ClientSavvy

Socio-Linguistic Analysis

www.clientsavvy.com

Sociolinguistic Analysis

What is sociolinguistics?

Sociolinguistics is the study of the way people use language in society. Sociolinguists study the unwritten rules we all follow subconsciously when using language and identify how we employ various strategies to achieve a desired outcome. In other words: they study the "grammar of communication."

Why do I need a linguist?

Language is a part of everything we do. Deep knowledge of language is, therefore, a huge asset. Linguists have a unique set of skills to interpret and understand interaction and can provide insights into your client relationships you would never have had before. Harness the power of science to improve your communications and edge out the competition.

How does it work?

Sociolinguistics theory provides a toolkit for examining language data in a scientific, systematic way. It is a framework that can be trusted, tested, and replicated. Applying this theoretical lens and the expertise of a skilled analyst to your communication will unearth questions, ideas, and findings that would have gone undiscovered with a more traditional approach, AND will help you translate the patterns in your clients' language into something meaningful that you can act on.

It can be applied to:

- Client feedback surveys
- RFP documents
- Marketing Materials
- Website design
- Internal communication practices
- Pretty much anywhere you use language in your business

Read on for examples from real Client Savvy clients.

Linguistic Analysis of Feedback Comments

Background

ACME Construction is a 3,000+ contractor with offices across the country. They utilize Client Feedback Tool to monitor their success across offices and business divisions and identify potential problems. Client Savvy provides insight into the scores reported through CFT and what those patterns reveal, but up until now the firm hasn't paid much attention to the comments that often accompany feedback scores. The firm asked Client Savvy to provide an analysis of what their clients are trying to tell them in the comments.

Problem

Qualitative data like free text comments can be difficult to analyze reliably. To the untrained eye, the data is chaotic and any insights are unreliable.

Solution

Client Savvy conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of ACME's client comments.

Outcomes

The analysis identified several key themes in the data that led to specific recommendations for how to improve their service. The currents running through the language in their client feedback were not necessarily organized by question or topic, and so were not immediately evident when doing a scores-based analysis. These themes covered more emotional, abstract, and relational issues within the firm that were not limited to a specific stage or aspect of project delivery or a certain type of project. Without a linguistic analysis, the firm would not have been alerted to concerns and opinions that clients were repeatedly expressing in their feedback.

Key Examples

Staffing was a major concern to clients, not in terms of quality, but quantity. Many simply stated the project was understaffed, but others provided more nuanced assessments:

> "John Doe is an excellent project manager. Probably needed two of his caliber on the project, at least for some of the time."

The firm also discovered that clients' anxiety about the staffing was closely linked to concern about the level of effort, especially in the end phase of a project:

> "Felt like attention to the project dwindled towards the end…"

Further exploration of this issue revealed that clients had concerns that the large size of the firm led to less attention paid to their project – undoubtedly that insecurity could be related to clients' high criticism of team staffing and effort.

ACME adjusted their end-of-project staffing protocol to create more positive close-out experiences for their clients, reducing the sense of "abandonment" and increasing measured loyalty. Key staff now stay engaged more closely through total completion.

Linguistic Analysis of Net Promoter Scores

Background

ACME Engineers is a large (1,700 employee) Civil Engineering company with clients in both the public and the private sector. They have included questions based on the Net Promoter system, which is a way of assessing loyalty. The Net Promoter System uses scored responses to categorize your clients into those who will help your brand's success (Promoters) those who will hinder it (Detractors) and those who will do neither (Passives). ACME wants to better understand their NPS data.

Problem

The NPS system creates clear categories based on the scores respondents give, but doesn't provide the tools for deep analysis into how to apply that knowledge beyond identifying where each client falls along the spectrum.

Solution

Client Savvy conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of ACME's NPS data.

Outcomes

The analysis helped the firm not only understand WHO were their Promoters, Detractors, and Passives, but also WHY certain clients felt that way. Put another way, it helped the firm identified the areas where they could not afford mistakes, and the areas were the stakes were not as high.

Key Example

ACME Engineers learned that the attribute most highly correlated to "promoter" outcomes is high-quality staff. The highest correlation to detractor was price – but mention of cost was non-existent in Promoter comments, which were almost exclusively about praising the high quality of staff. This tells ACME that when the right staffing assignments are made, the firm can pass along the cost of retaining top staff, as high-caliber of personnel provides value beyond cost concerns.

> "[John Doe] is among my top trusted advisors and I will go to him first if I need help in the future."

Comments like the one above raise an interesting potential liability for the firm – this particular client values their relationship with John Doe above their relationship with ACME. Were John Doe to move on, they might not retain this client. The firm implemented plans to retain top talent, connect their exceptional staff to the right clients, and work to replace interpersonal connections with loyalty connected to their overall brand.

Linguistic Analysis of Baseline Survey Results

Background

ACME Engineers is a Civil Engineering company with nearly 5,000 employees nationwide. The firm employs Client Savvy and the Client Feedback Tool to conduct annual baseline surveys of their clients along with ongoing project-based feedback. They utilize the baseline data to track their overall client relationships, identify trends and areas for improvement, and get a better sense of what their clients are looking for in a consulting firm. The firm had a Board meeting approaching, and asked Client Savvy to help frame their client relationships into key findings and recommendations for the board.

Problem

Typical analysis of baseline surveys breaks down the numerical scores and organizes them according to a number of different metrics and cross-sectional surveys. This level of analysis, however, does not always reveal the motivations or sentiments that motivate clients.

Solution

Client Savvy conducted a sociolinguistic analysis of ACME's baseline survey results.

Outcomes

The linguistic analysis revealed many common themes between clients as far as how they conduct their work and communicate within their teams. The analysis also delved deeper into how the clients view the business practices of the firm – something that wasn't expressly asked about in the surveys and so was not brought to the surface in other discussions of baseline data.

Key Example

ACME learned that clients felt a sense of 'abandonment' after projects went to the 'punchlist' phase. As critical staff members moved on to new projects, perceptions during transition suffered. The firm also discovered that staff transitions, unavoidable in a large company with projects lasting years, has had positive and negative impacts on their clients' perceptions.

+ POSITIVE

"I used to be highly unsatisfied. However our new engineer is outstanding and has completely turned things around."

+ NEGATIVE

"The engineer on my project recently retired. We are working through the transition."

For the firm, this notion of smooth transitioning and succession planning has become a key part of their new strategic plan. They implemented a plan to carefully pair two key internal staff (one account oriented, one project oriented) on each major client/project. In addition, they solicit feedback during and immediately after a staff transition to assure positive perceptions are maintained and peak performance delivered.

Linguistic Analysis

Case study 1 - Full report

ACME Engineers Feedback Comments

COMMENTS

Case study 2 - Full report

ACME Engineers 2016 NPS Analysis (Part 1)

NPS

Case study 3 - Full report

Linguistic Analysis: Baseline Survey Results

BASELINE

ACME Engineers Feedback Comments

1. General Overview

This analysis included only responses that were accompanied by free text comments. Object 1 shows the breakdown of the 463 total surveys with text comments into four categories based on the survey score (or lack thereof). A few points to highlight:

1.1

Generally speaking, offering a comment is a rare behavior, occurring on only 463 of the thousands of questions that ACME ENGINEERS asked throughout the year. **Why does this matter?** Any time a speaker does something unusual, it means something. These speakers have something they want to communicate to ACME ENGINEERS, which is why it is important to pay special attention to the words they use and the way they express themselves. Much of the time, they want to express enthusiasm for the work being done. But when someone takes the time to write about a concern or a criticism, that means it is important enough to take the time to address, and should be taken seriously.

1.2

38.2% of responses with comments were not accompanied by a score. Most of those (all but 3) were responses to the "Other comments" prompt at the end of a survey with several questions. The assumption, therefore, is that comments following a question from a specific category are focused only on the firm's performance in that area, while responses to the "Other comments" prompt are either on the general impression ACME ENGINEERS left or on some other behavior not included in the other questions.

1.3

The most common score was a 7 (occurring 100 times), followed by 6 (occurring 61 times).

