

Oh no, not another questionnaire!

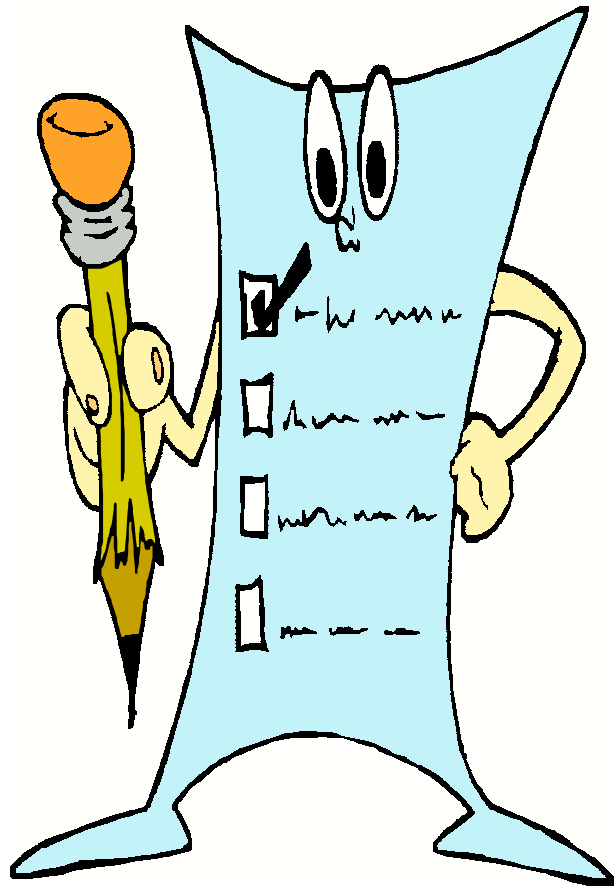
I will not take the time to complete and send back a questionnaire. I am not in the minority however, nearly everyone I speak to feels the same. **So why do organisations assume their customers will complete a questionnaire?**

When I analyse my reluctance the conclusion is that I can't justify spending 10-30 minutes of my time. Also, many surveys ask you for details, which are obviously for marketing purposes, and I get enough junk mail as it is!

As I spend much of my time helping my own and other organisations to improve customer service you may think that my aversion to questionnaires is rather strange. Well, I have not always felt this way, and I am sure that in some circumstances the questionnaire can be a useful technique. When you have many thousands of customers, with whom you have no personal relationship and/or perhaps only infrequent purchasing patterns, the questionnaire-based survey will provide some customer feedback. It will probably give some metrics but it is unlikely to provide useful qualitative feedback on which to plan improvements.

If you have got this far and are wondering why these concerns relate to ISO9001: 2000 then let me explain.

ISO9001: 2000 requires an organisation to be customer focussed, to monitor customer perceptions and to have customer satisfaction as a key measure of the effectiveness of the system. Unfortunately many organisations have linked these



requirements with the need to conduct questionnaire-based customer surveys. Some certification bodies, and the IQA, have also been promoting the questionnaire approach! But the standard does not state how these are to be met and therefore it is up to each organisation to adopt its own approach. Some may feel that the questionnaire approach is right for them but if every ISO9001: 2000 registered organisation sent questionnaires to all its customers the reputation of the standard may suffer.



An alternative approach

The good news is that most ISO9001: 2000 organisations have a relatively small customer base, the significant majority of whom work within the business to business (B2B) environment. This means that personal relationships already exist and there is likely to be a great deal of customer interface at all levels within each customer and supplier organisation. All that is needed is the ability to convert this customer contact into information which can be used to both measure (perceptions of) customer satisfaction and to improve customer service/focus.

Who are your customers?

Customers are people and not organisations. If you doubt this asks any salesman what they fear most and they will tell you that it is the change of key decision makers/influencers within a customer organisation.

In deciding who to target consider including all key points of contact. These contacts will have differing views of the products and service you provide. It is important that you take as many of these views into consideration as is practical.

Measuring customer satisfaction

When presented with a measurement scale many customers seem unable to indicate top marks for customer satisfaction. When asked why this is so the typical answer is "there is always room for improvement". This presents a dilemma: you either accept that a

false ceiling is a natural phenomenon of customer satisfaction measurement, or, do you change the emphasis of the measurement itself?

