



Assessing Customer Satisfaction
(People to People)
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I find the ISO9001:2008 standard fascinating in that it leaves little clues in different places which, when you combine them, provide useful guidance on how to implement certain requirements. For example, ¶ 8.2.1 tells us to “monitor information relating to customer perception” as to whether or not we have met their requirements, suggesting – if not directing – we ought to look at it from their point of view.

At the same time, ¶ 7.2.3 tells us to implement effective communication with customers to get their feedback. Since most of our business-to-business transactions are not really from organization to organization but from people to people, I concluded that the best approach is to talk to them – one-on-one, person-to-person.

I admit to being biased against formal surveys and for many reasons, starting with the impersonal nature of them, i.e. arm’s length. Moreover, very often they don’t get to the right people. And who are the right people? They are all the ones who are going to “get burned” or who may “burn you” if your performance doesn’t meet their needs and wants.

Your customers are your “meal ticket” and it’s up to you to make them friends, by performing well, or enemies, if you disappoint them. (We all know the Godfather’s rule about keeping them close, don’t we?). Since we should all be in personal contact with our customers on a regular basis - certainly with the 20% that make up 80% of our business - I recommend making it a practice of peppering your conversations with a few simple questions, such as: (pick from the list-mix them up):

1. How are we performing for you: Meeting our promises? Meeting your needs?
2. Tell me about any problems we may have caused for you?
3. What other problems do you have that we might be able to fix?
4. What future needs do you foresee where we could help?
5. How easy is it to do business with us?
6. How can we be better for you?
7. How do we stack up against our competitors?

I am not suggesting you turn every conversation into an inquisition. Split them up. Perhaps, ask questions 1 & 2 during week one of every month: 3 & 4 during week two:, 5 & 6 during week three: and 7 during week four. Don’t be afraid if your questions uncover a problem because aggressively solving it is what makes you look like a hero. Even if you were the one who caused it. Sounds counter intuitive, but I’ve seen it work.



CREATE AN OCTOPUS

As I alluded earlier, these conversations should not be limited to those between your sales person and the “Buyer”. They should also take place between respective bosses, QA, engineering and manufacturing managers. (The “Buyer” is not the only person whose needs must be satisfied. In fact, the “Buyer” is rarely the one who needs to turn your product or service into a deliverable to its customers.)

Now, if you really want to go outside the box, try setting up regular connections between your line people and your customer’s line people. I have found that when a person becomes acquainted with the one who has to use the parts they make or services they provide, it becomes much more than an anonymous, arms-length relationship. It becomes a personal one. If you can establish that type of multi-level relationship with a customer, you may find you have built a moat around the customer that your competitors may be hard pressed to cross.

One way to get this started is to ask personnel at each level of your organization:

1. Who are your counterparts at each customer?
2. How often to you speak with them?
3. Describe the benefits that could accrue to you/us if you conversed regularly?

Jot down the results of these conversations on a sheet of paper. If the conversation raises an issue that needs to be handled right away, forward it to the appropriate person/department and make sure it’s entered into an action system you have set up, e.g., a complaint or corrective/preventive/action item¹ system. Otherwise, put it in a “box” and collect them weekly or monthly, analyze them and take appropriate action.

If you feel inclined to turn all this data into a statistical report, e.g, run chart, histogram, pareto, knock yourself out.

Simple, effective and, unlike a formal survey, you are assured of a 100% response rate from all the right people. Do it often enough and you may find you have created or strengthened a relationship of mutual trust. Not a bad idea!

¹ Like CAPA-AIMS™



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And one last shot at formal surveys: I have never seen one that yielded anything close to a 100% response. Anything more than a 10% or 20% response is usually unheard of. With that in mind, it's good to heed the maxim, "Many unsatisfied customers don't bother to complain; they just walk away."

While every requirement of the ISO9001:2008 standard is intended to establish a minimum level of control, the methodology is not the goal. The results are the goal. Any system is only as good as the consistency of the results it yields.

Back in my college days – before steam was invented, as my grandsons tell it- I attempted to negotiate my grade up on a quiz from a zero to something less embarrassing based on "At least I should get credit for using the right method." The professor's response: "You got the wrong answer – you used the wrong method." A lesson forever learned! Ever since, I have tried to follow and preach Leonardo DaVinci's advice, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

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