



# FEEDBACK FROM THE FRONT-LINE

**G**ood customer satisfaction research is a fantastic investment. It provides information that helps to structure business operations and motivate people. It gives valuable data about how companies are perceived, where there are opportunities to create customer loyalty and beat the competition. It can even guide recruitment, training and reward policies.

But unfortunately, most companies do not use their customer satisfaction research to do any of these things. The plain truth is that most customer satisfaction research does not drive change because it has not been designed to give actionable results, the data is very often out of date and is not shared with the people who can act on it.

There are some commonly accepted rewards for companies that invest in improving service for their customers:

- more repeat business, reducing cost of

sales by up to 40 per cent

- up to 50 per cent increase in customer retention
- increased referrals, potentially reducing promotion costs by up to 40 per cent
- the opportunity to charge a seven to 12 per cent premium on prices

Used correctly, customer satisfaction measurement can indeed be one of the most valuable investments your company can make. The challenge is to collect the right data and then act on it.

## The right data

First, it is vital to collect the right data. Customer satisfaction data will only be able to help you get closer to delivering the right customer experience if you ask the right questions. Most research is based on what the company wants to know, not what the customer cares about. Successful research depends on listening to what the

customer wants to say. Customer satisfaction research must also be relevant to the particular business. Gathering data that is not directly relevant to an organisation's unique circumstances or part of its processes will not give the kind of information that will help to drive improvements; it simply will not be possible to act on the results. All customer satisfaction research must be designed with a business question in mind: 'What will we be able to do with the results?'

## Act on the results

Customer research data is a waste of money if it languishes in the filing cabinet of the research department. The information has to be available to be acted upon by the people responsible for delivering the service - that means the front line. Customer satisfaction results must be:

- timely - if the feedback is a month old, people will excuse the results on the



Many businesses believe that knowing what customers want and acting on that information is the fastest way to increase customer loyalty and increase revenue. But, says **Brenda Stewart** of Cape Consulting, the whole company needs to know that senior management is totally committed and that customer satisfaction results are as important as hitting sales targets

basis that improvements have been made in the meantime and the results would not be the same today

- ranked - you have to know which aspects of service are most important in the opinion of customers and therefore what will make the most difference
- specific - so that it can lead to action. It will not help you to know that 80 per cent of your customers think your service could be better if you have not found out what they want you to change

A vital component of driving improvement from customer satisfaction results is using the feedback to develop a service vision that can be shared with staff and which will gain the commitment of everyone in the organisation.

Employees need to be motivated to deliver the service vision, which means that management have to stress its importance by

recognising good service in measures and rewards. The more that front-line staff can be involved in the process of developing the vision, the greater the commitment to its delivery. What most businesses fail to understand is that it is not possible to monitor every small transaction. The only way to make a difference is to engage and motivate front-line staff in the process and empower them to demonstrate the behaviour that will create a positive experience for customers.

#### Engage front-line staff

The best way to create a culture where staff consistently impress customers is to engage them in the customer research process. Front-line staff are excellent at predicting what aspects of service that customers will say is important, which is not surprising as they are in constant contact. Staff also say that, while they know what will improve customer satisfaction, there are operational

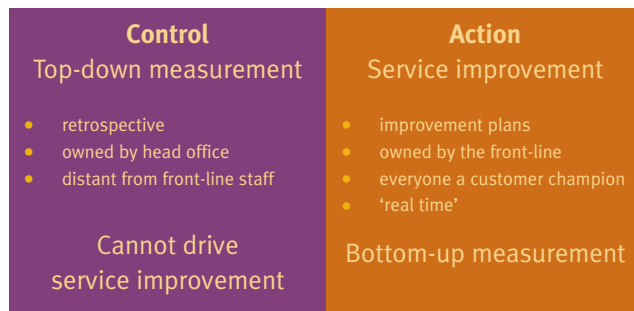
obstacles to overcome, they are often powerless to act and their opinions are rarely sought. The benefit of involving staff is that they will be able to support rather than undermine the process of data gathering; they will be far more likely to believe the results and will be prepared to act on the findings. Not only can staff contribute to the design of questionnaires, they can be directly involved in data gathering.