The most effective measurement principle is based upon providing an explicit link between the score provided and the improvement sought by the customer. This has two advantages:

By addressing the improvements sought by customers subsequent scores are likely to improve.

Customers are less likely to score low when they are unable to provide an improvement suggestion

Improving customer service

Customer feedback always identifies one or two issues which the majority of customers feel is a significant weakness of your organisation. Addressing these key issues is essential but this also has to be accompanied with a more customer-specific strategy of improvement.

Every customer values different aspects of your products and services and therefore it is not surprising each has a different perception of customer satisfaction. This makes the improvement of customer service more complex. However this does not present an impossible task, as most of these differences in perceptions relate to issues which are relatively easy to address.

Utilising customer feedback

Asking customers to provide feedback should provide the opportunity to identify



both the negative and positive aspects of working with your organisation. Whilst ideas for improvement will provide a key driver for customer led improvement it should also be evident that your customers actually like many aspects of your products and services. This comes as a surprise to many staff, mainly due to the over-emphasis on negative aspects raised by customers. The primary reason why your customers deal with you and not your competitors is that they like your organisation, your products and very importantly your people. Given the opportunity customers are delighted to provide this feedback and this presents much sought after information which can be used to:

- Praise staff
- Identify internal and external best practice
- Support marketing activity

7 customer focus principles



ISO9001: 2000 requires an organisation to demonstrate that they are customer focused. It is worth considering the following principles as they will add to your knowledge of customers and improve customer relationships.

- ① Use your own staff to gather customer feedback – a 100% response rate is guaranteed
- ② Only include topics which are of value to customers – this will demonstrate the importance you place on customer service
- ③ Train your staff to gather feedback – this provides a consistent and effective approach

- ④ Always respond to customer issues – even if you can't provide exactly what the customer is looking for they will appreciate your consideration
- ⑤ Commit to improvements before implementing – this way the organisation will be focused on achieving the results, the customer will be looking for and taking note of the improvement
- ⑥ Embed the process into normal working practices – this will avoid the process being seen as an initiative which is likely to be dropped when other initiatives take precedence
- ⑦ Never be afraid of changing the process – as your customers' expectations change, reflect this in the process

FAQs

Frequently Asked Questions

Q *Will customers give our staff honest answers?*

A Being able to talk honestly with customers is an essential element in building strong relationships, key to customer retention. With good training your staff should be able to 'open-up' customers and, as they know your business better than a researcher, they will be able to develop actionable data.

If you already know that relationships between certain customers and staff are not working introduce someone new, possibly a more senior manager, to identify the issues and to start rebuilding relationships. If you are not aware of relationship problems you can consider designing the process to provide feedback as to where relationships are ineffective.



Q Is this an expensive way of undertaking customer research?

A As you already have contact with customers this approach should be extremely cost-effective. You may feel that you have too little contact with some key customers and therefore you can use this method to overcome this, which in turn should improve relationships and customer retention. You may consider that for some smaller accounts a questionnaire is more cost-effective.

Q Are the satisfaction measures statistically valid?

A Yes. You decide who you wish to see at the planning stage, confident in the knowledge that you will have a 100% success rate. You may decide that all customers should be included, or you may elect to see a representative sample of customers.

Q Will we raise customer expectations?

A There is no doubt that your customers will expect some action as a result of your staff gathering customer feedback. However, the improvement actions are nearly always relatively minor issues which can be implemented quickly. There will be

occasions when a customer raises an issue which is more difficult to resolve. It is much better that these are raised with your staff than the customer talking to your competitors (on the assumption that you may not be able to meet their expectations).

Q Could this be seen as another initiative driven by ISO9001: 2000?

A If you see this approach as only being necessary to meet the requirements of ISO9001: 2000 then this methodology is not for your organisation.

And finally

A Health Warning



Do not enter into this approach unless you:

- a) Design and pilot the process before implementing – you need to be confident that the approach meets with customer approval and that it provides the information you are looking for
- b) Train staff to conduct customer reviews – good reviewing skills are essential to the success of this approach
- c) Take actions as a result of customer feedback – your customers will expect it, and your staff will not be given a second chance to gather more information

The Author

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