

This PDF is a follow-up to the PhotoShelter case study at www.conversion-rate-experts.com/photoshelter-case-study, which is well worth a read.

If you want to hear the voice of the customer, why aren't you letting them speak?

Open-text fields: a powerful way of increasing conversions

Here's a great conversion technique that we used on PhotoShelter's checkout. It sounds simple, perhaps embarrassingly so, but can provide your business with a never-ending stream of important information.

Here it is:

If you want to hear the voice of the customer, let them speak!

So, when you ask questions, use open-text fields, not drop-down fields.

When we started working with PhotoShelter, they had the following question in their checkout process: "How did you hear about us?"¹

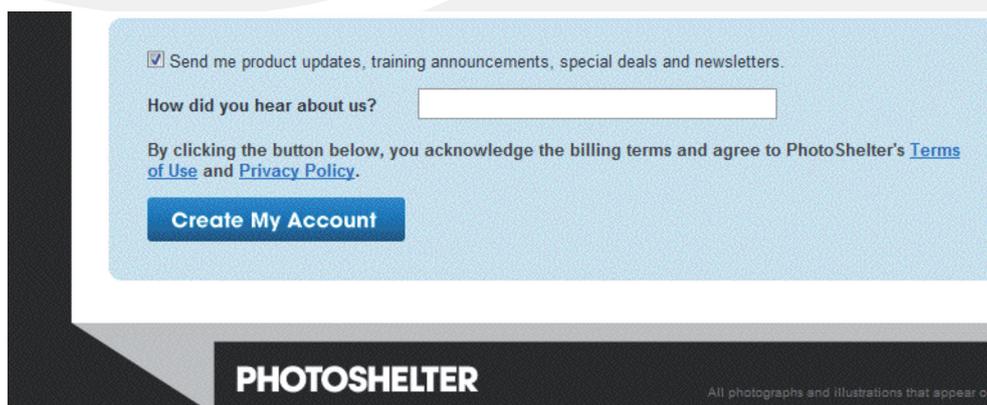
(1) Ideally, we would have moved this question to the thank-you page—so it didn't interfere with the ordering process—but, for technical reasons, we had to keep it where it was.

We changed the response field from a drop-down one to an open-text one.



The screenshot shows a "Final Step" form for PhotoShelter. It includes a checkbox for "Send me product updates, training announcements, special deals and newsletters." Below this is the question "How did you hear about us?" followed by a drop-down menu. The menu is open, showing options: "Word of mouth", "Google", "Yahoo", "Magazine", "Trade show", "Another website", and "Other". To the right of the menu, the text "letters." and "and [Privacy Policy](#)." is visible. A blue "Create My Account" button is at the bottom. The PhotoShelter logo and a small disclaimer "All photographs and illustrations that appear on" are at the bottom of the form.

PhotoShelter used to use a drop-down box, forcing users to shoehorn their responses into categories like "Search engine" and "Word of mouth". This is the web equivalent of those annoying people who ask you questions then try to finish your sentences for you.



The screenshot shows the updated "Final Step" form for PhotoShelter. It includes the same checkbox for "Send me product updates, training announcements, special deals and newsletters." Below this is the question "How did you hear about us?" followed by an open-text input field. Below the input field is the text "By clicking the button below, you acknowledge the billing terms and agree to PhotoShelter's [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)." A blue "Create My Account" button is at the bottom. The PhotoShelter logo and a small disclaimer "All photographs and illustrations that appear on" are at the bottom of the form.

We changed the box to an open-text field.



See how this seemingly trivial change affected the quality of the responses:

Response from the open-text field

"Ami Vitale mentioned you"
"Scott Bourne's podcast"
"You are in a book 150 Workouts for Student Photographers"

What the response would have looked like if we had used a drop-down list

Word of mouth
Word of mouth
Word of mouth

The above examples clearly illustrate how drop-down menus force words into your customers' mouths. Your customers have to shoehorn their responses into one of your pre-selected categories. The busy ones might choose a category at random.

Also notice that the information in the left-hand column isn't just richer—it's *actionable*. Here's how PhotoShelter could take action on it:

- They might decide to contact Ami Vitale to thank her. Maybe they could invite her to join PhotoShelter's affiliate program. (They actually decided to interview her, and feature the interview on their website.)
- They might decide to extract the relevant section from Scott Bourne's podcast, and add it as an audio testimonial to their sales page using a service like [Xiosoft Audio](#), if they felt it would help to persuade visitors to take action.
- They might add an image of the book *150 Workouts for Student Photographers*, with a starburst containing the words "As featured in..."

