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TWO SOLITUDES / *Suppliers and customers are often at odds when it comes to consumer surveys*

Satisfaction can prove elusive

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Special to The Globe and Mail

SUPPLIERS and customers too often speak different languages when it comes to measuring consumer satisfaction, two Toronto management consultants warn.

Ken Merbler, president of Proudfoot Canada, a unit of **Proudfoot PLC Co.**, says a retail industry survey conducted in the United States by his company identified a "definite gap" between the perception of "quality delivered" and "quality received."

The survey of 51 top executives of discount and department stores with annual sales of \$10-million or more found that most respondents believed quality of service in their stores had improved markedly in the previous year.

"However, most of the more than 1,000 customers interviewed say the quality of service hasn't changed at all," the consultant said. Only 20 per cent of consumer respondents noticed any upgrade in the level of service.

Mr. Merbler said a separate poll by the Angus Reid Group in Canada also spotlighted a communications gap between consumers and retailers.

In the survey of more than 1,500 Canadians, "91 per cent said it is very crucial for companies to build trust among employees and customers in these tough economic times. Yet most Canadians believe there hasn't been much progress in this area."

Only 28 per cent of those surveyed described companies as more believable than in the past. Another 21 per cent thought the business message to be less credible.

Customer satisfaction consultant Michael Hepworth, head of Hepworth & Associates Inc., said suppliers are being led astray by their own surveys that ask the wrong questions, often in the wrong way.

Thus, robot telephone-answering systems – the source of much loathing among frustrated callers – might take on a friendlier face if users were asked to rate, on a scale, the importance of being answer-

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ed within three rings.

"Importance scales provide you with absolute importance rather than relative importance," Mr. Hepworth said.

"If you talked to the customer, you'd find [a speedy response to a phone call] is not terribly important. They [might] say it's more important that the first person who picks up the phone is able to solve their problem."

While most companies have abandoned the "we know what our customers want" philosophy, "the statement is implicit in the way they design satisfaction questionnaires without first getting input from customers," Mr. Hepworth said. This leads to questions that focus strictly on the hard issues, like delivery and accuracy, rather than on the soft, or intangible, issues.

This might lead an airline to believe that its customers are more concerned with punctuality than clean washrooms. Customers rarely jump ship because of a late takeoff or arrival, he said.

"On international flights, dirty washrooms [occur] less frequently [than delays]. And yet they cause more damage" in terms of consumer dissatisfaction.

Another trap may be the frequency with which surveys are launched, Mr. Hepworth said.

"Either people measure too frequently and can't react to the data quickly enough, or they measure only once a year, which is too infrequent to keep people's feet to the fire."

The article EM9351 reprinted above is used in Figure 8.8d of the STAT 220 Course Materials, in Figure 11.16 of the STAT 221 Course Materials and in Figure 3.5d of the Course Materials for STAT 332 (1995 curriculum).