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Ten recommendations to collect feedback from users

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Introduction - We used to meet our users

Before the internet, we used to meet our users… all our users. It was the only way for them to obtain our data and publications.

But now, with the internet, users can get our data and publications via self-service on the internet. Our strategy is to publish all what we can on our website: key figures, tables, microdata, charts, maps, and publications. There is only one limitation: we must respect the confidentiality of personal information. So, now we know only a few users. They are users that have specific demands.

Before the internet, we used to ask our users when we wanted to have a feedback from them. But now, we cannot do this; we have to change our method to find information about our users.

At Insee, we started to change our approach six years ago and we are still changing it. According to my experience, I have drawn ten recommendations for best practices for collecting feedback from users.

1. Collecting feedback on a few precise topics
2. Choosing new topics each year
3. Working with colleagues
4. Interviewing specialist users and beginner users
5. Interviewing users from different professions
6. Using one or several methods to collect the feedback in link with the topic of the feedback
7. Knowing the different methods to collect feedback
8. Using the feedback to define actions
9. Issuing the main results of the feedback
10. Acting quickly

1. Collecting feedback on a few precise topics

We collect feedback from users on precise topics. This recommendation is not new. We had this approach before the internet.

We avoid collecting feedback on a topic which is too general. If we did that, we would not be able to know what to do with the feedback.

We have only one exception to this recommendation: each year we do a survey to know the image of our institution and of our main products (unemployment rate, gross domestic product, consumer price index, etc.).

We avoid collecting feedback on too many topics. We would not be able to do that correctly since we would not have the time to prepare, collect, analyse feedbacks and define the actions for all of the topics.
We have the time to do between six and ten exercises for collecting feedback each year. For each exercise, we choose a precise topic: for example, the part of our website on the consumer price index, our collection of publication 'Insee Premiere' that is a collection of 4-page publications, the service of our user-support by e-mail, our newsletter. If there is an exercise with two different topics, we split the exercise into two exercises.

With a precise topic, we can interview people during a brief period, we can get precise answers and we can use these answers to improve this topic. And we can find a colleague who is responsible for the topic.

2. Choosing new topics each year

We avoid collecting feedback on the same topics each year. If we did that, we would not collect feedback for the others topics. We would miss a lot of topics…

And if we did that, we would lose our time due to the three reasons below:

* It takes time to change our practices. It can take more than one year. In this case, we will interview the people twice on the same topic.
* Even if we had the time to change our practices very quickly, we will learn nothing very new by asking people one year after.
* The colleagues in charge of this topic can take it badly: "why us? And why each year?"

There are exceptions: if the first feedback on a topic is especially bad and if we improve our practices very quickly. But it is better to wait two years unless it is very important to know if the users are much more satisfied. And we have one exception: we do each year the survey to know the image of our institute and of our main products because it gives us general information that concerns everyone in our institution.

So each year we have to choose new topics. To do that, we analyse a lot of information
Sometimes, a colleague asks us to get for him a feedback from users on his topic. But, in general, we select the topics we wish and ask our colleagues for their opinion.

3. Working with colleagues

The people responsible for collecting feedback are working in the directorate of the dissemination and communication. They are specialist for collecting feedback. But they are not specialist of the topics that are chosen for a feedback and they cannot do the actions that will improve our service and raise the satisfaction of the users.

So for each exercise, we work with the responsible for the topic that is chosen for this exercise. It can be a member of the steering committee of our institute, but generally it is a head of department. We need to work with him and his team at the beginning and at the end of the exercise. At the beginning, we define together the main objectives of the exercise and the questions we will ask. At the end, he will define the actions that will improve our service and implement them.

We avoid choosing a topic when the person responsible (and his team) is not interested or does not have the time to work with us on the topic. In this case, we would work alone without him: we would not ask the good questions to the users and nobody would be able to change something to improve the satisfaction of the users. I know this because we did that once six years ago.

So it is very important to explain at the responsible of the topic what he will work with us on the feedback exercise and to know if he is prepared for a feedback exercise.

4. Interviewing specialist users and beginner users

It is impossible to meet all our users, there are too many: for example, there are 100 000 people on our website each day. So we have to interview a 'sample' of our users.
We can meet representatives from some of our most important users: teachers, local authorities, companies... It is necessary but not enough because they are "specialist" users: users who know very well our data and our services. We must ask people who know us less and even people who do not use our services.

