

The Customer's Perspective

Delivering consistently high levels of service requires you, the service provider, to get in to the head of the customer. Since we aren't mind readers, getting into the customer's gray matter takes a little work, a little time, a little skill and a lot of persistence. So, how do you do it?

There are several steps you can take to grasp the customer's perspective. I'll lay them out for you and then explain each in some detail. The steps are as follows:

- 1) Ask
- 2) Observe
- 3) Focus
- 4) Ask Again

To really know and understand what customers want from your business, you need to start with the first step and ask them about the services, systems and products that they want from you. Ask them how you can deliver more, better, faster and finer. The information that you will garner from this communication is invaluable. You'll learn more about what customers need now and about what they may need in the future.

However, when you ask, you have to be an astute listener. Some of the information that you get from customers may not quite fit with your perspectives. Rather than dismissing contrary information, have an open mind and consider the fact that different customers experience facets of your company differently. Listen to them to learn everything that you can about their views. It is by listening that you will get ideas for improving the products and services that you deliver.

Asking customers for their perspectives can be done several different ways. You can start by simply talking to them when you visit their locations. Encourage salespeople and service techs to do the same. Once you've started building dialogue, share what you're learning with other people in the



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organization. Another way to get in the habit of asking is to use Point of Service/Point of Sale questionnaires. Keep them brief and targeted to specific areas of measurement. In other words, avoid generic questions like "How was your experience?" Instead, be more focused. Ask customers about specific aspects of their purchase or service encounter. Think about what you want to learn before crafting a point-of-service questionnaire.

The last method of asking for customer input is the survey. Because this is an overused technique, I don't suggest it. But, there are those among us who believe it is the best method for gathering feedback. If you fall into that camp, be sure that your survey is concise. People do not like completing long, tedious surveys. The more arduous you make it, the lower your response rate will be. If you can use an electronic instrument and provide an instant reward, say a coupon or a discount, you will get more responses.

The second step is observation. Pay attention to your customers' buying patterns. See which service techs and salespeople produce the highest levels of customer satisfaction. Once you have uncovered patterns of high-level customer satisfaction, use those employees to coach and mentor others. They have obviously developed skills that are benefiting the enterprise. Make sure that those skills are contagious.

Observe issues and trends in your customers' industries as well. These activities may lead to increases or decreases in the business that they do with you. Knowing about what's going on in their world also increases your value to them. Customers like and respect vendors who understand their business needs. Observing their metrics of success enables you to converse with customers at a more meaningful level. You'll be able to talk about a lot

more than toner, copiers, cartridges and office equipment. You will become the vendor of choice because you have a real understanding of the issues that matter to the customer. These observations actually give you a competitive advantage.

The third step, focus, requires you to take the information that you've learned from your queries and observations and integrate it into targeted activity. Take what you've learned and start improving your services, systems and processes. You didn't gather the information just for the sake of gathering it. Instead, you have started on a course toward continuous improvement. Focusing your entire organization on customer-related outcomes requires that you rethink every process that touches the customer. Use the information that you gathered in the first steps to refine aspects of your operation.

Let me give you a real-world example of focused activities. A copier dealer used point-of-service cards to gather customer comments. Using the information from those cards, along with information gleaned from conversations with sales reps and service techs, they learned that their earliest service appointments did not really meet customer needs. They also learned that their telephone system did not adequately handle call volume. So, they used that information to plan longer shifts, not just for the service techs, but also for the phone lines. They also purchased a more sophisticated phone system and hired additional employees to staff it. Rather than try to fix a myriad of maladies, they focused on the ones that mattered most to the customers.



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The fourth and final step, ask again, takes us right back to where we started — querying the customer. You've started a continuous improvement cycle. That means that it is a journey that requires ongoing communication with customers. Stay in the habit of talking with them. Since their needs are constantly evolving, you have to keep an ear to the ground to hear what's changing, why and when. Think of it like this: Can you wear the outfit you wore to your high school prom? Probably not. Your dimensions have changed. Do you like the same food that you liked in the fourth grade? Probably not. Your tastes have changed. The same is true of your customers. Their needs are not static. Instead they are dynamic, in a constant state of flux. You have to be tuned in to the changes, small and large, if you want to remain a preferred vendor. This constant listening gives you an inside track that lazier competitors simply will not have.

Since most of us don't possess psychic abilities, we have to rely on other mechanisms to get information from customers. And once we get that information, we have to use it to implement processes that make sense from the customer's perspective. Because that's the perspective that matters the most! 

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