, 1997)

The conjoint method gives reliable estimates of the relative importance weights of service attributes and therefore can be used to give managers guidance on how best to raise current customer satisfaction levels. The biggest downside of the conjoint method is that it may diminish response rates because of the extra attribute fields that need to be filled by the respondent. Therefore managers should carefully revise what is wanted from the survey; which one is more important for the implemented survey, better response rate or more accurate information of customer satisfaction (Danaher, 1997). According to Krosnick (1999, p. 537), labelling of the scaling points should be a rallying point gap-analysis, performance-based analysis and the conjoint method.. Surprising effects of the verbal labels put on rating scale points have been identified, suggesting optimal approaches to scale labelling; respondents interpret questions on the basis of the norms of everyday

conversation, so violations of those conventions introduce error that can be minimized by giving a meaning for each scale point.

This section presented the basic ideas, benefits and shortcomings of the methods of conducting customer satisfaction survey. The three chosen survey methods present different ways of starting the customer satisfaction survey process with different approaches. The three methods illustrate the differences in approach and how the actual survey template will be affected in different ways. The first research question was addressed, i.e. how customer satisfaction surveys can be constructed.

The aspects previously presented can give companies an idea of when to use a particular method in measuring customer satisfaction. The method, which is chosen, needs to comply with the strategic reasoning behind the company's need for measuring customer satisfaction. For example, performance level survey gives results quickly from attributes that need to be improved whereas gap-analysis gives results of expected service in comparison to experienced service. Conjoint analysis is a hybrid of these two but may lower the response rates.

2.2. Survey template

This second component in the literature review addresses the second research question, i.e. the way a customer satisfaction survey template should be compiled. According to Alvarez et al. (2003), an advantage of web surveys is that they are relatively easy to conduct. This section will begin by discussing the role of prior customer expectations, incentives and satisfaction. The focus will then be shifted towards different cultural factors, since the survey respondent base is an international one. The third component discusses the construction of the web survey template, and does so by beginning with the actual template items, and continues to the grouping of these items. The scaling, which is used in the template, is presented lastly.

2.2.1. Prior customer expectations, incentives and satisfaction

Yi's widely recognised definition on expectations of services is:

Preconception beliefs about the overall performance of the service created

by: previous experiences; the organization's claims; service information; or/and word-of-mouth. (1991, p. 17)

The importance of prior satisfaction and expectations in customer satisfaction surveys is adamant. The duration of satisfied customer relationship affects positively on experienced product or service failures and/or increased transactional costs so that cumulative satisfactions acts as bumper for appeared problems in service. This means that, that in a long product or service provider- customer relationship the prior satisfaction and information weights more heavily than the new information. In turn, this cumulative satisfaction has an effect on survey results. Especially in the B2B environment the early steps of customer relationships are important because it is the time when image building has the greatest effect during the relationship life cycle. (Bolton, 1998, p. 45; Yi, 1991)

As Bolton (1998) continues, if the service or product provider is not able to deliver what is expected in the beginning, the customer is more likely to have a poor opinion long after the problems have been repaired. This situation results in companies achieving mediocre satisfaction results in surveys, when the product or service is more than expected. In terms of survey results problems can arise if the service provider has an excellent reputation and the new customer acknowledges this. The results can then be mediocre because the prior expectations of the customer are relatively high when compared to the actual end result that is provided. According to Andersson (1997) it is also notable that expectations are influenced by prior experience. When prior experience becomes more and more satisfying, expectations for future performance are adjusted ever higher. This is the prevailing reason why satisfying customer never comes easier. This expectation factor is one of the most bypassed concepts when creating customer surveys.

The possibility of grudge holding is also possible; it is the situation when a customer does not convey a lack of service or product in a certain area before the satisfaction surveys are distributed and filled out. A grudge holding component is particularly important in long haul service relationships. Grudge holding has a more serious impact in the B2B field, because exit barriers from the service agreement are higher and grudge-holders are less likely to initiate communication. If this is not asked in surveys, it may stay unnoticed and therefore affect the results of the survey. Routine customer satisfaction surveys should have a grudge-holding item or two, in order to detect the level of grudge holding, particularly

since grudge-holders are less likely to initiate communication. (Bunker et al. 2006, p. 37; Vavra, 1999)

Incentives have an important role as well when creating a survey. It has been theorised that customer satisfaction has a long-term effect on profitability. The enduring effort has the biggest effect on long-term service and satisfaction. Therefore, customer satisfaction is also a measurement tool of the amount of the enduring effort. Well-designed survey processes provide employees with an understanding of what is being measured from the customers. (Houser et al., 1994)

Maximizing the satisfaction of customers, both in B2C and in B2B, has a variety of value-adding side effects. One of the most important one is Heskitt and Schlesinger's theory on the relationship between the satisfied customer and satisfied employee. The theory cycle suggests that satisfied customers tolerate higher margins that can be used to better pay employees. This boost employee moral, reducing employee turnover, which in turn helps produce more satisfied customer through longer personal relationships between customers and employees. (Vavra, 1999, p. 9-10)

2.2.2. Cultural factors

Language and cultural accommodation effects are not a universal effect, but they occur in a very substantial number of situations. When it comes to customer satisfaction web surveys, the most crucial cultural component is language. One difficulty in constructing an survey template which is distributed to an international respondent base is that there is no absolute guarantee of translation accuracy. When creating the survey template the cultural effect of the survey receiver should be taken into account in some degree. Understanding cultural differences is critical to international business success, spanning from the internationalization process to customer satisfaction. The cultural dimensions have significant affects on the response rates and clarity of the attributes to the respondent. When the template is constructed and distributed to an international recipient base, language is definitely a distinct consideration. (Harzing, 2004; Yvonne et al. 2004)

An essential explanation for the differences in response styles across languages and cultures could be linked with the differential interpretation of equivalent scale anchors in

different languages. An example of this would be to define the satisfied-dissatisfied – continuum (Hayes, 1998) for different languages and cultures, without losing the balance between each term and thus create skewed scales for different nationalities. Even if the scale anchors could be translated into appropriate local equivalents, the intensity and mental differentiation associated between these equivalent could still remain different from the original language and other translations. (Harzing, 2006)

Language and cultural effects are present in many different types of survey items. These effects are increasingly present, when the item involves a culturally-charged aspect or a cultural dimension variable. The choice of survey template language is a prominent factor, which ultimately affects the results and the corporate strategic objectives of customer satisfaction. An example of such would be the following (Harzing, 2004):

> *If a survey written in English, researching the cultural dimensions between Japan and the US, is distributed to both nations, the results would show that the two nationalities are almost identical in overall results. When using a Japanese survey, a researcher comparing different cultural dimension between Japan and the US would obtain results that indicate significant differences between the two nations.*

Culture may affect how to sell the questionnaire to the receiver or if the receiver even bothers to look at the questionnaire. For some cultures, formality is maintained, even in longer-lasting relationships, whereas e.g. in the North European cultures informality is introduced quite early on. Also, cultural variables can affect the choice of the respondent, i.e. who actually responds to the survey, even though it may not be attended to the person from the service provider. (Marcus et al., 2000)

It has been noted that English-language surveys lead to a higher level of middle responses, while questionnaires in a respondent's native language result in more extreme response styles. English language competence is positively related to extreme response styles, and consequently contributes negatively to middle response styles. The language of the survey is a more significant factor in constructing the template, than the respondents' English language competence. (Harzing, 2006)

In another situation, a respondent with a high level of uncertainty will convey mild answer, whereas more assertive cultures would put forth more extreme opinions on the survey scale. Such aspects need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the survey results, because differences in response rates relate to the entire survey template, not just for particular items. (Harzing, 2006; Unsunier 2000)

Language does have an impact on the way people respond to questions relating to cultural values (Unsunier, 2000; Hofstede 1984). Customer satisfaction is one of these values, since different nationalities perceive their level of satisfied customer service on different scales. The decision on the language of the survey template is consequently a prominent one. For example the use of English-language survey templates might obscure important differences between country results. (Harzing, 2004)

There is still a strong relevance in culture, when customer satisfaction surveys are constructed and distributed. Cultural aspects can sometimes explain the reason why the survey was not answered; the answer time was long or was answered by a wrong person. They can even provide us solutions as to why a particular cultural grouping answered differently from others. The choice of language is essential in the construction of the customer satisfaction template, as was proven by Harzing (2002, 2004, 2006). Even the survey answers can be affected by culture, e.g. individualistic cultures tend to give more assertive answers so that the emphasis is more in the extreme ends.

2.2.3. Template items

The survey template should start from general issues and funnel down to more specific issue (Hayes, 1998). This approach will provide the respondents the ability to first warm-up their precognitions concerning customer satisfaction, and then provide accurate information regarding particular questions. This way, order effects that comprise of saliency and consistency effects, will diminish. Saliency effects mean that some questions proposed to the respondent seem more important than the following items, consequently providing skewed results. Consistency effect on the other hand means situations where the respondent tries to find consistency between questions, even though consistency is not meant to be there. Also, the questionnaire structure needs to be simple, since the survey can include

only short instructions on how to fill out the survey. The simplicity of the structure will also result in higher response rates and higher quality. (Vavra, 1999)

The survey needs to consist of precise statements that leave little room for interpretation. In this case, the questionnaire then provides more detailed and specific feedback concerning organizational and personnel performance. This can be achieved by constructing a survey that consists of well-characterised items; relevant and concise measures that directly link to the topic. Items that do not appear to measure customer satisfaction, when the instructions point to that direction, simply confuse the respondent. Redundant words should not be used, creating survey items that are too long, and difficult to read. An example of a long item would be (Hayes, 1998):

> *The service person seemed to act in a very personable manner to me when*
> *I asked for service.*

A shorter, more concise way of depicting the same item would look like the following sentence:

> *The service person was very personable.*

Some important microstructure guidelines for conducting the questions are (Vavra, 1999):

- Make sure each question is necessary. This means one should always know how to use the information that is asked.

- Never ask additional questions that the company should already have in their database.

According to Hayes (1998, p. 75-76) the items that are picked for the survey can be chosen by way of using either personal judgment or a mathematical approach. When using personal judgment, company personnel independently choose the most relevant items for the survey, and the results are a compilation of the most favoured items. The mathematical approach on the other hand requires statistical procedures that help determine the most appropriate items by means of conducting longer questionnaires to some actual customers. After analyzing the results of this statistical pre-screening, the most ideal items (that have

equal means and are highly interrelated) are chosen. The mathematical approach results in a more statistically reliable end result. All in all, the general goal for choosing the most suitable items is to retain items that "differentiate between customers who are dissatisfied and those who are satisfied".

Survey templates need to be constructed using a scale format, since the term satisfaction needs to be scaled. Satisfaction as a term means different thing to different people, so an understandable scaling system needs to be in place. The scaling will provide both parties, the interviewer and interviewee, a common understanding of the measurement under scrutiny. The survey template construction should follow a golden rule of thumb, which has been used in the past. This rule is that the template should be kept short, simple, and single-minded. It is all too common that surveys use industry jargon, too complex questions, or multiple items in one question. If there are multiple items in one questions, the interviewee tends to asses only one of the items in the question. Also, too general questions from the past should be avoided because rarely customer has an exact memory of the performance that the question is seeking an answer to. These items need additional clarification, and make the survey longer, which is the reason they should be broken down or left out. (Vavra, 1999)

Hayes (1998, p. 64) and Dillman et al. (1998) state that items should not be ambiguous, but rather the respondent should be capable of understanding precisely what the items are asking. Skewed answers are a result of vague items, since the survey is not defining precisely what the item is all about. An example of an ambiguous item might be:

The transaction with the service provider was good.

