

VIEWPOINT:

Why customer satisfaction research doesn't get results

Just about every company measures customer satisfaction. But do the results lead to real service improvements for their customers?

Forward-looking businesses are right to measure customers' opinion of their service. How else can they react to the ever-increasing pressure to improve the quality of the customer experience? Yet few managers believe the information they collect has any real impact on the way their business operates. Indeed, customer satisfaction surveys are now so popular with organizations that both professional researchers and customers complain of "questionnaire fatigue" and an increasing "nuisance factor".

Why doesn't the valuable information gathered through customer service satisfaction surveys result in improved service? Because the real challenge for organizations is not in collecting customer feedback but in using it effectively. Nearly all organizations ask customers about their performance – easier to ask for data than to act on it.

Companies find it hard to act on customer feedback because there are a number of common corporate misconceptions acting as barriers to service improvement. How many do you recognize?

1. Because we have a lot of data, we have the right data

It is widely acknowledged that managers have to deal with too much information. The real issue is not of quantity, but of quality and relevance. All too often, customers say that they are not asked about the things that really matter to them. A first principle must be to make sure that questionnaires are designed around what customers want to say and not what the company wants to hear about.

2. Managers act on the information they receive

Managers are busy people. Companies can talk about getting the "voice of the customer" into the organization, but that voice can be barely audible over other calls on management time – cost, quality, time and productivity – to name but a few.

Another reason for inaction is that issues about service reported on customer satisfaction surveys are often not actionable at an operational level. User friendliness of systems, access to helplines, or number of staff available, can be outside their direct control. Measures must provide actionable data. The data must be:

- specific and lead to clearly defined actions;
- timely, current and up-to-date;
- ranked – allowing clear priorities to be identified;
- freely available and shared between everyone affected by them.

Without these characteristics it is virtually impossible to translate survey results into direct action.

A key principle of customer service measurement must be to make sure survey results cry out for action. Surveys and questionnaires must be designed with a business question in mind: "What will we be able to do with the answers?" Of course the aim should be to improve the quality and consistency of the customer experience. Measurement is only the first stage in a cycle of service improvement and review.

3. Customer satisfaction measurement requires technical expertise and should be the exclusive responsibility of an internal or external professional

The design and analysis of customer satisfaction surveys rarely involve front-line service providers. This excludes the very people who will be directly affected by improvement actions that should follow from the data gathering exercise. But they should be involved; they are the people who can make the changes happen. Measuring service performance must be part of daily work rather than a one-off activity. To be effective, the measurement system should be easy to use, provide real time feedback and be integrated into other business activities. Front-line staff must identify with and own the measurement process. They need to understand how it works and feel they have been involved in its creation.

Measurement and the resulting improvement process must not be a separate management initiative driven by a separate function with success and failure reported in percentages. The people responsible for service delivery must be able to identify how to change on an ongoing basis.

4. Focusing on complaints will inspire improved service

Working with a client recently, we were able to compare the effects on morale and motivation between gathering customer feedback involving front-line employees with data collection and the use of complaints data, compiled centrally and presented in league tables. Well, you have already worked out the answer – who feels motivated by coming bottom of a league table?

The process of central monitoring, with results being provided down the chain of command four to six weeks after data collection, was reversed. Instead, measurements of service performance were taken locally and reports on resulting actions were reported up the line to senior management. This change in dynamics had clear advantages:

- staff, although initially skeptical, were impressed when their knowledge and experience of dealing every day with customers was sought and used in the questionnaire design;
- enthusiasm among staff for collecting the data impressed their customers; and
- the measurement process itself actually stimulated higher levels of service performance – everyone tried harder.

Collecting customer satisfaction data that are not directly relevant to an organization's unique circumstances or part of its unique processes will not drive improvements. Gathering the right data can, however, be the most valuable investment a company can make. Knowing exactly what your customers want is the fastest way to increase customer loyalty and sales, but only if everyone in your organization is motivated and empowered to act on the results.

5. The right way to make sure customer satisfaction research gets results

- Recognize that customer feedback is a means to achieving improvements in customer service performance, not an end in itself.
- Capture the elements of customer service that are really important to customers.
- Ensure that the questions asked will produce answers that can be acted on.
- Act on the results. Not doing so wastes time and money and sends negative messages to staff and customers alike.
- Involve staff who provide service to customers so they are committed to the process.
- Make the feedback relevant, personal and timely.

If customer service measurement is approached in the right way, managers will stop talking about how they measure service and start talking about how they improve the quality of customer service.

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