

A photograph of two women in a modern office environment. The woman on the left has long blonde hair, wears glasses, and a grey textured sweater. The woman on the right has short blonde hair and wears a red top. They are both looking at a tablet held by the woman on the left. The background is a blurred office space with large windows and warm lighting.

# Five Stars or a Perfect 10: Why choosing Your Scale is a Big Picture Question

Seven questions to ask when designing your next  
customer feedback system

**Medallia**  
INSTITUTE





## WHY THIS MATTERS

When companies are designing surveys to gather customer feedback, they frequently wonder: Is it better to ask for ratings on a zero-to-10 scale, as Bain & Company's popular Net Promoter System suggests? Or is it more useful to use a one-to-five scale, as companies such as Amazon and Airbnb do? Medallia research suggests there is no single right answer. It all depends on your business objectives.

## KEY FINDINGS

If your product or service is complex, if you want to learn more about your most and least satisfied customers, or if your competitors are using longer scales, think about opting for zero to ten. If you're more concerned about survey simplicity, including ease of use on mobile phones, or if you're planning to report your findings to the broader public, one-to-five may be the way to go.

Let's say you want your customers to rate hotel room cleanliness in an online survey. Should respondents be asked to rank their accommodations on a zero-to-10 scale, with zero meaning unacceptably dirty and 10 being immaculate? Or should they be given a smaller range of possible answers, on a scale of one to five? Believe it or not, it's quite a hot topic these days as we move into a ratings economy where people are evaluating everything from taxi rides and hotel stays to their engagement at work.

Zero-to-10 scales have several advantages, including the fact that most of the world uses the metric system and already thinks in units of 10. Respondents are less likely to flip zero-to-10 scales in their minds, mistaking "number one" for best. Zero-to-10 scales also have the support of Bain & Company management consultant Fred Reichheld, whose bestselling 2006 book, *The Ultimate Question*, introduced the world to the popular Net Promoter Score for measuring customer loyalty. He maintains that scales with fewer points can miss distinctions that may be important to a company's bottom line.

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Efficiency	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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PREVIOUS NEXT

On the other hand, some believe that five-point scales are becoming standard as people grow accustomed to online surveys conducted by well-known companies, such as Amazon, and digital disruptors, such as Uber. Some marketers also speculate that millennials, who have grown up using smartphones and tablet computers, may be more likely to respond to surveys with five-point scales because they are easier to read on mobile devices.

## So which of these two scales is better?

To find out, Medallia researchers recently conducted a panel survey of a thousand customer-facing frontline employees in five industries across the United States. They answered questions about the effectiveness of their companies' employee feedback systems. Two hundred fifty of the employees were asked to respond to the survey questions using zero-to-10 scales. The remaining 750 were asked to answer identical questions on one-to-five scales.

The results confirmed that there is no "right" answer to the question of which scale to use. Rather, it depends on the goals of the survey—and those should be driven by concrete business objectives.

To help customer experience professionals choose the response scale that best meets their goals, we suggest that they ask themselves the following questions:

**Does the scale fit the way our customers experience our service or product?** While shorter rating scales are preferable for evaluating very simple items, longer scales tend to be better for evaluating more complex experiences and objects. If a customer is being asked to rate something basic like a coffee filter, a one-to-five scale might be perfectly adequate. But for more complex products or experiences like hotel stays, where the overall judgment is based on multiple factors, studies show that respondents like to have scales that allow for nuanced expression. When researchers from the University of Leicester presented both types of scales to respondents and asked them to rate the two on "ease of use," respondents rated one-to-five scales significantly higher. But when the respondents were asked which allowed them to express their feelings adequately, they favored zero-to-10 scales.<sup>1</sup>