As depicted by Hayes (1998, p. 65-66), the item does not define precisely why the service was good, consequently it leaves room for interpretation. Some respondents might consider the item assessing the promptness of the service, whereas others may link it towards the service provider's professionalism. It can thus be concluded that a good item contains only one thought, and should only address one question. To minimize hesitation and confusion among the respondents, the example item can be split into two items:

The transaction took a short period of time.

The service provider talked to me in a pleasant way.

After the proper items have been chosen for the survey, the proper format needs to be decided upon. A response format determines how the respondent is able to take part in the survey. The choice of the most suitable format is essential, since it has a direct impact on the answer rates and the amount of data that can be collected from the survey, and how it can be analyzed. (Hayes 1998, p. 67, 76)

2.2.4. Item grouping

According to research conducted by Hayes (1998, p. 76), by combining items under a particular topic (e.g. customer service), the items need to be positively related to each other, providing thus high item-total correlations. For example, a survey was sent out to 100 customers. From this survey, five item-total correlation coefficients were calculated (table 3). We see that item 3 is not highly correlated with a composite of the other items, and can consequently be dropped from the survey. The results suggest that it would make sense to combine items 1, 2, 4 and 5 to achieve an overall score of customer service satisfaction. The third item could also be grouped with other survey groupings and check whether or not it has a high correlation with them.

Item 1	r = .67
Item 2	r = .55
Item 3	r = .23
Item 4	r = .59
Item 5	r = .77

Table 1. Correlation coefficients (Hayes 1998, p. 77).

The template needs to include additional items that are outside of the item groups. These items can provide additional information regarding specific aspects of customer satisfaction. Overall satisfaction should always be asked, because the questions may not cover all of the aspects of customers' satisfaction. If not overall satisfaction is not asked, the template could make the assumption that all of the appropriate performance measures

are included. If insignificant items are included, or significant items are excluded, the summation of these performance items becomes biased. With inappropriate items, the estimate of overall satisfaction will not correspond with the realistic situation. (Vavra, 1999)

A second reason for including the overall satisfaction item in a customer satisfaction survey is that if the overall value does not align with the other items, it may indicate that something is not asked or is lacking from the question template. Overall satisfactions should be asked at the end of the questionnaire because the respondent has then evaluated the service, firm or product through preceding, more exact template items. (Vavra, 1999)

2.2.5. Scaling

Interval-scale (= Likert-scale) is the most commonly used method because it gives the most robust information in simple format. It is also noted in recent literature that Likert-scale is favoured because there is a high correct impact of subjectivity to creating the actual question (Bothe et al., 1996, p.48). This means that when creating the question itself it is recommended to take into account the survey-respondent relationship because this does not bias the survey results itself. The Likert-scale shows the measurable distance between each variable. Odd and even numbered scale (e.g. odd 1-5 or even 1-6) differentiates from each other in the way that in even numbered scale the interviewee is forced to give opinion because there are no "neutral" answer in the scale.

The Likert-scale is able to provide a higher reliability of results with a lower amount of labour, which is the reason it has been picked as the other main focus point in choosing the format. The other is the checklist format that simply uses a "yes" or "no" answering scale. The more positive feedback the service is given, the higher the level of satisfaction is. This entails that the checklist format should only be used when the satisfaction items themselves (e.g. consumer products) are being used as the items in the questionnaire. For Nice this approach will not suffice. The Likert-scale is more appropriate in determining the level of satisfaction among its customer base, simply because the scale allows for the respondents to evaluate, with varying degrees of satisfaction, the different components of agreed-upon, good service. (Hayes 1998, p. 68)

The following scale is used in determining the level of satisfaction among customers. The scale is called the dissatisfied-satisfied continuum, and it can be used to reflect specific aspects of service, whilst being neutral. The continuum has grown into a silent industry standard, with a multitude of companies adopting the scaling to their own internal process evaluation tools (Vavra, 1999; Hayes, 1998).

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5

Table 2. Close-ended Likert-scale (Hayes 1998, p. 69).

With the satisfied-dissatisfied continuum, the respondents are allowed to reflect upon their received level of service, when comparing it to the checklist format. The level of reliability of the results increases when a five-point scale is used, and it is noteworthy that reliability also seems to decrease after five scale points, suggesting thus that there is minimal incremental utility in using more than five scale points. The Likert-scale does have difficulties in determining the interval between each scaled point. For example, the idstance between satisfied and very satisfied can be ambiguous and thus presents an issue when the results are analyzed. (Vavra, 1999; Hayes, 1998, p. 71)

Studies of attitudes between different cultures rely on a comparison of aggregated mean scores to Likert-scale questions. This suggests that when individuals of varying cultural backgrounds fill out a survey, their answers are based on the substantive meaning of the different template items they are responding to. In addition, people's responses are also influenced by their response styles. Conducted studies reveal that there are major differences in response styles between cultures and countries, a fact, which both confirms and extends earlier research. (Harzing, 2006)

A next step in the survey is the writing of the instructions. They should be concise, depicting the purpose of the questionnaire and provide instructions for completing it. Also, it might be explained, how the data will be used and analyzed. The introduction should also

convey how to complete the items as well as what explain the scaling. When using the satisfied-dissatisfied continuum, the instructions should ask the respondent to indicate the extent to which they are satisfied. The survey might have overlapping questions, and this needs to be addressed in the instructions. The reason for this could be that a more accurate assessment of customer's opinion is desired, hence the similarity of questions. (Hayes, 1998, p. 74-75)

This section introduced the different aspects that are present when considering the survey template. Particular factors, such as cultural aspects and prior expectations need to be examined while constructing the template, but they may be factors that are not that obvious for the recipient. Other factors, such as the actual items on the survey, item grouping and scaling all affect the success of the survey process, ultimately aiming to serve corporate strategy and useable results that have been obtained from the international customer and client base.

2.3. Survey distribution

This is the third component in the literature review, and addresses the issues related to distributing the web survey to collect international customer satisfaction information. The second research question, what an efficient cover letter comprises of, is introduced and researched. This section aims to answer what considerations need to be undertaken, when constructing an efficient cover letter that is the primary medium of distributing the web survey link. The subtopics start off with discussing when the web survey should be distributed, and during what intervals. The other important aspect in distributing the customer satisfaction web survey is the role of the cover letter. This component is researched in the latter part of this section.

2.3.1. Timeline

Three months is a typical scale for a survey project to be carried out, even twice longer if in-house personnel, who have other responsibilities as well, conduct it. The way a company has set up its intra-organizational survey functions reflects closely the speed and accuracy of the obtained results. This ultimately means, how much organizational resource a company is willing to put into implementing the survey process. Since the survey process is

more or les constantly on going, it can be stated that a survey process is never-ending, and thus should not be viewed as separate actions. (Hill, 2003)

Depending on industry there are two general explanations to interview periodically. Some interviews are conducted out of convention and others are done in line with events. Convention (or habit) finds organisations routinely surveying satisfaction annually or quarterly. The other situation is where surveys are administered at the same time of e.g. conventions, expos, or at the end of big projects. Both of these distribution schedules have their challenges. They both increase the possibility of providing skewed results due to the fact that personnel is aware of the similarly-timed yearly surveying, and do their best to obtain superior customer satisfaction during the months preceding the survey. (Vavra, 1999, p. 214)

Also, when surveying during particular events there is a possibility of biased results because events usually have positive effects on survey results. Interval surveying can give service providers a calendar with which to allocate special treatment to the customer. If the period of customer satisfaction survey is widely known, these periods can signal the time for enhanced servicing of customer. These bias effects should be taken into consideration, when constructing a distribution schedule on a yearly basis. (Vavra 1999, p. 214)

These previously mentioned changing the surveying schedule within a timeframe of 2 months, and distributing the schedule to a limited group within the organization could minimize effects causing biased results. Continuous (=quarterly or monthly) and moment of truth (after critical points in time, relating to a particular project) surveying are additional ways of reducing the risk of biased actions and results. Continuous measurement can be implemented, if the administrative cost structure is moderately low. Examples of possible activities under continuous measurement are databases. The moment of truth surveying refers to specific points of time, e.g. call centre performance that requires satisfaction measurement on an active basis. (Vavra, 1999; Hayes, 1998)

When conducting electronic surveys, warm-up calling should be used to entice the respondents' curiosity as well as their willingness to answer. For the recipients, this means that they are aware of the impending cover letter that is arriving in their inboxes within the announced schedule. For the sending company this means that they need to construct two

rounds of sales and marketing resources in terms of contacting the customer base. (Anton, 1996)

The survey respondents must have expertise and familiarity with respect to the topic. For the sender organization this means that the customer base needs to be aware of the different survey template items. Also, it is equally important to have the recipient base capable of truthfully answering the survey, so that the company obtains factual, useable information from their customers and clients. Ultimately the respondents' expertise and familiarity of the topics surveyed serve the validity of the survey results. (Ahmad et al., 2002)

2.3.2. Cover letter

Even though many people are swamped with work, the survey can provide a good "breather" between job assignments. The way people view the surveys are heavily impacted upon the cover letter that introduces it. The cover letter should also be personalized, which has been shown to have a significant increase in the response rates (Heerwegh et al., 2007). It is also noteworthy to realize what Couper et al. (2007, p. 623) and Kaplowitz et al. (2004) discovered; sending out a reminder mail notification prior to the actual cover letter containing a link to the web survey has a positive effect on response rates.

The web survey link requires an accompanying cover letter. When the survey distribution process is started off with a pre-notification letter, the actual cover letter in turn will be less likely to be deleted and consequently will be viewed more positively, ultimately enhancing the response rates (Couper et al., 2007, p. 624). According to Feiertag (2007, p. 10) the actual cover letter should be concise. The letter should be straight-to-the-point, since the first paragraph needs to attract the reader's attention to what the letter is informing. As stated by Penttila (2005, p. 62), it is relevant to notice that the first paragraph needs to be as compelling as needed. As Feiertag (2007, p. 10) continues, by using last names to identify the recipient in the salutation section of the letter, a personal touch can be added. According to Heerwegh (2005), it has been found that response rates increase when personalization is applied.

Feiertag (2007, p. 10) continues by stating that creativity should be used when using cover letters. The structure of the letter should follow a three-paragraph -structure. The first paragraph catches the reader's attention, with no more than two or three lines. The next paragraph should contain the reason for sending the letter. The third and final paragraph is the call-to-action; the reader is asked to do something, such as take part in the web survey. According to Heerwegh et al. (2005), personalization has positive effects on the survey response rate, but one should carefully consider whether or not to personalize when a survey on sensitive topics is conducted

There are two main keys for using email as a medium for persuading recipients. The first key involves keeping the format simple. Unlike most material that is sent to recipients, such as brochures and PowerPoint presentations, the sender has little control over how the letter will eventually look to the recipient. Crafted HTML emails may become unintelligible lumps of code to people with text-only email programs, and simplified text messages can be appear differently with different screen width or different email programs. Simple is consequently efficient, even relating to the use of hyperlinks. Hyperlinks should be written out so that the entire URL can be seen, instead of having a "click here" alternative. It is also noteworthy that bullets, line wrapping, and even font selection and colouring may all differ once the letter has been sent. When using emails, the message must rely on its content. (Dalton, 2004)

The second key in using email cover letters is to break long messages into smaller segments. The cover letter needs to convey a certain amount of information, involving the corporate culture of the sending organization's communication styles. The solution for aligning the message the cover letter conveys, and what corporate policies say of communication involves creating a letter that is short, but in line with other corporate documents. The less bulky the message is, the more high-skim value it possesses, making it thus more attractive and interesting. High skim value can be a lacking factor in most cover letters, resulting in information-glutted messages. The content must make the recipient to react to the letter, which in this case means that the cover letter entices the recipient to click on the web survey link. In the case of a long and strenuous cover letter, this enticement is diminished. (Feuertag, 2007; Dalton 2004, p. 7)

This section addressed the third research question, which surrounds the structure of an efficient cover letter. It was noted that the cover letter has a prominent role in the entire customer satisfaction survey process. It is the cover letter's role to actually make the receivers become interested in the web survey, and it does so by being short, concise and straight to the point. It needs to sell the notion of taking part in the survey, so it can be said that even if the survey template is constructed near to perfection, the cover letter needs as thought put into it as well.

