InsightSofa

Customer Experience Management

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# Open-ended vs. Closed Questions

What each format really tells you —
and why you almost always need both.

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For CX, insights and research practitioners

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INTRODUCTION

# The false either/or

The choice between closed and open-ended questions has become, in some CX circles, an ideological one. The quantitative camp argues that only closed questions produce comparable, trackable data — anything else is just anecdote. The qualitative camp argues that closed questions force customers into pre-fabricated boxes that miss everything that actually matters.

Both camps are right, in narrow ways, and both are wrong, in important ones. Closed questions and open-ended questions are not competing answers to the same problem. They are different instruments that detect different signals — and most well-designed surveys need both, deployed deliberately and with awareness of what each is and is not capable of doing.

This paper sets out, in concrete terms, what each format reveals and what it hides. It then gives a practical decision framework, six common mistakes to avoid, and a worked redesign of one of the most overused survey questions in customer experience.

## What you will get out of this paper

By the end of fourteen pages you should be able to:

- Name precisely what each format reveals and what it cannot reveal.
- Compare the answers a single insight produces under each format, side by side.
- Apply a decision framework to any survey question you are about to write.
- Understand how modern AI changes the cost and accuracy of analysing open-ended responses.
- Avoid the six most common ways teams misuse each format.

### The short version

**Closed questions** tell you *what* customers do, at scale and with comparability. **Open-ended questions** tell you *why* they do it, in their own words. A survey without closed questions has no trend. A survey without open-ended questions has no story.

PART I

# The two formats, defined

## Closed questions

A question with a predetermined set of possible answers. The customer must pick one (or several) of the options the question-writer has chosen. The most common forms are Likert scales (1–5, 1–10), yes/no, multiple choice, and single-best-choice. NPS, CSAT and CES are all closed questions.

### What it produces

A number, or a categorical value. Easy to aggregate, plot, compare across segments and track over time. The output is a *distribution* — "42% of respondents picked 7 or above on the scale".

### Cognitive load on the respondent

Low. The customer reads the options, picks the one closest to how they feel, and is done in seconds. This is exactly why closed questions get higher response rates.

## Open-ended questions

A question with no predetermined answer — the customer types or speaks their response in their own words. The most common forms are "why?" follow-ups, "what would you change?" and "in your own words, describe the experience". The answer is unstructured text.

### What it produces

A piece of free text. Not easily aggregated by a spreadsheet, but extremely rich when read individually or analysed at scale with text analytics. The output is a *story* — "the issue is mostly about delivery timing, with secondary mentions of packaging quality".

### Cognitive load on the respondent

Higher. The customer has to compose a sentence, which requires both attention and effort. This is why open-ended questions almost always have lower response and completion rates than closed ones, unless something has been done to make them easier.

PART II

# What each format actually detects

Think of the two formats as different lenses on the same subject. Closed questions are a wide-angle lens — they capture the overall shape of the field, but lose detail. Open-ended questions are a macro lens — they reveal texture and specifics, but cover much less ground. The diagram below maps what each lens detects, what it misses, and the overlap that matters.

### CLOSED — "what"

Quantitative, comparable, scalable

- **Trends over time** — "NPS dropped from +42 to +38"
- **Comparisons across segments** — "SMB scores lower than Enterprise"
- **Benchmarks vs. industry**
- **Statistical significance** testing
- **Distributions** — "23% are detractors"
- **Conversion-style metrics** — "% who would renew"

### BOTH — the real insight

Where the two lenses overlap

- **Prioritisation** — which issues matter, in what volume
- **Diagnosis** — the score plus the reason behind it
- **Decision-quality** evidence for leadership
- **Closed-loop targeting** — who to contact, with what
- **Storytelling** — numbers backed by direct quotes
- **Trend explanation** — why is the number moving?

### OPEN-ENDED — "why"

Qualitative, rich, slow to analyse

- **Root causes** in the customer's own words
- **New issues** the question-writer didn't anticipate
- **Emotional register** — anger, frustration, delight
- **Language** the customer uses (useful for marketing)
- **Edge cases** and stories that move executive teams
- **Competitive intelligence** — comparisons customers volunteer

***Reading the diagram.*** *The left and right panels show what each format alone can reveal. The middle panel is the productive territory — insights that emerge only when you have both formats in the same survey, analysed together. Most of the strategic CX work happens in the middle column.*

PART III

# Strengths and weaknesses, side by side

## Closed questions

### Strengths

- Fast to answer (seconds), so higher completion rate.
- Comparable across respondents, segments and time.
- Easy to aggregate in any tool — no NLP needed.
- Cheap at scale; cost per analysed response is essentially zero.
- Statistically tractable — confidence intervals, significance tests.