The next step in the process is training staff to interpret the results and to develop coaching skills for team leaders and first line managers so that they can provide the right support and motivation for their staff to act on them. The aim is to transfer responsibility for delivering customer satisfaction to the only people who can really make a difference.

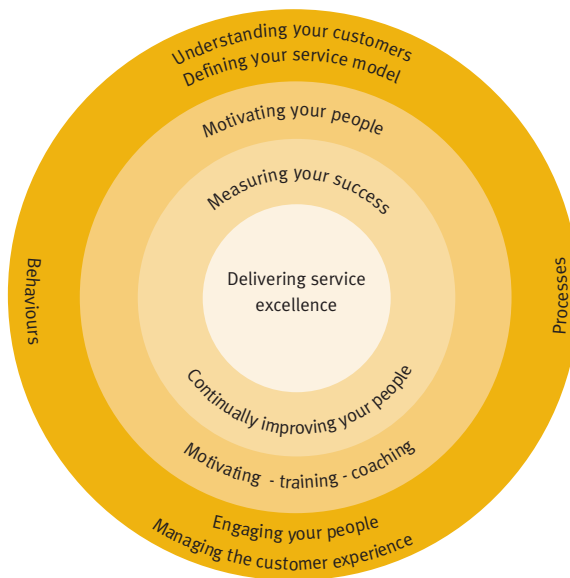
It is the behaviour of staff that has the greatest impact on customer satisfaction. It is undoubtedly the case that if the process-



**Figure 1.**  
Reversing the dynamic



**Figure 2.**  
Improving customer service - an ongoing process



- bringing a service vision alive for front-line staff
- maximising staff's contribution to the customer experience
- understanding what prevents staff from delivering service excellence
- breaking plateau'd customer service performance measures
- sustaining service excellence strategies over time

All of these challenges can be overcome by using customer satisfaction measurements as a tool to drive change. Customer satisfaction measurements should not be viewed in isolation. As figure 2 shows, improving customer service is an ongoing process, starting with understanding what customers want, using that data to develop a service vision, engaging and motivating staff, and remeasuring and using the results to continually improve and refine behaviours and processes.

To make a difference, customer satisfaction has to be a priority. The whole company needs to know that senior management is totally committed and that customer satisfaction results are as important as hitting sales targets. Few companies currently take customer satisfaction measurement this seriously, but knowing what customers want and acting on that information is the fastest way to increase customer loyalty and sales **Q**

es do not work, even the most brilliant staff will not be able to overcome the failure to deliver. But the empathy and understanding conveyed by staff who interact with customers is the ingredient that creates truly satisfied customers - and those are the ones most likely to remain loyal.

**Reverse the dynamic**

Working with a client recently, the effects on morale of gathering customer feedback involving front-line employees were compared with data collection and the use of complaints data, compiled centrally and presented in league tables.

In this instance, the usual dynamic was reversed, where central monitoring was followed six weeks later with reporting down the chain of command. Instead, measurements of customer satisfaction were taken locally and reports on action

taken were reported up the line to senior management. This change in dynamic had clear advantages, illustrated in figure 1.

Staff were impressed that their knowledge and experience of dealing every day with customers was sought and used in the questionnaire design, and this enthusiasm from the staff for collecting data impressed their customers. The measurement process itself stimulated higher levels of customer service because everyone tried harder at every transaction. Staff knew and agreed with what was being measured, so they could focus their activity.

**The main challenges?**

Those organisations that want to improve customer satisfaction commonly face the following challenges:

- understanding what customers really want and think



Brenda Stewart is a consultant with Cape Consulting which specialises in developing customer service strategy and measurement systems for consumer and business to business markets. With a background in senior management she understands the impact of implementing new ideas, and focuses on practical solutions based on sound research. She works with a wide range of industries, including financial services, retail, IT and utilities.