2.4. Survey results

This fourth and final component presents how the previous survey process end result, i.e. the survey responses, could be set up so that the sender organization could benefit from them in the best way possible. This section will address the fourth research question, i.e. how can the customer satisfaction information be useable for an organization. According to Stefanou et al. (2003, p.5) customer satisfaction surveys can be used as a primary tool to enhance customer knowledge in a CRM system. Stefanou et al. (2003, p. 6) continue on stating that this is due to advances in IT and information systems that the CRM systems have been able to be integrated into existing company processes.

CRM has consequently become an enterprise-wide integration of technologies working together, including such activities as data warehousing, websites, intra-and extranets, phone support systems, accounting, sales, marketing, and actual production (Stefanou et al., 2003, p. 7). As Xu et al. (2002, p. 2) see it, when a CRM approach is used to obtain knowledge of customer, customer service and -support become easier. This is due to the possibility of combining the centralized contact information data and the past customer survey results.

It is advisable to plan suitable interventions for regaining the trust of customers who feel that their requirements and expectations were not fully met by companies (Muffatto 1995, p. 10). By quickly responding to sub-par customer feedback, the international companies are consequently able to take control of the situation and make changes needed to make the customer regain their trust in the service. It is not enough to obtain results from the recipients, but also to analyze the results and act upon them, when needed. As Takala et al. (2006, p. 5) put it: "The customer satisfaction information needs to be analyzed in new

ways that recognize its potential". It should be remembered when analyzing the results that satisfaction is a temporal and imperfect measurement and thus results should be interpreted more as a guiding tool for future actions to service improvements than as an exact problem solving tool, except in the case of unsatisfactory response. (Vavra, 1999, p. 44)

The usage of database will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. Human error is more likely to occur when non quantitative measurements are used because human nature will automatically look for information that reinforces one's own perception of things, thus objectivity is maintained if results are in quantitative form (Bly 1993, p.107). It is most complex in B2B situations to analyse and gather customer satisfaction data because purchasing and usage is divided to many individuals and/or cohort and therefore is submerged into customer's organisation (Vavra, 1999, p.66).

Usually, in B2B situations, there are many different parties that are involved in using the service such as purchaser of the service, primary user of the service, decision maker, gate keeper, subcontractor, etc. Not only these parties should be identified, but their relative importance in future acquisition and satisfaction should also be ascertained. This information may be used to combine ratings and possibly weight the ratings by relative influence. (Siskos, 2002). According to Vavra (1999, p. 67), a separate satisfaction-tracking database should be created. This would be a copy of the customer base with special modification. A separate database would be desirable for several reasons (Vavra, 1999, p. 82-83):

1. It should be accessible for "satisfaction measurement team" and not for the whole company because of the possible competition from other departments for accessing the file.

2. To properly sample and analyze the returned data, certain information of customers will be useful. This information may have to be appended to the file, extending the size of the current file.

3. The satisfaction-tracking file will require linking to other relational databases to enable storing satisfaction scores from many years' worth

of surveys. This linking will generally not be welcomed to an existing (e.g. accounting) file.

Relating to the fourth research question, when a web survey process is in place, a company is also able to have all the data in a centralized database, facilitating the distribution and management of the results. And by having the feedback in electronic form, it should be easier to construct a database of feedback requiring follow-up. This allows for the person initially reviewing the feedback to forward it to the employee(s) responsible for addressing that particular feedback. At that time, a record can be added to a database to keep track of which employee the feedback was assigned and forwarded to, and the date to follow up with that employee about the feedback. This database can be part of a "groupware" which would allow various people within the company to check and update the status of specific customer feedback. (Opoku, 2006; Alvarez et al., 2003)

2.5. Framework

On the basis of secondary research presented in the literature review chapter, a framework is presented, including the most relevant aspects for managers in the B2B sector to consider when constructing and distributing the customer satisfaction web survey. This framework has been outlined below, showing the four main components that will be used as the base structure to conduct primary research (chapter 3), analysis (chapter 4) and make managerial recommendations (chapter 5) upon. The four aspects presented here will be consequently be used to conduct empirical research in the form of qualitative interview questions, to determine whether or not all these components are important in the customer satisfaction web survey process.

Customer satisfaction survey methods

1. What is the starting point for the process?

Survey template

2. What is a good template?
3. How many items are in a good template?
4. Template strengths?
5. Template weaknesses?
6. Where is there room for improvement?

Survey distribution

7. What benefits can be gathered when using the web survey vs. e-mail attachment?
8. Web survey vs. e-mail attachment weaknesses?
9. Room for improvement?

Survey results
10. How is the data processed?
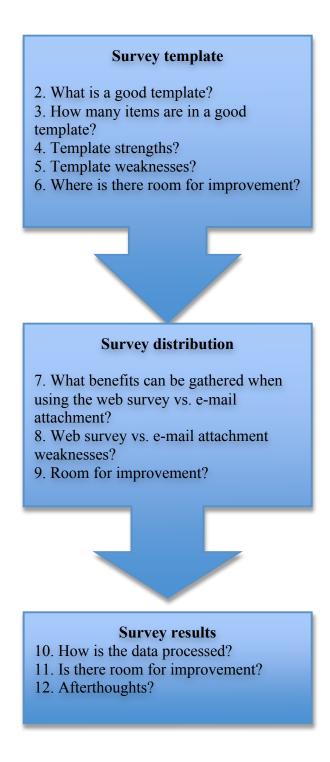11. Is there room for improvement?
12. Afterthoughts?

Figure 3. Thesis framework.

The previous components all influence the successfullness of the latter components,

meaning that if inappropriate decisions are made in the first components, the latter components and the ultimate objective of collecting useable customer satisfaction information, will be negatively impacted. The four components and their contribution to the framework can be summed up as follows:

Customer satisfaction methods: The method that is chosen presents the starting point for the survey process. The choice of survey method will determine how many and how long the survey will ultimately be. It will be necessary to investigate how a company chooses a method of approach to their customer satisfaction survey. The method decision indicates what the survey template will comprise of.

Survey template: The second component presents the different considerations that need to be addressed when constructing the actual template for the survey. The objective for managers is to construct a professional template that can be used to measure e.g. customer satisfaction. The actual survey items, scaling, outlook and grouping are decided. In the interviews it will be essential to distinguish what a respondent feels like is a good survey, how long it should be, and what weak spots and strong hold there are present in today's multiple surveys.

Survey distribution: This component provides a suitable medium for distributing the constructed web survey in an international B2B setting. The cover letter as well as other means of survey marketing is used, so that a high number of responses can be achieved. It is crucial to interview people who receive numerous cover letters on a weekly basis, and ask their perception of a well-written cover letter that entices them to take part in the actual web survey.

Survey results: The fourth and final component gathers the proper decisions made in the previous segments and collects potentially useable and useful results from the customer base. The results obtained from the web survey process need to serve the ultimate objective; figuring out on what level an international company is in terms of their customers and

clients being satisfied in their products and services. This objective is the primary basis for the first component of this framework.

3. Empirical studies

This section will elaborate on the research method chosen for this thesis, as well as illustrate how the empirical data was collected. The research method will be presented in a larger context, and the corresponding empirical data collection tool will be presented. The role of this section is to provide an academic understanding of why research was conducted according to a particular manner, as well as how the empirical data will be used in the latter parts of this thesis. The empirical findings in this section will be analyzed with the material most relevant in the literature review in chapter 4.

3.1. Research method

According to Eriksson et al (2008) and Mason (1996), business research is often related to practical questions and issues of companies. Business research is an approach that covers a broad range of research methods, which are linked to different aspects of the social world (Ritchie et al., 2003). This was the case in my situation, where I was introduced to the topic of customer satisfaction in my studies earlier on. The topic was chosen by me simply because I felt that the topic was a current one, and which interested me greatly. The aim was also to produce new managerial suggestions towards business situations, i.e. what aspects relating to customer satisfaction web surveys need to be considered. (Mason, 1996; Denzin et al., 1994; Robson et al., 1989)

3.2. Empirical data

The empirical data was collected by qualitative interviews. The key types of generated data in qualitative research are in-depth interview and focus groups. They serve different roles, and selection between these two depends on three key factors: the type of data sought, the subject area, and the nature of the study group. A key feature of in-depth interviews is their depth of focus on the interviewee. These interviews provide an opportunity for detailed investigative research of an individual's experiences on a particular topic. Focus group offers less opportunity of the in-depth analysis of personal experiences and reflections. For this research, the depth of focus into interviewees' experiences on customer satisfaction surveys was the primary choice for qualitative data collection. (Eriksson et al., 2008; Richter et al., 2003)

The other key factor distinguishing between in-depth interviews and focus groups is the subject area. Very complex systems, processes or experiences are generally best addressed in interviews, simply because they provide more depth of focus and the opportunity of clarification and detailed understanding. The interviews are capable of providing motivations, decisions, and exploring impacts and outcomes, which are the bread and butter of this research topic. The interviews would provide me with data that would address the issues that were presented in the literature review framework. (Richter et al., 2003)

Thirdly, the in-depth interviews allows for the third key factor, the nature of the study group, to not be an issue. I interviewees were all high-ranking business professionals, and had busy schedules. The interview approach gave the researcher and the interviewees flexibility to come upon a timeslot that was best suitable for both parties. If I had conducted a focus group discussion, the possibility of someone cancelling at the last minute, or finding a suitable timeslot within my own research schedule, would have become a potential issue. With individual interviews, I was able to set dates that gave flexibility for myself to take advantage of all the interviews in full throttle. Also, as the interviews were conducted incrementally, i.e. during different days, it gave me the chance to reflect upon each interview and learn more about the topic, ultimately increasing my ability to debate and discuss the questions more thoroughly in upcoming interviews. (Richter et al., 2003)

The emphasis on the qualitative research was ultimately put into conducting interviews of limited amount, which in turn could provide distinct opinions, viewpoints and deep analysis into the topic at hand. The research conducted in the literature review was put to the test, as I conducted three interviews on the basis of past connections in working life. Since the topic of customer feedback and the decisions to go about it with respect to actually constructing the survey and distributing it are sensitive information, the individual and company names have been withdrawn from this document (Richter et al., 2003).

