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A True Experience

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There's an uncomfortable truth about customer satisfaction scores: they tell you how you're doing, but never why. When scores go up, we all high-five each other. When they go down, we blame the economy, tariffs, climate change or whatever else we can point to instead of taking responsibility.

In reality, we have no idea why the scores move up or down. Numerical scores capture a moment in time, but miss the story behind it.

After my keynote at The Garden Center Group Fall Event in Raleigh, North Carolina, we brought five real garden center customers onto the stage for a live focus group. What emerged wasn't just data—it was a revelation. Their stories, frustrations and unfiltered experiences provided a masterclass in why qualitative feedback trumps quantitative metrics every single time.

The Problem with Scores Alone

Traditional customer satisfaction surveys ask people to rate their experience on a numerical scale. For example, Net Promoter Score (NPS) asks them to rate their willingness to recommend you on a scale of 1 to 7. It's tidy. It's trackable. And it's almost useless when it comes to driving meaningful change.

These surveys tell you that something shifted, but they don't tell you what to do about it. Did your score drop because of product availability? Staff knowledge? Checkout experience? Pricing? Without the "why," you're flying blind.

What Real Customers Actually Reveal

When you ask open-ended questions and truly listen, customers don't just give you ratings—they give you roadmaps. Our focus group participants shared experiences that no survey could ever capture.

Dennis, a retired Army veteran, shared a story that left the entire room speechless. While deployed in Afghanistan on a mountaintop watching Taliban movements, he called a garden center to arrange an anniversary surprise for his wife. The staff member—who turned out to be the owner—went above and beyond, delivering a beautiful pot and flowers while Dennis was overseas.

When the pot broke in a windstorm, the owner replaced it at no charge. And when Dennis's wife was subsequently

diagnosed with cancer, that same owner personally selected and delivered a pink cherry tree for their front yard.

This wasn't just customer service. It was relationship building. It was caring. And it's the kind of experience that creates customers for life—something no CSAT score can measure or predict.

The Education Gap

Ben and Katja, both highly educated professionals, revealed another critical insight: expertise in one area doesn't translate to gardening knowledge. Ben could explain electron transport chains in chloroplasts, but struggled with when and where to plant specific varieties.

"I like the idea of going somewhere where I can actually be educated on how to try to pretend to be a horticulturist," Ben explained. "Error is expensive, and if I could avoid it, I certainly would like that."

This highlights a crucial truth: many of your customers are coming to you with passion, but without knowledge. They're craving education, guidance and patience—not just transactions.

The Family Experience Factor

Anya, a physician and cut-flower farmer, emphasized something often overlooked: the importance of being family-friendly.

"I have two young kids, and when I go in, I know that my kids are welcome there," she shared. "The staff members are aware of the kids and super friendly with them."

For parents, a garden center that accommodates children isn't just convenient, it's essential. It determines whether they can shop at all. Yet how many satisfaction surveys specifically ask about this?



The Browser vs. The Mission-Driven Shopper

The focus group revealed two distinct customer types that require completely different approaches:

The Browser: Katja visits garden centers primarily for the atmosphere and experience. "Most of the time, I want to go there for the atmosphere and so it's more of an impulse," she explained. She enjoys wandering, discovering and, yes, leaving with items that weren't on her shopping list.

The Mission-Driven Shopper: Anya typically arrives with a specific need. She wants knowledgeable staff who can quickly locate specialty items and provide answers about availability.

Customer experience expert and keynote speaker Dan Gingiss leads a focus group on stage at the 2025 The Garden Center Group Fall Event in Raleigh, North Carolina, consisting of customers of Raleigh-area garden centers.

One wants to be left alone to explore; the other wants efficient assistance. Both are valuable customers, but they need different experiences.

What Frustrates Customers (And Why It Matters)

Sandy visited a recommended garden center looking for 13 flat of violas, her absolute favorite. When she tried to select younger, pre-blooming plants that would peak at the perfect time, two staff members rushed over and insisted she could only choose from the currently blooming selection.

She left without buying any violas and she's never returned to that garden center. The lesson? Sometimes overzealous "helping" feels like controlling. Customers know what they want, and when staff override that judgment without explanation or flexibility, it damages trust.

"We have the feeling that sometimes nurseries tend to tailor to people's lack of knowledge," Ben said. "I wish that I could buy certain plants when they're not flowering. I know they will flower next year."

The Insights You'll Never Get from CSAT

Emotional Cues That Scores Miss: When customers speak, you hear emotion in their voices. You hear excitement when they describe discovering a new Japanese maple variety. You hear frustration when they can't get the help they needed. You hear gratitude when they remember the staff member who took extra time to understand their specific garden conditions.

These emotional peaks and valleys drive loyalty, word-of-mouth and lifetime value far more than any numerical score.

The Language Customers Actually Use: When you listen to real conversations, you discover how customers talk about your products and services. You might call something a "1-gallon container," but do they call it that? You might focus on "premium quality," but they might be talking about "knowledgeable staff" and "not being pressured."

This linguistic insight is gold for marketing, staff training and customer communication.

Why Qualitative Feedback Drives Real Change

Quantitative data tells you something changed. Qualitative data tells you what changed and why it matters. These aren't abstract metrics. They're specific, implementable insights that can transform your customer experience immediately.

"This was the very first time where we have had our garden retailers in the room listening to actual consumers sharing their experiences," said Danny Summers, Managing Director of The Garden Center Group. "It was powerful and insightful and something our retailers would never learn otherwise."

How to Gather This Kind of Feedback

You don't need a conference stage or a professional moderator. You need genuine curiosity and a willingness to listen.

Invite three to five loyal customers for a casual conversation. Offer them a gift card to your store as a thank you. Ask open-ended questions:

- Why do you shop here?
- What's one experience that really stood out to you?
- What frustrates you about shopping here?
- What's one thing we could do better?

Listen for emotion, not just information. Pay attention to what makes customers' voices light up or fall flat. Those emotional markers reveal what truly matters.

Look for patterns, not perfection. When multiple customers mention education, staff friendliness or atmosphere, you've found something worth investing in.

The Bottom Line

CSAT and NPS scores are useful for tracking trends, but they're terrible at driving transformation. They measure outcomes without revealing causes. They quantify satisfaction without explaining dissatisfaction.

Real conversations with real customers reveal the texture of your customer experience—the moments that delight, the friction points that frustrate and the opportunities that lie hidden beneath surface-level metrics.

When you truly listen, you don't just learn how you're doing. You learn why customers choose you, what keeps them coming back and how to create experiences worth sharing. **GP**

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