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## The Value and Limitations of Customer-Initiated Feedback

Blink once evaluated an in-flight email application for a client. It had already been in use as a beta and the client was aware of a few wrinkles in the UI. So it came as a shock when not a single participant in the study could figure out how to open an email in the application. All the while, a feedback option had been available.



By

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Clients often tell us they haven't had complaints about certain aspects of their product, whether it's a website or software. But as the in-flight email example illustrates, this is clearly not a foolproof indicator of a smoothly functioning and effective product.

While it's tempting to think that your customers will make you aware of any issues they are experiencing with your product, there are many reasons why serious issues may not reach you.

## Hurdles for self-reporting

Customers love it when you improve their experience with your website or software, and happy customers are loyal customers. But before they can make you aware of what they are missing, they have to clear several hurdles, some related to user psychology, others to the design of your website/software. These hurdles are the reason that feedback from self-reporting offers only a limited view of your customers' experience with your product:

The number of users with a similar problem or need is likely to be much greater than evident in self-reporting methods.

- The type of feedback is incomplete and tends toward the extreme, though it's often a compendium of smaller issues that causes users to abandon.
- Faced with the following hurdles, most customers will simply leave without telling you you've lost their business.

## **Hurdle 1: Memory - "Problems? What problems?"**

People have a natural tendency to remember outcome more clearly than process. It's not uncommon to observe people struggling through a website and afterwards say it was "easy enough." And while these are the ones that made it through with a few cuts and scrapes, many others simply leave without letting you know.

### **Suggestions**

1. Use customer contacts as a learning opportunity.
2. Provide easy contact options without taking users out of the flow.
3. Live support by phone or online chat is fast, keeps customers on task, and allows you to get a more detailed understanding of actual customer issues.
4. Perform usability tests to uncover issues that users would otherwise forget or consider trivial by users in retrospect.

Note that surveys are particularly bad at uncovering these kinds of issues, because of the time that has passed between the user's actual experience and the survey.

## **Hurdle 2: Attribution - "I probably did something wrong"**

When it comes to software and websites, many users blame themselves when problems occur. My wife and I were using a real estate website, and every time she clicked to see a photo the browser window would resize to miniscule proportions, forcing her to resize the window for each photo. "This is stupid," she said, and I could only agree, but then she added "or maybe it's me." Issues that make people feel stupid remain under-reported.

### **Suggestions**

1. Usability testing helps uncover issues that people would not report by themselves.
2. Improve the site; don't frustrate your customers, don't make them feel stupid.

## **Hurdle 3: Comfort level - "I don't feel comfortable making suggestions"**

People often assume that the software or website they are using is the best that's possible. People working in IT know better, so they are often over-represented in feedback. (One of the

most popular suggestions on Dell IdeaStorm is “Pre-install Linux on laptops.”) Most users, however, are much less web-savvy and may experience a host of issues that remain under-reported. Even if a prominent “Contact” option is provided, this may not communicate that you want to encourage people to make suggestions.

## Suggestions

1. Actively solicit feedback and make it visible.
2. Seeing other people’s feedback is a powerful motivator and builds community.
3. Encourage discussion & voting. Voting has a lower threshold than originating ideas.
4. Online feedback services have really taken off in recent years.

Some examples:

I suggest you ...

allow sign Search

... Vote for one of these? ... or ... Create New Idea

194 votes allow embedding in customer web site completed  
We would like to embed the user voice UI in our site UI.  
2 comments | by anonymous | closed on 02.08.2009

165 votes Allow tagging of suggestions planned  
It will be nice to organize the suggestions either using something lightweight like tags or something like categories created by an admin.  
14 comments | by vineet

- UserVoice helps companies gather feedback in a structured way.
- Users can show support for ideas through voting (for quantitative insights) and adding comments (for qualitative insights).
- Duplicates are reduced by showing possibly similar suggestions while typing. No registration is required for voting (abuse is reduced through IP address check).
- “I suggest you...” nicely frames the expected input and format.

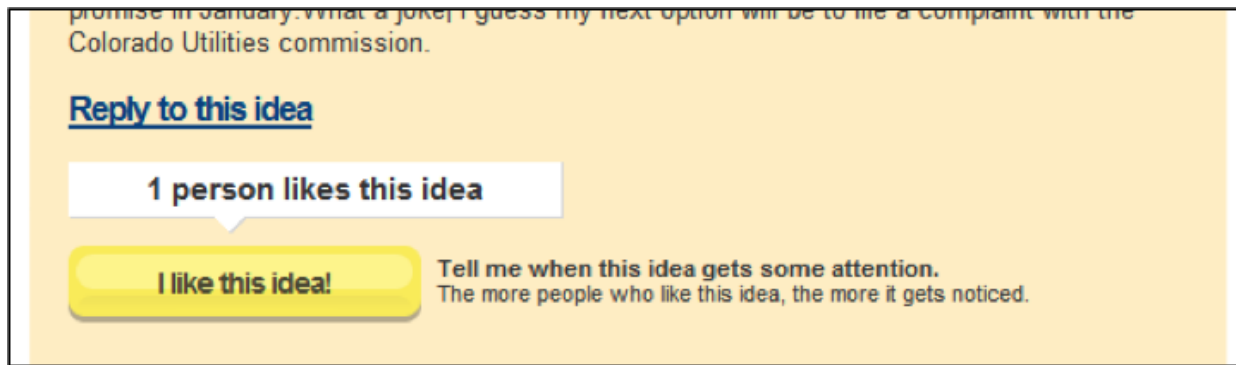
GetSatisfaction is explicit about the feedback they are looking for: questions, ideas, problems and praise.

