

CAPTURING THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER (VOC)

What is it that your customers are really looking for? Are you tapping into the opportunity to increase business by listening to the Voice of the Customer? It is an old adage that the customer is always right, now we call it marketing and you get degrees in it! The point is, of course, that this is the very essence of a business: find out what your customers want and give it to 'em.

Many businesses feel that because of the background of the owner or manager they know their market. It's what they have lived and breathed for most of their life and what they don't know isn't worth knowing.

Gut feeling will only get you so far

Others rely on gut instinct or simply carry on doing what they've always done. In good times its possible to survive, but when the going gets tough finding out what the customer really wants can be the only way forward. How do you do it? Talking to customers may happen every day, but unless the right questions are asked and the customer believes you are listening to the answers you may not get the feedback you need.

House of Quality

Inevitably, the answer is market research, but in a fast moving market, and with pressures on both budgets and time, is there a process which can capture the Voice of the Customer and, as an added bonus, feed into a quality system perhaps even providing the data for House of Quality modelling?

Whilst such processes have been designed for fast moving and innovative markets, the principles behind them can be applied to good effect in any marketplace. The method is a mixture of primary secondary research – it used to be called desk research, but substitute 'internet' for 'desk' these days.

Defining the Voice of the Customer

It needs to start off with defining the Voice of the Customer: what is it that is of critical important to your customers? Is it delivery, reliability, innovation, communications, sales force or one or more of a host of other criteria? The only way to establish this is by interviewing customers. A few key interviews can usually provide this information as our experience shows that just a few interviews, regardless of the size of a customer base, can provide the initial insight needed. Just a few interviews with key customers can tell you: what customers want now, how it

has changed from what they used to want, the challenges they – and therefore you – are having to face, and what can safely be left out of the product/service package.

The views and information from these interviews can then be added to information from the marketplace which is gathered over the internet, from industry briefings and from specialist and trade journals.

The next part of the jigsaw is the input from your own sales force. There is often a vast store of untapped knowledge residing in the informal memory of a sales force. A system that encourages the sharing and logging of this kind of information may provide the link, when included as part of a system, which provides that competitive edge.

Don't forget the feedback loop

The final part of the jigsaw is closing the circle by communicating your findings back to the customer. This will demonstrate to the customer that you are interested in their market and are keen to work with them to help them develop their business, which in turn of course will help your business.

The key to this system is not only setting up the system, but driving and managing it continuously. It is this type of system that provides the background knowledge and intelligence which gives you the power to question and offers the opportunity to progress as a business. It is only when this is a continuous process that it is possible to identify the changes and trends that can affect your business.

It is this continuous process that becomes the virtuous circle of capturing the voice of the customer, comparing it with market knowledge and 'in house' knowledge and feeding it back to the customer. In some cases it is possible to set up a customer satisfaction algorithm which can help you to identify the good – and the bad – points in your relationship with customers.

Giving you an opportunity to 'talk' to your customers on a regular basis, be it weekly (unlikely), monthly, quarterly (probably) or annually, will keep you involved with your customers. Involving your customers will improve loyalty and give them less reason to look elsewhere. Remember, keeping customers is cheaper than getting new ones.

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