

The Importance of Continuous Customer Feedback ... and How to Get It Quickly

by Anthony Cirillo and Angi Fisher

Why is it that some companies can turn on a dime to improve products and services while others take years to do so? Simply put: They listen. All the time.

The occasional focus group, the annual top-of-mind recall survey, the yearly employee satisfaction survey, and the sporadic distribution and collection of patient satisfaction surveys are not enough. By the time those surveys give you answers, your window of opportunity for making an impression has passed.

Consider companies viewed as having very loyal customers – Apple Computer, Harley-Davidson, Saturn Corporation, and Southwest Airlines. What contributes to that loyalty? These companies continuously ask their customers what they can do better, and then they act on the suggestions – quickly. Some of these companies have formal mechanisms in place to gather feedback at any time. Others, such as Southwest Airlines, don't even have to ask. Southwest's customers take such ownership in the company that they feel free to compliment or complain at any time because they know their words elicit action.

The Times, a leading British newspaper, surveys a panel of 2,000 readers every month to determine what they think of its articles. Going one better, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Serra* conducts 200 reader interviews per day, seven days each month. The panel of readers digs deep, analyzing article content, placement, and design. Everything is scrutinized, and articles are graded. If it feels the need, the paper will conduct further focus groups about issues that have surfaced. That level of scrutiny for words on the printed page allows the newspaper to adjust rapidly to improve readers' experience. Imagine what that kind of scrutiny could do to help hospital patients have a better experience during a time when they are most vulnerable and would give anything to be anywhere else.

The case for continuous quality monitoring

If your organization is losing customers' favor and doesn't discover it for several months, chances are it will never regain those customers. Continuous quality monitoring captures results on an ongoing basis. Even a hospital whose customers may not come back for weeks or years needs to know how they feel about their

experience and what they will tell their family and friends. Companies that rely on stand-alone surveys instead of quality monitoring are seeing pieces and not the whole pie.

Quality monitoring frequently involves the use of various survey techniques and is a real-time process that allows companies to discover when a procedure, product, or service begins to take a downturn. Corrective action can then be taken before a negative impact takes hold.

Objectives

To determine the objectives of any research, be sure to start with your organization's corporate and business goals. You want the information you collect to be useful and ultimately "operationalized" – or assimilated with your organization's business operations.

The corporate objective for most organizations is to drive revenue to their bottom line while generating 100 percent customer satisfaction and ongoing profitability. Business objectives for departments that interface with customers vary, but the following are common questions:

- In marketing, are you designing a solution your target audience wants and defining a message that resonates?
- In sales, are you delivering that message in a clear, concise, and digestible manner?
- In service, is the support organization meeting customers' expectations?

Defining a survey's objective is straightforward when answers are sought for a specific event. For example, an organization might want "to determine whether it is providing patients with the best possible care during their hospital stay." That would provide a baseline for further study.

In quality monitoring, the objective becomes "to increase patients' satisfaction with their care by 30 percent." With this objective, different customer-interfacing departments would need to meet regularly to review the latest results and act in coordination to continuously improve operational processes and satisfaction levels.

Methods you can adopt

There are several ways you can engage your organization in obtaining ongoing customer feedback. Here are a few:

Use the shift change to shift attitude. A hospital's nursing shift change is typically devoted to reviewing clinical issues. What if patient concerns of a non-clinical nature were also discussed during this time? Easily addressed items can be handled in the upcoming shift. Concerns that require more study can be assigned on a rotating basis to one nurse, whose job it is to highlight the issue with appropriate departments. This is an opportunity to gain points with patients, and if nothing else, fewer matters are likely to fall through the cracks.

Don't write, call. A printed survey delivered after hospital discharge is a dinosaur. How many surveys are returned? How many issues raised are addressed? In addition to a phone call to see how patients are doing clinically after discharge, consider a call to talk about their experience at the hospital.

Post executive e-mail addresses on your Web site. Make executives easy to contact and encourage customer feedback. When aimed at the top, concerns will trickle down and be addressed.

Consider a mystery shopper. Hire trained consumers or consultant specialists to check into the hospital for routine tests and report on their experiences. Knowledge of their presence is usually restricted to the CEO and chief medical officer.

Hold CEO listening sessions. Many companies schedule quarterly employee meetings with executives to raise issues and concerns and gather feedback. Take the concept to the outside by having senior staff members meet informally over lunch with representative members of your customer base. You not only receive great feedback, but you form a lasting impression just by making the effort.

Monitor the Web. "Google" your organization and find out what people are saying about you. Participate in or monitor pertinent discussion groups. Start a blog about your organization.

Stay online all the time. Offer visitors the opportunity to comment through online forms, two to four question pop-up surveys, or more in-depth questionnaires.

Create a quality monitoring task force. Set up a task force across hospital departments that is focused on obtaining and acting on survey feedback. Having all relevant departments involved is more likely to lead to successful, permanent changes.

Use a third-party survey company. People are more likely to share feedback with a third party. Outside companies can also help design surveys and analyze results.

Remember the car repair satisfaction survey. Have you ever been handed a bill with a sticker that says to contact the local car repair shop if you don't rate its service as excellent before answering a survey from the shop's corporate headquarters? If so, you probably were annoyed. Similarly, many health care institutions are guilty of trying to coax the best results from patients.

Be consistent and persistent. It takes time to gather feedback from customers. Don't forget to get feedback on how your improvements have affected patients. It's not a one-time deal, but an ongoing process.

We live in a 24/7 world. Hospitals have always operated 24/7. Seeking feedback needs to be a 24/7 activity as well. Those organizations that cultivate loyal customers listen every day and improve every day. That attracts attention and increases satisfaction.

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