Ask a question Share an idea Report a problem Give praise

Continue

GetSatisfaction also supports voting with “I like this idea!” and “I have the same issue” buttons,

making it extremely easy to for users show support while keeping the comments focused on actual value as opposed to “me too’s”.



## Hurdle 4: Effort vs. Reward - “Should I bother?”

I can’t remember how often I’ve thought “I should let this company know about this,” but, lacking an obvious and easy way to contact them, said “Oh, I don’t have time for this!” and left instead. This is typical of many busy people: someone who has just spent a lot of time trying to use your site will not be excited to spend even more time trying to provide feedback. People may also wonder whether their feedback will reach the right person and be considered.

### Suggestions

1. Always dignify the customer’s effort with a response (automated or personal), even if you can’t use the suggestion.
2. Follow up for clarification if needed; few people will object to you showing interest.

## Hurdle 5: Discouragement - “Don’t make me jump through hoops”

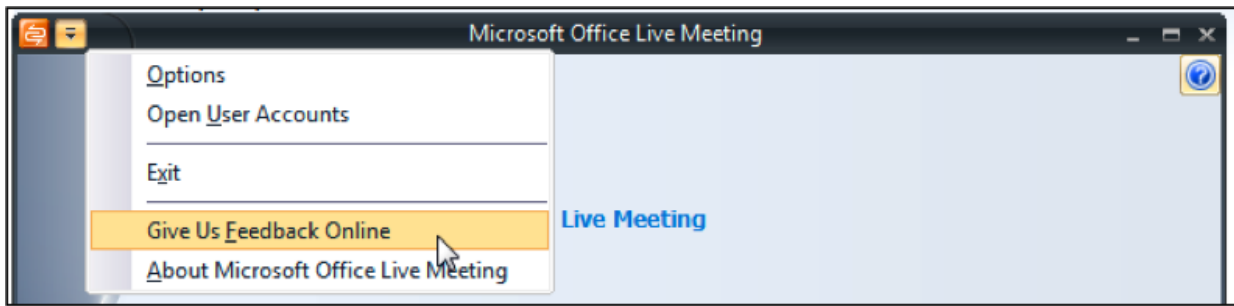
Customer feedback can lead to a better product, benefitting both the organization and its customers. While this may seem like a natural alignment of user and business goals, it’s not uncommon for companies to create obstacles in an effort to reduce contact volume, by:

- Burying the contact options many clicks deep,
- Requiring registration (people hate it),
- Forcing extensive categorization of the type of feedback, or asking for details that don’t make sense or are privacy sensitive.
- Desktop software users may face a bigger hurdle still, as contact options in software tend to be less visible, entirely missing, or, unlike on the web, simply not expected.

### Suggestions

1. Invite and smartly utilize feedback to improve the product. This is a better long-term strategy for reducing contact volume than hiding from feedback.
2. Don’t ask for more information than necessary. Find a balance between your internal needs for structured feedback and customers’ desire to just get their message across quickly.
3. When suggesting help content that may be similar before providing a final Submit option, make sure that the suggestions are relevant so users don’t tune them out.

In desktop software, provide an easy way to give feedback.



Microsoft's Live Meeting software provides an easy way to give feedback.

## Hurdle 6: Organization attitudes & process

Of course, none of this matters if a company does not see the value of customer feedback and has no process in place to evaluate and act on it. Unfortunately, getting value from feedback requires a concerted effort.

The quality of feedback will vary greatly, as most customers will be unaware of the goals, constraints and trade-offs that went into the making of the product. Some suggestions will be very helpful, others useless. In addition, many people assume that suggesting specific solutions ("please add a button that says XYZ") is more helpful than describing their actual needs, goals and issues, which is what your team ultimately needs to have the space to explore alternative solutions.

Nevertheless, the customer is showing engagement with your product and has offered up some of their time to help you improve it further.

### Suggestions

1. If you want the best product you can possibly get, you want feedback all the time. The gains in customer loyalty and reduced support cost can be significant.
2. Process feedback in a structured way. Identify underlying user needs, and look for patterns & themes. Evaluate each theme on customer & business benefit on the one hand, and required implementation effort on the other.
3. Involve your interaction designers, writers, and usability engineers in the feedback-to-improvements process. They are skilled in recognizing patterns and translating user needs into usable solutions.
4. Users will suggest all sorts of things. Act on your understanding of underlying needs, but don't implement their literal suggestions.
5. Record the user need, even if you have to discard the suggested solution.
6. Act on timely opportunities, table those whose time or resources have not yet come, and archive those that don't align with the company goals or don't make sense otherwise.
7. Don't stop improving your product.

## Conclusion

Customer-initiated feedback can be a valuable source of ideas for improvement, provided it is used wisely and as part of a larger effort to understand user needs that includes user research and usability testing.