Why Your Clients Prefer a 3rd Party Interviewer

By Cole Franklin

FCW has conducted client satisfaction and proposal win-loss interviews with thousands of C-Suite and other executive decision makers. Over the years these executives have shared their opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of their service providers, as well as their opinions of best business practices. While virtually all of these executives believe that conducting client satisfaction surveys is important, 95 % stressed the value of being interviewed by an independent, 3rd party.

Many companies today use internal resources to conduct their client satisfaction surveys. Unfortunately, conducting an internal survey presents some significant drawbacks:

- Clients feel "awkward" or uncomfortable giving unfiltered, honest feedback, and as a result, clients provide limited quality and quantity of information in their responses.
- Results can be skewed, manipulated, or buried to fit an internal agenda, which prevents the transparency necessary to improve service.
- The internal interviewer is an expert at something other than interviewing, and they do not possess the credibility nor the objectivity that a 3rd Party provides.
- An internal survey is seen as "going through the motions," whereas hiring an independent third party gives clients the perception that you are "going the extra mile."

To reiterate our remarkable research findings, of the thousands of executive interviews that FCW has conducted, **95% say they prefer being interviewed by a 3rd Party,** and a majority of them volunteered that it is "*the only way to do it*". Here is a brief sample of their comments:

- "Oh, they can be horrible doing it internal… To me, it shows that they're really taking this pretty seriously to get an outside group to come in who has some expertise of telling them what they need to hear."
- "I think it is essential… It is enormously helpful. The results are not always pleasant, but they are exceptionally helpful."

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- "You can't make the right decisions without the right research... For me, [using a 3rd Party] is a no-brainer."
- "I think an independent evaluation is always the best. No matter how scrupulous you think you can be you can always fool yourself. So if it was somebody how had a vested interest doing this, you know, people have unconscious biases that are hard to eliminate."
- "You have to [use a third party]. If you had it in-house it would be worthless."
- "Oh, I think a third party is the way to go in a situation like this… When you're really trying to make sure that the information that's going back to the leaders is truly accurate information and things aren't left out."
- "I would much prefer going this direction versus an internal. You just don't feel like you're getting much value out of that internal one as much as I do talking to somebody that I know is getting paid for their services so they're probably going to listen to you. It only makes since."

Using an independent, 3rd Party to conduct Client Satisfaction Reviews is a best business practice, and it is preferred by an overwhelming majority of executives. Many have remarked that "the third party audit is probably more valuable than anything," and offer 4 common sense reasons:

1. Increased Client Comfort

- The interviewee is more comfortable speaking with a third party, and therefore, willing to be "candid" in their responses.
- One interviewee commented, saying "*An outsider is better. An outsider is a more neutral, and I do not have a kind of sensitivity when we compare between [Vendor and Competitors]*".
- Clients believe it is "just so much easier to be frank and open with an independent person than it is with someone that you work with more often and you want to go back to them for advice. I trust that the independent advisor will convey the message constructively".
- While your clients "want this feedback to go back to them," they couldn't, "be as bold if it was member of the staff".
- Others voiced their concern about an internal resource, saying "you don't want to put anybody on the defensive and sometimes it may come across that way," but with an independent 3rd Party "there is no emotional attachment to the answers".

2. Increased Quality & Quantity of Information

- This comfort, candidness, and honesty provide an objective assessment of the client's true opinion and level of satisfaction.
- One interviewee captured this sentiment perfectly, saying "If they were doing it themselves, nobody would be as candid as they could be. If it's a third-party, people can speak more candidly and freely and they're going to get better responses I believe, more true to form."
- Two J. Crew executives stated, "Honestly, I think we spent more time with you than we probably would have spent with somebody from their office... I think we're much more comfortable to be honest."
- Other clients voiced that they would not participate in the client satisfaction review if an internal resource was used to conduct the interview:
  - [Using a 3rd Party is] "the only way to do it, because I wouldn't have said a peep of some of this to a [Vendor] employee."
  - "If I knew it was an internal resource, I wouldn't even respond to it."

3. Provides Legitimacy to the Information

- The fact is that FCW is an independent third party "adds validity" and "credibility" to the findings and it eliminates any possibility of internal manipulation.
- As one interviewee put it, the third party "adds a level of discernment and assures [the vendor] that the information that they're getting back is not information that can be influenced by any personal relationships or encouragement from someone within the organization". When having "an internal person do it… there is always that concern that somebody will… taint the results or bury it".

4. Speaks Volumes About the Vendor

- The fact that your organization uses a 3rd Party says you are willing to "go the extra mile" to get the truth about both your strengths and your weaknesses. Here are some powerful examples of what interviewees read into hiring an objective third party:
  - *"I think it speaks volumes about the fact that they're [using a 3rd Party]… I've got great respect for them. I know it's not easy. It's costly and time consuming… [but] it speaks a lot to the leadership and the dedication of growing a business."*

- *"I always admire a company who wants to see what their clients feel about them. I think it's a very smart thing to hire a third, objective person to say, 'What was your experience really like?' and 'Tell me the truth.' So I admire that."*
- *"I think it shows that they're not afraid to be vulnerable. They are really interested in shoring up any perceived weaknesses. That's the only way we get stronger, right, is to understand our weaknesses. So that is admirable. My hat is off to them."*
- *"If they didn't [use a third party], I'd think they'd be selling themselves short. Any quality partner should do this. Since I view them as such, why wouldn't they?"*

So if your Client Satisfaction goals are to gain meaningful information on how to improve your service to your current client base, benchmark your current performance, and increase business through New Business Opportunities, then as one of our executive interviewees said, using an independent, 3rd Party "is a no brainer".