CATEGORY	SCORE 1-4.0	SCORE 4.1 - 6	SCORE 6.1 - 7	NO SCORE
ACCURACY	3	9	15	0
BUDGET	3	16	10	1
COMPLIANCE	1	5	5	0
HELPFULNESS	8	13	32	0
RESPONSIVENESS	5	12	25	0
SAFETY	8	12	23	2
SCHEDULE	9	18	16	0
QUALITY	8	15	15	0
OTHER COMMENTS	0	0	0	174
TOTAL 463	45	100	141	177
% of Total	9.7%	21.6%	30.5%	38.2%
% of Scored	15.7%	35.0%	49.3%	

2. Word Frequency Statistics and Analysis

This analysis included only responses that were accompanied by free text comments. Object 1 shows the breakdown of the 463 total surveys with text comments into four categories based on the survey score (or lack thereof). ***A few points to highlight:***

2.1

Attachment A contains a curated word list showing the top 30 words in the data. The list is curated to group together words that serve the same function, and also eliminate function words like pronouns that don't have the same semantic weight as more significant content words. Using the curated list allows patterns to surface that might otherwise go unrecognized.

For instance:
the first row of the curated list shows that [+ADJ/ADV] words are the most frequently occurring words in the corpus. [+ADJ/ADV] includes all words that carry an implication of a positive assessment.

The differences between "good," "great," and "exceptional," are more to do with the personality of the writer rather than the meaning they are trying to convey, and so grouping them into a category of "positive assessment" allows us to see that, by far, the most common sentiment expressed in the data is one of positivity toward ACME Engineers.

2.2

When the word "project" is grouped with its plural form, creating the label [PROJECT(S)], it has almost the same number of occurrences as [+ADJ/ADV]. As [PROJECT(S)] is a Noun and [+ADJ/ADV] contains adjectives and adverbs, it is a logical inference that these two categories of words often co-occur in the data. This could happen contiguously (i.e., "This was a great project", or non-contiguously (i.e., "The project, from my standpoint, was excellent." This allows us to make the assumption that the commenters expressed positive views of ACME ENGINEERS projects in this data.

2.3

"Always" - It is rare to see the word "Always" so near the top of a word frequency list, as most people avoid making such extreme blanket assessments of the world and favor a more nuanced approach. While it would require a detailed analysis of the use of the word in each instance of its use to be completely sure, it is safe to assume that this word is being used in positive instances. The reason for this is twofold: we have already seen that positive assessments are the most commonly used words in the dataset, and so it is logical that these two words of high occurrence rates would co-occur. Second, just like most people avoid using extremes, it is also rare for them to be used in negative instances. The rules of politeness encourage speakers to respect others' sense of self by avoiding direct threats to their reputation or character.

2.4

The word "schedule" appears in the data 12 more times than the word "budget." A higher frequency for any given topic reflects its relative importance, but it doesn't give any indication of whether the mentions were with a positive or a negative association. Looking at the distribution of the scores can offer a clue. Of the 43 responses related to scheduling, 9 of them (21%) were a 4 or below. The numbers for the budget questions look very different – only 3 of the 29 budget-related questions (10%) were in that 4 or below range. While these are small numbers and a much larger dataset would be necessary to determine if this is a strong pattern, these results indicate that the firm might have more challenges in meeting client expectations with regards to scheduling than budgetary concerns.

2.5

Logistics - Many of the words on this list are related to project logistics and procedure, rather than technical components of the work ACME ENGINEERS does. Examples: "time," "process," "issues," "schedule," "safety,"

"overall," and "budget." The fact that most of the comments focus on these process-oriented concerns rather than product-centered ones indicates that the product is meeting the clients' needs consistently. It is also a reflection of the relative simplicity of commenting on a deliverable as opposed to scoring how someone does at going about delivering on a promise. The specifications of end products are detailed in project documents and contracts already, which makes it is easier to identify when something is being done well or being done poorly. As such, it is unsurprising that many of the comments in this dataset contain a reference to a successfully completed project before they get into the logistical issues they want to address.

Clients recognize that they have signed a contract for services and agreed to pay for a specific end product. They are therefore emboldened to point out areas of dissatisfaction frankly and without concern. Most contracts, however, do not go into detail about how the client is required to feel during the construction process. Interpersonal issues or communicative challenges, therefore, are more delicate to point out. What are the reasonable expectations for a client to have about the way a contractor goes about performing the duties they are set?

NOTE: Several of the comments in this datasetmake reference to a client being a poor communicator or less-than-pleasant teammate at times. Clients are aware that relationships are a two-way street, and that just as there are reasonable expectations of a contractor's behavior, so there are parameters for what is acceptable coming from a client.

The following section will detail the behaviors that clients have emphasized as particularly pleasing or distressing from their perspective.

3. Thematic Analysis

While the distributions of scores across categories is a useful way of seeing the firm's areas of success or failure at a glance, a deeper investigation into the comments respondents make brings up many themes that would not come to light from a simple analysis of each category. This is especially true when considering that a large percentage of comments are not associated with a score or a category at all. The following details themes that emerge when closely examining respondents' language.

3.1. Staffing

Respondents consistently made mention of issues or concerns surrounding how a project was staffed.

In more negative comments, staffing often referred to the way that management assigns employees to projects, and is often a question of quantity as opposed to quality (see the following examples).

"The project team was understaffed."

"Project was not well staffed for PMs and APMs."

"Steven is an excellent project manager. Probably needed two of his caliber on the project, at least for some of the time."

As the last comment clearly indicates, the respondents' issues were not with the work that was being put out by the ACME ENGINEERS staff as much as they were with the team's overall capacity. This puts the onus of solving the problem onto the people who make project assignments, rather than on the staff set the task of carrying a project out.

Staffing was a prominent part of positive comments as well (the word "team" was used 196 times). ACME Engineers clearly has high quality staff their clients connect with and appreciate greatly:

"Great team to work with. Very cordial. Very involved. Very diligent"

"On top of their game! Couldn't ask for more…"

"Working with ACME ENGINEERS is always a good experience, you come to the table as a team player dedicated to making the project work. ACME ENGINEERS goes the extra mile compared to many of your peers when it comes to working out budget or construction issues. I don't have to worry as much when ACME ENGINEERS is on the job."

In the highest scoring comments, respondents took the opportunity to single out ACME Engineers employees who were exemplary:

"John Doe was an absolute pleasure to work with. He created a positive environment for teaming and collaboration"

"In my 10 years of development, I have never worked with a group of professionals as consistent, considerate and thorough as the team lead by John Doe."

"John Doe was fantastic throughout the project and Jane Smith was great at the beginning of the project."

Using someone's name is an intimate and personal act, which is why commenters only do it when they have exclusively positive things to say. Even in a survey, which is supposed to be an opportunity for honest assessments of both good and challenging aspects of the firm's performance without the pressure of a person-to-person conversation, speakers will avoid pointing out anything negative about a particular individual, instead preferring more passive language to create a sense of distance between the speaker and the subject. Second person pronouns ("you"), as stand-ins for personal names, work similarly. In examining the data sorted by lowest to highest score, the first instance of "you" does not appear until a comment accompanying a score of 5. The first mention of a person's name doesn't appear until the group of 6 scores.

Meanwhile, lower scores have comments with less specific language, more use of the passive tense, as well as sentence fragments. All of this has an effect of distancing the speaker from their subjects as much as possible, and also allows them to make a complaint or give a criticism without having to place blame on any individuals.

Last, it is worth noting that even in very positive comments, commenters are still cognizant of the fact that the teams are hired and assigned to projects by someone else. Many comments included references to these assignments:

"The key to this project boiled down to the team members assigned to the job."

"Kudos to ACME Engineers for establishing an incredible process of managing construction projects - but a hardier congrats for hiring good people!"

"The staff that was assigned to this project exceeded my expectations."

The reason this trend is important, is that it is a tacit acknowledgement of who holds the most control in the company – the firm management. It is clear that the thing that will have the most impact on how well a project turns out is the people working on it. Although clients have the ability to choose the firm they work with, they are not as in control of the team who will carry out the work. That vulnerability is something that commenters are clearly (but perhaps at times subconsciously) sensitive to. Most comments about a great team do not make mention of how they were assigned. When comments make mention of the team being assigned, it is a nod to the seemingly random choice that turned out to be so successful for them.

While ACME ENGINEERS may not have made that decision randomly, the client is communicating how important it is for the firm to be conscientious of the personnel they put on projects. They would be well advised to heed that advice, as having a great team seems to be the best way to please clients. Many of the positive comments about great staff make mention of issues and challenges that came up along the way (some even that the client claimed responsibility for).

Clients recognize that a project will have its moments of difficulty – what they are looking for is not a flawless project, but a proactive and engaged response to challenges when they arise. Problems are an opportunity to impress clients with calm, swift, and effective solutions and teamwork.

