



Hands-on Management

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Quality: Giving Customers What They Want

Quality, when defined as giving the customers what they want, can provide a major competitive advantage in an issue that is vital to the survival of any company. Customers have ever-increasing expectations for the quality of the product or service they are purchasing. Listening to our customers is a cornerstone of quality management. We can get so busy doing the same things day after day that the customer's voice can get lost in the operational noise. Surveying can be an important listening tool that can bring you the information needed to form a systematic approach for improving the relationship.

Designing a Successful Survey
Surveys can be constructed to measure customer satisfaction and to help your company meet customer expectations. A thoughtfully designed survey is mostly common sense, whether you direct the survey yourself

or work with a survey specialist.

Professional-looking surveys are created by combining two different types of expertise:

- Your understanding of the operation of the business, and
- The technical knowledge of constructing surveys.

With a little care, your organization can develop and implement a very effective questionnaire.

Reading Your Customers' Minds

Do you really know what your customers are thinking? Your key customers, your management team and your top employees all have valuable opinions and information the company needs to plan for the future. Before you get out the customer mailing list and begin forming questions, ask yourself this: Am I willing to act on the information this

survey returns? Carefully executed surveys head the list of powerful decision-making tools, because you can act on the results collected from direct feedback from your customer.

The survey development process includes:

- Determine the purpose of the survey
- Develop a clearly defined statement of direction and a sound organized view of what you will do with your new-found information
- Link the information to an action plan

Resist the temptation to gather more information than you really need to improve the business. Asking questions that are simply interesting or could be useful to know can lengthen the survey unnecessarily. Remember that any survey requires time from both you and your customer. Do not needlessly make work for the customer. Work out specific research questions that, when answered, help to guide your decisions.

One of the most important judgments to be made is to whom the poll will be directed. By selecting the correct target audience, you can be more precise with the results. For example:

- What are the key groups that have the data you need?
- Are all of your customers from the same industry?
- Who are the decision-makers for your product or service?
- Should you sample all customers, or survey randomly?

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A large, random sampling will produce more generalized information. This, however, will not bring more accurate data about the questions at hand if the customers you needed to reach are only a small part of the random group sampled.

There are several types of surveys most frequently used by small businesses:

Written survey—This is the most widely used type, because of the lower cost in time and material requirements. It is user-friendly because it affords the customer more time to respond. It is essential that the questions follow a logical sequence and that the survey directions are very clearly stated. The only chance for interaction with the respondent is follow-up after the survey is returned.

Telephone survey—A phone interviewer will ask the questions and note the answers in order. The interviewer, however, can interact with the respondents to clear up any confusion with the survey. Problems with the survey organization can be quickly detected and corrected.

Larger businesses may opt for these types of surveys:

Face-to-face interviews—the sample size for this type of survey is usually very small. Face-to-face surveys can tackle difficult issues and shed light on customer needs and requirements. Discovering the services that are of foremost importance to the customer is possible. Interaction is at the highest level, and nonverbal responses can be gauged by a skilled interviewer to give maximum insight.

Focus groups—Meetings are held at which a facilitator may lead small groups of customers through the questions on the survey. Responses, in general, are assumed to apply to other customers from similar background industries.

A critical decision is determining who should create the survey. I helped my employer put together a simple, one-page written survey that

gave us the answers to the following questions:

- What other types of finishes should we consider offering?
- How is our service?

Sometimes it is helpful to bring in a skilled and impartial third party to manage a survey. Complex surveys

can benefit from the credibility and objectivity customers may perceive with the use of an outside organization. **P&SF**

Bibliography

R.F. Zimmerman, L. Steinmann & V. Schueler, "Designing Customer Surveys that Work," *Quality Digest*, October 1996, pp. 22–28.

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