3.2.1. Interview type

Interviews in general consist of talk organized into a series of questions and replies. Interviewers have the tendency to talk first and ask questions, and interviewees talk second and provide answers. Qualitative interviews on the other hand may also resemble everyday conversations, in which the distinction between the interviewed and the interviewee is not

so important. Individual interviews are probably the most used method of data collection in qualitative research. Also, interviews most often take place face-to-face, and are conducted between two people. (Eriksson et al., 2008; Ritchie et al., 2003; Denzin et al., 1994; Robson et al., 1989)

Qualitative interviews have the distinct purpose of producing empirical material for the study in questions. These types of interviews can be hard to conduct, but by preparing well in advance as well as knowing and understanding the source material, the interview situation. A key aspect is to time the interviews appropriately, so that the interviewer arrives in time and the total length of the interview is within the agreed timeframe. These interviews allow for the research conductor to collect information in a relaxed atmosphere, where the interviewer himself is allowed to be an active component in the interview discussions. (Eriksson, et al., 2008; Mason, 1996; Robson et al., 1989)

The three types of qualitative interview study are the positivist-, emotionalist-, and constructionist approach. The first approach, also called naturalist or realist, the facts are of interest. Accurate information is searched after, meaning that distinct questions will be introduced. The second approach, also known as the subjectivist approach, considers the interviews as being pathways towards the participants' authentic experiences. In this case, the interviewer is highly interested in knowing how people experience processes. This was the approach that I used in my thesis, since it felt the most suitable for collecting real-life examples of customer satisfaction survey experiences. The interview questions will focus on people's perceptions, conceptions, understandings, viewpoints, and emotions, instead of information. The third and final interview approach, the constructionist approach, focuses on the meanings that are produced as a result of the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. (Eriksson et al., 2008; Denzin et al., 1994)

These three interview types all have a similar approach to collecting qualitative data; they generate data through research interventions. The data collection methods within each interview type differ. The different types of qualitative interviews are as follows: Structured and standardized interviews; guided and semi-structured interviews; and unstructured, informal, open and narrative interviews. The first option has a specific group of questions for all participants, whereas the second approach simply provides and outline of topics, issues, or themes to be discussed. The third option has some guiding questions or core

concepts to start with, but freedom to move the conversation in any direction of interest is very high.. (Eriksson et al., 2008; Denzin et al., 1994)

Interviews conducted with the structured and standardized approach contain a pre-planned script and there is little flexibility in the wording or order of questions. A structured and standardized interview is considered as being qualitative in the situation, when the responses given by the participants are open ended. This approach felt too confined, and I felt that the interviewees would not be allowed to respond freely enough to my open ended questions without being overlapping with other responses. The second interview technique, the guided and semi-structured approach, has the biggest advantage I was looking for in an interview approach: With a pre-prepared outline of topics, the interviewer still has the possibility to vary the wording and order of questions in each interview. This allows for greater flexibility, and takes into consideration the level of expertise of each interviewee with respect to different topics. If a certain participant had more to say about one topic, but less of another, the interview could have an emphasis on the first topic foremost. This would ensure that the most could be learned from the interviewees and their respective expertise in the field of customer satisfaction surveys (Eriksson et al., 2008; Denzin et al., 1994; interviews)

In addition, the guided and semi-structured interview approach works well if one is somewhat skilled and experienced in interviews. The most challenging aspect then is to make sure that all the topics on the outlined are covered, and at the same time, be prepared to probe for more in-depth answers. When comparing this approach to the unstructured, informal, open and narrative interviewing technique, it was clear to me that I had found my most suitable approach. This third approach has the lowest level of formality or interview protocol. The interview situation is highly individualized, and can produce insights that the researcher could not have anticipated. Because each interview is unique, I felt that the time required to conduct the interviews as well as analyze the answers, would not be ideal in this thesis research project. (Denzin et al., 1994; Mason, 1996; interviews)

As discussed in previous chapters, both the research approach and research questions guide in choosing the most suitable approach to interviews and their role in the research. For myself, I chose the qualitative interview, which could be conducted on the basis of the literature framework, which gave me a theoretical understanding of the topics I wanted to

empirically examine. I felt that this approach would suit my own interviewing capabilities and skills, as well as provide valuable input on the research in question, and do so in the most appropriate manner. and I picked the guided and semi-structured approach. I consequently conducted interviews that were open-ended in nature. They were situations where respondents were asked about facts and personal opinions regarding the customer satisfaction survey process. The interviewees could express their opinions freely and in a relaxed manner.

Lastly, the open-ended questions ultimately provided me with the possibility of synergizing with the interviewees; with these types of questions I was able to awaken discussion and deep analysis relating to the different aspects surrounding a successful survey cover letter, for example. If I was to have conducted the interviews with a longer set of pre-determined questions, I am confident that less value could have been drawn from the interviews as a whole. I am very confident that the interviews conducted with respect to this thesis provide a thorough user-based opinion on what needs to be considered in survey template construction as well as during distribution.

3.3. Validity and reliability of the study

I conducted interviews with three representatives of Finnish companies, which have a wide variety of international operations, and strong aims to internationalize even further. The companies have customer satisfaction feedback systems in place, with incremental developments being planned and implemented to the existing processes. For the company representatives, the main attribute in the surveys was the ease-of-use, which ranges from the way it is constructed to distribution.

Initially I conducted four interviews, but the fourth interviewee was surprisingly not capable of answering the questions presented in table 4. The reason for this was that even though her corporate position indicated knowledge with respect to the topics under investigation, she had never truly accumulated hands-on information regarding the actual survey process. This is why this thesis is a qualitative research comprising of three interviews.

All interviewees had much experience on filling out different surveys as respondents,

ultimately providing me with a strong base of understanding what works and what does not, when it comes to compiling a survey and distributing it. One of the interviewees is responsible for their company's survey distribution currently, and was also able to provide insight into what the realistic difficulties and struggles are in terms of compiling a survey and sending it out.

These three interviewees were chosen primarily because of the author's existing corporate contacts. The contacts all worked for companies that one or both of the following characteristics that made for the interviews reliable and useable:

1. The company has an international customer base, to which customer satisfaction surveys are currently sent.

2. Personal experience of answering internal- and external web surveys, customer satisfaction included.

The interviews were conducted in company premises, and were conducted with the use of open-ended questions. It was my objective to ask questions, which would allow for the interviewees to analyze the different stages of the process on their own terms. Some interviewees had a substantial amount of accumulated knowledge with respect to responding to surveys during their career, not specifically relating to their current company status. All three interviews were beneficial in this thesis research, and were able to provide insight into the different components of the customer satisfaction web survey process.

3.4. Research interviews

The literature review provided me with the notion of the different aspects that are relevant in constructing customer satisfaction web surveys, as well as how they can effectively be distributed. On the basis of the literature review, I comprised a framework (table 4), which I used to make the outlined questions I used in the interviews. The questions I used in the interviews can be seen below:

1. Survey method
1.1. What is the starting point for the process?
2. Survey template
2.1. What is a good template?
2.2. How many questions?
2.3. Strenghts?
2.4. Weaknesses?
2.5. Room for improvement?
3. Survey distribution
3.1. Strenghts?
3.2. Weaknesses?
3.3. Room for improvement?
4. Survey results
4.1. How is the data processed?
4.2. Room for improvement?
5. Afterthoughts?

Table 3. Interview questions.

The interviews were conducted with three specific sub-topics in mind. These topics were identified on the basis of the literature review's framework, and are as follows: Survey template, distribution, and results. The first segment of the framework, customer satisfaction survey methods, is the shortest and was essentially fused in with the survey template discussion in the interviews. This was done, because I felt that this would best serve the flow of the interviews. The survey methods were briefly discussed in the beginning, as they themselves are a starting point in the process as well. The most affluent results were obtained from the first two sections, i.e. the template and distribution. The survey results section of the interviews gave some insight into how companies, which collect customer satisfaction, could use it in the future.

3.4.1. Survey template

The first interview questions surrounded themselves around the survey template, and most specifically on what makes for a good survey template in a B2B setting. An overall input from the three respondents were that the template should not be too short, have ambiguous questions, and be difficult to fill out. For the interviewees, it was clear that the starting point for the survey needs to be supported by corporate strategy, meaning that the objective is to collect data that can be then used to assess and develop current operations.

According to one interviewee, the proper length of the template should equal one A4-sized sheet of paper with questions on it. The interviews gave a strong indication towards the template being shorter rather than longer. The interviews also indicated that the survey template needs to consist of simple, and precise questions. The respondent becomes increasingly confused and irritated, if the items on the survey template are not specific, but rather leave room for interpretation. The survey template also must not contain too many questions, nor should it have difficult questions that confuse the recipient.

The survey template also needs to follow a certain rationale; if a particular scaling has been chosen, it must not be switched or altered in the midst of the survey. This in mind, it is apparent, that the actual scaling of the survey template needs to be given thought, since it is one of the cornerstones of the survey. If the scaling is off, this adds to confusion and resentment towards the survey among the interviewees. Confusion and resentment in their books stood for not completing the survey but instead opting to quit and deleting the cover letter.

It was also discussed, that an overall satisfaction item could be a good closing template item. By the end, the respondent has already thought through different attributes that link to personal and company satisfaction issues. By providing the possibility to end the template with an overall satisfaction item, as well as a comments-box, would give a longer lasting mental imprint of the survey to the recipient. The comments, suggestions, ideas-box would in turn provide the recipient the possibility of evaluating a particular situation in mind, or provide suggestions for further improvement.

On the basis of the interviews, it was clear that the most used scale in the customer satisfaction surveys currently in use are different versions of the Likert-scale (Hayes, 1998). The different versions all use the main root of the scaling, essentially providing a five-point scale. It was discussed that there are problems when the company sending out the survey uses a 7-point scale, whereas the recipient companies are known for using a 5-point scaling. This causes headaches for analyzing the results, when the respondents give satisfied results, but value them below from what is seen as an acceptable level of satisfaction. For example, a respondent could fill out the survey with an overall mean value of 4 (the recipient company uses a scaling from 1-5, 5 being the highest), which amounts to below acceptable levels of satisfaction in the surveying organization (which use a scaling from 1-7, 7 being the highest, and 5 the level of satisfactory service).

A definite consideration for companies is to weight in intra-company scaling and what scaling other companies use. This would mean that the sender company uses industry standard scaling on the survey, providing factual levels of satisfaction from their corporate counterparts. By choosing the most widely used scaling often diminishes the confusion among recipients, who are used to filling out the surveys according to certain scales. If the scaling is new, it will take for more thought to go through the survey, and thus diminishes the "breather" factor of the survey.

In addition, the interviews revealed that the web survey template must not contain items that are already known. This means that if the template includes random questions, the respondents feel as if their time is being wasted. Every item that ends up in the survey template should be carefully thought through, and analyzed if it serves the company's ultimate goal of actually measuring their level of obtained customer satisfaction. If the template includes items that the company already knows or more importantly, should know. For the interviewed survey respondents, this was a definite nail in the coffin and told them that the company sending out the survey was not on top of things.

For the recipient, the items need to be all connected to what is being measured. If there are items that pop out of context, this confused the respondents and takes their attention away from other items. The worst survey templates were the ones that had even one weak item; the respondent would continue filling out the rest of the survey items, but would continue analyzing and thinking what to answer to that specific item.

The reasons for having such ambiguous items range from multiple thoughts being pushed into one item, thus over-cramming them. Another possibility was that industry jargon or difficult terms were used that, when not known by the recipient, created a sensation of underachievement. The interviewees told of surveys they had filled out, that included such weak items, and that at the first sign of ambiguous items, they would press delete. As one interviewee stated:

> *"...it is the job of the sender to come up with a sure-shot survey template, I don't have time to be their guinea pig."*

It can thus be stated that the survey template is as strong as its weakest item is. The template needs to be constructed well in advance, therefore diminishing the probability of weak spots. For survey responding experts, such as the ones that I interviewed, the template simply needs to be well constructed, and light, in terms of how many items it includes in it. As was mentioned in one interview:

> *"...the template can survive without excessive questions and difficult vocabulary, but can rely on simplicity."*

3.4.2. Survey distribution

Once the survey template is in order, the sending out of the survey is the next step. The interviewees were given two modes of alternatives when it came to surveying; the web survey and email attachments. All respondents agreed that the email attachment approach of distributing the survey has become too heavy and difficult to fill out. They felt that the time had passed on the email attachment. The biggest difficulty with the email attachment was that it needs to be saved on a particular hard drive, and then, once filled out, sent back manually. As one interviewee stated:

> *"...the attachment needs to be opened, saved on my hard drive, opened, filled out, saved again, and separately sent back. It is simply too time-consuming. With the web survey it's much more convenient and speedy."*

The web survey was seen as having a lighter approach, ultimately meaning that the web survey provides a much simpler way of taking part and responding to surveys. Even though

it was understood that the differences between the web survey and email attachment was minimal in terms of how many mouse clicks more the attachment required, it was still seen as the primary driver for opting for the web survey.