3.2. Scheduling and Communication

As noted in the previous section, scheduling is an important and challenging part of project success. Throughout the data, it is clear that the creation, adherence to, and communication regarding scheduling could make or break a client's impression of the firm. Many of the issues that ACME ENGINEERS's clients had with the firm in terms of scheduling were wrapped up in how the team communicated with the clients and other partners on the project. When a construction issue required a delay in the schedule, clients did not like feeling like they were the last to know what was going on.

"The schedule process could have been improved. The project was delayed by the client several times but communication of the delay or updating of the schedule was not relayed to the client or design team."

"The original schedule was not accurate and I had to continually ask for a schedule update so I could communicate and organize the affects of this 3-4 week delay."

"A construction delay was not ACME ENGINEERS's fault but the communication of a delay should have been better."

All in all, it is clear that respondents did not enjoy having to chase ACME ENGINEERS staff for information regarding schedules, and that is an area where the firm can continue to improve.

Another area for improvement with regards to scheduling seems to be following up on the final details of a project. Numerous commenters expressed end-of-project frustration, especially concerning the loose ends at a project's close.

"We have a number of lingering items in both suites preventing close out."

"The tail end of the project was close - barely finishing in time to meet original furniture installation plans. In the end we had to delay moving so that user changes could be finished so we were fine. There was a small issue with the space not being fully cleared out when it came time to move furniture in."

"When the problems were identified, the team jumped right on the problem. The difficulty was follow through.[...] Addressing the problems on an on-going basis for service recovery.[...] They were resolved, but the attention to detail in service was just not there for this project."

"Felt like attention to the project dwindled towards the end..."

These issues are highly related to other things like responsiveness and helpfulness. ACME ENGINEERS had very high marks when it came to those two categories generally – where the firm suffers seems to continually be in this issue of follow-through at the end of a project. Clients appreciate when a project is complete on time, but they are also sensitive to the fact that the end of a project is when enthusiasm wanes. This comment sums up the sentiment nicely: "We need to finish strong. Currently this project is the model for how we want all of our projects built going forward." Knowing this, it is important for ACME ENGINEERS to emphasize consistency throughout the entirety of a project, and to anticipate that their clients will be watching for signs of dwindling energy.

3.3. Perception

As a large firm, ACME ENGINEERS has an obstacle of perception to overcome at times, especially when working on and staffing a smaller project, or a project with a new client. Clients and owners recognize that while the project is their top priority, it is one of many that ACME ENGINEERS has in process at any given time. As such, they fear that they may be getting the "B team" while the firm's top professionals are assigned to a larger and more profitable project. ACME ENGINEERS would do well to be cognizant of that concern when addressing clients of smaller scale projects, allaying those fears from the onset.

This issue could be a part of why firms are so focused on the team's focus at the end of a project, knowing that as a project comes to a close teams get smaller and professionals get shifted to other sites. One commenter made a specific note regarding this issue:

"The only other item from my point of view is that the lead on site person (John Doe) should not have been taken from the project and sent to a different job."

Other commenters were even more blunt in expressing their hesitancy regarding ACME ENGINEERS:

"I knew that I would pay a premium to work with ACME ENGINEERS as opposed to a smaller firm... It was worth every penny. The team exceeded all expectations and I will make ACME ENGINEERS my first go to on the next project - the professionalism, resourcefulness and quality of deliverable was unparalleled."

"Really solid. I was a little concerned in the beginning that this project would be too small for ACME ENGINEERS, but I was proven wrong with the great service."

"We were surprised and very please (sic) with the level of service and support provided to our company. At times, we may have been "a little needy", but your teams: PM's, Superintendents and Management were always responsive. We appreciate your willingness to listen and respond to our questions."

"...It took us several weeks to validate and get comfortable that you could perform on our project (we thought Stadium Project would take priority). We quickly learned that you assigned a very capable team to our project."

As these comments show, clients are aware of the advantages of using a larger and better-resourced firm, but are apprehensive of getting lost in the shuffle. ACME ENGINEERS should celebrate that firms with concerns were pleased with the end result, and be aware when entering into new projects of a smaller size that this may be a barrier to overcome when gaining the client's trust.

3.4. Relating to Clients and Owners

A final theme that arose in the data was the question of the contractor's role in relation to the other partners and stakeholders collaborating on a project. Overall, ACME ENGINEERS's performance in this area was outstanding. Multiple respondents made a point of praising the team for having an appropriate sense of how to work within the larger project team infrastructure.

> "Overall this team has done very well. Issues have been taken care of by the team and appropriately rolled up when my help was warranted. The team has a good understanding of the proper viewpoint of what "owner" means and the roles each plays within operations and budgets."

"Overall this team has done very well. Issues have been taken care of by the team and appropriately rolled up when my help was warranted. The team has a good understanding of the proper viewpoint of what "owner" means and the roles each plays within operations and budgets."

> "Questions were addressed promptly however as the project manager I was bypassed at times regarding questions or concerns during the project. Ultimately I am the one who is/was held accountable for all decisions made related to construction. Technically speaking, other than Jane I was the only person who had the responsibility to make or approve decisions. John and Jim both have a long history with the hospital and their input and skills are valued. I trust their judgment and knowledge but I should have been the first point of contact and then I would utilize input from others for decision making in order to make the best decision possible."

While one negative comment amongst many positive ones is not a cause for alarm, the overall emphasis of this part of a project is something that is worthy of note. Beyond high quality craftsmanship and maintaining the schedule, clients appreciate working with someone who understands their place within the larger picture. From a client relations standpoint, it is critical that the firm employees be able to articulate the roadmap for including stakeholders in a question or problem, as well as the overall architecture of the project team. Without this piece in place, every new issue will require a great deal more work, and perhaps create unnecessary tension.

Another issue relating to the idea of relationships that came up frequently was the way that ACME ENGINEERS staff responded to challenges presented by the clients themselves. Clients expect a "customer is always right" approach to the way that ACME ENGINEERS responds to concerns. While that level of service can be a challenge to maintain, it reaps rewards in the creation of goodwill from happy clients.

> "We knew we bought a tough site and the project hinged on a low enough site number. I realize we are difficult and can be prickly when issues arise."

> "At times, we may have been "a little needy", but your teams: PM's, Superintendents and Management were always responsive. We appreciate your willingness to listen and respond to our questions."

Conversely, clients do not appreciate when the firm pushes back on issues too hard or attempts to be an authority regarding the environment of the job site.

> "With regards to changing breakers that were energized, the expectations of John Doe and Jane Smith were not realistic; they were not open to receiving the reality of the situation (were could not shutdown lab); their efforts to circumvent hospital's expectations and appeal to the corporate office were not appreciated and delayed work; and since a different contractor was eventually utilized to change the breakers, I question the wisdom of hiring Bright Future originally"

This comment includes a wealth of information about potential pitfalls in communicating with a client. The owner did not appreciate when their expertise (in this case, the ability to close the lab) was not respected. They also did not react well to having the issue taken to higher ups when the issue was not resolved. The client was looking for ACME ENGINEERS to find a creative solution within the parameters the worksite offered, and were disappointed when they were rebuffed.

Consider this comment:

> "You operated with the mantra "Even though we can't, we will" and found solutions to every obstacle."

This is the attitude that produces repeat clients, and it was that creativity and ingenuity that the client above was hoping to see from ACME ENGINEERS.

4. CONCLUSIONS

By and large, ACME ENGINEERS's clients are satisfied with the service they receive. Far and away the biggest assets to the firm are its employees, who represent the firm with integrity and excellence. A final theme that shined through this data is an awareness of the complexity of the projects ACME ENGINEERS takes on. Clients were more than willing to point out their own limitations and even ways that they may have made life for ACME ENGINEERS's professionals more difficult during a job. That is a testament to the trust and teamwork that seem to characterize the projects ACME ENGINEERS produces.

There is always room for improvement. For ACME ENGINEERS, the one takeaway is that there is value in paying attention to the little things. Whether it be cleanliness at a job site or following through on the little loose ends at the end of a long project, clients are watching and they appreciate when time and energy is invested in these things.

A second, and even more important, lesson is the way relationships shape a project. That includes the relationship the owner has with ACME ENGINEERS as a firm as well as the one-on-one relationships between workers, project managers, and other professionals at the site. At every level, it is important for the firm to remember its role in the grand scheme of things and how that influences the actions it takes. Reviewing and interpreting the comments from past clients can help the firm better anticipate the possible concerns of their clients and pitfalls to avoid.

