

# Finding Out What Residents Want in Orange Beach

900 words

Rauf Bolden

December 30, 2017

## Finding Out What Residents Want in Orange Beach

Without sophisticated polling and surveys to guide decision making our cities will become intellectually bankrupt, and politically rudderless in a sea of data. The constant purr of good news from City Hall has yielded an imaginary hashtag, #NoPublicData, where the wildfires of rumors can only be quelled with real proof. Orange Beach should be the data-mining leader in Baldwin County, shirking from its role does not do anyone any good.

Customer-service surveys are not tealeaves suggesting harmony. They are an easy way to get feedback from residents, having a link on the website for “Take Our Survey”, allowing survey designers to change the survey monthly, gathering different sorts of information. Orange Beach is already paying for Google and Seamless Forms. Both are built for data collection.

These are not your only options. Survey Monkey, PollDaddy, SurveyGizmo, Zoho Survey, LimeSurvey, and SurveyLegend are all free, with restrictions. The reasons for improving customer service are real. Collected data can target the needs of a city’s constituents, utilizing taxpayer dollars in the most productive way instead of assuming people want to give government the keys to the castle, and constituents won’t ask too many questions.

What do you want out of the survey? Here are sample questions from Survey Monkey: How likely is it that you would recommend this city to a friend or colleague? Overall how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with our city? Which of the following words would you use to describe our city? How well did our city meet your needs? How would you rate the quality of your experience in our city? How would you rate the value for money of our city? How responsive have we been to your questions about our city? How long have you been visiting our city? How likely are you to visit our city again? Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?

The questions above target general-customer satisfaction, but they can be focused, and applied to issues like short-term rentals in residential areas, the need for a hospital, public safety improvements, or what trees to plant in the beach median.

Now that you have collected lots of data, the results need to be collated. Seamless Forms has a built-in engine for evaluating data. Google’s Cloud Machine Learning (search “Google cloud machine learning”) is free for testing on a project like the 56 video-surveillance cameras at the Art Center, analyzing video feeds and facial recognition, understanding how people use the facility.

Privacy is certainly going to be a talking point. “Online surveyors commit multiple violations of physical, informational, and psychological privacy that can be more intense than those found in conventional survey methods. Internet surveys also invade the

## Finding Out What Residents Want in Orange Beach

interactional privacy of online communities, a form of privacy invasion seldom encountered with traditional survey methods,” according to Social Science Computer Review.

Squaring the circle with privacy is important. The City of Orange Beach’s privacy policy outlines how they will secure your information like name, email, telephone number, family members, home address, SSN and direct-payment info.

DIY surveys don’t produce reliable results. “Employees and their relationship with your company are different from your customers and their relationship with your company,” according to InfoSurv a marketing-research firm.

Raw data is often skewed in DIY surveys. Orange Beach conducted one DIY Survey in 2015, yielding the following results from 1,424 residents: 5.76% completely satisfied; 36.80% mostly satisfied; 26.19% were neutral; 23.74% mostly dissatisfied; 7.51% dissatisfied, according to this survey’s designer. It looks as though 36 out of every 100 people living in Orange Beach are mostly satisfied. In contrast, Pensacola is reporting a 77% satisfaction rate, according to the Pensacola News Journal.

Obviously numerical analysis is not enough. Other techniques must be applied to make sense of human behavior in big datasets.

We can provide better data for our businesses, residents, and visitors, simply applying technologies that are within our grasp, and making the data public for topics like business-owner satisfaction, rating the quality of the beach, flood-insurance pricing, traffic statistics, and employee contentment. These data give constituents a better understanding of what is going on under the hood. Orange Beach should be the data-mining leader in Baldwin County, shirking from its role does not do anyone any good.

ENDS.