So for each exercise for collecting feedback from users, we interview specialists (i.e. people who know the topic of the exercise and use our service/data), and we interview beginner users (i.e. people who do not use our service/data).
The specialists and the beginner users give different information: specialists give ideas to enlarge the services and beginner users give ideas to enlarge the number of users by improving the accessibility.
When something is said by specialists and beginner users, it is something very important. When specialists and beginner users say the contrary about something, we have to be careful and examine what is the most important for us. Personally, I think that we have to hear especially the beginner users.

5. Interviewing users from different professions

We have defined some "professions" including teacher, local authority, national authority, researcher, student, journalist, private company, associations and individuals.

For each exercise of feedback, we interview people from different professions because each profession has his specific uses and specific requests.
If something is asking by all the professions, it is something very important. If something is asking by only one profession, we wonder if it is something important.

For an exercise, we do not interview all the professions, but only the professions that are concerned by the topic of the exercise.

When we want to collect feedback for a service that is for one profession, we interview only this profession and define some "under professions" in order to get varied answers.
For example, when the topic is our services for the media, we interview only journalists. And we interview journalists from different types of media: economic media, general media, newspapers, television, radio… They have different requests and some of them are beginner users.

6. Using one or several methods to collect the feedback in link with the topic of the feedback

It is simple to interview specialists. It is very difficult to interview beginner users.
For example, a survey about a part of our website that is proposed on our site (with a pop-up window for example) does not catch all the diversity of our users. The specialists answer this survey because

they visit our site frequently and if we improve our site, they will find it easier to use or they will have access to more data than today. But the people who come only once a year on our site do not answer this survey because they will not benefit from an improvement of our site. And the people who do not come on our site because they do not know it or -very interesting- because they do not like our site, these people will not answer this survey.

So it is necessary to use more than one method if one method does not reach all the kind of people we want to reach.

We choose the method or the methods in link with the objectives of the feedback. It implies that we know the different methods to collect feedback.

7. Knowing the different methods to collect feedback

There are several methods to collect feedback. Each one has its advantages and its drawbacks. After five years of experience, it is still difficult to know all the advantages and drawbacks of each one.

7.1 Online survey with a pop-up window on our website
When someone is visiting our website, a pop-up window invites him to respond to a questionnaire. We can install the pop-up window in all the pages of our website or in some of them only.
It is useful to collect feedback on a part of our site which is seen a lot (minimum 10 000 visits per month) in order to collect enough (minimum 1 000 if possible) answers in a short time.

It is a cheap method because we can use it ourselves. We use a software program to write the questions, to collect the answers on-line and to analyse the answers. We can calculate the satisfaction and the main factors of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Cf. appendix 1 for an example.

But only the people who come on our website can answer and the beginner users will not answer (or very few of them will answer). And we do not know the bias in the representation of the respondents and answers.

7.2 Online survey via e-mailing
We use this method when we have to collect feedback from specific users, for example the people who have contacted our user support by e-mail or the researchers who use our data.
Sometimes we must first find the e-mail addresses of our key users. For example, for the researchers, we had asked the researchers we knew to give us the e-mail addresses of their colleagues. The advantages and drawbacks are similar to that of an online survey with pop-up. We can control the bias sometimes.

7.3 Focus groups
During three or four hours, ten people are in a room and are interviewed about our topic. Two groups of ten people are necessary. Each group must be homogeneous: if you want to interview students and teachers, you have to interview 20 students (in two focus groups) and 20 teachers (in two focus groups too).

We can observe some interviews behind a one-way mirror. It is very interesting to observe interviews together with our colleagues who are specialists of the topic because they will more easily understand the results of the feedback.

This method is useful when you do not know how to interview enough people by an online survey and when you want to solicit users ‘opinions about an ‘object’ such as a book, a video, or a publication.
We do not carry out this method ourselves, relying on external support, so it is the most expensive method to collect feedback.

7.4 Individual interviews
During two hours maximum, one person is interviewed in a room about our topic. It is better to do 20 interviews. If you want to interview specialists and beginner users, it is recommended to do 30-40 interviews (15-20 interviews with specialists and 15-20 interviews with beginner users).

We can observe some interviews behind a one-way mirror. It is very interesting to do that with our colleagues who are specialists of the topic because they will more easily understand the results of the feedback.

This method is useful to get feedback about the accessibility of our site. We prepare some questions like 'Can you tell me how much is the unemployment rate?' and see where the person clicks on the website and why.

We do not do the interviews ourselves for ethical reasons to ensure the results are impartial, therefore, it is an expensive method to collect feedback. Sometimes we do the interviews ourselves (less than one hour) for simple topics if we can analyze the results with impartiality: for example, the signature of our institution or the first page of our book collection.

