

Gaming and manipulation of scores

“Data manipulation” and “score manipulation” are terms used in customer satisfaction research to describe behaviors—whether intentional or not—that can influence and misrepresent customer satisfaction data. “Gaming” is a more specific term used to describe intentional efforts to manipulate customer satisfaction survey scores or collect multiple incentives. Gaming and score manipulation are important issues in customer satisfaction survey research, given the common use of highly appealing incentives and the tendency for corporations to bonus or otherwise reward employees based on scores.



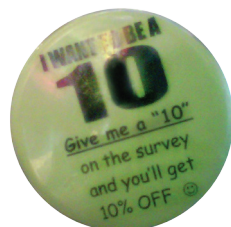
Attempts at score manipulation or gaming are important to identify and address because they can potentially distort customer feedback and give clients an inaccurate view of the customer experience in their stores. Although the issues of gaming and data manipulation can be complex, we can think about these issues more simply by first focusing on who attempts to manipulate or game surveys and the strength of their efforts. This paper describes the various types of score manipulation and gaming that can occur with customer satisfaction surveys and methods that can be implemented at the store level to identify and discourage such activity. Survey design issues relevant to score manipulation and gaming are also discussed.

Types of manipulation and gaming

Score manipulation can come in many forms, from directly manipulating scores with the intention of gaming to indirectly influencing scores by not paying attention to the survey. As mentioned above, it is only when individuals act with the intention to influence scores or purposefully try to receive more incentives than they are allowed that score manipulation can be considered gaming. If an individual is not knowingly trying to influence scores or be deceitful, this is not considered gaming, although it still can be score manipulation and compromise data integrity. The most common types of score manipulation and gaming will be discussed, although this list is not exhaustive. The identification and prevention of score manipulation and gaming is an ongoing process, as a small percentage of individuals will always be searching for new ways to game the survey or manipulate scores.

Employee manipulation

Direct: At the store level, employees may directly try to manipulate scores by pretending to be a customer and taking the survey themselves. They may do this by keeping customer invitations and taking the survey themselves or by trying to get into the survey using fake invitation codes. Most often employees attempt to raise the score of their store by taking the survey themselves, however employees may also try to lower the scores of other stores in the area, or recently laid-off employees may try to sabotage scores at the store where they were employed. Another way employees may try to directly inflate scores is by using personal appeals to encourage customers to give high ratings. Personal appeals can come



in many forms, including posting signs, writing on the invitation, or through conversation. Regardless of the form, it usually involves a staff member encouraging a customer to complete the survey and appealing for the customer to provide a specific score independent of the customer's actual experience. Both methods are forms of gaming in which employees are intentionally attempting to manipulate scores.

Indirect: Employees may also use less direct tactics to manipulate or inflate satisfaction scores. Employees may selectively distribute survey invitations to high-frequency customers, friends or family members, or customers who appear highly satisfied to try to inflate satisfaction scores. Conversely, employees may also try to prevent undesirable ratings by not giving a survey invitation to customers who appear dissatisfied. Although employees may not be directly instructing individuals on what ratings to provide, the simple act of intentionally distributing surveys only to those customers they believe are more likely to provide better ratings is considered gaming.

Customer manipulation

Direct: Unlike employees, when customers manipulate scores the intention is usually to take advantage of the incentive rather than inflate scores. Customers may want to increase their chances to win a sweepstakes or try to receive multiple discounts. When customers intentionally focus on ways to circumvent limitations to their participation in the survey, they are engaged in direct manipulation of the data, which is also considered gaming. This may involve such actions as trying to use a single survey invitation multiple times or changing telephones, computers, or personal information to avoid being identified as a repeat responder.

Indirect: Finally, there are some actions by customers that impact data integrity but are not necessarily intentional efforts to influence scores. Indirect customer score manipulation includes completing the survey more times than allowed in a particular time period by visiting frequently enough to receive multiple legitimate survey invitations. It also includes customers who are motivated by the survey incentive and therefore speed through the survey without paying sufficient attention to survey questions and responses. While these behaviors may not be intentional or perceived as harmful, they still threaten data integrity and can lead to misrepresentation of the service experience at the store level. >>

Combating score manipulation and gaming

Protection from score manipulation and gaming requires a continuous focus on the data to identify threats to data integrity through known methods and also to uncover and address emerging threats. SMG Authenticate® is a multimodal, three-phased approach to combat manipulation and gaming through deterrence, blocking, and detection. These phases incorporate a combination of technology, processes, and behaviors and are equally important in the protection of data integrity.

Deter customers and employees from gaming

Deterrence encompasses two main premises: 1) Creating a culture to reduce employee motivation to manipulate scores, and 2) Making intentional score manipulation difficult for employees and customers. Both should be carefully planned prior to launching a customer satisfaction program and continually assessed throughout the process.