3.5. Cleanliness

Not a single comment responding to questions relating to safety expressed concern over ACME ENGINEERS's efforts and emphasis surrounding keeping workers safe. Rather, the recurring comment was regarding the housekeeping at the job site.

5. LESSONS LEARNED

- Assure clients with smaller projects of their importance to the firm.

- Avoid shifting staff around.

- Make sure professionals are adequately supported by their colleagues and that teams are sufficiently staffed at all times.

- Remind staff of their role within the larger project, and their relationship to other key stakeholders.

- Make sure everyone knows who is their first point of contact when addressing an issue.

- Be proactive when communicating, even if the news is bad (i.e., a delay to the schedule).

- Clients recognize that no job will be completed without running into some obstacles. They remember when a team maintains poise and professionalism during those moments.

- Clients appreciate a team that is willing to take on a challenge and listen to their point of view.

WORD	OCCURRENCES	RANK
+ADJ/ADV (S&, Great, excellent, well)	255	1
Project(s)	237	2
Team	196	3
ACME ENGINEERS	175	4
Very	124	5
Work	101	6
Job	90	7
Working	66	8
Always	53	9
construction	48	10
Did	45	11
Time	44	12
Process	42	13
Issues	41	14
Schedule	38	15

WORD	OCCURRENCES	RANK
Site	33	16
Through	31	17
Safety	31	18
Overall	29	19
Forward	28	20
Qualitv	27	21
Pleasure	27	22
End	26	23
Budget	26	24
Done	25	25
expectations	24	26
make	23	27
during	23	28
future	22	29
what	22	30

NPS

ACME Engineers
2016 NPS Analysis

Sentiment Analysis of Client Insight Report

The following pages include an initial analysis of the client insight reports collected using Client Feedback Tool. 144 of the 398 surveys were completed, and 126 of them included text comments along with their Net Promoter Scores (NPS). This analysis is focused on the sentiments expressed in those comments, with the intent of better understanding what motivates a client to become a Promoter for the firm. This analysis has two parts: part A is a sentiment analysis, while part B is an examination of the most frequent words used by respondents from each NPS category.

IMPORTANT TRENDS

This initial analysis reveals several important trends:

1. Higher scores will most often include more references to people, whether it be by name or in more general terminology like "staff" or "team."

2. Comments on higher scores include more emotional language, while lower scores are often accompanied by more distant and formal language.

3. Across the board, successes and failures in communication are the most influential factor in scores and accompanying comments.

4. The longevity of the relationship between the firm and the client is an important factor in scoring.

5. Responsiveness is one of the most important behaviors in a client relationship.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

What are the drivers for Net Promoter behaviors?

1a: What are the most used words in Promoter comments?

1b: What are the most used words in Detractor comments?

1c: What are the most used words in Passive comments?

1d: What do the patterns in the word lists from questions 1a, 1b, and 1c indicate about Net Promoter behavior?

A. Initial Sentiment Analysis.

See Attachment A for a graphic illustrating the spectrum of sentiment displayed in this dataset.

Generally, the sentiments reflected by Detractor comments fall into an overall feeling of FRUSTRATION. Those reflected by Promoter comments can be most often be characterized by ENTHUSIASM. Passives are split into two subcategories: AMBIVALENCE and SATISFACTION. Below is a description of each of those emotions and the associated language.

AMBIVALENCE

These comments include words that reflect negativity and even anger. They detail areas in which expectations were not met, conflicts were not resolved, or the results were dissatisfying. In some cases, emotional words may be used, but most of the time respondents avoid directly mentioning the firm, its staff, or even themselves, preferring more clinical and passive language.

SATISFACTION

Comments were coded as ambivalent if they included both positive and negative sentiments within a single comment. These are the comments in which a person details what went right and what could have been better, or where they reserve an overarching judgment of the firm. Respondents who spoke of recommending the firm but only in certain instances are also characterized as ambivalent.

FRUSTRATION

Comments were coded for satisfaction if they expressed that the respondent's expectations had been adequately met. These comments use language like "good" rather than "great," and are often shorter than the more effusive enthusiastic comments. A respondent who gave a very high score, even a Promoter score, but whose language was reserved and restrained would still be coded for satisfaction. This situation can be very revealing about what level of performance is required for Promoter behavior; further study of those types of comments would be very revealing of what matters most when a client is considering making a recommendation.

ENTHUSIASM

Enthusiastic comments include highly positive and even emotional language. These are the respondents who use words like "excellent" and "great," who refer to specific people by name, and who use words that intimate emotions and even vulnerability – words like "trust," "respect," "honesty," and "team." These types of comments reveal what sorts of behaviors and situations convert a client into a Promoter and advocate for the firm.

Further analysis of these sentiment groups, the words used, their connotations, and the semantic weight behind them would reveal a great deal more about the emotion and message that respondents are trying to convey when they leave a comment along with their score. This type of analysis would help to begin to dissect the difference between a person who gives a Passive score but rave reviews and a person who gives a perfect Promoter score but not a comment. Understanding the sentiment behind a score and understanding the linguistic choices that respondents make can help to paint a clearer picture of what impacts a score and a client's experience the most.

B. Word Frequencies.

See Attachment B for the word frequency lists for questions 1a, 1b, and 1c.

All three categories included the words "**GOOD**" and "**PROJECT(S)**", but those words do not appear contiguously. The word "**ACME ENGINEERS**" is the most frequent word for both the Passive and the Promoter categories, but does not appear at all in the Detractor data.

Both the Passive and Promoter groups used the word "**RESPONSIVE**" with high levels of frequency. This reveals two important things:

1. Communication is a major influencer in how a client perceives the firm.

2. Not hearing back from a firm after the client reaches out is a problem that clients fear, or at least anticipate.

There is a lot that can be said about the word "**RESPONSIVE**". For one, implies that the client made the initial outreach.

None of the comments mentioned that they, for instance, were impressed that ACME Engineers was so communicative about the project, providing frequent updates without being asked. This isn't to say that the firm doesn't do that – the data doesn't include any information to suggest whether or not this is one of ACME Engineers' practices. What the data does reveal, however, is that when a client has a question and reaches out to the firm for an answer, they appreciate a speedy response. It may also imply that not hearing back from a firm is a common occurrence, that this is an issue within these types of relationships. Most of the comments on these surveys are brief. That makes every word important; respondents are not saying everything, they are only saying what is worth noting. If responsiveness is so noteworthy that is comes up 10 times in this small dataset, it would suggest that this is a problem that clients have faced before.

↓ NEXT: Analysis of each behavior category's most frequent words.

B1. Detractors

Observations

The data set for the Detractor comments was very small, but there are some insights that can be made with that limited information.

Only 6 of the 8 respondents who gave Detractor scores made comments. Topics referenced:

· Cost/pricing

· Billing and invoicing timing and accuracy issues

· Project delays

· Poor communication

· Understaffing

The only issue mentioned more than once was cost and pricing. With such a small dataset there is no way to identify if any of these are significant challenges or issues within ACME Engineers's project delivery approach in general, but it is noteworthy that all of the issues mentioned are related to project logistics and delivery rather than technical skill or expertise with regard to the project's scope and the requirements on the engineering professionals. Put in other words, the negative scores are not a result of a lack of follow-through on the specifications of the project and its contract, but of difficulties with the communicative and transactional components of the projects.

Detractor Conclusions

Initial analysis indicates that dissatisfaction with financial, communicative, and interactional components of a project can result in a detractor score, regardless of the project's end product.

Possible further study

1. Broaden the dataset to other detractor scores to determine is this pattern continues.

2. Interviews with the individuals who gave detractor scores to learn more about the specific instances that resulted in their score. Specifically, focus on areas in which communication was the detractor, rather than elements of ACME Engineers's business model or approach. This investigation could lead to recommendations on customer service interactions and approaches to conflict during a project that could preempt and prevent further detractor behavior in clients.

3. The analysis of promoter scores revealed that longevity of a relationship with a client may correlate to higher scores. If the argument holds that the Passive scorers are the "base line" for the respondent system, what would cause someone to lower their score? Arguably, it would similarly be a series of negative results, or one instance of such frustration that would cause someone to not give the firm another look. Examining the data from Detractors and cross-referencing it with the longevity of the relationship with the firm would provide some clues into where those respondents fall.