7.5 Telephone interviews
It is like an individual interview but shorter and by phone. And we interview a minimum of 200 people.

We can listen to some interviews. It is very interesting to do that with our colleagues who are specialists of the topic because they will more easily understand the results of the feedback.

This method is useful when we want to interview the people in all the regions of our country or to interview about our services by phone (user support for example).

We do not do the telephone interviews ourselves but it is not very expensive to use external experts.

7.6 Mystery calls
This method is useful only to ask about our services by telephone. We did that once for our user support by phone.
Someone calls our user support and asks him questions. We gave the caller a hundred questions (and the best answer): the caller compares the answer he has just received with the best answer.

7.7 Analysis of questions we receive
Analysis of the questions our user support receives.
Analysis of the questions our user support for media receives.
Analysis of the questions our local directorates receive
Analysis of the questions our user support for big companies receives.

This method is useful to prepare, complete or validate another method.

7.8 Analysis of our website statistics
This method is useful to prepare, complete or validate another method, however, we do not use it very often.

8. Using the feedback to define actions

It is not in the subject of my paper; it would be worth writing another paper on this topic. But I must say a few words about it because it is necessary to use the feedback to define the actions that will improve our statistics, our dissemination, our products and our services.

We must confront the feedback with what we feel and with what we want to do on the one hand, and what we can do on the other hand. What we feel comes from our practice and from discussions with our contacts (we still have some contacts). What we want to do and what we do not want to do come from our strategy and from regulations (for example we must respect user confidentiality).
When we have chosen the appropriate actions, we study their feasibility and we classify them into three groups: what we can do in the short term (less than one year), what we can do in the medium term (in two years or in a project), and what we cannot do for technical reasons (for example we do not have the expected data).

To do that, we organise a meeting with our colleagues who are responsible for the topic. We (or our supplier if there is one) present the results of the feedback and some recommendations for improvement actions. Then, our colleagues define the actions after this meeting.

9. Issuing the main results of the feedback

When we have defined the actions that will improve the service, we can communicate the main results. We must not communicate them before that because it is much better to complement the results with some actions.

We can communicate the results in three ways:
- targeted to the people who work in our institution.
- targeted to the people who have given their feedback.
- targeted to a more general and broad audience.

Sometimes we communicate only to some people in our institution and sometimes we communicate in the three directions, depending on the sensitivity of the topic.
For example, we have communicated the results about our services for journalists to very few people: the Director-general and the Director of the Dissemination.
We have communicated some results about our image on our website (http://www.insee.fr/en/insee-statistique-publique/default.asp?page=connaitre/rae/partie2_3.htm ; cf. appendix 2).
We intend to communicate on our website more than today because we should give more messages to our users in order to show them that we want to improve our statistics and services. However we must avoid giving messages which would disturb colleagues because there is a risk that they will stop participating in the feedback process.

10. Acting quickly

An exercise of collecting feedback is not a statistical activity. It should be much faster.
Between the first meeting with our colleagues to define the topic of the exercise, the main objectives and the provisional methods and the meeting to give them the main results with proposals of actions, we try to complete all of the work in two or three months. It depends on the methods we use.

After these two or three months, it is not finished but our colleagues have the results. We have to define the actions to improve the service. It may take time: between one month and one year! It depends on the topic. For example, it took one year for an exercise on our services for researchers, because three directorates from our institution and two services outside of our institution were concerned.

And after the definition of the actions, the follow-up of actions can take years because some actions may be difficult to implement.

Conclusion

These are only ten recommendations that I bring from my experience. I hope that they will be useful, in particular for the institutions who collect feedback from their users using less organised approaches.

We do not use a statistical survey to collect feedback from our users. We use different and less scientific methods. In a statistical institute, the culture is scientific: so it is not easy to explain that the methods to collect feedback provide information we can use. Even though sometimes we must admit that we are not sure of the precise level of satisfaction (but we are still sure of the actions to implement in order to increase satisfaction).

And it is very important to gather feedback. If we did not do this, users would gradually stop using our data and services. They would try to find data elsewhere or they would do without any data.

Appendix 1 - How to know the main factors of satisfaction/dissatisfaction in an online survey

It is interesting to know the level of satisfaction, but it is more interesting to know what the main factors of user satisfaction are.

For example, let's suppose that the satisfaction of our website depends on four factors: data (contained in our website), documentation (which explains how to understand and use our data), accessibility (ease to surf on our site) and look (how it looks). For each factor, we can compare its own satisfaction with the satisfaction of the website and calculate the link between both satisfactions.

