



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Capture 'The Voice' Right!

Ways of capturing voice of the customer through the most popular method – interviews.

It's vital for organizations to create better products and services that are not just innovative and 'early to market', but also delight the customer. To do so, an organization puts in its best efforts across all fronts from design to final delivery. Yet, the market response is often not as overwhelming as expected. Why? Simple...because the best efforts rarely match the voice of the customer.

"Voice of the customer" is the term used to describe the explicit and tacit customer needs or requirements. Different ways of capturing the voice of the customer include: direct discussion or interviews, surveys, focus groups, customer specifications, observation, warranty data, field reports, and so on.

This article discusses the pros and cons of the most commonly adopted method of obtaining and interpreting VOC – Interviews.

Interviewing customer is one common mechanism of capturing VOC. It is either conducted one-to-one with an individual customer or in a focus group discussion from the same business sector. Simultaneously the proceedings of the interview are noted. These observations are later evaluated and distinct customer needs are extracted.

A common pitfall in capturing VOC

The quality improvement team will impulsively think of obtaining a list of customers from the sales department at the thought of interviewing. Organizations fall prey to this most common pitfall.

Sometimes, sales department would not like personnel from other departments like engineering and manufacturing, to interact with the customers. They assume that the engineers might give the customers a new idea leading to new and unreasonable demands. So, the sales personnel often give the list of positive customers having loyalty towards the organization and the product.

These customers are satisfied with the existing products and hardly realize the need for change or technology up-gradation. Their feedback therefore, does not add any value to the organization. Organizations therefore continue to produce the same product.

Meanwhile, new players enter the market identifying and capitalizing on the emerging customer needs. Once the new players establish themselves in the industry, they try to diversify into other sectors of business. This is a potential threat to the existing organizations.

Therefore organizations should avoid choosing customers impulsively. A careful evaluation is imperative to capturing value adding customer feedback.

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The next stage of interviewing...

Having identified the customer to be interviewed, organizations now face some questions like

1. Deciding upon the venue.
2. Identifying the right interviewer.

1. Venue:

Several factors are to be considered before one decides the venue. Available common options are:

- Interviewing at a place where product is located and operated.
- Interviewing at a neutral location.

Interviewing at a place where product is located and operated

Specific reasons abound regarding manufacturers' need to consider interviewing at the location where the product is installed and operated. The advantage is that manufacturers can themselves check the functioning of the product and understand their problem. Being approached for an opinion also makes the customer feel special and unique, leading to increased customer satisfaction.

Interviewing at the customer's location sabotages the interviewer's need to disclose certain facts like the organization being represented. This might lead to the customer withholding crucial information about the competitor's strategy. The interviewer therefore must be capable to take the customer into confidence, and extract crucial information.

Interviewing at a neutral location

This means that both the interviewee and the interviewer agree upon a common place and meet at that location for the interview.

Advantage of interviewing at a neutral location is that one can make use of available time in an optimum manner. Considering the interview location that is not owned by either parties and is centrally located will help both the parties save time and costs.

These interviews can be scheduled in a manner that enables a company to conduct multiple interviews simultaneously by forming an interviewing committee.

The *disadvantage* is that the interviewer cannot check the functioning of their product and have to rely on customer feedback. Unawareness on the part of interviewers regarding the exact manner of product operation, might lead to misinterpretation of the VOC.

2. Identifying the right interviewer:

Organizations are foxed by another major question that is to identify the right interviewer. An interviewer could be a technically qualified individual, an operator, a product analyst or a hired external expert. Essentially there are two cases here

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- An internal organizational employee
- A hired external expert

An internal organizational employee

One *advantage* with internal organizational employees is that they are well acquainted with the technical intricacies of the product. Therefore, they can understand and interpret customer feedback rightly. This is cost effective than hiring an external expert.

Some of the *disadvantages* are that, excess time invested by employees in conducting such interviews. Companies often train technically qualified people at interviewing and yet find them incapable of extracting appropriate feedback from customers.

Possessing sufficient knowledge on the technical functioning of product will lead technically qualified interviewers to ignore some important points. They might remain oblivious to some aspects that are vital.

When the customers complain about the design of the product they tend to give reasons, which might sometimes leave the customers dissatisfied.

Considering a professional interviewer...

The main *advantage* with trained interviewers is that they establish a rapport with the customer thus extract maximum information. Professional interviewers identify the tacit thoughts of the customer and in turn pose more questions to elicit facts.

Also internal employees feel obligated to pose fundamental technical questions to the customer. In such situations it is preferable to have a trained professional who is trained to ask such fundamental questions.

A *disadvantage* with professional interviewers is that they need to understand the technical aspects of complicated products or processes prior to the interview. If the interviewers were adept at learning new technologies it would be an added advantage to the organization.

Other considerations

No standard method exists through which one can ascertain that 'This is the right way of capturing VOC'. The type of product, current market situation, the organization economy, and the accessibility of human resource executives are some of the factors that are to be considered before deciding upon the right interviewing method. Organizations must also realize that these techniques are customized and are specific to each organization.

Irrespective of the technique adopted by an organization, capturing VOC and interpreting it appropriately, gives it a competitive edge over the others. By extracting distinct customer requirements from the VOC evaluation, organizations can generate remarkable margins. Based on them they can develop and deliver better products and services according to the customer needs.