B2. Passives

Observations

The dataset for passive scores was much larger than that of the detractors. 24 of the 38 respondents who gave passive scores left comments. The most frequent word was "**ACME ENGINEERS**," followed by "**GOOD**" and "**PROJECTS**." The word "**VERY**" appears for the first time in the data in the passive list. In fact, it appears within the top five words on the list. This is significant because it is an amplifier, a way to emphasize a characteristic that has been ascribed to the firm's work. Furthermore, none of the instances in which "**VERY**" was used were in instances that ascribed negative characteristics to the firm's work. Having words like "**VERY**" appear in the list implies intensified experiences and emotions, and since none of these instances are negative, and intensifier means higher positivity and therefore a higher score.

The word "**GREAT**" also appears for the first time in the Passive dataset, appearing 4 times. Following a similar analysis as the word "**VERY**" it is reasonable to infer that this implies even more positive associations than the word "**GOOD**", or even the phrase "**VERY GOOD**" which does not appear in the data, although the phrase "**VERY WELL**" which has a nearly equal sentiment does. One of the instances of the word "**GREAT**" however, is the sentence "Good but not yet great" – which means that this use of great does not, as the initial analysis would suggest, imply an amplified version of "**GOOD**".

A further exploration of the word "**GREAT**" reveals that two of the other times the word is used in the Passive dataset, it comes before a conditional or qualifying statement, such as "Effort is great, prices a bit high." This again creates that sense of contrast that was noted above. These types of comments are useful because they parse the experience of the respondent down to types of interactions, areas of the project, or other variables within the working relationship, rather than applying a blanket statement to the entirety of the respondent's experiences with ACME Engineers.

Overall, it is not unexpected to see those types of qualifiers and conditional language in a Passive comment – by their nature these scores reflect a mixed view of the work, with the good and the bad both coming to light. It is therefore unsurprising to see that the word **"HOWEVER"** appears three times, as well as words like **"SOME"** and **"TYPE"**, all of which are words that help to specify and narrow down a field being assessed.

Compared to the detractor data, the passive word list includes much more emphasis on the work being done, rather than the transactional components of the project. The word **"WORK"** is in the list, along with other terms suggesting technical elements like "**TYPE**", **"TESTING"**, **"PLAN"**, and **"STUDY"**. A sentiment analysis of the phrases within the comments would reveal which of these words are associated with the positive adjectives analyzed above, and which are not.

Last, initial assessment of the words used in passive comments revealed a divide within the respondents. There are actually two sub-groups represented in this category: respondents who are ambivalent about the firm and respondents who are satisfied. The above analysis focuses on the ambivalent scores mostly, because they are the ones that include more information. The comments from the second group, the satisfied respondents, are characterized by positive but unemotional comments. They express that their expectations have been met, but don't go into detail or great lengths to explain how. Those types of comments are reserved for the next group, the promoters.

Passive Conclusions

Passive comments include more positive language than those of Detractors, but they also include qualifiers and conditionals which reflects the ambivalence and complexity of the sentiment expressed. Passive comments are the most difficult to parse because they are not fixed on one end of the spectrum. They also include the most important information for the firm in terms of growth, because they provide a window into where the firm excels and where it doesn't, offering a more nuanced and specific assessment than either detractors or promoters.

Possible further study

1. There are rich possibilities in the exploration of comparatives and qualifiers and how they impact the sentiments the respondent is trying to express. Is there a difference between the comments (hypothetical) "Good work," and "Good work, but not great"?

2. Sentiment analysis of the comments and the topics expressed is an important part of this analysis because knowing which areas of the firm's work are positive and which are qualified is the only way for the firm to productively use these survey results. The comments need to be coded for positive and negative associations with each topic to discern if there is a pattern in the items that received positive vs. negative marks.

3. Exploring the difference between ambivalence and satisfaction. Thorough exploration into what separates ambivalent from satisfied comments will reveal not only where the respondents have experienced shortfalls, but also what they expect as a baseline level of service. Knowing these expectations is necessary in order to be able to deliver on them.

B3. Promoters

Observations

Like in the Passive dataset, **"ACME ENGINEERS"** is the word at the top of the list in the Promoter category. The word **"VERY"** jumped from fifth to second, overtaking the words **"GOOD"** and **"PROJECT"**, which came in third. **"GOOD"** does not appear until tenth on the list, after the words **"WORK"**, **"SERVICE"**, **"EXCELLENT"**, **"STAFF"**, **"BEEN"**, **"TEAM"**, and **"PROFESSIONAL"**. All of these words are incredibly significant. They represent the shift from the ambivalence and satisfaction that makes up the Passive group into the Enthusiasm required for someone to become a Promoter. **"WORK"** and **"SERVICE"** were both high on the passive list, appearing between **"VERY"** and **"GREAT"**. The words that follow, however, provide the real insight into what respondents with Promoter scores focus on. They still mention the firm first of all. But taking that out of the equation, since it was equally present in the Passive group and therefore not significant to a comparison, it is worth noting that the Promoter group is the only one in which people, **"STAFF"**, are mentioned. The other three words that appear before **"GOOD"** are **"BEEN"**, **"TEAM"**, and **"PROFESSIONAL"**. **"TEAM"** has a similar impact as **"STAFF"** in that it references people, but it also implies collaboration and community, which one could argue is an amplified or intensified version of **"STAFF"**, a similar relationship to the one between the words **"GOOD"** and **"GREAT"** in terms of sentimental significance.

The word **"PROFESSIONAL"** has many connotations, depending on its setting and circumstance. An exploration of the significance of that word and its meaning in an institutional context specific to that of the engineering industry would shed light on what it represents in the mind of the respondent. It is definitely positive, but what are the behaviors that the survey respondents are trying to convey? That, I believe, is one of the major factors in understanding Net Promoter behavior as it relates to firms like ACME Engineers.

Last, some might think that the word **"BEEN"** seems out of place amidst the rest of this list. I would argue that it has just as much significance as any of the others. The word **"BEEN"**, grammatically, implies longevity. It implies consistency over time. It can only be used in instances in which the experience that the respondent is addressing

is long in the past, rather than in their immediate memory. It is no fluke that this word appears on this list. It takes time and trust for a client to become a Promoter. The simplest way to gain someone's trust is to continue to perform over time. This leads me to believe that the Passive group is essentially a population of potential Promoters. While one fantastic experience may make someone give a Promoter score, it is far more likely that those who a) take a survey like this and provide detail and b) give a Promoter score are those who have had a series of experiences that have cumulatively provided a positive outcome.

Promoter Conclusions

People make Promoters. The most overwhelming pattern in Promoter data is that Promoters feel a real connection to ACME Engineers and its staff. At the Promoter level, the technical skill of a firm is a given. What makes someone a Promoter is the notion that they can trust and rely on the firm to not only do great work, but to work with the client.

Possible further study

1. How much do clients associate with the firm vs. with the specific firm representative who has earned their trust and admiration? Does this client feel this strongly about the firm, or about a person? Put in other words –would they stick with and trust the firm even without the person they have worked with in the past?

2. What does professionalism mean to a client?

3. How long have Promoters been working with ACME Engineers, on average? What length of relationship is required for that type of trust to be built.

C. Proposal for Further Study

Introduction

The analysis above is the first step toward a complete linguistic analysis of the Client Insight Reports provided by Client Feedback Tool. This was only a word-level analysis, looking at word frequencies across the three categories of Net Promoter Score behaviors. Much more can be learned from this data through further investigation of the linguistic features of the text comments associated with survey respondents' scores. 72% of those who responded to the surveys left comments along with their scores. Without a scientific approach to understanding those comments, they provide only nominal value to the firm. Linguistic analysis allows the firm to understand the scores from the perspective of the client, to understand what they were trying to express when they answered the survey and rated their experience. Every individual has a unique experience, and every individual has their own interpretation of the scale used on these surveys. NPS is one way of equalizing those differences to provide insight. Linguistic analysis is another opportunity to do that. It also provides the ability to not just understand what the clients are trying to say, but also to turn those insights into actionable recommendations for future projects.

Approach

STEP 1.

Analysis

Research begins with questions. Below are some sample research questions that could be elucidated through analysis. Linguistic analysis involves re-filtering and reorganizing this data by categories and metrics informed by language. Language is flexible and infinitely productive. So before we try to understand what someone said, or why they said it, it is important to truly grasp what choices they made… and the ones they opted against. Choosing to write a comment at all, for instance, is a language choice that we can analyze and try to understand. All of that will help ACME Engineers better relate to its clients.