In one company, the interviewee is in charge of the survey distribution. She had many years' experience on compiling customer contact information into older software solutions, and manually sending out the email attachments with the accompanying cover letter. For her, the web survey was a win-win situation. For her, the process in general would be best to construct with tools

> "…*that allow for the highest level of automation, ultimately being able to generate reports from the data easily.*"

She also agreed that the survey needs to convey a linkage to corporate goals, ultimately meaning that the survey needs to be considered as a tool for measuring how well the company is currently measuring up to its satisfaction agreements and levels of approvable service. They had undergone extensive process developments, including the template itself, and the way they would distribute the survey to a wide variety of customers. It was her opinion that the web survey tools that are currently available, are large in numbers, and are capable of offering solutions of different calibre to companies.

The accompanying cover letter is an important element in the distribution process. Ultimately it is the role of the cover letter to sell the idea of filling out the survey to the recipient. The best ways of increasing the chances of the respondent to click on the web survey link, after reading the cover letter, is to have the letter constructed concisely, and with personal touches. What really catches the recipients' attention is, according to the interviewees, that the survey topic is important to the company and that through personal touches, the matter of the individual is a crucial component in generating, e.g. better levels of service.

The cover letter has the potential to either make or break the success of the survey. It needs to stand out of the endless amount of other surveys that arrive into peoples' inboxes. There is a current development with respect to surveying, where company representatives receive an increasing amount of survey cover letters both from out- and inside of the organization.

With the amount of surveys growing, the need to positively stand out has become crucial. As the interviewees saw it, the cover letter's job is to positively distinguish itself from the rest.

If the cover letter is badly written, contains information that is not relevant, or has the feel that it has been sent to 3 000 other people at the same time, will definitely be more easily deleted than other cover letters that put importance on the importance through wording and the overall layout of the letter. It was also discussed that both bad and good cover letters stand out of the mass. The difference between the two is that the bad ones are tossed to electronic trash cans, whereas the good ones receive the five minutes it takes to fill out the survey. The remainder, the neutral mass, cover letters usually get the same treatment as do the bad ones. It is then a question of the topic, and the relevance of the survey to the recipients' job description. If by filling out the survey, the individual is able to influence corporate relations to work more smoothly in the future, the survey will be filled out, even if it was presented with a mediocre cover letter.

The degree of personalization, e.g. having a good message topic and identifying the letter's respondent by some means, is an important element in the letter. The interviewees provided following examples of the personalized approach:

- Have the respondent's name in sight.

- Provide reasons why the respondent should answer.

- Identify the proper people the survey is sent to, and link the closest company personnel as being the sender(s).

- Spell out why the survey was sent to a particular individual.

The cover letter should thus be short, personalized and have particular benefits written out. For one interviewee, there was much thought put into the notion of

> *"…when will I be receiving the results of the survey, and how will those results have an affect on the current company relations?"*

For her, it was clear that the cover letter needed to provide an actual grabber, i.e. something that will directly benefit her own job, if she takes part in the survey. This grabber gives a strong indication that the company sending out the survey actually wants peoples' opinions. A grabber can be seen as a "deal breaker"; with it the cover letter succeeds in communicating the primary benefits of the survey to the recipient as being connected with filling the survey.

It was also discussed, that the cover letter needs to present the actual amount of time it will take for filling out the survey. For most interviewees, it was clear that if the time was five minutes, it would be ok, but if it would take longer, e.g. 10-15 minutes, the actual level of attractiveness of the survey and its cover letter will be totally undermined simply due to too much time the survey requires. This links with the actual template, but also involves the cover letter's ability to sell the survey to the recipient.

The survey cover letter should not contain instructions on filling out the actual survey, but instead give clear instructions on how the web survey can be filled out. For the respondents, it is eminent that the cover letter should provide the reason why to take part in the survey, and the instructions on how to go about it. For the interviewees, the template itself should contain simple instructions on filling out effectively the survey.

The interviewees provided mixed opinions on the role of potential gifts they would receive, if they took part in the survey. The cover letter could thus contain a segment that offers "a luggage belt for every respondent who fills out our survey and is a part of our continuous road to further service development". Some said that it would entice them further to take part, whereas others knew that the beef of the survey for them would be to somehow develop existing relationships. One interviewee said that

> *"...It would be nice to receive a fruit basket or a bottle of red wine before the Christmas holidays, as a thank you for taking part in our survey. But the basket or bottle wouldn't affect on me answering. It would just be a nice gesture, that's all."*

The survey also has a consideration involving when it its distributed. On the basis of the interviews, it became apparent that one regular working week is a suitable time for filling

out the survey. The survey should also be sent out in the beginning of the week, with a deadline on the Friday of the same week. This timeslot would provide the recipient with enough time to take part in the survey, but not too long, so that the survey is forgotten. There were discrepancies between the interviewees, when it came to he notion of distributing the survey before holidays. It was clear, that even if the surveys provide "a breather" between regular work assignments, the survey could more easily be forgotten amongst the mentality of

> *"...hurrying to get everything done, trying to clear out my desk from assignments, and going on vacation…"*

It was also argued that the survey could be sent out after the holiday seasons, just in time to be filled out during the time when everyone is getting acquainted back to working life again. This window of opportunity would be around twice in Finland, after the summer holidays in July, and Christmas holidays in January. One interviewee told that it is then, when low priority tasks, such as filling out surveys, provide a welcomed, soft return to office assignments.

The interviews provided insight into cultural factors relating to the actual answers. In the Nordic countries, the discrepancies are more marginal, whereas countries situated outside the North European political area will provide companies with different results. These differences can largely be due to differences in culture. An interviewee, who told of the differences between Finnish and German respondents, provided one example:

> *"...Finns will never give you five out of five (5/5), nor will we give one out of five (1/5), even if we have made considerable mistakes and provided actual service shortcomings. If you go to Germany on the other hand, the extreme answers will become more used. In Finland the scale will be from two to four, whereas in Germany the entire range will be used."*

In the situation, where the recipients had not taken part in the survey, there were mixed arguments whether or not it would be beneficial to either send out the survey again, or provide a reminder message concerning the survey. Apart from the actual cover letter, it seemed that additional messages would simply feed into the steady flow of other emails,

and would not motivate the recipient to take part in the survey. These insights are situational in nature, relating to when these reminder emails would be sent out. As is the case with the actual cover letter distribution, these additional messages should be sent out during the other times than Monday mornings or Friday afternoons.

3.4.3. Survey results

An interviewee, who is responsible for their company's survey process told that the most essential thing currently for their process is to be able to provide automated solutions for managers in the form of survey result reports. For them, the web survey fitted the bill of being able to potentially link a CRM solution with a web survey tool, which together are capable of distributing and analyzing the survey results more easily than the other electronic survey mode, the email attachment. The email attachment was seen as too time-consuming and labor-intensive, effectively not providing the possibility of gathering automatically the results into a centralized database, from which distinct flows of information could be drawn out and analyzed.

In general, it was seen that the web survey process provides a more updated version of collecting customer satisfaction data. The email attachment was seen as outdated, whereas the survey presented the modern times. The survey template, and the cover letter that introduces it, were seen as the two primary focus points in distributing the survey. Weak template items and uninspiring cover letters appear to be the manifestations of the most crucial mistakes to avoid in the process of constructing and distributing a customer satisfaction survey in an international corporate setting.

4. Analysis

This section has been divided into four subtopics, namely survey methods, survey template, survey distribution and survey results, as was presented in the framework illustration (figure 3). The literature review will consequently be fused in with the empirical findings in the coming sections. The aim for this thesis project was to research how web surveys can be constructed and distributed to collect international customer satisfaction information in a B2B environment. This research question will be analyzed on the basis of actually creating the survey, as well as distributing it.

In the first stage, where the different methods of the customer satisfaction survey are contemplated, the sender organization is yet to distinguish what need the survey is going to fulfill. Depending on the chosen method, corporate goals, strategy and the data they wish to mine from their customer base, is determined (interview).

4.1. Survey methods

The gap-analysis alternative measures expected and experienced service levels (Hemmasi et al, 1994). This means more questions to the template, thus creating a longer and therefore heavier survey template. This could potentially have a negative effect on answer rates. The conjoint similarly provides more information, but makes the actual answering more difficult. This is a definite issue with the respondents; the as the number and difficulty of questions increases, so does the unwillingness to take part in the survey. The problem with the performance level survey template is that it might not reflect the actual service level, and might therefore mislead management to make incorrect decisions. (Gillin, 2006; Danaher, 1997)

For a company using this method could then analyze the results and the attributes that receive the lowest and highest scores will get the most attention. The highest scores represent the success stories of the service, whereas the lowest points require immediate attention. The performance-based method consequently allows for companies to pinpoint what they are currently doing right and wrong. But as Gillin (2006) and Danaher (1997) conclude, the problem with the performance level survey is that it does not necessarily reflect the actual service, and might therefore mislead management to make incorrect

decisions. Management may thus react to matters that are not essential for their customers' satisfaction.

It is apparent that the choice for template needs to address the issue of the corporation that is doing the surveying. The gap-analysis does have its strengths, but in the end the interviews favoured a lighter approach, which I do not think it is able to provide. For companies measuring customer satisfaction, there needs to be a distinctively leaner structure to its template construction. The template thus needs to address a group of items connected with satisfaction, but in a way that allows for an end result equivalent preferably of one A4.

The conjoint method on the other hand measures the different opinions from one individual, thereby giving a more validated understanding of the level of satisfaction. It is a combination of the before-mentioned gap-analysis and the performance-based method, which will be further discussed in the following paragraphs. The conjoint method reflects the respondents' expected satisfaction from the actual service (e.g. worse than expected, about the same as expected, and better than expected service). The conjoint method provides a hybrid solution between the gap-analysis and performance level survey. As was the case with the gap-analysis, the biggest downside of the conjoint method may lie in the diminished response rates due to a longer survey template. The interviewees clearly indicated that the conjoint analysis is capable of providing better results, but pondered whether or not it would make the template too heavy. (Danaher, 1997; interviews)

The conjoint method takes a step towards the right direction in my view. It takes away from the gap analysis' weak spots, mainly the high number of items on the template and lower response rates, and allows for specific data to be collected, but with a lighter template solution. However, it does still represent a solution towards customer satisfaction measurement that is not optimal. Even if the method is capable of providing better results, it does so potentially by driving away a higher pool of respondents. This leaves us with the other main way of measuring customer satisfaction, the performance-based method.

The other method of measuring customer satisfaction is to simply measure performance and leave out the expectation variable. By using this method, the level of satisfaction under investigation is the actuality of the situation. For companies it might be more important to

know exactly where they are in reality, corporate goal aside. Companies are able to measure what was agreed upon in the Service Level Agreement (SLA) and measure what the actual service was. It provides them with the current weak spots in their customer satisfaction, as well gives indication on what their customer value most.

Whatever method an international company chooses as their customer satisfaction survey method, it is most crucial for it to be aligned with the corporate strategy. Managers need to carefully revise what information they want to extract from the respondents, what information they need to develop their services even further, what they still do not know. Ultimately it boils down to having higher response rates (a shorter, simpler survey template) or more accurate information from customers (extra questions on the template). (Danaher, 1997; interviews)

The three options, the gap-analysis, conjoint method, and performance-based analysis can all be fit to serve corporate goals, which ultimately is to figure out how they are doing in terms of their customers being satisfied with them. In regard to the first research question, it can be stated that customer satisfaction surveys need to be constructed with regards to the respective corporate objectives. The aspects presented may give companies food for though on when to opt for a particular method over another. In all situations it is crucial that the method complies with the strategic approach by management. After all, they conduct surveys because they want more useable information from their customers. The survey method, as does all its following components, all serve the processes' objective: Collecting customer satisfaction information in an international setting, which can be used and analyzed.