These are just three examples chosen at random; PhotoShelter has received thousands of responses. The challenge is to prioritize which ones are worth taking action on.

Why you're not too busy to do this

Some marketers believe that they're too busy to read individual responses. We strongly disagree: if you read just 100 open-text comments—which would take you about three minutes—you'll learn much more than looking at a bar chart of drop-down responses.

Things you'll learn from doing this

When you're analyzing your sales funnel, you'll get a number of clues that'll show you where to start working. These are two of the biggest:

- You learn useful details about where your business is really coming from. You may know that your business is coming from "Friends and family", but what does that really mean?
- You'll discover sources of business you didn't know existed. It's not uncommon for this question to reveal media mentions that you weren't even aware of ("I heard about you on XYZ TV"). You can then go and fetch copies of the media mentions, and add them to your list of testimonials.

Once you know where your business is coming from, you can spend more time and resources on getting more business from those sources—or from similar sources.

How much data do I need to collect?

Clients often ask us how many responses they need to collect. The answer is, "As many as you're prepared to read." Actually, a better answer is, "As many as you're prepared to take action on."

Keep checking the responses

It is important to keep monitoring the answers, because you never know what will turn up. New sources of business keep cropping up, and these fields allow you to discover them immediately. It's worth staying on top of this information so you can build relationships with partners effectively.

If you're too busy to read responses from every visitor, you might choose to throttle the appearance of the question so it only gets asked to a certain percentage of people. If that sounds too technologically difficult, just manually add the question whenever you need more feedback, then manually remove it once you have received enough responses.

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Five good open-text questions

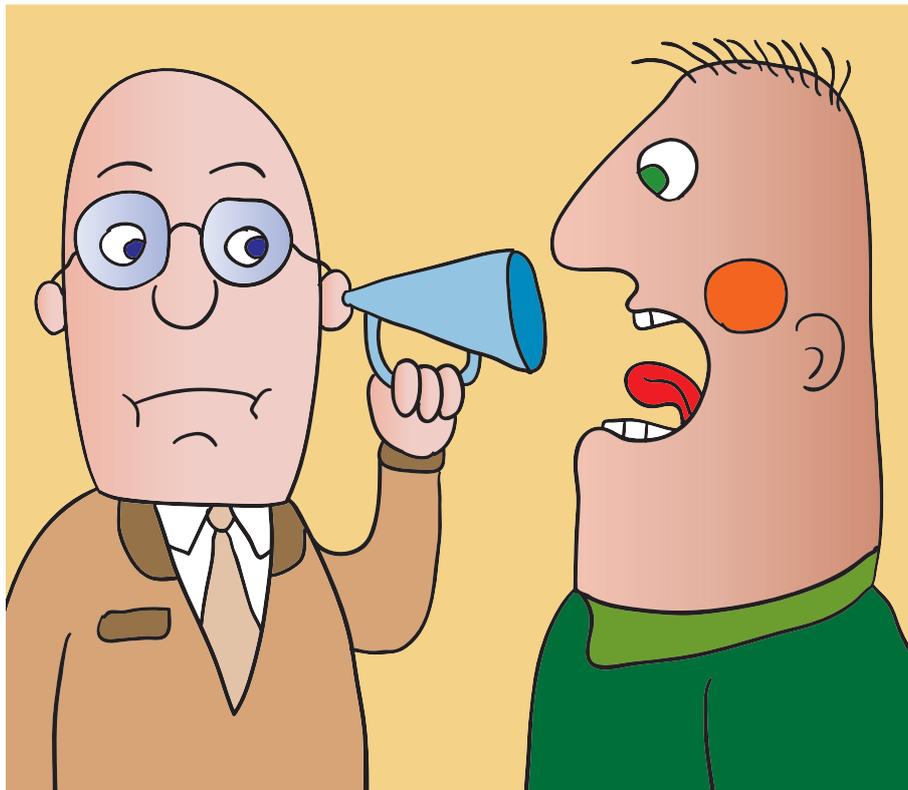
Here are five good questions, all of which give valuable information:

1. How did you first find out about us?
2. What persuaded you to purchase from us?
3. How would you describe us to a friend?
4. What prompted you to start looking for this type of service?
5. If you could change one thing about this website, what would it be?

Actually, we'll save our breath: there are loads of good questions in [this article](#).

Key Points

- Keep your questions open-ended, unless there's a good reason to do otherwise.
- The order confirmation page is a great place to put questions.
- Don't make the question a required field. If a visitor doesn't want to answer the question, you probably don't want to hear their response.



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