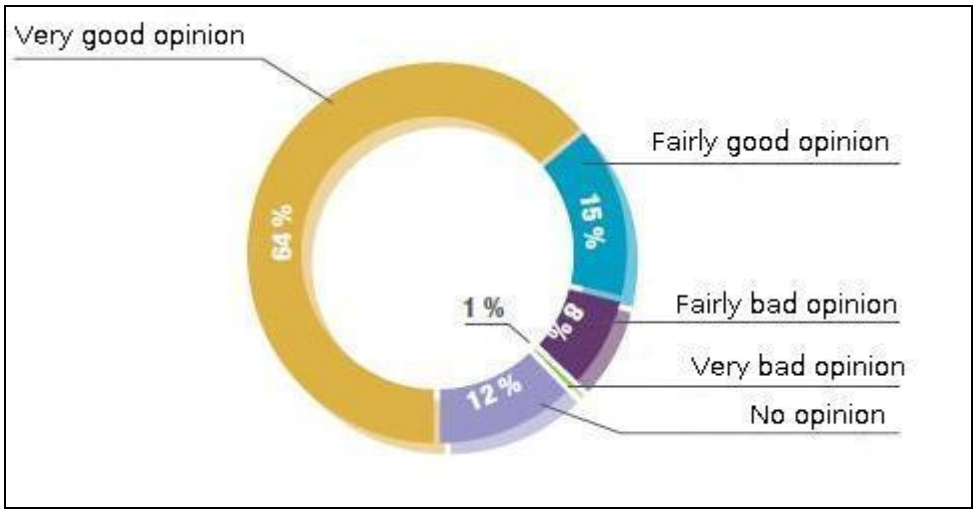
Let's suppose the results of the feedback are:

Factor	Satisfaction of the factor	Link with the satisfaction of the site
Data	++	very strong
Documentation	+++	weak
Accessibility	--	strong
Look	---	very weak

In this case, there are two factors that are bad: accessibility and look. It is very important to improve the accessibility because this will improve the satisfaction of our site. On the contrary it is not important (not so important) to improve the look, because it will not change the satisfaction of the site. And there two factors that are good: data and documentation. It is more important to maintain (or improve) the satisfaction of the data because it will maintain the satisfaction of the site. For documentation, we can even define a negative priority!

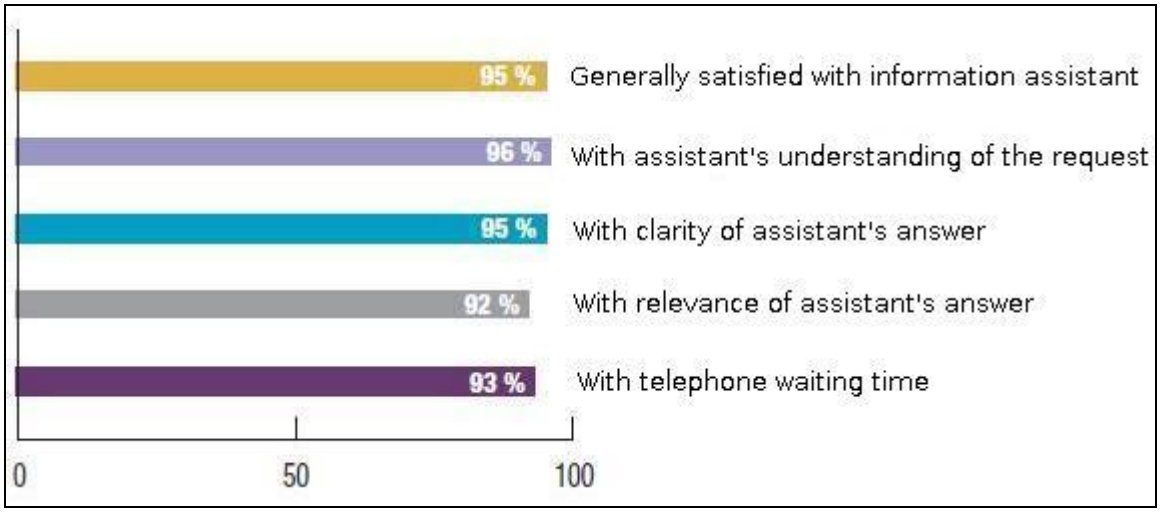
Appendix 2 - Some results about our image we have communicated on our website

Opinions on Insee



IPSOS poll of 956 persons, September 2012

Users very satisfied or fairly satisfied with information assistant during telephone inquiry at Insee Contact (user support)



BVA telephone survey of 300 persons who contacted Insee in April 2012