Research Question 1: What behaviors on the part of the firm are most important to clients?

Research Question 2: What role do specific individuals play in driving NP behaviors?

Research Question 3: How does technical expertise compare to client services in terms of driving NP behaviors?

Research Question 4: How often are references made to specific circumstances vs. general assessments?

Research Question 5: What are the most common linguistics features in Promoter, Passive, and Detractor comments?

STEP 2.

Interpretation

Analysis reshapes the raw data into units that are more meaningful and easier to work with. It can tell us a lot – about the data. The productivity of that analysis only comes through interpreting it. Applying sociolinguistic theory to the results of the initial inquiry means that not only is the question answered, but so is its follow up: "so what?"

E.g.: Responsiveness is one of the most common words in passive and promoter data. So what? That means that there is concern among clients about their ability to effectively and efficiently get answers from a firm they have contracted. Sociolinguistics allows researchers to interpret the language choices people make and understanding them as interactional and relational moves, to read the subtext of a message and get to its true meaning.

STEP 3. *Recommendation*

Analysis and interpretation make it possible to understand and listen to the clients' responses. After that, knowledge of communication and relationships and discourse analysis can inform and influence next steps. This is where this learning goes from informational to productive. The people who have taken the time to answer these surveys are trying to share their experience. This analysis will help ACME Engineers listen better, and be better for the next client. This is where the knowledge that Client Savvy offers becomes invaluable.

Value Proposition

ACME Engineers' clients are trying to communicate something. These respondents chose to answer a survey, and chose to leave a comment. They have given the firm an irreplaceable resource, and this analysis provides an opportunity to capitalize on and maximize that resource's value.

· How do our clients see us?

· What can make or break a project?

· What can we absolutely not afford to compromise on?

· Where can we trim some fat?

· What makes our clients happiest?

· What does our client wish was different?

· What do our clients want us to know?

With this systematic and proven approach, ACME Engineers can answer these questions, and help turn those answers into results.

ATTACHMENT A

DETRACTORS — **PASSIVES** — **PROMOTERS**

FRUSTRATION	AMBIVALENCE	SATISFACTION	ENTHUSIASM

lacking

peaks & valleys

possesses breadth & depth

commitment

delayed

in general

capable

stands among a few

Pricing

adequate

very pleased

reliable

rare

cost

depends

conscientious

creative and strategic

cost trippled

responsiveness

good quality

knowledgeable

honesty

responsive

dependable

confusion

average

trust

billing issues

not great

good work

exceptional service

interaction was poor

great experience

not the best

good job

expertise

listening

uniformly professional

DETRACTORS

WORD	ITERATION
Project	5
Good	2
Some	2
Cost/Pricing	2
25k	1
Final	1
Tripled	1
Through	1
Two	1
Change	1
Orders	1
However	1
Scope	1
Basically	1
Stayed	1
Same	1
Interaction	1
Poor	1
Pricing	1

words: **96**   characters: **582**

PASSIVES

WORD	ITERATION
ACME Engineers	16
Good	11
Project(s)	11
Some	7
Very	7
Service(s)	6
Work	5
Great	5
However	3
All	3
Quality	3
Type	3
Needs	3
Testing	3
Responsive	2
Plan	2
Challenges	2
Study	2
Provide	2

words: **686**   characters: **4,299**

PROMOTERS

WORD	ITERATION
ACME Engineers	26
Very	21
Project(s)	20
Work	17
Service	13
Excellent	12
Staff	10
Been	10
Team	10
Professional	9
Good	9
Expertise	8
Responsive	8
Quality	7
Experience	6
Provided	6
Needs	5
Great	5
All	5

words: **1,215**   characters: **7,689**

DRIVERS OF CLIENT LOYALTY

IMPACT ON CLIENT LOYALTY

HIGH

- Pricing
- Promptness
- Scheduling/ On-time Delivery
- Overall Communication

- People / Staff
- Creativity
- Teamwork/ Collaborative Relationships
- Responsiveness
- Professionalism
- Trustworthiness / Reliability

LOW

- Post-Project Invoicing
- Turnaround times
- Final document formatting
- Range of Service Areas
- Convenience of Location

- Quality of work
- Knowledgeability
- Consistency

LOW   **HIGH**

CLIENT SATISFACTION WITH ATTRIBUTE

LOW/LOW: Weak Drivers - Monitor as lowest priority for investment.

LOW/HIGH: Key drivers - Invest in these areas to increase loyalty.

HIGH/LOW: Visible Drivers - Leverage and promote in marketing.

HIGH/HIGH: Hidden Drivers - Highlight as part of the firm brand.

Linguistic Analysis: Baseline Survey Results

Data Overview

The following analysis is based on the responses to surveys sent to two separate working groups for the firm, ACME Engineers. Figure 1 displays the response data for each group.

As Figure 1 shows, there is great disparity in the amount of data received from the two groups – this is mostly due to the initial amount of survey requests sent; the ING гroup received less than a quarter of the amount of requests as SOUTH. The ING group did show less inclination to respond to the surveys, however – their responsiveness overall was at only 22% compared to South's 27% response rate. That being said, those who responded to the survey from ING were more likely to provide text comments in addition to numerical survey responses. More data from both groups, especially ING, would be required to test whether these patterns are predictable behaviors.

Figure 1

	SOUTH	ING
Surveys Sent	**576**	**131**
Survey Responders (individuals)	**156** (27%)	**29** (22%)
Responders with text comments	**70** (45%)	**15** (52%)

NPS Scores

61 SOUTH

39 ING

The wide disparity between NPS scores can be attributed first to the smaller amount of data from the ING group. With so little data, one score moving from one category to another makes a huge difference in the overall score. For example: the only detractor score below a 5 was a 3. Looking at the comment associated with that NPS score, the responder wrote:

> "Our company does not allow us to "officially" make recommendations on third party services. However, I could indicate in conversation our satisfaction with the work completed by ACME ENGINEERS."

The sentiment expressed here is one of satisfaction with the work of the firm, and a willingness to express it, all hallmarks of a PROMOTER type. If this score were changed from a 3 to a 10, following that sentiment, the overall NPS score of the group jumps from 39 to 46.

It is not possible to do the same type of sentiment analysis on the remaining two DETRACTOR scores, as neither of those responders left text comments. It is, however, worth noting that these DETRACTOR NPS scores are from individuals who gave above-satisfactory scores on the QUESTIONS surveys. Both gave a 4 for Budget, while one respondent gave a 5 for Responsiveness and the other a 5 for quality. Neither completed more than two questions in addition to the NPS score. Although this is limited information, there is still learning to be gained from it. The more enthusiastic and invested a respondent is, the more likely they are to answer a survey and give high quality, detailed responses. This is true if the scores are positive or negative. Based on the lack of responses (answering only 2 questions) and the lack of enthusiasm (positive-but-not-excellent scores), these scores reflect a sentiment of ambivalence, rather than negativity. Although they gave detractor scores, therefore, their sentiment analysis reveals a profile more akin to that of a passive score.

Re-categorizing these two scores to the passive group brings the NPS score up from 46 to 54, a major improvement from the baseline 39.

Relationship

Loyalty (and PROMOTER behavior) is often linked to the personal relationships that clients develop with the firms, and with the employees they work with. This holds true with the responses to ACME ENGINEERS's surveys from clients. What is different from other firms, however, is that the positive comments don't skew as heavily toward emphasizing specific individuals as that of other firms. I coded the comments for the SUBJECT of the comments. This process involved looking at the whole of an individual's comments on the firm and identifying the various subjects that they identified in their responses.

As Figure 2 shows, a large majority of the comments (63.5%) reference the firm by name. That indicates a strong sense of awareness of the brand, and indicates that the scores are related not just to the experience of the individual commentator, but on the experience with ACME as a whole. This information has both positive and negative possible interpretations. From a negative perspective, it might reveal that the relationships the clients develop with ACME ENGINEERS's employees are not as strong. From a positive perspective, this pattern reveals that ACME ENGINEERS does a good job of establishing their brand and their identity as a company, rather than relying on their best employees to carry the team. Not identifying the special individual(s) who have made the experience a positive one suggests that all employees have been consistently effective, so much so that it is impossible to name the one or two who merit recognition.

Which case is it for ACME ENGINEERS? I am inclined to think the latter. First, it is important to remember that some of those comments included in that large majority are also comments that mention people, or even identify them by name. It is also important to note that the second largest category is that of PROPER – which means that there are a good number of comments that call out particular people. Last, even the most negative comments did not use the name of the firm. Null comments are split between positive and negative connotations, but any mention of people and/or ACME ENGINEERS by name is a positive comment.