### Weaknesses

- Forces the customer into your conceptual boxes — misses what you didn't anticipate.
- Order and wording of options bias the answer.
- Susceptible to *satisficing* — picking a middle answer to be done.
- Strips away emotional register and language nuance.
- Gives you the "what" but not the "why".

## Open-ended questions

### Strengths

- Surfaces issues you never thought to ask about.
- Captures the customer's own language — invaluable for marketing.
- Reveals emotional register and intensity.
- Gives leadership the quotes that drive change.
- Anchors quantitative findings with concrete examples.

### Weaknesses

- Higher cognitive load — lower response and completion rates.
- Harder to aggregate without text analytics.
- Susceptible to non-response bias (the loudest voices respond first).
- Quality depends heavily on the question wording.
- Without AI assistance, analysis cost rises linearly with volume.

PART IV

# Same question, two formats — what each answer looks like

The fastest way to internalise the difference is to look at the same underlying insight expressed through both formats and see what each version actually delivers. The example below comes from a hypothetical onboarding survey at a mid-market SaaS company.

## CLOSED QUESTION

**How easy was it to set up your account?**

Scale 1–5: Very difficult → Very easy

### Sample distribution from 1,200 responses

**5 (Very easy):** 38%
**4:** 27%
**3:** 19%
**2:** 11%
**1 (Very difficult):** 5%

### What you can do with this

Track "% rating 4+" over time; compare across segments; report a single number to leadership; benchmark against last quarter. You cannot tell *why* the bottom 16% gave low scores.

## OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

**What was the hardest part of setting up your account?**

Free-text response

### Sample of actual responses

*"The SSO step kept timing out — I had to retry four times. Eventually I just used a personal email."*

*"It wasn't clear which integrations were free and which were paid until I'd already connected mine."*

*"Setup itself was fine — the painful part was figuring out which template to use."*

### What you can do with this

Identify three distinct, specific friction points your designers can act on this week. Notice that none of these surfaced in the closed-question version above — the categories simply weren't there to pick.

### The lesson

Neither answer is complete. The closed version tells you the size of the problem (16% rated low). The open version tells you what the problem is (SSO, pricing transparency, template selection). Together you have something to act on. Apart, you have either a number with no story or stories with no scale.

PART V

# When closed is the right choice

Closed questions are the right primary instrument whenever the goal is comparability, speed and statistical legibility. The five situations below cover most cases where you should default to a closed format.

## 1. You need to track a trend over time

Any metric on an executive dashboard needs the same instrument across periods. Closed questions are designed for that — identical options each time, comparable distributions, moving averages. Trends from open-ended data are possible but expensive to maintain.

## 2. You need to segment the result

Slicing by region, customer tier or product line requires aggregable values. Distribution of "% who selected option X" by segment is a single SQL query; the equivalent over open-text answers requires text analytics for every slice.

## 3. The question has a finite set of valid answers

"Which delivery method did you choose?" has five answers. "How satisfied are you?" has seven scale points. Letting customers type these in free text would produce the same five or seven categories, plus typos and ambiguity. Closed is the natural fit.

## 4. Response volume is small

Open-ended data is statistically thin at low volumes — patterns emerge only after several hundred responses. Closed questions still produce a usable read at 30–50 responses. For small populations (pilot programmes, niche segments), closed is the only realistic choice.

## 5. The respondent has low time or attention

Mobile, in-store, post-call, mid-checkout — any context where the customer's attention is borrowed for seconds. Closed questions can complete in under ten seconds; open-ended ones almost never can.

### What closed cannot do

Surface anything you did not anticipate. The categories you offer become the ceiling of what you can learn. If you have a hunch the real issue lies outside your current categories, only an open-ended question will surface it.

PART VI

# When open-ended is the right choice

Open-ended questions are the right primary instrument whenever the goal is depth, discovery and language — the parts of the customer's view that closed questions cannot reach. The five situations below cover most cases.

## 1. You are exploring rather than tracking

When the question is "what should we be measuring?" rather than "how is X moving?", open-ended is the only honest instrument. The category list does not yet exist — that is what the open-ended responses will help you build.

## 2. You want the customer's exact language

Marketing copy, product naming, value propositions and messaging are best built from the words customers actually use. A closed question forces them into yours; an open-ended question gives you theirs.

## 3. The score needs a reason

Almost every closed question benefits from a single open-text follow-up: "why did you give that score?". This is the most common and most productive combination. The closed score gives you the number; the open follow-up gives you what to do about it.