As a concluding remark, it needs to be stated that the performance-based analysis presents the ideal solution for striving towards a combination of lean survey structure and high response rates. In this regard, the performance-based analysis most likely fits the corporate goal of surveying customer satisfaction. It identifies current weak spots in companies' customer satisfaction, ultimately providing them with a tool that helps them increase their own level of services and product availability, whatever the customer perceives going downhill.

4.2. Survey template

The template of the survey was under discussion in the interviews from many viewpoints. It was stated that the survey template needs to consist of simple and precise questions. The respondent base grows increasingly confused and irritated, if the items on the survey template are not specific, but rather leave room for interpretation. The survey template also must not contain too many questions, nor should it have difficult questions that confuse the recipient.

The template construction has a direct link with the three alternatives, the conjoint method, the gap analysis and the performance-based analysis. For companies, this second component in the web survey process connects with what they wish to achieve with the actual survey. The performance-based analysis definitely fits the ideal solution from the interviewees' point of view, as can be seen in the coming chapters.

4.2.1. Cultural considerations

When discussing international surveys, the template should be able to identify the respondent's nationality. This could be done e.g. by including a field in the template, from where the respondents choose their corresponding nationality from a drag-down-box. According to the interviews, the primary benefit gained from this distinguishing item is that companies are more capable of analyzing and making assumptions on their current customer satisfaction. As was stated in the interview, when the interviewee compared Finnish and German respondents, by distinguishing these two customer bases and analyzing the results differently, the company might conclude that they are doing a satisfactory job when compared to different, cultural mean values of service results.

There is no denying that culture affects indirectly to the way people work, communicate, and respond to surveys. So when the template is constructed, cultural effect of the survey recipient base should be taken into consideration. According to Yvonne et al. (2004), understanding cultural differences is critical to international business success, spanning from the internationalization process to customer satisfaction. The overall goal of the survey is to get to know the company's customer more deeply, become acquainted with what they value and perceive to be important. By taking in the cultural considerations in constructing the survey and distributing it, more dependable results can be obtained. As

Harzing perceived it to be, cultural dimensions have significant affects on the response rates and clarity of the attributes to the respondent. So, when the template is constructed and distributed to an international recipient base, language is definitely a distinct consideration.

The possible cultural dimension can have a significant affect on the response rates and clarity of the attributes to the respondent. Culture-bound communication norms can ultimately determine whether or not the recipient sees the benefits of the survey, is satisfied with the way it is distributed, and presented in the cover letter. Culture also affects the actual answers, and scaling of the results. (Marcus et al., 2000; Hayes, 1998; Hofstede, 1984; interviews)

In long-term service provider- customer relationships, the prior satisfaction and information weights more heavily than current satisfaction results. This suggests that in long service provider- customer relationships, prior satisfaction and information weights more heavily than the new information. This gives a possibility for the sender organization to make corrections and enhancements to their existing products and services, which in turn benefit all parties involved. It was also proposed that in the B2B environment, the first steps in relationships are important because it is then that images are constructed, built, and perceived to be. (Bolton, 1998; interviews)

4.2.2. Template items

With respect to the actual template items, they should be kept short, simple and single-minded (Vavra, 1999). The following examples provide illustrations of long, difficult and confusing items:

- Deviation management

- Use of methods, tools, hardware

- Flexible co-operation and service attitude

The term "deviation management" is considered industry jargon, which could easily be replaced with another term, that is more widely used and understood: change management.

Hayes (1998) and Dillman et al. (1998) state that items also should not be ambiguous, but rather the respondent should be capable of understanding precisely what the items are asking. Skewed answers can thus be a result of vague items, which give the respondent the possibility of misunderstanding what is being surveyed.

The second example illustrates a complex template item; it should convey the way an individual uses work methods, web tools and computer hardware to the benefit of the project, but instead stops the respondent to figure out what the item actually means. This ambiguity needs to be minimized in all templates, and the term "practical skills" could be used instead. Redundant words should not be used, allowing for templates to be created that consist of items that are long, and difficult to read (Vavra, 1999).

The third example, involving flexible co-operation and service attitude, addressed two issues and should be separated into two separate items. As Hayes (1998) saw it, a good item contains only one though, and should only address one question. It is also noteworthy that too general questions of past performance need to be avoided, since rarely respondents have exact memories of the past performance incidents the item surveys (Vavra, 1999). The interviewees told of surveys they had filled out, that included such weak items, and that at the first sign of ambiguous items, they would press delete. As one interviewee stated:

> *"...it is the job of the sender to come up with a sure-shot survey template, I don't have time to be their guinea pig."*

When the survey template is constructed, every item needs to be justifiably present, meaning that each item provides useful data for the company sending out the survey. The template should start from general issues and funnel down to more specific questions (Vavra, 1999; interviews). The ultimate objective is to construct a survey that has concise items, which leave little room for interpretation (Hayes, 1998). As was mentioned in one interview:

> *"...the template can survive without excessive questions and difficult vocabulary, but can rely on simplicity."*

The interviews revealed that the web survey template must not contain items that are already known. This means that if the template includes random questions, the respondents feel as if their time is being wasted. Every item that ends up in the survey template should be carefully analyzed, with the intention in mind that this item brings something additional value. The template must not include items that the sender company already knows or more importantly, should know. For the interviewed survey respondents, this was a definite nail in the coffin and told them that the company sending out the survey was not on top of things.

For the recipient, the items need to be all connected to what is being measured. If there are items that pop out of context, this confused the respondents and takes their attention away from other items. The worst survey templates were the ones that had even one weak item; the respondent would continue filling out the rest of the survey items, but would continue analyzing and thinking what to answer to that specific item. It can thus be stated that the survey template is as strong as its weakest item is.

As the interviews revealed, the template needs to be short, which in turn suggests that there can be only useful questions on the template. The items themselves need to be grouped under specific topics (e.g. customer service), resulting consequently as positively related item groups that have the potential to achieve a high level of correlation between each other. According to the interviews, it would be beneficial for the items to all be connected to what is actually being measured. If there are items that pop out of context, this confused the respondents and takes their attention away from other items. An example of correlation has been introduced in table 1 (Hayes, 1998, p. 77).

As stated before, the survey should start off with general items, and then boil down to more specific questions. In the end it might be a good idea to add an item called "overall satisfaction", which would allow for the recipients to first evaluate specific satisfaction items, and finally give an overall grading of the level of actual satisfaction. An overall opinion is easier to come by, after the previous survey items have been answered. The overall satisfaction item mean value could then be compared with the other item values; if there are discrepancies, it might suggest that there is something missing from the template and that not all relevant aspects of customer satisfaction are measured.

By placing the overall satisfaction item in the latter part of the template, the respondent has already thought through different attributes that link to personal and company satisfaction issues. When providing the possibility to end the template with an overall satisfaction item, it gives a longer lasting mental imprint of the survey to the recipient. The overall satisfaction can also be a good starting point for future discussions and negotiations among companies. (interviews)

According to the interviews, a comments, suggestions, ideas-box would in turn provide the recipient the possibility of evaluating a particular situation in mind, or provide suggestions for further improvement. For some respondents it can be very important to define their answers even further; e.g. if indicating a lower level of satisfaction. The open box can provide a way to distinguish what went wrong. It might also provide future service concepts or room for development, something that might not come up during regular meetings, or conferences. The use of this box may also vary according to cultural specifications.

4.2.3. Scaling

A possibility for scaling could be with the use of the satisfied-dissatisfied continuum on the Likert-scale (Hayes, 1998). The scaling is simple and easily understandable, diminishing the potential for confusion and resentment due to unclear scaling. The survey template needs to follow a certain rationale; if a particular scaling has been chosen, it must not be switched or altered in the midst of the survey. This in mind, it is apparent, that the actual scaling of the survey template needs to be given thought, since it is one of the cornerstones of the survey.

The Likert-scale includes a scaling of five, which has become a quiet industry standard. There are different versions of the Likert-scale being used, with a common main root present in all templates, i.e. the 5-point scaling. By choosing the most widely used scaling often diminishes the confusion among recipients, who are used to filling out the surveys according to certain scales. If the scaling is new, it will take for more thought to go through the survey, and thus diminishes the "breather" factor of the survey. An example of the scaling can be found in table 2. (Krosnick, 1999; Hayes, 1998, p. 69; interviews)

The survey needs to maintain a simple and uniformed structure throughout, because once

the respondent has become acquainted with the visible template scaling, they will easily become confused, if it is changed midway. An example of this would be to reverse the order of the scale (table 2 versus table 3). In this situation using a 5-1 scale, where five (5) is very dissatisfied and one (1) being very satisfied:

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1	2	3	4	5
Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
1	2	3	4	5

Table 3. Reversed close-ended Likert-scale.

Because of the fact that numerical scaling often distorts the results (Vavra, 1999; Hayes 1998), verbal labelling should be used instead. I have put the corresponding numbers in parenthesis, simply to illustrate the verbal labels' corresponding value in the dissatisfied-satisfied continuum. I would include simply the verbal labels on the customer satisfaction template, because that would allow for people to put more realistic assessment of actual services.

Referring to the second research question, the survey template requires a number of different aspects to be fused into it. Cultural considerations, such as in what language the survey is distributed, can have a significant effect on the actual answer rates as well as the results obtained. Different items need to be analyzed carefully, for they need to be simply presented and leave little room for interpretation. Also, the number of items is a factor that directly links with the willingness of the recipient to fill out the survey entirely. The grouping of items has an impact on the overall outlook and rationale of the template, as is

the overall satisfaction –item clause.

4.3. Survey distribution

The survey method- and survey template –section provided analysis regarding the process parts primarily within the sender organization. The process continues onwards, with the survey being received by the customer and client base. The third topic, the survey distribution, provides an insight into the distribution of the survey. The following sections will connect with the other component in the research questions, namely how can web surveys be distributed to international companies to gather customer satisfaction information.

4.3.1. Web survey vs. e-mail attachment

The web survey offers an intriguing medium to distribute customer satisfaction surveys (Alvarez et al., 2003; Solomon, 2001). There are substantial technological and methodological improvements to be gained through the use of web-based surveys (Grant, et al., 2005). For one interviewee, it was clear that the time-consuming and labour-intensive method of constructing and distributing an email attachment survey would give way for the web survey. In this respect, perhaps the greatest benefits offered to companies implementing the web survey are the savings in both time and money, access to a large recipient base, decreased cost for data collection and data entry, and the ability to present survey information in different formats (Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Duffy, 2000; Schmidt, 1997).

The email attachment approach of distributing the survey has become too heavy and difficult to fill out. The interviewees felt that time had passed on the email attachment approach of distributing surveys to corporate personnel. The biggest drawback for the attachment mode was seen in its apparent need of having to be opened, saved, filled out, saved again, and sent back manually. For the interviewees that was simply too many additional mouse clicks. The web survey was seen as having a lighter approach, ultimately meaning that the web survey provides a much simpler way of taking part and responding to surveys. Weak template items and uninspiring cover letters appear to be the manifestations of the most crucial mistakes to avoid in the process of constructing and distributing a customer satisfaction survey in an international corporate setting. (interviews)

4.3.2. Distribution schedule

According to Alvarez et al. (2003), an advantage of web surveys is that they are relatively easy to conduct, when comparing the process to the one of email attachments. The restraints can be on the company sending out the survey, or on the recipient. This ultimately means that time and labor considerations come into the picture. As one interviewee told, the web survey provides a method of conducting the customer satisfaction process more easily.

