The secret to making a

A case study

One of the most interesting projects I've been involved with was developing and managing a site for an online automotive accessories retailer. At it's peak, the site was serving over 20,000 sessions a month, and processing over $1M/yr in sales on the website alone. It was the first large scale projects that I had designed entirely from scratch, using a combination of MS SQL Server and classic ASP.

A favorite feature of the project was custom-written metrics package that intergrated with every piece of the puzzle. Using this system, I tracked *everything*. You name the metric–it was logged, sifted, mined, aggregated, plotted, and reported. Other than determining conversion ratios from various referers, the most frequent use of the data was a near constant tweaking of the site's UI, especially the feedback forms. And with thousands of people using the forms, I was able to analyze quite a bit of data.

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Designing the proper feedback form is a balance between collecting enough information from the user, yet making it easier than applying for a job at the CIA. The biggest mistake made by developers is believing "the more information, the better. Period." If you're using a form to collect bug reports, then that's probably a good philosophy. *However, if you're trying to turn the visitor into a sales lead, that misbelief will hurt you.* When selling something to a person, you need to remove any obstacle, no matter how small, between the person and the sale. Being a computer geek and not a sales ~~weasel~~ professional, I had to learn this in a roundabout manner.

As an automotive accessories retailer, of course one of the first questions on our feedback form was make/model/year of the persons' car. We'd also ask for their ZIP code in case we needed to quote a shipping rate… and a few radio buttons, asking which department they wished to contact… plus, a checkbox or two asking whether they wanted to be on the mailing list. We had all the bases covered, believing that the more information we had upfront, the better we could serve the customer. However, the problem was that less than 15% of people who viewed the contact form ever actually completed it. I double-checked the form validation routines, making sure that some odd error wasn't causing it to bomb. I also rechecked the site on various platforms/browsers and monitored the database for connection problems. Nada. Then I decided to experiment with the form itself.

The initial change was removing the ZIP code box. The completion rate went up 4%. At first that seemed odd because it only takes a second or two to key in a ZIP code. In fact, the average completion time (page request to postback delta) was statistically insignifcant. I then removed the phone number input box. Completion jumped almost another 7%, *even though it was clearly labeled an optional field*. Eventually I whittled the feedback form down to just three fields: "Name" (merging the "First Name" and "Last Name" fields), "Email Address", and a "How Can We Help You?" textarea. Now more than 40% of the people who loaded the page were completing the form–nearly tripling the number of people asking for sales assistance.

Actions speaking louder than words

Even more interesting was the fact that users were saving an average of just six seconds with the shorter form. Inevitably, it would take more than those six seconds to ask the customer their ZIP code and car model in a follow-up email or phone call. It also meant that we now had to manually route the email to the proper person. However, with a significantly higher "first contact" rate, sales also increased. Speaking through statistics, our customers were saying they'd rather tell us the details *after* they had our ear. In retrospect, that seems a bit obvious. Like a brick and mortar store, the majority of our customers would go through the checkout process unassisted. However, on occasion, someone needed a bit more help. The verbose feedback form was the equivalent of requiring that a shopper fill-out a comment card before they could speak to the sales staff. How often would you ask for help in a store like that?

Feedback Form Tips:

- Require either an email address or a phone number, but never both.

- Log validation errors and use them to improve usability of the form.
- Besides a "thanks for your feedback" confirmation page, also send the user a confirmation email containing your company's full contact information, in case the person desires a more immediate response.