Reduce employee motivation to manipulate scores

One major component of deterring manipulation and gaming is creating the appropriate culture in the company from the outset to reduce motivation for employees to game. Emphasizing the benefits of measuring customer satisfaction, creating standard rules and policies around the program, as well as taking action when employees are caught attempting to game all help to maintain data integrity.

Increase program buy-in: Appropriate staff training regarding the uses and benefits of the customer satisfaction survey may also help reduce employees’ likelihood to intentionally manipulate scores. It is essential for store-level managers and employees to buy into the importance of measuring and tracking customer satisfaction and learn how each specific store can benefit by doing so. If employees believe the program is an important and valuable tool, they may be less motivated to cheat.

Set reasonable goals: Bonusing based on customer satisfaction program scores is another factor that may lead to intentional score manipulation, especially in stores that underperform. Since there is a direct benefit to employees for high scores, employees may be more motivated to game. Therefore creating tiered, reasonable, and attainable goals for stores and managers is recommended. It is also important to give employees the opportunity to raise their scores in legitimate ways by providing actionable feedback if they are not performing at the desired level. Store employees who feel the goals set for them are too hard or impossible to attain using legitimate methods are likely to become disengaged from the program and have increased motivation to manipulate scores. >>

TABLE 1

Summary of the types of score manipulation

Employee direct

Attempt to take the survey themselves in order to increase scores for their location or decrease scores for other locations

INTENTIONAL

Employee indirect

Selectively distribute survey invitations to customers they think will provide high ratings

Ask customer to provide high ratings

INTENTIONAL

Customer direct

Trying to use the same survey invitation multiple times to get an incentive

INTENTIONAL

Customer indirect

Responding to multiple survey invitations in a limited time frame

Speeding through survey and not paying attention to responses

NOT INTENTIONAL

Use additional metrics: Another way to reduce the employees' motivation to manipulate scores is to use customer satisfaction scores in combination with other metrics that cannot be manipulated as the basis for bonuses. For instance, store-level sales or transactions, which are linked to customer satisfaction scores, could be used in conjunction with satisfaction scores for determining bonuses. Employees at a store with underperforming sales and satisfaction scores would find little benefit in attempting to inflate their satisfaction scores, as they would not be able to change their sales figures to get the desired bonus.

Establish penalties for gaming: Finally, consequences for intentional gaming — including tearing off invitations, distributing receipts selectively, or making personal appeals — should be established, communicated, and consistently enforced in a timely manner, as allowed by the company's policies. When consequences are enforced, simply knowing that gaming and score manipulation will not be tolerated and will be actively policed can, in itself, reduce employees' temptation to do so. In addition, the threat or knowledge of other employees who have been caught and were penalized may also be influential in reducing the motivation to game.

Make intentional score manipulation difficult for employees and customers

Another important way to combat score manipulation and gaming is to strengthen the survey invitation process. A tightly controlled invitation process will make it more difficult for employees to take the survey themselves and will systematically distribute the survey in a way that does not bias scores.

Distribution method: Distribution of surveys using point-of-sale (POS) registers helps reduce the likelihood of intentional score manipulation compared to a coupon distribution method. Coupons can be stolen or distributed to non-customers, customers wanting multiple incentives, or employees trying to influence scores. POS receipt invitations are more likely to be provided to customers who actually made a purchase. In addition, POS systems with the capability to produce invitations on an interval or random print schedule help prevent score manipulation. By not inviting every customer, this method produces fewer invitations, which can reduce the likelihood of customers attempting to get multiple incentives using valid invitations, as well as employees' access to discarded invitations. When employees do not know when an invitation will be produced, or for which customer, it can also make it more >>

FIGURE 1

An example of a survey design to deter manipulation and gaming



Fonts, size and color

If possible, we want to draw the customer's attention to the invitation through the use of large, bold fonts or color when available. Surrounding the invitation with asterisks or enclosing it in a box will also help draw the customer's attention.

Placement

For security purposes, it is preferable to place the invitation between the subtotal and the total on the receipt.

Validation code space

A space should be allocated in the survey invitation to allow the caller to enter their validation code.

Unique invitation codes

This code should contain transactional data such as store number, date, and time of visit. Each code should be valid for one survey use and include a check digit code.

difficult for employees to steal invitations or bias scores with selective invitation or personal appeals. Further, random distribution also helps ensure no single customer type (e.g., demonstrably satisfied customers) is more likely to be invited to take the survey.

