

SEM Experience Analytics Case Study

Garden Fresh Discovers a New Recipe for Success



Restaurant Chain Boosts Customer Loyalty by Consistently Listening to Feedback

Every business values customer feedback, but not many companies have learned how to collect and analyze it in a systematic way. As the number of touch points grows to include customer service hotlines, interactive voice response systems, email surveys, and Web forums, figuring out what motivates customers—and how to respond to their issues in a knowledgeable way—has become a major challenge. Smart companies maintain an ongoing dialogue with their customers, and learn how to act on their feedback to promote positive experiences.

“Part of the secret of success in life is to eat what you like and let the food fight in out inside.”
— Mark Twain

“Despite a growing emphasis on gathering customer feedback, a lot of business people still rely on their instincts,” says Jill Trecker, Guest Loyalty Manager for Garden Fresh Restaurant Corp., a chain of 104 buffet-style restaurants based in San Diego, California. “Often, these instincts pay off. But, more and more, you need to back up your decisions with real customer data.”

Trecker speaks from experience. A 12-year veteran of Garden Fresh Corp., with a background in restaurant management, she has helped the company develop a sophisticated guest-feedback program. Guests can fill out survey cards while dining in the restaurants. They can also call a toll-free phone number to share their experiences. And they can supply feedback through the Garden Fresh website, either on a specific restaurant or by sharing their general impressions.

A Complete Menu of Feedback Options

In addition to structured or “multiple-choice” style responses, which are easy to tally and analyze, Garden Fresh always gives customers the option to write in general impressions via open-ended forms and 60-second sound bites. This unstructured data, which often contains hidden gems for guest loyalty managers, is the most difficult type of content to review.

“We’re big proponents of keeping our ears to the ground and listening to what our guests are saying,” says Trecker. “Our guests are very vocal. They tell us about everything.”

Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before Garden Fresh was overwhelmed by the volume of customer feedback it was receiving—especially the freeform responses, which now amount to about 10,000 unstructured comments each month. “It was way too much to read, and it would be overwhelming to analyze it all manually,” Trecker admits. “We started to look for a better way to manage our guest feedback program.”



Snapshot

Organization: Based in San Diego, Calif., Garden Fresh Restaurant Corp. is a chain of 104 buffet-style restaurants known as Soup Plantation in Southern California and Sweet Tomatoes in other parts of the United States.

Challenge: Overwhelmed by the volume of customer feedback it was receiving—especially free-form responses—Garden Fresh needed to find a better way to manage its guest feedback program.

Strategy: The restaurant chain asked KANA to help it categorize, analyze and share customer information, enabling guest loyalty managers to identify issues, spot trends, and find meaningful patterns in their customer data.

Results: Managers now have a systematic way to validate the “voice of the customer.” They can track guest comments from a variety of channels and make decisions that fulfill customer expectations.

Hungry for Information

In 2005, Garden Fresh implemented an integrated listening system from KANA, Inc. KANA offers customer analytics Software-as-a-Service solutions to help companies identify issues, spot trends, and find meaningful patterns in their customer data—even the unstructured data that confounds most companies. The core of the process is a continuous listening system, which uses statistical word-extraction and classification methods to aggregate customer comments into highly relevant business and market intelligence. Working with KANA, Garden Fresh found a way to take action on the insights their customers give them every day.

Consultants from KANA worked closely with Trecker and her team to create a customer feedback system that suits their specific needs. They began by taking 10,000 records of unstructured data, which had been transcribed from guest comments, and used them to train the SEM Experience Analytics system. The objective was to automatically sort the comments into categories of praise, criticism, and requests.

The Right Technical Ingredients

SEM Experience Analytics uses natural language processing technology to take open-ended customer feedback and combine it with structured information such as demographic data, customer records, and closed-end survey responses. Its sophisticated data mining algorithms, based on dozens of patented models, analyzes text and detects trends. SEM Experience Analytics presents the results through a series of standard reports. The reports are accessible through a customizable dashboard interface, allowing stakeholders to continually monitor customer insights and generate ad hoc reports as well.

KANA set up online links to Garden Fresh’s data collection vendors, so they could automatically upload guest feedback on a regular basis. Customers express how they feel, in their own words, and SEM Experience Analytics evaluates their comments, summarizing the results into a variety of reports. These reports provide market intelligence that Garden Fresh can act on.

“SEM Experience Analytics helps us detect emerging issues much more quickly and reliably than would be possible if we were doing it manually,” says Trecker. “They take all of our guest comments, and organize and analyze the information to reveal trends from month to month. For years we have been monitoring this information. Now we can do it much more efficiently, and drill down as necessary.”