## 4. You need to surface edge cases

Statistical aggregation actively buries the most interesting responses — the angry outlier, the unexpected delight, the niche use case. Open-ended preserves these in their full form, where they can be read, quoted to executives and acted on individually.

## 5. You have AI text analytics in place

Once theme extraction, sentiment analysis and AI summarisation are part of the toolkit, the cost of analysing open-ended text falls dramatically. What used to be a question of "how many responses can we afford to read?" becomes "how many can we afford to leave in raw form?". For most teams now, the answer is none.

### What open-ended cannot do

Give leadership a single comparable number. If your board needs "NPS is now 38, up from 35 last quarter", a free-text answer cannot deliver that. The two formats serve different masters.

PART VII

# How AI changes the open-ended equation

For most of the last twenty years, the practical argument against open-ended questions was cost. Reading 5,000 free-text answers, coding them by theme and producing a quantifiable summary required either a small team of analysts or a heroic individual. The result: most CX programmes used open-ended questions sparingly and analysed them shallowly. That economics has now changed.

## What modern text analytics actually delivers

- **Theme extraction** at scale — clustering thousands of responses into a handful of named topics, with example quotes.
- **Sentiment per theme** — not just "this response is negative" but "the delivery theme is negative, the support theme is positive".
- **Trend tracking on themes** — "complaints about pricing are up 22% quarter-on-quarter".
- **Automatic summarisation** at the segment level — one paragraph that captures what 300 detractors said.
- **Multi-language** handling — English, Czech and other responses analysed in a single dataset.

## The new economics of open-ended

When the marginal cost of analysing an additional open-ended response drops to near zero, the calculus reverses. The right default for most survey questions becomes "closed score plus open-ended follow-up", rather than "closed only". The team gets the trackable metric *and* the explanation, at the same cost as the metric alone.

## What still requires human judgement

AI is not a substitute for occasionally reading the raw responses yourself. Themes are useful but lose the specific texture; sentiment scores are approximate; rare but important signals can be lost in aggregation. The right rhythm is to let AI handle the summary, and for the CX team to read 50–100 raw responses per quarter as a calibration exercise.

### A practical rule

If your current programme uses open-ended questions "sparingly because they are hard to analyse", that policy is now several years out of date. The cost has fallen by an order of magnitude; the policy should too.

PART VIII

# Designing better questions of each type

Most of the response quality you eventually get from a question is decided in the seconds spent writing it. The principles below come from common-cause analysis of survey questions that work — and ones that don't — across roughly forty client programmes.

| | DO | DON'T |
|---|---|---|
| **Closed questions** | Use balanced scales (equal positive and negative options). Anchor scale endpoints with explicit labels ("Very dissatisfied" → "Very satisfied"). Include an honest "not applicable" option where relevant. Test the question internally before launch. | Use scales with no middle point (forces false dichotomy). Mix positive and negative options in random order (confuses respondents). Use jargon ("net promoter", "CSAT") in the question wording. Offer more than 7 options on a single scale. |
| **Open-ended questions** | Ask one question at a time. Use specific prompts ("What was the hardest part?" rather than "Any feedback?"). Position the question after a related closed question, so the respondent has a frame of reference. Set realistic length expectations. | Make the open-ended question mandatory (kills completion rate). Ask very early in the survey (before rapport is built). Combine multiple questions in one ("What did you like and dislike?"). Pre-fill with placeholder text (biases the answer). |

### Test the question, not just the survey

Before any survey goes live, take five sample answers (real or hypothetical) for each question and ask: would the team know what to do differently based on this distribution? If the answer is "not really", the question needs rewriting — regardless of format.

PART IX

# Six common mistakes

## 1. Treating open-ended as an optional add-on

Many surveys end with a token "any other feedback?" box that nobody reads. This is worse than not asking — it signals to the respondent that you do not value the answer. Either commit to analysing the open-ended response, or do not include it.

## 2. Asking double-barrelled closed questions

"How would you rate the speed and friendliness of our service?" cannot be answered honestly on a single scale, because the two attributes may diverge. Split into two questions, or rewrite to focus on a single attribute.

## 3. Using a 10-point NPS scale where 5 points would do

NPS specifically requires 11 points (0–10). Most other scales do not. Five-point or seven-point scales produce cleaner, more interpretable data for almost every other satisfaction measurement. Inheriting the NPS scale by default is lazy design.

## 4. Putting open-ended questions early in the survey

Open-ended answers are richer when the respondent has been warmed up by a few easier closed questions. Putting the free-text box on screen one will lower completion rate and shorten the answers you do get.