Codes

FIRM

Any comment that mentions the firm by name (ACME or ACME ENGINEERS were acceptable here).

PEOPLE

A comment that refers to people within ACME ENGINEERS, but not by name. (I.e.: "staff," "team," "representatives"

PROPER

Any comment that identifies a ACME employee by name. 2nd person pronouns are also included in this category.

FIRM, PEOPLE

Comments that use both the firm name and references to people.

FIRM, PROPER

Comments that use both the firm name and proper nouns.

NULL

Comments without an identified subject.

CATEGORY	COMMENTS	%
FIRM	31	36.5
PEOPLE	4	4.7
PROPER	14	16.5
FIRM, PEOPLE	11	12.9
FIRM, PROPER	12	14.1
NULL	13	15.3

Why is this important?

One of the commenters wrote:

> "When selecting consultants I will typical hire the person not the firm."

It is important to know how your people stack up, as most clients will rely on that relationship to serve as their primary measure of the firm's capabilities overall. That, however, can pose problems because when that person leaves the firm, transfers, or retires, the firm might not be able to rely on their relationship with their client to keep them on board. These stories come up in even this small amount of data.

For instance, here are two "small stories" that reflect this phenomenon, pulled from this dataset.

One writer wrote:

> "The engineer on my project recently retired. We are working through the transition."

This person gave an NPS score of 8 – a PASSIVE score. They are withholding judgment on recommending the firm until they decide how their new engineer fits into their team, and whether the relationship will continue to be positive. Not only that, but they are looking to see how the transition happens, and how the firm handles this disruption. How well ACME ENGINEERS, and this new engineer, handle this will determine with the next NPS score this respondent gives is a 10 or a 6.

Another writer wrote in answer to the question of responsiveness:

> "I used to be highly unsatisfied. However our new engineer is outstanding and has completely turned things around."

In the overall comments section, this person followed up with even more detail on the situation:

> "I can't say enough to express my appreciation of Bob Jones… if it wasn't for Mr. Jones, we probably would have left ACME a couple of years ago."

The story under these comments is an important: this person was very unhappy with their service, so much so that they were ready to walk away from the relationship with the firm. We have no idea whether they expressed this difficulty, or to whom, but we do know that changing one person on the team was enough to save the whole relationship. This person also gave an NPS score of 8 – still not at PROMOTER status, but it is likely that this is one of the rare times where a DETRACTOR has been converted back into a more positive relationship with the firm. It is likely that another successful project with this new engineer will be enough to change that 8 to a 9, and this client from a DETRACTOR to a full-blown PROMOTER.

Longevity

Clients with long histories with a firm are much more likely to be promoters. Of course, only happy customers become return customers, but also – only customers who feel like they have had adequate time to assess a firm are willing to go out on a limb and make a recommendation. Many commenters make reference to their history (or lack thereof) with ACME ENGINEERS in their comments. It is good for the firm to remain cognizant not only of how they are doing on the current project for a client, but to recognize where on this spectrum of loyalty they fall for the client – knowing that can inform how they communicate with the firm and also help them to better understand how the client is approaching the interaction.

"It has been my experience through many projects over 25 years that ACMESmith consistently provides ideal engineering consulting services with a team of approachable, intellectual, and experienced staff."

"These ratings are based on this single project and on the progress made so far. ACME has historically done and excellent job for us on numerous projects and I expect that many of these ratings will improve once the project is finished."

Budget/Cost

Far and away, the most negative or concerning comments from ACME ENGINEERS's clients were with regards to Budget and Cost of services, as well as the estimation of costs at the beginning of a project vs. the actual costs as it progressed. Not all comments were negative, nor was it true that high costs seemed to be a total detractor from the client, but it is clear that ACME ENGINEERS needs to continually demonstrate the high value they offer clients fi they want to continue to charge their current rates.

"I'm pleased with ACME's support on projects. ACME's rates are generally higher that other consultants that I use."

"Phase 2 was lost because of high cost estimates."

"The original budget supplied and the specifications provided in the engineering of project were not in line. If we had purchased what was specified we would have blown the budget."

"Only contractor who has raised rates in 2017 is ACME. Others have held rates and committed to hold rates for years."

"Rates tend to be lower than other national firms."

"We have a lot of work with ACME ENGINEERS. (sic) We value the worldwide knowledge with the local office feel. ACME ENGINEERS understands our facilities but sometimes does provide realistic project budgets or the budgets change by more than 10% from 60 to 100%. This is an area for improvement for our area of the country."

"Generally OK. Above average quality of work deserves high fees. OK! Scope was fully obtained."

"This is our largest concern with ACME. We plan and ultimately budget for a project to find out just before bidding that the final estimates have significantly increased from just the previous estimates. We have lost confidence in our planning based on ACME estimates."

"Rates tend to be lower than other national firms."

These comments are not all of the ones referencing budget/cost, but they get at the various themes that were represented in the data. With the exception of one outlier, comment 5, all commenters were in agreement that ACME ENGINEERS has higher costs than other consultants. While this led some clients to walk away from the firm entirely (comment 2), others recognized that high quality comes at a price (comment 7). This is an area of improvement for ACME ENGINEERS, to be able to provide consistent communication and of ROI and to maintain the cost levels estimated at the beginning of a project.

What these comments capture is not that clients are necessarily shopping for the best price, but that they want to feel like they are getting what they are paying for, both in terms of value and in terms of seeing the end product that they expected to see for the price they had decided on.

One final example that teases out the nuances of this discussion is in this final comment:

"Making your services scalable for smaller utilities would be very helpful to us so we utilize your firm for smaller projects moving forward. Sometimes we do not need all the "bells and whistles" to accomplish some of these projects and in turn would make your services more affordable."

This commenter gives ACME ENGINEERS a recommendation as to how to get more business from them, and counter to what many firms might expect, it involves removing some of the services that might be part of working with a very large firm with more resources than a smaller company. This commenter recognizes that sometime they are paying for resources they simply do not need to carry out the project – in those cases, they prefer to use a different firm, perhaps without the longstanding relationships or the high quality staff, but with a more reasonable rate for the size of the job at hand.

Responsiveness

"Some times ACME can be responsive, other times it could take some time to receive a response back."

The above comment is an example of the feedback ACME ENGINEERS got back with regards to responsiveness and communication. The firm would do well to pay attention to these issues, because when clients to not receive a response back, they fill in that empty space with their own interpretations of what is happening, as is the case with the respondent who said:

"I believe that ACME staff have a heavy work load."

This respondent still gave a 9 as an NPS score, but the most common score to other questions was a 4. While the response might initially seem like a non-sequitur, this is a signal that the ACME ENGINEERS representatives working with this person are not working at the pace that they would prefer. Furthermore, while they might be a satisfied customer now, a firm can quickly fall from grace with a client like that if they do not regain the client's confidence.

Another point of note is that person used this same exact response in two of the questions they gave (the only ones with any text in the comments). This was their response to questions regarding schedule and responsiveness. Repeating the exact same thing twice is a signal that this person has strong feelings and real concerns about this issue.

Of course, issues of scheduling, and especially responsiveness, are central to the relationship the client builds with the ACME ENGINEERS employees working on the project. By referencing their workload, however, the speaker is removing some of the blame from the people she is working with, and

instead placing it on the ACME ENGINEERS management, or whoever distributes the work/takes care of staffing assignments. This is a common strategy for dealing with uncomfortable situations, especially in instances when two people are working closely together. Although this person gave satisfactory scores, and probably likes the people she works with, she is concerned that she is not the priority and that their project will suffer as a result.

The "Bad Stuff"

Firms often want to know "what did we do wrong?" This section will do a deep dive into the individual who expressed the most frustration with the firm. Figure 3 includes those comments below. This individual's comments ranged from a 1 to a 2.5. The writer uses a good deal of narrative elements to explain their scores, and unlike many other respondents who take the question category as a cue and repeat that word in the response, this respondent instead simply tells his story with little regard for the actual question being asked (though the connections between the questions and the responses can be presumed in many of the cases).

