Methods of capturing customer information:

Data capture is ‘any process for converting information into a form that can be handled by a computer’. Essentially, it is the extraction of key data from a form, template or just a simple piece of paper which then has to be input into an I.T system. For example, when purchase invoices arrive in a company’s accounts department, the first task is to enter the figures into an accounts system before payment can be authorised. It is really important for business to capture customer data because there are many great things you can do with it once you have it. Customer data should be really important to ecommerce businesses. Customer data enables you to help you give an understanding for who your current customers are and the reasoning that they are buying from you. It is also really powerful in helping a business to retaining its customers by various methods and means. Collecting information on your customers can be a mundane task, but some POS systems make it very easy. If you do not have a POS system, there are other ways to collect this valuable data. What data do you need? You need basic customer contact information, this is highly required, but if you can gather even more information about them, you’ll be able to customize your communications to your customers and give them specific reasons why they should return to your business. It’s important to keep a record of when and how you communicate with your customers so you can determine what works. Some customers respond to a single email. Others will visit if they receive a postcard. Still others may need a couple of communications. You’ll know how to most effectively communicate with each customer if you can measure what has worked in the past. The most important thing about data, when you’re collecting it and when you’re using it, is don’t be creepy. And, of course, follow all local and national laws (including anti-spam laws for email communications). Customers will react negatively if you make them fill out too many forms, if you don’t have a privacy policy that outlines how you will use their data, and if you use the data to communicate with them too often (or too personally). The concept of document capture or document scanning has been around for some time but the ability to capture the data from a document is a more recent development. Businesses are now shifting away from manual data entry to automated data capture. Manual data entry is time consuming, labour intensive, slow and expensive. Automating information gathering is by far the preferred option as it is fast, accurate and inexpensive. The speed at which information can be fed into a system, for example, for invoicing purposes, can seriously affect cash flow. The faster data is collected, the quicker the money will come in. Data capture can also have an impact on product to market time and can help you stay ahead of competitors. One of the most popular ways of collecting data is to use OCR (optical character recognition) which ‘reads’ and interprets information contained in a document and integrates it into an information system. There are, however, other means of capturing data such as the digital pen. This device looks and feels much like a traditional ball point pen and is used in conjunction with special paper which has been overlaid with a series of tiny dots invisible to the eye. It is particularly effective for field workers who spend a lot of time form filling. As soon as all the fields have been completed the data can be instantly uploaded to an office IT System for processing, thus eliminating the need to manually input the information which has been collected.

Overt methods of collecting customer data:

1. Conducting experiments where there is an experimental group and a control group. Data from the subjects in the experiment do that data is being collected from them because they were recruited to be the subjects. Not only have these subjects, mostly college students, been recruited, they also may see the data being collected because in one way they are the data. This is an example of overt collection of data.

2. Another way overt data may be collected is when people shop for groceries. The receipts for their groceries are duplicated in the cash registers or when their membership cards are flashed to gain points for discounts or sales items on specific groceries. Certainly, the customers of groceries
stores are aware of the overt collection of their groceries purchases so this is overt data collection.

3. Interviewing people for information about their knowledge on any behaviour is an example of overt data collection. Whether, it is by telephone, or person to interviewer, the ethical way of interviewing is to inform the interviewees about the purpose of the interview. That is an overt way of collecting data.

4. Videotaping for TV programs like game shows, contests, sports events and the like is collecting data overtly where the people or events that people attend are locations that the audience, visitors, and participants know that video cameras that they see are obverting collecting images to be viewed or broadcast as television programs or shows that will be seen by millions of viewers. This also is an illustration of an overt method of collecting data.

Many if not all of the above methods of collecting data overtly can easily become covert if subjects of the experiments are not told or informed about the purposes of the data collection for which they volunteered to be subjects, viewers, or participants in a theatre performance, television, show or sports events. When they are left with no information, deceived, misinformed about the data being collected, then the data becomes a covert method of collecting it.

**Covert methods of collecting customer data:**

Covert methods may involve leaving cookies on a customer's computer. The cookie identifies the computer and user when a later visit is made to the transactional website. Cookies can help in market research when recording a customer's visits to a website. Knowing customer habits can affect design of websites.

Cookies:
Cookies are another way of collecting customer information. They put an individual code for that computer on the website which leaves a 'cookie' on the customer's computer. This code creates statistics for the website to keep, with facts such as:
- The frequency of the customer visiting the website
- What pages within the website the customer looks at.
- The length of time the customer stays on the website for.
- What internet browser the customer uses.
- The search engine used to find johnlewis.com.
- The words used in the search.

Covert methods of capturing data means that the customer himself has no acknowledgement that there is data being collected about them whereas overt method means it is captured openly and is also plainly apparent.