## 5. Reading open-ended responses only when something is wrong

Many teams treat open-text as an early-warning system — only read when scores drop. This misses the upside; promoter open-text is where you learn what to lean into, not just what to fix.

## 6. Making the open-ended question generic

"Any feedback?" produces vague responses. "What was the single most frustrating part of today's interaction?" produces specific, actionable ones. Specificity in the question is what produces specificity in the answer.

PART X

# A worked redesign — "why did you give us that score?"

Almost every CX survey on the planet includes some variation of "why did you give us that score?" as the open-ended follow-up to NPS. It is also one of the worst questions in routine use. The redesign below shows what three small changes do to the quality of the answer.

| Version | Question wording | Why it works (or doesn't) | Typical answer length |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Baseline** | *"Why did you give us that score?"* | Vague, unfocused, and asks the respondent to do interpretive work the survey designer should have done. Produces generic answers. | ~20 characters |
| **Improvement 1: Specificity** | *"What is the main reason for your score?"* | Forces a single reason rather than a list. The respondent has to choose what mattered most — which is exactly what the analyst wants to know. | ~45 characters |
| **Improvement 2: Conditional branching** | ***For detractors:*** *"What is the single most important thing we could improve?"*<br><br>***For promoters:*** *"What is the most important thing we should keep doing?"* | Different respondents need different prompts. Detractors are asked what to fix; promoters are asked what to protect. Each prompt is more specific to the respondent's headspace. | ~80 characters |
| **Improvement 3: Specificity + branching + frame** | ***For detractors:*** *"Think about your last interaction with us. What is the single most important thing we could improve?"*<br><br>***For promoters:*** *"Think about your last interaction with us. What is the most important thing we should keep doing?"* | The frame ("your last interaction") anchors the answer in a concrete event, which dramatically improves specificity. The combined effect: more useful answers, longer answers, and a 12-point response-rate improvement in our pilot data. | ~120 characters |

### The headline

Three small changes — a specificity nudge, conditional branching for detractor vs. promoter, and a concrete event frame — produce a 6× increase in answer length and a qualitatively different kind of response. The same survey, the same respondents, dramatically better data.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

# Use both, on purpose

The argument that closed and open-ended questions are competitors is a category error. They are not two answers to the same problem — they are two instruments that answer different questions. A mature survey, in most contexts, uses both on purpose: a closed question to anchor the metric, and a tightly-scoped open-ended follow-up to explain the score in the respondent's own language.

## Three principles to take away

### Closed gives you the "what". Open gives you the "why".

Neither is a substitute for the other. If a survey has only closed questions, you have a metric without a diagnosis. If it has only open-ended ones, you have stories without scale. Both, used deliberately, give you something actionable.

### AI has changed the math.

The reason most legacy programmes minimised open-ended questions — analysis cost — no longer applies in the same way. If your design heuristics were set five years ago, they probably overweight closed questions today.

### Specificity is the leverage point.

Generic questions of either format produce generic answers. The most reliable improvement we ever see in CX programmes is not switching formats — it is rewriting the existing questions to be more specific, more concrete, and more anchored to the respondent's actual experience.

## How InsightSofa can help

InsightSofa is built around the discipline this paper describes. Every survey deployed through the platform combines closed and open-ended questions natively, with AI-driven analytics on the open-text and full quantitative reporting on the closed scores — in the same dashboard, in the same export, in the same conversation with the leadership team.

### Where teams typically start with us:

- **Question library** — proven open-ended and closed question wordings for every common touch-point.
- **AI text analytics** — theme extraction, sentiment per theme, multi-language summarisation.
- **Closed-loop workflow** — detractor responses routed to the right operational owner.
- **Question A/B testing** — run two versions of a question in parallel to measure quality lift.
- **Executive reporting** — quantitative scores anchored with representative open-text quotes.

### Start with a question audit

If you would like us to review every active survey question in your programme — closed and open — against the framework in this paper, the engagement is typically one week and produces a concrete "keep, rewrite, retire" verdict for each. Reach us at **+420 777 661 368** or **info@insightsofa.com**.

**Sources referenced in this paper.** Don A. Dillman et al., *Internet, Phone, Mail and Mixed-Mode Surveys* (Wiley, 2014). Roger Tourangeau, Lance J. Rips & Kenneth Rasinski, *The Psychology of Survey Response*. Qualtrics XM Institute research on open-text analytics. InsightSofa internal benchmarking from approximately forty client programmes (anonymised). All example questions and answers in Part IV and Part X are illustrative.