CATEGORY	#	COMMENT
Helpfulness	**1**	The City spent 12 million dollars on a new sludge dewatering facility that can't be used because of problems in the aeration basin design.
Responsiveness	**2**	To slow, latest project has been closed out for 3 months yet there are still several outstanding issues that have not been resolved.
Resources	**2**	The designer never visited the plant after construction started thus is oblivious to errors in design omissions that are causing us severe problems now.
Schedule	**2**	The Contractor drove the schedule.
Quality	**2**	The City ended up solving most of the problems on it's own.
Scope and Fees	**2**	Expected a lot more hands on management for the money.
Budget	**2.5**	Project was not completed within original budget due to the time running out. Ended up sending the RPR away when needed most.

Figure 3

1. Using a narrative form is useful because it helps the client express what is bothering them. In a sense, it comes down to expectations – everyone knows that the ideal story is one where everything goes according to the plan (the plot) that was laid out at the beginning of the project. When it doesn't go that way, the plot becomes riddles with obstructions and the journey is much more unpleasant.

2. The story painted here is not a good one – the client is frustrated for a number of reasons, including a slowed schedule, a nonfunctional product, and a sense that their money was not well spent. While all of those things are true, the overall sentiment expressed in these comments is not frustration— **it's abandonment**. Clients recognize that most projects hit their speed bumps and their issues. But they want a firm that will double down and dig in when those issues arise. In each of the comments above, beyond the frustration with things that went wrong, the client is feeling abandoned by the people they need the most to help solve the problem.

3. In response to this type of commentary, ACME ENGINEERS should respond to that feeling of being abandoned just as much as the feeling of frustration.

General Comments

The firm has a lot to be proud of. The biggest battle for ACME ENGINEERS, based on this data, is balancing their identity as a large national firm and their ability to provide nuanced service. They do generally a good job – especially in terms of service, the firm has excellent feedback. As a brand, they have a strong identity and their customers know what to expect. That being said, the customer is also aware of the potential pitfalls (high costs, competition for attention, impersonal approach of a large firm).

Analytical Approach

1. Comparing two types of data (NPS and Questions scores) can be a challenge, especially when the scoring systems are so different. I began by reorganizing the data so that all of the data for each individual was connected, using the email address of each person as their unique identifier. Being able to see the way that respondents applied the two scoring styles was interesting – I normalized the data of the question data so that it was on a 1-10 scale for the sake of comparison (fully recognizing that although a 4 is considered a satisfactory score on the 7 point scale, its equivalent value of 5.7 on a 10-point scale would be considered a DETRACTOR score). This little experiment mostly proved that these two scales do have different functions, but being able to compare the scores became useful when determining sentiment, as is seen in the NPS analysis of the ING group (section 2).

2. I then coded the data for subject, and also made notes on other topics that were common themes, such as budget/cost and responsiveness. The challenge with this data was the relatively small amount of text data available compared to other datasets. There were a large number of individuals who gave scores but did not elaborate with free text commentary, meaning their data was not useful in determining interactional/behavioral patterns for the group.

3. A similar problem was the number of repetitive responses – many individuals even copied and pasted the same response in multiple comment boxes. This meant doing a data analysis on word frequency and repeated phrasing was completely useless, as it is impossible to account for these types of copied responses. And if we were able code for them in a word counter, how would we understand them? Are these words less important because they are repeated? The truth is – when we look at word frequencies we are often more interested in when MULTIPLE people decide to say the same thing, rather than when the SAME person repeats him/herself. That is a signal that for them the interaction is one of rote response, rather than original thought (besides the first time they spoke/wrote it), especially in the context of a survey. Repetition in natural speech can have important implications, but in a survey it is merely a reinforcement of the first time the response was given, and also an indication that the responder is not as deeply engaged as someone who comes up with an original response for each question.

4. For all of the above reasons, I determined that analyzing this data by individual rather than looking at the free text without regard for speaker would give more insight into the group as a whole.

5. "Small stories" – The notion of "small stories" is a based in theories of Discourse Analysis and Interactional Sociolinguistics. People often respond to questions in a narrative form. Although the text comments in these surveys may not appear to have a narrative element to them (they don't have plot arcs, main characters, conflict and resolution), there are story-like elements to be found in them, especially when looking at several responses from the same individual. The analysis of small stories I did in section III was useful in that it helped shed light on the relationship between the client and the firm. Similarly, the negative comments are often the ones with the most narrativity, since they have the most "drama."

SUMMARY

The above action items will work together to produce a higher quality of experience and more satisfied clients that view ACME Engineers as their go-to resource, including "Walter", which will increase profitability through stronger relationships with repeat clients, more referrals, and additional references.

Client Savvy welcomes further discussion with ACME Engineers on these topics to collaborate on ways to further your success.
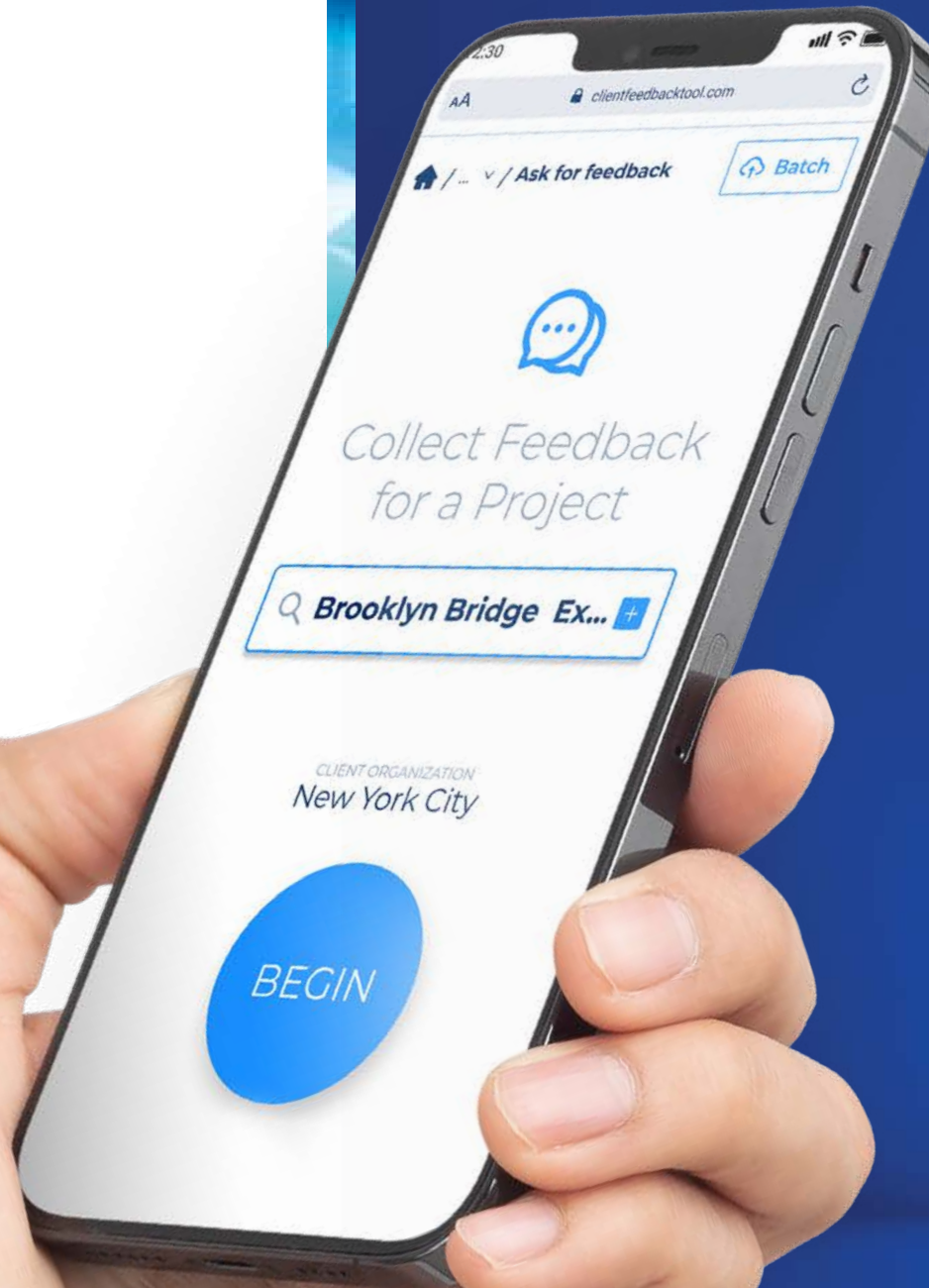
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500 Westover Dr, #19970
Sanford, NC 27330

866.433.7322
answers@clientsavvy.com
www.clientsavvy.com