

Are your berthholders and visitors satisfied? Why not use research to understand their views

Marina managers are close to their berthholder and visitors. They chat to them, hear their views at the annual berthholders meeting and often use simple devices such as comment cards to gather their feedback.

But more and more marinas are carrying out proper surveys to closely examine the views of berthholders and marina visitors – particularly ‘customer’ satisfaction with the services that the marina offers.

This trend is partly in response to the requirements of TYHA’s Gold Anchor Award Scheme and partly in recognition of the more competitive market that exists now. And it’s also because these surveys tend to reveal attitudes and opinions that managers had previously no idea about – people tend not to complain face to face, but are more willing to be critical when they have an opportunity to do so anonymously.

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Understanding the views of your customers will deliver all sorts of benefits, helping to identify problems that would otherwise go unreported, as well as opportunities for improving the life of marina users that might not otherwise come to your attention – such as gaps in wifi coverage, staff attitude problems or uncertainty amongst marina visitors as to what’s available at your marina.

Customers’ views can also give you competitive edge, for example by helping to understand and address the reasons why berthholders move annually from marina to marina – and, research shows, it’s not all down to price.

The views of berthholders and marina visitors can be gathered in a variety of ways. This article explains the alternatives and provides guidance on how to carry out research.

A quick look at the alternatives shows that there are three basic ways to gather feedback.

The first ways are very simple – using a suggestions box or printed comment cards. These are simple to understand by the customer, simple and cheap to organise and produce, and the comments made are simple to collate and analyse. But the information that can be gathered is limited and there is little incentive for the customer to contribute, unless they particularly unhappy or magnanimous. And these ways are not really suited for gathering the views of berthholders – they don’t really respect the longer-term relationship that berthholders have with ‘their’ marina.

Proper research surveys come next. These used to be difficult to organise and were also expensive – needing a team of people to conduct an interview by telephone or face to face. Even paper questionnaires can take a lot of administrative time to organise – and few marinas have the capacity to analyse the information that comes back. The growth of the Internet has almost completely removed these problems – online surveys are quick and easy to organise, can cost almost nothing to administer and provide the anonymity that encourages people to participate and give their views freely.

The third and final way of gathering feedback combines the simplicity of comment cards with the ease of the Internet – these include online

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forums and blogs, twitter and TripAdvisor. What links all these forms of comment is the unstructured nature of the comments that are made – it’s a bit like overhearing a conversation in the pub, sometimes useful – but often not. Marinas cannot focus the commentary into areas that they are particularly interested in – and, most importantly, the voice of the silent majority can be lost completely in the opinionated chatter.

So of all the various ways of gathering feedback, online surveys seem to be the best way ahead. There are three basic ways of conducting online surveys:

- the do-it-yourself option – buying a software package such as

SurveyMonkey, designing the questionnaire yourself, inviting your customers by email to go online and complete the interview and analysing the results that come back. The cost starts at about £300 per year, plus the costs for your time and that of your staff, assuming you have the resources and the necessary skills (although TYHA can provide help and guidance for you)

- by applying for the Gold Anchor Award Scheme, when your marina will be added to those that are available for berthholders to rate on TYHA's "whichmarina.com" website. This has a short and simple online questionnaire that will provide you with basic customer ratings of your facilities
- the professional solution – engaging the services of a research agency that specialises in marina surveys, which already has a large bank of suitable questions and will administer the survey for you, as well as analyse and report on the findings. This solution provides all-important independence and confidentiality for an all-up cost of about £2,000 per year.

“a few basic steps”

However you do the research, there are a few basic steps to consider when designing surveys. First – and this is the most important step – decide what the issues are that you want answers to. Then, if you're taking the do-it-yourself option, translate those ideas into a series of questions – that are easy to understand and unambiguous, and which allow for all possible opinions. Take care not to 'lead' the customer into giving you any answer and leave at least some space for them to contribute their views in an open-ended way. Design the questionnaire so it is easy on the eye and easy to read online – as with any website, clarity and simplicity are key.

Then, invite your berthholders or visitors to take part, and sit back and watch the results come in, perhaps reminding them occasionally over the period of a couple of weeks to enhance their response.

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You will be surprised by what they have to say.

And the final step? It's not enough to simply produce the results – you really ought to do something with them. The purpose of research is to identify problems and opportunities – and then to address the issues that have been raised. One thing is sure – if you ask people for their opinions, they will hope that you'll take action on the issues that they raise. We would recommend that you should take the opportunity to publicise (perhaps a suitable selection of) the results in your berthholders newsletter, produce a short summary of the findings that people can refer to (for example, online) and even to promote the more positive findings in the local or marine press. If you can show what action you are taking in response to the findings – be it better wifi, enhanced staff training, a welcome pack for visitors and so on – so much the better!

There are many benefits of proper surveys, including improved customer satisfaction, better perceptions of your marina as a place to visit, and the opportunity for positive publicity. Here's what Charles Bush, Manager of Mayflower Marina in Plymouth (that recently achieved its Five Gold Anchor Award) has to say:

“Your survey with our berthholders has prompted us to refocus our priorities. Our berthholders are very satisfied, but they had some great ideas for making improvements!”

This article has been prepared by Hugh Inwood, a director at The Research Box. For further information on professional online marina surveys, please contact Hugh by email (hugh.inwood@researchbox.co.uk) or phone (01453-836341). The Research Box is a member of BMF and TYHA.