Invitation placement: Survey invitations located at the very top or bottom of the receipt are more susceptible to employee manipulation, as they could easily be torn off without the customer's knowledge. To prevent this, it is advantageous to embed the survey invitation in the middle of the receipt, where it would be difficult for employees to remove the invitation from the receipt.

Unique invitation codes: Where possible, require an automatically generated unique code to enter the survey. It should not be apparent how this code is generated and any transactional information within the code (e.g., store number, date and time of visit) should be embedded in a less than apparent way. Another step to prevent individuals from fraudulently entering a survey is to embed a check digit within the code. The check digit is computed based on an algorithm of all the other numbers in the code, making it difficult to generate by the user. Finally, each code should only be valid for one survey use, and once used successfully, anyone who tries to use that same code again should not be allowed into the survey. This helps prevent individuals from taking a survey on the same experience multiple times and also prevents distribution of a valid receipt across multiple individuals.

Standardize the invite process: Staff should also be educated regarding the invitation process. In order to prevent invitation and survey bias, it is best if employees are not asked to inform customers about the survey and do not ask customers to complete the survey. If it is necessary that employees inform customers about the survey (in the case of low response rates), there should be a predetermined script that employees should use verbatim to reduce the potential for employees to use personal appeals or other tactics, whether intentional or not. This type of standardization is difficult to maintain without a high level of employee commitment and oversight, including spot checks on compliance.

Identify and block invalid surveys

There are several real-time procedures built into the SMG survey application that can help both identify and block surveys that appear to be from individuals trying to manipulate scores.

Blocked surveys: Clients can provide phone numbers or IP addresses for a block list so employees are not able to take the survey from their home or work phones or computers. This helps reduce the ease and likelihood of employees taking the survey to inflate scores. Pay phone numbers and corporate IP addresses can also be blocked, as employees may use either to take the survey in an attempt to prevent being identified. In addition, SMG records the number of times someone from the blocked list attempts to enter the survey. This information can be reviewed at the store level to help track potential gaming.

Duplicate responders: When an individual takes a survey on a web-enabled device, SMG Authenticate identifies up to 75 attributes of that individual's device and recognizes respondents who have already taken the survey during the reporting period. SMG also keeps a record of the automatic number identification (ANI) of phone respondents. When respondents try to take another survey within the reporting period using the same phone or computer, SMG Authenticate identifies them as duplicate responders and the survey data is not included in reporting. This digital identification technology helps thwart customers who are trying to get the incentive multiple times as well as employees who may be keeping and using valid invitations to inflate scores. In addition to preventing the survey data from being used in reporting, the total numbers of duplicate attempts and the highest number of attempts from a single number/computer are both recorded by store to help investigate potential gaming during a particular period.

Speed prevention: IVR-based surveys have a function built in to help deter those attempting to manipulate scores by not allowing respondents to speed through the survey without listening to the whole question or response options. If a respondent tries to enter a response before the question is finished (prior to where the marker is placed), the question will start over from the beginning. Repeated failure to listen to questions in their entirety triggers the offending survey to be excluded from reporting. >>

Detect and monitor manipulation

In addition to the embedded real-time survey features described above, SMG Authenticate monitors score manipulation by reviewing store-level patterns and changes in valid and invalid survey attempts as well as response characteristics on a monthly basis using the SMG data anomaly tool. Some metrics that may indicate a store is gaming or have poor data integrity include significant changes in scores and responses as well as significantly higher rates of flatlining, responses without a comment, or invalid responses compared to other stores in the company.

Monitoring survey incentive redemption rates or sweepstakes entries can also point to stores that may have gaming issues. Any store with a redemption rate that is extremely low or high should be investigated, while stores with an extremely low percentage of respondents providing sweepstakes information should also be considered suspicious.

Conclusion

Score manipulation, whether intentional or not, undermines the true purpose of customer satisfaction measurement and therefore is an important issue to continually assess and address. While there is not one stand-alone method to prevent every individual attempting to manipulate scores, implementing a variety of approaches using several modes can help reduce and combat such behaviors. SMG Authenticate's continually evolving three-phased approach of deterrence, blocking, and detection integrates technology, processes, and behaviors to protect the integrity of the data. While SMG can provide many tools to prevent and assess score manipulation and gaming, it is also imperative for clients to create and maintain the appropriate climate in their organizations around the use of satisfaction survey scores. This includes educating employees on the value and importance of accurate feedback from customers, rewarding or bonusing employees in a manner that discourages intentional manipulation, and taking strong action when gaming is uncovered. It is strongly recommended that clients implement and utilize as many of the available strategies as possible rather than relying on only one or two. Using an ongoing, multimodal plan including both proactive and reactive strategies will help ensure customer satisfaction scores are truly representative of the customer experience. ●



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