

Capturing the 'Voice of the Customer'

 By Vicki Erskine

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80% of the participant organisations in an extensive Bain survey believed they were delivering a "superior experience" to their customers. But when Bain asked customers of about their perceptions, only 8% of those companies were really delivering it.



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The 'Voice of the Customer' is a process used to capture customers' requirements and feedback in order to provide the best in class service or product quality. It serves as a starting point in understanding the gap between what you believe you are delivering to your customers and what they are actually experiencing.

There are a number of ways organisations can listen to their customers, ranging from distributing a simple questionnaire to maintaining a complex, integrated database of customer complaints. It can be overwhelming deciding where to start. The best method to use is the one that gives you the answer to the question you are asking.

The most useful type of information is always data which is representative and at the required level of detail. This is a guiding principle when selecting the method of collecting Voice of Customer data. The results of Voice of Customer exercises are their most insightful when a variety of data gathering techniques are applied and their outcomes collated and reviewed holistically.

Ask customers for feedback

There are a few different proactive ways that customers can be approached to give feedback on your organisation's service levels. The first method is via the distribution of a customer satisfaction survey. This traditional approach enables large volumes of information to be gained from a high number of customers at a fairly low cost. The constraints of using pre-defined questions can be minimised through including a general comments section.

Conducting customer interviews is a second way to gather insights. As this approach is more resource intensive, it is important to apply objective selection techniques for choosing customers to participate. Applying standard questions and using probing techniques during the interviews enable the resultant data to be analysed robustly.

The third method of asking customers for their views on service is through facilitating focus groups, involving a number of customers at one time. As the customers may be competitors, it is important that you manage the expectations and workshop agenda to ensure constructive participation.

Review opinions on service through other channels

Traditional Voice of Customer exercises tend to focus on the active soliciting of feedback from customers. However, there are a variety of other opportunities to gauge insights. Employees who work in front-line roles interact with customers all day. If asked, these staff members can provide relevant feedback on what elements of the organisation's service delight customers and what disappoints them.

Customer meetings present another opportunity to hear from them. Listening to the issues they raise and probing for clarification enables this information to be used for analysis at a later point. Unsolicited compliments provide indicators of areas where expectations are being met or exceeded and warrant further analysis. They present opportunities for replication.

Customer complaints narrow down elements of service which fall below what the customer deserves. For both compliments and complaints, their usefulness in driving customer experience is dependent on their content being recorded. It is essential that mechanisms are put in place to log and categorise them in a standardised manner.

Experience service from their perspective

A highly effective but seldom used way to collect Voice of Customer data is to conduct customer mirrors by spending the day in the customers' shoes. With this technique, an employee spends a day at the customers' premises, sits with them and observes their interaction with your organisation. Their experiences and the customers' responses should be recorded and used as information for analysis. This is a fairly resource-heavy approach, but the insights gleaned are usually remarkable.

Understanding what your customers think and feel about your service levels is critical if you intend to meet their requirements and retain customers to grow your business. Voice of Customer data alone will not shift your organisation's performance, but if used as input into a targeted set of improvement actions, it certainly will.

ABOUT VICKI ERSKINE

Vicki Erskine is an experienced leader, independent consultant and writer, with a passion for improving the way South African organisations service their customers. Vicki holds a Business Science degree from the University of Cape Town, with Honours in Industrial Psychology, is a Six Sigma accredited Black Belt and has a Diploma in Managing Service Systems from the Scandinavian International Management Institute.
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