Opoku (2006) states that a majority of companies have shifted their customer feedback process from emails towards a more online approach. The web survey has consequently been picked due to the potential it possesses in terms of providing increased automation within the survey process, saving time and human resources. The interviews confirmed this viewpoint that the current email attachment solution is a little too heavy for the respondents to open, save, fill out, and send back.

The web survey thus provides a higher level of potential in terms of constructing an automated distribution channel. In one interview, it was revealed that a particular company had undergone extensive process developments, including the template itself, and the way they would distribute the survey to a wide variety of customers. It was the interviewee herself, who was in charge of the entire survey distribution process. She stated that, the web survey tools that are capable of offering distribution solutions of different calibre to international companies.

The most important consideration organizational-wise is the way companies set up their intra-organizational survey functions. Speed and accuracy of the obtained results relate to a large extent on the survey process owners. Hill et al. (2003) stated that three months is a typical timetable for a survey project to be carried out. The web survey can definitely shave off a few weeks; with the entire process going through increased automated solutions that all serve the end results.

With the web survey in place, a CRM approach could be taken into use, to manage the customer contact information. As Xu et al. (2002) see it, when using a CRM approach to obtain knowledge of customer, customer service and -support become easier. This is due to

the possibility of combining the centralized contact information data and past customer survey results (interview). This serves the notion of surveying being a process, not a set of inter-connected activities.

The answer time stated on the cover letter should be one working week (five working days), which is in alignment with the theory that satisfaction surveys are not seen as a high priority for the recipients. The survey should thus be sent out in the beginning of a regular workweek, and include a due date of Friday afternoon of the same week. This timeslot would provide the recipient with enough time to take part in the survey, but not too long, so that the survey is forgotten. It was also argued that the survey could be sent out after the holiday seasons, just in time to be filled out during the time when everyone is getting acquainted back to working life again. This way, the survey could be viewed as a welcomed, soft return to the office environment. (interviews)

4.3.3. Cover letter

The way people view the surveys are heavily impacted upon the cover letter that introduces it. This was an important insight that could be derived from the interviewee-base. The cover letter is consequently the primary medium of selling the survey to the recipient, and all other marketing or reminder mail notifications simply support it. It needs to be personalized in some way; it may be that the web survey is actually sent from a close company contact involved heavily in a particular project that the company is currently evaluating satisfaction on. (Heerwegh et al., 2007; Couper et al., 2007; Kaplowitz et al., 2004; interviews)

The degree of personalization, e.g. having a good message topic and identifying the letter's respondent by some means, is an important element in the letter. The interviewees provided following examples of the personalized approach:

- Have the respondent's name in sight.

- Provide reasons why the respondent should answer.

- Identify the proper people the survey is sent to, and link the closest company personnel as being the sender(s).

- Spell out why the survey was sent to a particular individual.

For companies this means that they must construct the cover letter to be next to perfect. According to Feiertag (2007), it needs to be personalized, concise, meaning that it goes straight-to-the-point. The interviewees felt that a good topic and a strong opening argument lifted the willingness to take pat in the survey considerably. The first paragraph needs to be as compelling as needed (Penttila, 2005), and by using names effectively, taking into account the cultural and long-term relationship considerations (Marcus et al., 2000; Bolton, 1998; Hayes, 1998; Hofstede, 1984), the cover letter achieves this.

With a cover letter that includes personal touches and a straight-shooting mentality, the respondent is positively surprised of being contacted to fill out the survey (Heerwegh, 2005). As the interviews revealed, it is important to ask the opinion of an individual and convey this message in the cover letter. Companies also use surveys as an in-house survey tool, which adds on to the total amount of survey requests people receive. This increases the importance of having a positively different cover letter, providing ultimately a way to distinguish a company's survey from all the rest.

According to the interviews, what really catches the recipients' attention is, that the survey topic is important to the company and that through personal touches, the matter of the individual is a crucial component in generating, e.g. better levels of service. The cover letter needs to attract the attention of the recipient, and should thus contain a grabber, i.e. something that entices the reader to act. A grabber can be seen as a "deal breaker"; with it the cover letter succeeds in communicating the primary benefits of the survey to the recipient as being connected with filling the survey.

Business respondents are often motivated to respond to the surveys that connect directly with their own business objectives. Consequently it could serve the survey structure to strike first at the heart of the matter and save the demographic information to the end. Ultimately, the cover letter needs to provide a break from the recipient's current activities, and thus needs not to contain formal language or high reading levels. As the interviewees saw it, the cover letter's job is to positively distinguish itself from the rest.

The heading of the cover letter should be enticing, according to interviews, thus it would stand out from multitude of surveys that most of interviewees get in their inbox. Companies also use surveys as an in-house survey tool, which adds on to the total amount of survey requests people receive. This increases the importance of having a "selling" cover letter, providing ultimately a way to distinguish a company's survey from all the rest. The survey can be seen as an image of the company and therefore in longer corporate relationships informality should not be seen as a threat but an opportunity to personalize the cover letter

The content must make the recipient to react to the letter, which in this case means that the cover letter entices the recipient to click on the web survey link. It achieves this goal by following a three-paragraph structure. The first paragraph will catch the readers' attention, with two to three lines. The next paragraph contains the reason for sending the letter (e.g. "we value your opinion, give us feedback!"). This egoistic appeal, which emphasized the importance of the recipient's response, has a prominent impact on response rates. The third and final paragraph is the call-to-action; the reader is asked to do something, such as take part in the web survey. Clarity and clear benefits are on the top of the list for interviewees who read through survey cover letters on a weekly basis. (Feuertag, 2007; Dalton 2004; Jobbar et al., 1998; interviews)

An essential ingredient in the formation of the cover letter is high-skim value. The less bulky the message is, the easier it is to skim through it and be willing to take part in the survey. Survey letters should thus accommodate the rigorous and demanding office work environment, and entice the recipient to be inclined to interrupt the current tasks. The format needs to be kept simple, meaning that the cover letter needs to be light, and different bullet points, additional graphics and illustrations will not entice the recipient's perceived willingness to comply with the call-to-action section of the cover letter. When using emails, the message must rely on its content, and this is achieved with a more simpler and lighter approach. (Dalton, 2004, interviews)

The survey cover letter should not contain instructions on filling out the actual survey, but instead give clear instructions on how the web survey can be filled out. This is one way of increasing the high-skim value of the document. For the respondents, it is eminent that the cover letter should provide the reason why to take part in the survey, and the instructions

on how to go about it. For the interviewees, the template itself should contain simple instructions on filling out effectively the survey.

In the situation, where the recipients had not taken part in the survey, there were mixed arguments whether or not it would be beneficial to either send out the survey again, or provide a reminder message concerning the survey. The decision to send out the web survey link in a shorter, reminder letter divides the recipient base. In part, the reason behind not answering the first time could have been due to a hectic schedule, or it could have been a simple case of forgetting to fill it out. Then again, the respondent might have deliberately chosen not to fill it out, becoming thus increasingly annoyed with the reminder messages. (interviews)

In addition to sending out a short cover letter, direct contact is highly recommended by interviewees, since it is the most efficient way of communication. This direct communication should be connected with normal day-to-day routines in some manner. Relating to the interviews, it can be stated that the timeframe stated in the cover letter should not succeed seven days. All in all, the marketing factor of conducing customer satisfaction surveys is an integral part of obtaining feedback from a multitude of recipients within the customer base.

4.4. Survey results

The fourth and final component of analysis has the sender organization being in the state where they have obtained results from the customer satisfaction process, but are yet to process them further. The results are multitude in nature; even the simplest survey template offers many items to analyze deeply, and distinguish the strengths and weaknesses of current customer satisfaction and its link towards corporate strategy.

For one interviewee, the customer satisfaction process centered on obtaining useable results that could then be analyzed into report form for management. This mindset is also supported by Muffatto (1995), who stated that it is advisable to plan suitable interventions for regaining the trust of customers who feel that their requirements and expectations were not fully met by companies. This means that by being able to analyze the survey results flexibly and quickly, the company is able to respond to sub-par customer feedback, and

regain control over difficult situations. This ultimately means that customers will maintain their trust in the company, and be satisfied.

Customer satisfaction information needs to be used in ways that recognize its potential. The usage of a result database will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. The web survey tool that collects the information should thus contain the possibility of collecting the information into one central database. (Takala, 2006; Vavra, 1999; Bly 1993)

An interviewee, who is responsible for their company's survey process told that the most essential ingredient in their current survey process development is the ability to provide automated solutions for managers in the form of survey result reports. For this particular company, the web survey fitted the bill of being able to potentially link a CRM solution with a web survey tool, which together should be capable of distributing and analyzing the survey results more easily than the other electronic survey mode, the email attachment, which was still currently in use.

The database would be desirable because it would be accessible for all intra-organizational parties involved in providing the different elements that combined are customer satisfaction. Different departments would be able to assess what others have done correctly and vice-versa. The data could also be properly analyzed throughout the organization since it would be in a central database, where relevant parties would have access. Thirdly, the database might be linked to other relational databases, such as the company's CRM database. By combining the CRM database with the survey results, distribution of the survey becomes more easier, since it can be seen who answers the survey and how does not (Vavra, 1999; interviews)

The usage of the database will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. As Bly (1993, p. 107) put it, human error is more likely to occur when non quantitative measurements are used because human nature will automatically look for information that reinforces one's own perception of things, thus objectivity is maintained if results are in quantitative form. By having the web survey tool in use, automated reports can be more efficiently generated from the customer data, which is gained from the surveys.

Companies might also consider linking the survey results with a company newsletter that presents the results and other noteworthy aspects that were uncovered during the latest survey analysis. This would provide the recipients an actual example of how their contribution has paid off. It would also take advantage of the positive results obtained through hard work, and provide a chance for the personnel to become acquainted with how they are currently performing.

It is common in B2B situations, that there are many different parties that are involved in using the service such as purchaser of the service, primary user of the service, decision maker, gate keeper, subcontractor, etc. These different process users need to be identified, as well as their relative importance in future developments (on the basis of the results). An organization is as effective as is its managements' capability of using the results to further develop their survey template item processes. The main contribution behind the fourth research question is that the sender organization is able to collect the results in a database solution, which allows for an increased ability to analyze the information in report form (Siskos, 2002; interviews).

5. Conclusion

The aim for this thesis project was to research how web surveys could be constructed and distributed to collect customer satisfaction. The initial problem setting was the starting point for this research, and was continued with secondary and primary research. The source for secondary research was the different material presented in the literature review, whereas the primary source of data were the interviews conducted on the basis of the acquired knowledge from the secondary research. Analysis followed, with a comprehensive view on different key points with regard to the initial research problem. This problem was deconstructed into four research questions, which were the following:

1. *How can the customer satisfaction survey be constructed?*

2. *How should the survey template be compiled?*

3. *What an efficient cover letter comprises of?*

4. *How can the customer satisfaction information be useable?*

The main findings, based on the literature research and empirical data obtained through interviews, will be presented in the following chapter. It is apparent that the first three areas of research, namely the survey method choice, template construction and distribution, are equally important and provide possibilities to be used in an international B2B environment. The fourth component in the process, the survey results, was is a continuation of the survey process thus far; once the survey has been successfully distributed, and the results collected, much potential lies in what can be done with the vast amount of customer satisfaction information.

