

# Survey Says...

*Charlotte session to focus on querying your storage customers and knowing the right questions to ask.*

By Tom Comi

If storage operators knew exactly what it took to make every one of their customers happy, they would never lose another customer again. And because their occupancy would be completely filled with happy tenants, there would be no need to target new ones.

Okay, you can wake up now. While that dream scenario is obviously nice, the reality is that every facility experiences churn. It's part of the business that can't be completely avoided. However, it doesn't mean you can't understand why they are leaving and implement subsequent steps to minimize the damage in the future.

With that in mind, the SSA has put together a session at its Spring Conference & Trade Show in Charlotte next month to help storage

owners know their tenants better. *Listening to Your Customers: Understanding How to Use Customer Survey Technology* will be held on Wednesday, April 6, at 2:30 P.M.

To offer a glimpse of what the session will entail, *SSA Globe* magazine caught up with the two moderators, Robert Chiti (president and CEO of OpenTech Alliance) and Steve Hartman, senior vice president of marketing for U-Store-It Trust.

**SSA Globe:** *How much value do you put on customer input and why is it important?*

**Chiti:** It's critical to our success. We are innovators at heart, but we need to understand the un-met needs of our customers to ensure we are solving real problems and not wasting time and money on developing solutions in search of a business problem. Improving customer collaboration has been one of OpenTech's top corporate priorities since the beginning of 2009.

**Hartman:** We put a lot of focus on measuring customer behavior, getting input from them, and analyzing what works and what doesn't. This enables us to make sure that what we're doing really makes a difference for our customers and in our business results.

**SSA Globe:** *Is it ever possible to put too much emphasis on customer feedback and why?*

**Chiti:** You can never put too much emphasis on listening to customers,

but the real skill is knowing what feedback you should act upon and which you should keep on file for a later date.

**Hartman:** If you're too overzealous, you can get overwhelmed by a mountain of information and get stuck in analysis paralysis. It's important to focus on understanding feedback to make actionable decisions, not just to gather as much feedback as possible.

**SSA Globe:** *How do you determine what questions to ask in a survey?*

**Chiti:** I am still learning the best process for developing survey questions. I have learned it may take hours of thought to craft a valuable question but it should take seconds to answer it.

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**Steve Hartman**  
Senior Vice President of Marketing  
U-Store-It Trust



**Robert Chiti**  
President & CEO  
OpenTech Alliance

**Hartman:** Before trying to design a survey, determine with absolute clarity what insights you want to gain. What do you want to know in order to make better decisions about what product or services you offer to customers and how you offer them? What are the decisions you're trying to inform?

**SSA Globe:** *What are the current technologies/companies that are available to business owners wanting to do a survey?*

**Chiti:** There is a multitude of survey vendors that offer Internet-based systems. The good ones offer solutions on multiple platforms, including mobile apps. The key for self storage operators is that the system needs to be easy for them and their customers. The survey process also needs to be integrated with their property management software and deliverable via all the customer touch points: email, from the facility website, at the facility counter, over the phone, etc. To learn more you will have to come to our session.

**Hartman:** We not only think about survey technology but all of the tracking and analytics tools to understand customer behavior from our initial marketing touchpoints all the way through to rentals in our point of sale software. We make sure that our survey information is integrated so we can analyze what customers say together with what they actually do.

**SSA Globe:** *How does a storage operator go about setting up a customer survey and knowing what to ask?*

**Chiti:** I would say most important is that the time it takes to complete the survey is the most important factor of getting people to complete it, so whatever you ask, do it in priority order so if they user bails on the

survey after a few questions then you still have collected some valuable information. What to ask can be tough, but remember: surveying your customers is not a task, it should be part of a broader strategy that is focused on learning from your customers how you can improve your processes and behaviors. It is not what to ask, but how and when to ask it.

**Hartman:** Survey design and analysis is a science. There are a lot of proven practices to get accurate survey results and improve completion rates. Over the years, I've used a number of consultants with deep backgrounds in survey administration and I've usually been pleased with the additional insights that they've been able to provide. However, if you're doing a survey on a budget or on your own, there are a large number of books on the topics to get you started and help you avoid some common mistakes.

**SSA Globe:** *What is more important, improving your customer retention or attracting new customers?*

**Chiti:** That is simple, customer retention. The way you attracted your current customers in the first place was by committing to provide them a service or product that would meet their needs, fulfilling that commitment is the difference between staying in business or closing your doors. If you are following the social media movement you will see that the key to the future is to make your current customers happy so they tell their friends. I am not suggesting that you should stop marketing for new customers, but I am a very big believer that we all fail to realize the potential value our customer base has in terms of helping bring new customers to our door step.

**Hartman:** Both are important, especially in an industry like ours which has a healthy mix of customers who are familiar with our product along

with customers who have never used storage before. We want to make sure that our existing customers have a great experience with us so that they stay with us as long as they need storage, recommend us to their friends and associates, and choose us again if they have a future need. In addition, we continue to have a laser-like focus on attracting as many self-storage customers as possible in our markets, especially in the current competitive environment.

**SSA Globe:** *Explain why it can hurt to focus more on new customers rather than keeping your current customers happy.*

**Chiti:** Remember the saying, "Do something good for a customer and they will tell one person, do something nasty to them and they will tell everyone that will listen to them."

**Hartman:** Now more than ever customers have a multitude of venues like Twitter, Facebook, Yelp, Google Places, and others to talk about their experiences and vent when they're unhappy. If you're not taking care of your current customers, you'll hear about it—along with hundreds of other potential customers.

**SSA Globe:** *What can people who attend your session in Charlotte expect to come away with?*

**Chiti:** Some insight into what survey technology is available to them, some basic principles about surveys and real-life examples of what other self storage operators are doing in the way of surveys.

**Hartman:** Hopefully, our attendees will come away with a better understanding of how to glean accurate and actionable customer insights across a number of important sources, such as traditional customer surveys, online review sites, social media, web analytics and more. ❖