

For some consumers, surveys breed feedback fatigue

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(AP) -- We appreciate your decision to read this story. Would you take a short survey about your satisfaction with the reading experience? Could you review this article on a website? Rate it for other readers?

As inboxes fill with requests to appraise holiday purchases and trips, it's [prime time](#) for feedback fatigue.

With emailed appeals for comments on commonplace transactions and customer-service calls that beget requests to take a survey, consumers are being pinged for opinions at a rate that has gotten some publicly grouching about a surfeit of surveys.

One such lament spawned dozens of responses on a frequent fliers forum last year. Some [Gmail](#) users complained about recurring bids to react to a change in the email service's look this fall, prompting owner Google to curtail the requests. Comedian Bill Maher dinged the feedback frenzy in a video for The [Huffington Post](#) in 2010, telling a nameless company, "I was actually pretty happy with your customer service, up to the point where you asked me to take a survey about your customer service."

Surely, it's nice to be courted for input, at least sometimes. But some consumers say they're fed up with giving time-consuming feedback for free, don't like being drawn into a data web used to evaluate employees or feel companies don't act on the advice they get. Others say they simply don't have anything revelatory to impart about, say, ordering a shirt or buying a package of pens.

"I resent the assumption that I'm interested in helping this company beyond making a purchase. Giving them your money is enough," says Travis Van, 34. He blogged about the issue in June on the website of ITDatabase, a San Francisco-based service he founded for [technology companies](#) seeking media contacts.

While market-research polls have been conducted for decades, customer-satisfaction surveys have proliferated in recent years because of technology, a growing emphasis on getting data to shape decisions and measure results, and a drive to hold onto customers in a difficult economy, experts say.

"People care much more about what the customers think today," said Brian Koma, vice president of research at Vovici, a Herndon, Va.-based firm that conducts surveys and helps businesses integrate the results with views customers express online, in phone calls and elsewhere. It's owned by Melville, N.Y.-based Verint Systems Inc.

There's no scientific measure of the number of customer-feedback requests, but questionnaires have percolated into such professional settings as law firms and doctor's offices and become de rigeur for even everyday purchases.

"I can't remember the last time I bought a fast-food hamburger or a sandwich without seeing a request for a survey on the receipt," said Valerie Salven, 57, a semi-retired lawyer in Lexington, Ky. "I don't always have that much to say about a purchase."

Julie Pfeffer has sworn off phone surveys and most online ones. She finds most so vague that it's "impossible to see how they could ever be of any use," and she questions whether companies are even listening. Pfeffer, 44, who works in money management and lives in Hockessin, Del., recalls trying vainly to provide specific comments to a car-rental

company survey-taker who wouldn't veer from a "totally satisfied, somewhat satisfied, not satisfied"-style script.

Brian Warner doesn't mind being asked for input on such a big-ticket item as a car or a cruise. But "my goodness, after an oil change?" the retired high school principal chuckled.

Moreover, he's unsettled by the plaintive tone of some pleas for feedback. "It gives me the picture of some poor manager who's going to be taken out and flogged" if the response isn't ebullient, says Warner, 66, of Blaine, Wash.

A reluctance to weigh in might seem ironic in an era when countless consumers volunteer their views on social media networks and user-generated ratings sites. But to frequent traveler Wayne Rutman, it often makes more sense to comment on such sites than to take surveys.

"This way, both potential customers and management can benefit," says Rutman, 44, a Wilmington, Del.-based equity analyst who participated in an outpouring of survey weariness on the online forum FlyerTalk last year. He feels companies should offer rewards for responses, as some firms do, though some survey experts question the effectiveness of incentives.

"Survey fatigue" has long been a concern among pollsters. Some social scientists fear a pushback on feedback could hamper important government data-gathering, as for the census or unemployment statistics.

If more people say no to those, "the data, possibly, become less trustworthy," said Judith Tanur, a retired Stony Brook University sociology professor specializing in survey methodology.

Response rates have been sinking fast in traditional public-opinion phone

polls, including political ones, said Scott Keeter, the Pew Research Center's survey director and the president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Pew's response rates have fallen from about 36 percent in 1997 to 11 percent last year, he said. The rate includes households that weren't reachable, as well as those that said no.

The Associated Press conducts regular public opinion polling around the world and has seen similar trends in response rates. There's little consensus among researchers on whether lower response rates, in themselves, make results less reliable.

Keeter attributes the decline more to privacy concerns and an ever-busier population than to survey fatigue. But the flurry of customer-feedback requests "undoubtedly contributes to people putting up their guard," he said.

Still, some consumers say the surveys can be useful to companies and customers alike.

To Seth Miller, "feedback surveys can offer an easy and efficient way to raise an issue." The 34-year-old New York information technology consultant and travel blogger fills out as many customer surveys as he can and finds they sometimes bring specific responses.

Even feedback about feedback can prove valuable.

After users sounded off in a Gmail forum about repeated requests for opinions on Gmail's fall overhaul, Google Inc. shortened the number of days the request would appear from 14 to four.

"We're very passionate about user feedback" and solicit it in various ways, the Mountain View, Calif.-based company said in a statement this week.

"We know not all users like to be surveyed," [Google](#) added.

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