For example, using the dashboards, employees can quickly identify common issues, such as a desire for a particular kind of soup at the salad bar or a complaint about noise in certain parts of the restaurant. If they want to hear what individual customers are saying, they can actually drill down to review their verbatim comments. “The reports summarize both the positive and negative things our customers are saying,” continues Trecker. “It’s very helpful to have all this information in one place.”

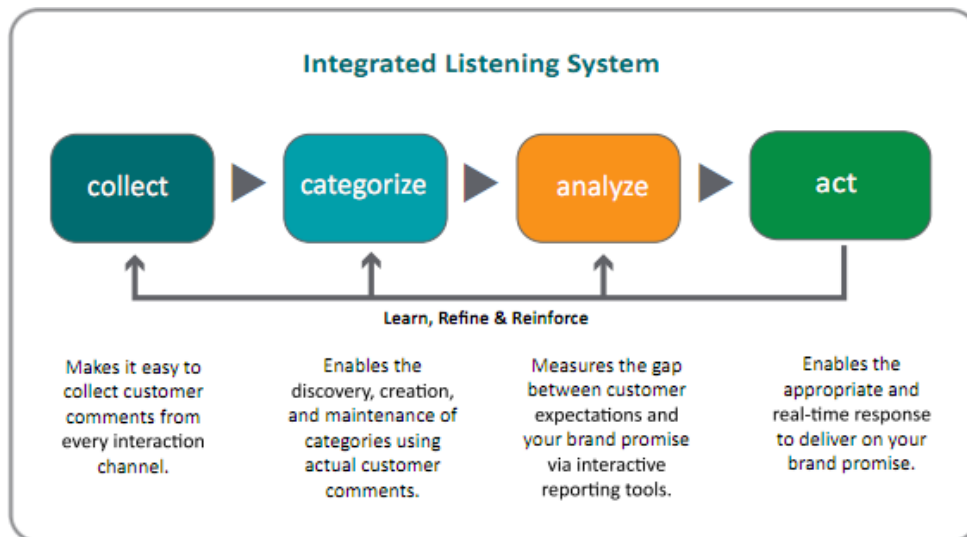
Trecker often shares these reports with her executive team, enabling them to make fact-based decisions about what to change at the restaurants. They verify and validate their decisions by monitoring reactions among the guest comments.

“Finding a way to make sense of guest feedback really helps our business. KANA puts it all into one place and allows us to see important trends over time.”

Jill Trecker, Guest Loyalty Manager, Garden Fresh Restaurant Corp.



KANA has helped Garden Fresh respond to customer demands for favorite menu items, particularly at the soup bar, which is one of the most popular parts of the restaurant. "Satisfaction with our soup bar has gone way up, and the complaints about soup variety have gone way down since we addressed these guest comments," explains Trecker. "Our menu decisions were solidified by the information we obtained from KANA."



Spicing Up the Design

This insight was particularly valuable when Garden Fresh recently built several new restaurants. In their continuous effort to please their customers, Garden Fresh restaurant designers devised a new prototype, with a different floor plan, a modified layout, and subtle changes to the branding. After opening the first of these new establishments, in Chula Vista, California, guests gave Garden Fresh an earful.

Fortunately, SEM Experience Analytics enabled Garden Fresh to listen to their customers. "Many of these guests had visited our other restaurants, and they gave us quite a bit of feedback on the new layout," Trecker recalls. "Some people said it was too loud. Others said it was too crowded. Having all this feedback helped our team modify the design for future restaurants. They improved the acoustics, added more booths, and came up with a new design that addressed our customer concerns." Garden Fresh was pleased to see guest satisfaction go up after designers had made these changes.

All of these experiences have helped managers realize the value of the information SEM Experience Analytics is giving them. They can view high-level summaries of customer feedback, broken down into customizable dashboards. They can also create ad hoc reports tailored to the needs of each department, whether its product development, marketing, or guest services, and deliver reports automatically to specific people by email.

"KANA has been a great partner," sums up Trecker. "They work with us on an ongoing basis and they are continually improving the user-friendliness of their system."

A Toast to Success

Before they started working with KANA, Garden Fresh didn't have a systematic way to validate the "voice of the customer." Now they can track guest comments from a variety of channels and make decisions that fulfill customer expectations. "It's not a leap—it's something we can verify by monitoring customer intelligence," says Trecker. "To make sense of guest feedback really helps our business. KANA puts it all into one place and allows us to see important issues and trends over time."

She pauses, reflecting on what she has learned and the advice she would give to other organizations facing similar challenges.

"Don't ask your customers for input if you don't have a way to listen to their answers," advises Trecker. "If you solicit feedback, and don't respond, you are wasting people's time. In our business, where we have very loyal customers and so much guest feedback, we not only capture the data, but sort it to reveal the top issues guests are talking about. This fosters customer loyalty and makes people more excited to come in and dine with us."

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