

Voice of the Customer

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Think about your company's mission statement. Undoubtedly, it has a phrase with "customer" in it, such as "committed to customer service" or "ensuring customer satisfaction." But for all the claims of being customer-focused, do you actually speak one-on-one with your customers? Who are your customers? End-customers that use your product, resellers, internal employees? If you're running a retail store or own a small business, talking to your customers is probably a daily occurrence. However, in a corporate environment, it's not as easy.

Do you work in the marketing department and find that your direct interaction with customers is rare to non-existent? Do you get to speak with customers, but wonder whether they feel comfortable telling the positive and negative things are your "partnership?" Are you gathering candid comments, but at a loss when it comes to modifying the way you do business based upon these concerns?

If you've answered "no" to the above, read no further. You're on the right track. You are truly living the customer-focused mission displayed in your front lobby. Keep up the good work. For those of you who nodded your head, or if you're concerned about how to capture the voice of the customer and why you should even bother, read on.

A world of quantitative data

There's a lot of value in conducting customer surveys and doing so on a consistent basis. What is the most important reason? To establish a baseline. Getting a pulse on how customers feel about your company, products, and services helps you plan more effective programs to exceed those baseline ratings. Then by continually capturing customer survey information on a regular basis, you can see how you're doing against a given benchmark.

But quantitative data only goes so far. It's numbers. It's statistics. In this world where authenticity and reality is coming back in vogue, it's important to remember that your customers are not just numbers, they are individual human beings. They have thoughts and they want to voice them. Quantitative data without an accompanying qualitative measurement is only two dimensional. For a three dimensional view, you need to hear the common themes that your customers raise regarding a new product, customer support, or the company image.

In their own words

Don't surveys capture that type of information? Isn't the market research gathered with its percentage points and bar charts enough to go on? No and no. Market research in the traditional sense gives you macro-level information on industry trends, competitive products and specific market segments. Customer surveys and questionnaires by their very nature are geared for brevity. Think about the surveys and questionnaires that you're willing to fill out. They take less than five minutes to complete and "x" marks the spot.

Technology companies have been notorious for the "if you build it, they will come" business model. These companies are now finding that they can save money in development costs and even

get venture capital by listening to what their customers have to say and taking the steps to modify products and services. Recently, we worked with a company that wanted to build a product that would answer a market need. After a thorough customer analysis, we discovered that the company was using a different naming convention for typical tasks. This caused confusion in the customer's mind and the perception that the product didn't meet their needs. These findings helped the company's product development and marketing teams to reevaluate its nomenclature while continuing to build a product that customers wanted and needed. The company went on to receive financial backing at a time when VCs were closing their wallets.

The value of actual comments from customers is akin to the power of testimonials. Their phrases, their candor, their choice of words help encapsulate the very issues that touch their lives – both the praise and the criticism are invaluable to your senior management, development team, marketing team, sales force, and corporate communications department.

From comments to commitment

You can capture all the customer comments you want. But it's not enough to put your most vocal customers on "advisory boards" to placate them. Here's the hard part. You've got to sift through the comments and determine which ones you want to act upon. Then you've got to commit to doing so, and measure the results so that you close the communication loop between your customer's comments and your actions. Depending upon what your customers care about, it might mean providing your customer support staff with a better knowledge database so that they are better equipped to handle initial complaints. It might mean modifying the product so that it addresses the easiest fixes first and the harder, more extensive modifications in the next version. It might mean letting your customers see their online bank statements any way they want versus the few ways that you enable them to sort the information.

Having worked with businesses of all sizes, we have come to realize that indeed each business is unique. But customers usually have common threads to their complaints and commendations. Now it's up to you to capture it and do something about it. Focus on the voice of the customer and you'll engender the loyalty and upside revenue potential that you seek.

Capturing the voice of the customer

1. Establish a baseline of quantitative data and continually strive to exceed it.
2. Gather qualitative comments from customers.
3. Create a three-dimensional view of your customers based upon the themes they raise and available quantitative data.
4. Share the information within your company.
5. Determine how you can change your products, programs, and interactions to better meet customer needs.
6. Close the gap between your company and your customers, and begin to measure your success.