

The Cassandra Phenomenon

InfoQuest
Business Process Review

Cassandra, according to Greek mythology, was the child of King Priam of Troy. She was considered to be Priam's most beautiful daughter.

Legend has it that the god Apollo, who was smitten by Cassandra, bestowed upon her the gift of prophesy – the ability to foretell the future – primarily as a ploy to win her affections. While Cassandra willingly accepted Apollo as a teacher of this rare art form, she was not interested in him as a lover and spurned his advances. Apollo, angered and insulted by her refusal, decided to punish Cassandra, and in retribution, caused the gift that he gave her to be twisted. As a result, everyone who heard her foretellings of the future, which were true and accurate, nevertheless believed that they were instead hearing lies. With that, the wondrous blessing bestowed upon a mortal became instead a terrible curse.

For the rest of her life, Cassandra predicted the outcome of many disastrous events. In one memorable example, she announced the dire consequences of the Trojans accepting the infamous Wooden Horse from their Greek opponents. But as Apollo made certain, in each case, no one believed Cassandra when she warned her companions about the future. Her tragic fate was to suffer a life of scorn and ridicule.

Which leads us to the present day question, what does any of that have to do with surveys? Within the field of market research, the Cassandra Phenomenon is defined as follows:

In a survey environment where the respondent believes that their identity is or may be known, a strong positive bias tends to filter into responses.

Why is that? The reason is fairly simple.

Endless studies have conclusively proven that the vast majority of customer complaints are never openly voiced. Against that irrefutable backdrop, when a third party steps into the equation and begins asking questions of a customer about the nature of their relationship with another business, a number of factors come into play. Most of them are based on a subconscious concern over the possible ramifications of critical comments.

Stop to think about that for a moment.

In most business settings, success is based on the development of personal relationships. Over time, people become acquainted, familiar with their business to business contact people, perhaps even develop something of a friendship. When they do, they tend to become more careful of hurting someone's feelings or expressing views that may get someone into trouble. In other words, personal relationships tend to suppress the expression of dissatisfaction or unmet need.

There are various manifestations of that problem.

- ✓ Some people may fear that if they express critical commentary, and have those comments attached to their name, they may find themselves at some point in the future being confronted or challenged by their replies, asked to explain what they mean and why they said what they said.
- ✓ Others may fear that a business contact will somehow be held accountable for critical comments and that, even if such accountability is deserved, the nature of whatever relationship has been enjoyed to date will somehow be altered, and not necessarily for the better.
- ✓ Yet others may be influenced by simple guilt over the prospect of telling an interviewer what they really think, despite never having made such comments to the company itself.
- ✓ And, of course, some people subconsciously fear that if they express views that are not commonly held by others, they might not be believed, or taken seriously, and might even be held up to ridicule.

Cassandra.

Through long observed behavioral patterns we see that approximately half the general population suffers no misgivings about clearly and openly expressing their views – both positive and negative. The problem is that the remaining half of the population does harbor concerns about the ramifications or consequences of openly speaking their mind. For those people, the only safe approach, absent being able to avoid the survey in the first place, is to “soft-sell” or “back-peddle” on complaints rather than have them committed to paper, where the possible consequences cannot be measured or predicted.

And, of course, for both the interviewer and the company using the resulting data, there is no possible way to know – before, during or after the survey – which half of the population any single customer belongs in.

The only possible way to mitigate these influences, and to promote the candid expression of accurate opinions, is to provide survey participants with a vehicle that will provide them a comfort level to openly express their views without fear of consequences. Clearly, a telephone-based survey – where the participant is called and asked for by name – has no chance whatsoever of providing that comfort level.

InfoQuest, on the other hand, provides for that need. Though participants are never told that the survey is being conducted anonymously, many tend to assume that is indeed the case. The result is high quality data that mitigates the positive influences brought about by identity fears. When coupled with the highest average response rate in the world, client companies can be assured that InfoQuest results will be accurate, candid and highly representative of the overall survey population.