5.1.1. Customer satisfaction survey methods

The choice of customer satisfaction survey method is directly linked with the international company's corporate strategy. Managers need to carefully revise what information they want to extract from the respondents, what information they need to develop their services even further, what they still do not know. This means that the proper method, be it gap-analysis, conjoint method, or performance-based analysis, needs to serve the bigger picture. Ultimately it boils down to having higher response rates (a shorter, simpler survey template) or more accurate information from customers (extra questions on the template). (Danaher, 1997; interviews)

The three options all provide different solutions for starting to construct the survey template. The gap-analysis alternative measures expected and experienced service levels (Hemmasi et al, 1994). This means more questions to the template, thus creating a longer and therefore heavier survey template, which is not favoured by the recipients (interview). Secondly, the conjoint similarly provides more information, but makes the actual answering more difficult. This is a definite issue with the respondents; the as the number and difficulty of questions increases, so does the unwillingness to take part in the survey. The problem with the performance level survey template is that it might not reflect the actual service level, and might therefore mislead management to make incorrect decisions. (Gillin, 2006; Danaher, 1997; interviews)

The performance-based method consequently allows for companies to pinpoint what they are currently doing right and wrong. The other method of measuring customer satisfaction is to simply measure performance and leave out the expectation variable. By using this

method, the level of satisfaction under investigation is the actuality of the situation. The performance-based survey needs to be carefully constructed so that it actually measures the essential components of satisfaction, which are considered important by the customers.

For companies measuring customer satisfaction, there needs to be a distinctively leaner structure to the template construction. The template thus needs to address a group of items connected with customer satisfaction, but in a way that allows for an end result equivalent preferably of one A4. It can be stated that the performance-based analysis presents this type of ideal solution for striving towards a combination of lean survey structure and high response rates. In this regard, the performance-based analysis most likely fits the corporate goal of surveying customer satisfaction. It identifies current weak spots in companies' customer satisfaction, ultimately providing them with a tool that helps them increase their own level of services and product availability, whatever the customer perceives going downhill.

5.1.2. Survey template

The survey template needs to draw upon the strategic decision of the survey method, and continue to start the actual survey item compilation. The survey template needs to consist of simple and precise questions. The respondent base grows increasingly confused and irritated, if the items on the survey template are not specific, but rather leave room for interpretation. The survey template also must not contain too many questions, nor should it have difficult questions that confuse the recipient. The proper length is one A4.

The template needs to identify the respondent's nationality, so that the results can later be analyzed in greater detail. This way, the results can be analyzed by differentiating between the results on the basis of culture and mother tongue. The nationality could be identified by e.g. including a field in the template, from where the respondents choose their corresponding nationality from a drag-down-box. Language needs to be considered as one aspect possibly influencing the survey results. The survey template language needs to be suited to provide a solution, which is able to extract truthful customer satisfaction information. By taking in the cultural and language considerations in constructing the survey and distributing it, more dependable results can be obtained

In long-term service provider- customer relationships, the prior satisfaction and information weights more heavily than current satisfaction results. This suggests that the sender organization is more capable of making correction and enhancements to their existing products and services, which would increasingly satisfy the needs of the customers. It is also relevant that the respondent is actually capable of answering the survey, i.e. they have knowledge pertaining to the survey items and can assess them.

When the survey template is constructed, every item needs to be justifiably present, meaning that each item provides useful data for the company sending out the survey. The template should start from general issues and funnel down to more specific questions (Vavra, 1999; interviews). The ultimate objective is to construct a survey that has concise items, which leave little room for interpretation (Hayes, 1998). The survey template must not contain items that are already known. This means that if the template includes random questions, the respondents feel as if their time is being wasted. Every item that ends up in the survey template should be carefully analyzed, with the intention in mind that this item brings something additional value.

The survey should start off with general items, and then boil down to more specific questions. The actual template items need to be kept short, simple, and single-minded (Vavra, 1999). Hayes (1998) and Dillman et al. (1998) state that items also should not be ambiguous, but rather the respondent should be capable of understanding precisely what the items are asking. Skewed answers can thus be a result of vague items, which give the respondent the possibility of misunderstanding what is being surveyed.

Industry jargon should not be used, but instead wording that everyone knows the meaning to. The items also need to be simple in nature, thus redundant words should not be used, allowing for templates to be created that consist of items that are long, and difficult to read (Vavra, 1999). In addition, a good item contains only one though, and should only address one question (Hayes, 1998). It is also noteworthy that too general questions of past performance need to be avoided, since rarely respondents have exact memories of the past performance incidents the item surveys (Vavra, 1999). If the survey has ambiguous items included in the template, the response rates decrease (interview).

The template should include a comments, suggestions, ideas-box that in turn could provide

the recipient the possibility of evaluating a particular situation in mind, or provide suggestions for further improvement. For some respondents it can be very important to define their answers even further; e.g. if indicating a lower level of satisfaction. The open box can provide a way to distinguish what went wrong. It might also provide future service concepts or room for development, something that might not come up during regular meetings, or conferences. The use of this box may also vary according to cultural specifications.

An item called "overall satisfaction" should be included as a final, closing item, which in turn would allow for the recipients to first evaluate specific satisfaction items, and finally give an overall grading of the level of actual satisfaction. The items themselves need to be grouped under specific topics (e.g. customer service), resulting consequently as positively related item groups that have the potential to achieve a high level of correlation between each other. The overall satisfaction item mean value could then be compared with the other item values; if there are discrepancies, it might suggest that there is something missing from the template and that not all relevant aspects of customer satisfaction are measured.

The survey template needs to follow a certain rationale; if a particular scaling has been chosen, it must not be switched or altered in the midst of the survey. This in mind, it is apparent, that the actual scaling of the survey template needs to be given thought, since it is one of the cornerstones of the survey. A possibility for scaling could be with the use of the satisfied-dissatisfied continuum on the Likert-scale (Hayes, 1998). The scaling is simple and easily understandable, diminishing the potential for confusion and resentment due to unclear scaling. An example of the scaling would be the following:

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)

Table 2. Close-ended Likert-scale (Hayes 1998, p. 69).

5.1.3. Survey distribution

The web survey offers an intriguing medium to distribute customer satisfaction surveys (Alvarez et al., 2003; Solomon, 2001). There are substantial technological and methodological improvements to be gained through the use of web-based surveys (Grant, et al., 2005). Perhaps the greatest benefits offered to companies implementing the web survey are the savings in both time and money, access to a large recipient base, decreased cost for data collection and data entry, and the ability to present survey information in different formats (Kaplowitz et al., 2004; Duffy, 2000; Schmidt, 1997). The web survey has consequently been picked due to the potential it possesses in terms of providing increased automation within the survey process, saving time and human resources.

The most important consideration organizational-wise is the way companies set up their intra-organizational survey functions. Speed and accuracy of the obtained results relate to a large extent on the survey process owners. Hill et al. (2003) stated that three months is a typical timetable for a survey project to be carried out. The web survey can definitely shave off a few weeks; with the entire process going through increased automated solutions that all serve the end results. With the web survey in place, a centralized CRM approach could be taken into use, to manage the customer contact information more easily.

The answer time stated on the cover letter should be one working week (five working days), which is in alignment with the theory that satisfaction surveys are not seen as a high priority for the recipients. The survey should thus be sent out in the beginning of a regular workweek, and include a due date of Friday afternoon of the same week. This timeslot would provide the recipient with enough time to take part in the survey, but not too long, so that the survey is forgotten.

The cover letter needs to attract the attention of the recipient, and should thus contain a grabber, i.e. something that entices the reader to act. A grabber can be seen as a "deal breaker"; with it the cover letter succeeds in communicating the primary benefits of the survey to the recipient as being connected with filling the survey. Business respondents are often motivated to respond to the surveys that connect directly with their own business objectives. Consequently it could serve the survey structure to strike first at the heart of the matter and save the demographic information to the end. Ultimately, the cover letter's role

is to distinguish itself from all the other surveys' cover letters.

The cover letter needs to be personalized, concise, meaning that it goes straight-to-the-point (Feiertag, 2007). The interviewees felt that a good topic and a strong opening argument lifted the willingness to take pat in the survey considerably. The first paragraph needs to be as compelling as needed (Penttila, 2005), and by using names effectively, taking into account the cultural and long-term relationship considerations (Marcus et al., 2000; Bolton, 1998; Hayes, 1998; Hofstede, 1984), the cover letter achieves this.

The content of the cover letter should follow a three-paragraph structure. The first paragraph will catch the readers' attention, with two to three lines. The next paragraph contains the reason for sending the letter (e.g. "we value your opinion, give us feedback!"). This egoistic appeal, which emphasized the importance of the recipient's response, has a prominent impact on response rates. The third and final paragraph is the call-to-action; the reader is asked to do something, such as take part in the web survey. Clarity and clear benefits are on the top of the list for interviewees who read through survey cover letters on a weekly basis. (Feuertag, 2007; Dalton 2004; Jobbar et al., 1998; interviews)

The survey cover letter should not contain instructions on filling out the actual survey, but instead give clear instructions on how the web survey can be filled out. This is one way of increasing the high-skim value of the document. For the respondents, it is eminent that the cover letter should provide the reason why to take part in the survey, and the instructions on how to go about it. For the interviewees, the template itself should contain simple instructions on filling out effectively the survey.

5.1.4. Survey results

The customer satisfaction process centers on obtaining useable results that can then be analyzed into report form for management. This mindset is also supported by Muffatto (1995), who stated that it is advisable to plan suitable interventions for regaining the trust of customers who feel that their requirements and expectations were not fully met by companies. This means that by being able to analyze the survey results flexibly and quickly, the company is able to respond to sub-par customer feedback, and regain control over difficult situations.

Customer satisfaction information needs to be used in ways that recognize its potential. The usage of a result database will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. The web survey tool that collects the information should thus contain the possibility of collecting the information into one central database. (Takala, 2006; Vavra, 1999; Bly 1993)

In deconstructing the survey results, the essential ability is to be able to provide automated solutions for managers in the form of survey result reports. This can be undertaken with a centralized CRM system, to which the results can be fed into. This type of customer database would be desirable because it would be accessible for all intra-organizational parties involved in providing the different elements that combined are customer satisfaction. By combining the CRM database with the survey results, distribution of the survey becomes more easier, since it can be seen who answers the survey and how does not (Vavra, 1999; interviews)

The usage of the database will help organisations to make quantitative measurements that will help to minimize the effect of personal interpretation. As Bly (1993, p. 107) put it, human error is more likely to occur when non quantitative measurements are used because human nature will automatically look for information that reinforces one's own perception of things, thus objectivity is maintained if results are in quantitative form. By having the web survey tool in use, automated reports can be more efficiently generated from the customer data, which is gained from the surveys.

To provide an answer the research problem, which was how can web surveys be constructed and distributed to collect international customer satisfaction information in a B2B environment, the survey template needs many considerations, as it is constructed and distributed to an international respondent client base. The web survey provides a superior process of distributing a well-constructed survey template via an effective cover letter. The web tool can be connected to a CRM database, from which the contact information is taken. The survey results can also be funnelled and analyzed into report form to cater for management level managers who wish to see whether or not the company is achieving its corporate goals and objectives.

5.2. Suggestions for further research

For future research, it would be a possibility to venture into the ways how the survey results can be analyzed and used for the benefit the sender organizations. Many international companies are using the web survey as the mode of choice in collecting B2B data, but it is not known how effectively those results are actually used. It is simply not enough to be able to collect customer satisfaction data, but not use it to develop the organization towards their own, strategic goals. There are many possibilities to store and analyze the vast amount of information, all of which present their respective possibilities and room for improvement.

Another aspect, which could provide useful, is additional research on the different ways an international company can go about constructing a cover letter, and what different considerations they need to be aware of. This project introduced the importance of an effective cover letter, and further research could be put into investigating the effectiveness of different templates with respect to different cultures.

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