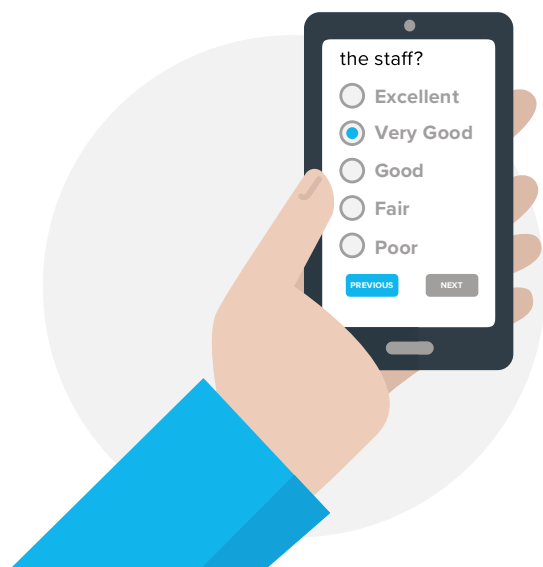
### How much information do I want to gather?

One advantage of longer scales is that they can provide more "granularity," or detailed information

<sup>1</sup> "Carolyn Preston and Andrew Colman. "Optimal Number of Response Categories in Rating Scales: Reliability, Validity, Discriminating Power, and Respondent Preferences." *Acta Psychologica*, 104.

about respondents, particularly those clustered at either end of the response spectrum. In the Medallia study, for example, when employees were asked how likely they were to recommend their company as a place to work, researchers found significant differences among those who indicated nine and those who said 10. Similarly, in consumer response surveys, “nines” and “10s” tend to differ significantly in their predicted spending habits. If you opt for a shorter scale, you’ll have a harder time teasing out those potentially significant differences. Keep in mind, however, that responses to two five-point scale questions will provide more insight than information from a single question on a zero-to-ten scale. If you can’t measure accurately, measure frequently.

**What system is my competition using?** Many of the world’s leading companies, including Nordstrom, American Express, Four Seasons, and Mercedes, have adopted the zero-to-10 standard so that they can take advantage of Bain & Company’s popular Net Promoter System. If you’re concerned about comparing yourself with your competitors, and all of your competitors are using zero-to-10 scales to calculate their Net Promoter Scores, you’ll be able to benchmark against those companies better if you use the same scale. Similarly, if your competitors are asking for ratings on scales from one to five—be they stars, hearts, or emojis—it makes sense to go with the flow.



## Key factors when choosing scales

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### **How am I going to report this data?**

If you want to summarize and report your survey results to the general public, five-point scales are the way to go, especially if the response categories are labeled.

### **What if I want to switch from one scale to another?**

Ideally you do not want to change your scale if you are concerned about losing information or making direct comparisons over time.

### **Do I want to compare responses over time?**

When someone of a given weight steps on a scale, the device should measure that weight consistently from one time to the next. Likewise, if a customer's feelings remain the same about a product or service, the scale should be reliably consistent. You don't want the customer to choose a seven followed by a 10 if the perceived quality of the product or service hasn't changed. Some studies show that this kind of survey reliability tends to be higher when respondents use a five-point scale, while other studies show just the opposite. Far more important than scale length is the consistent and precise wording of survey questions. If you ask customers about their experience with breakfast/lunch/dinner at a hotel instead of being specific about which meal they should evaluate, they are likely to consider breakfast at one instance and dinner at another. Your question won't be reliably measuring the same thing each time.

### **Am I surveying customers online or by phone?**

Medallia's research shows no correlation between response rates and scale lengths, with one important exception: mobile telephone surveys. In that case, five-point scales work better, because they're easier to see on small screens. It's also easier for multitasking respondents to hit the number five on a phone repeatedly than it is to punch out a double-digit 10. With the average online millennial (aged 16 to 30) spending 3.2 hours a day on mobile devices—the equivalent of 22.4 hours every week<sup>2</sup>—companies must consider the mobile look and feel of their customer surveys, and this includes their response scales.

**How am I going to report this data?** If you want to summarize and report your survey results to the general public, five-point scales are the way to go, especially if the response categories are labeled. For example, if you say "85 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that they would stay again at this hotel," that's easier for your audience to

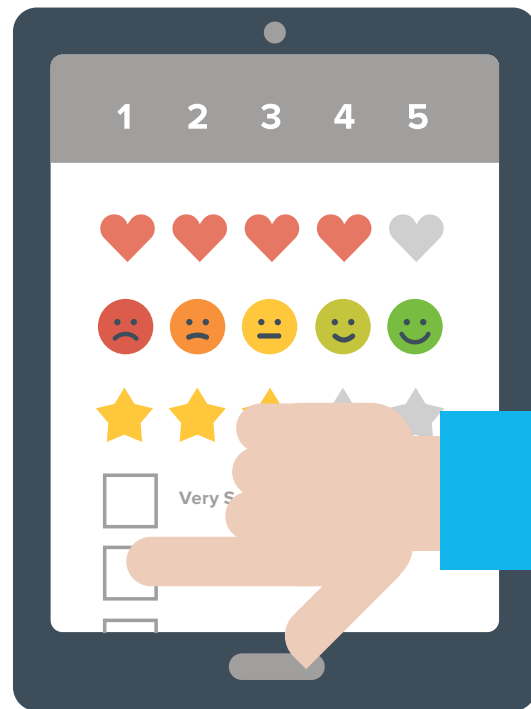
grasp than "85 percent of respondents ranked our service a seven or higher." Five-point scales also have the advantage of being familiar. Many large companies, such as Uber, Netflix, Amazon, and TripAdvisor, use five-point scales for rating products and services. Fives also are associated traditionally with quality, as in five-star hotels or five-star service. If you're reporting primarily to your own managers and employees, a zero-to-10 scale can be equally useful, as long as you provide adequate training to ensure proper interpretation.

### **What if I want to switch from one scale to another?**

Ideally you do not want to change your scale if you are concerned about losing information or making direct comparisons over time. Questions answered on different scales are never interpreted identically, even if the rest of the wording remains the same. Just changing the response scale may change how someone thinks about the question. If you still want to change from one scale to another—and there are many good reasons why you might—you would be better off doing it gradually, perhaps by asking a small percentage of your respondents to answer with the new scale and the remainder to continue with the old, before switching to the new system completely. Also remember that it's not a good idea to switch scales while making other radical changes to your products or service. If you switch to a five-point scale and roll out a free shipping promotion at the same time, for example, it will be difficult to tell if changes in subsequent satisfaction scores are due to feelings about the promotion or simply because your scale changed. In reality you may want to make many changes all at once if you're trying to revamp your customer experience program and improve your surveys. In those cases, it may be best simply to start afresh. Make your changes, but don't compare your new scores to your old ones. Look for other metrics or signposts to assess your progress until you've once again established a baseline.

<sup>1</sup> Connected Life study of over 60,000 Internet users worldwide from global research consultancy TNS (Dec. 2015); accessed Dec. 7, 2015. <http://www.tnsglobal.com/press-release/millennials-spend-one-day-a-week-on-their-phones>

In the end, it's not all that useful to think of one scale as better or worse than the other. The different scales optimize for different purposes, and sometimes these purposes can be in tension with one another. They may also change over time, so it's important to think long term and test whenever possible. If you're clear about your primary objectives (e.g., ease of use, benchmarking, fine-grained analysis) and the challenges you need to address to be successful (e.g., accommodating mobile users, appealing to millennials), you will make much better decisions about which scale will work best for your needs.



## About Medallia

Medallia is the pioneer and market leader in Experience Management. Medallia's award-winning SaaS platform, the Medallia Experience Cloud, leads the market in the understanding and management of experience for customers, employees and citizens. Medallia captures experience signals created on daily journeys in person, digital and IoT interactions and applies proprietary AI technology to reveal personalized and predictive insights that can drive action with tremendous business results. Using Medallia Experience Cloud, customers can reduce churn, turn detractors into promoters and buyers and create in-the-moment cross-sell and up-sell opportunities, providing clear and potent returns on investment. [www.medallia.com](http://www.medallia.com)

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