Hearing the voice of the customer part 1: Identifying your customers

Note: This article primarily refers to gathering voice of customer information about services; however, this concept applies to both products and services.

The term “Voice of Customer” or VOC is being used more frequently as organizations take steps to ensure their products and services appeal to and meet the needs of their customers. Gathering VOC is a structured approach to understanding customer needs, perceptions and opinions; and plays a crucial role in defining the products and services that you provide. Through gathering and analyzing this information you can:

- Identify both the stated and unstated needs and wants of your customers
- Understand what features your customers like and do not like about your services
- Understand how customers use your services
- Find opportunities to make improvements to your existing services
- Find opportunities to provide new services
- Identify and address customer perceptions and issues before they become viral sensations on the Internet or in the media

In my last article “Solving problems using deterministic reasoning” I introduced the concept of Y=f(X), where Y represents the product or service output that you provide to your customers. I also discussed that the process you use (the f) and the inputs into the process (the x’s) are what control every aspect of the final output. A critical point to understand is that your customers are the sole judge of the quality and utility of your product or service. Before you can start adjusting your process and inputs to get the right output, you have to know what the output should look like and what needs must be met. The only way to get that information is to ask your customers. They will tell you what services they need, what features and value your service must provide, and what type of customer experience they expect. I will be the first to admit that you cannot please every person every time, nor do I believe the customer is always right. I do, however, believe that by using VOC information you can design and provide robust services that are capable of meeting the needs of almost all of your customers.

Whether you are creating a new service or just making improvements to those you already provide, the place to start is defining exactly who your customers are; as this information will ultimately guide how you collect VOC from them and which questions you will ask. You must first identify what standard and special services you currently provide, and assess each one to see who is directly or indirectly benefitting (or who could potentially benefit) from them. At this point just saying that your customers are “students” or “staff” does not provide you with the level of information needed. The next step is to find ways to break these large aggregated groups down into more meaningful sub-groups using demographic and descriptive characteristics. Using students as an example, you might see if any of the following factors play a role in the types of services you offer and how they are delivered:

- Academic program
- Academic level
- Future career aspirations
- Full-time or part-time student
- Employment status
- Economic status
- Are they in-state or out-of-state residents
• Do they live on or off campus
• Age range
• Gender
• Cultural background
• Religion
• Health needs
• Do they have children
• With which social groups do they identify
• Interests / Hobbies

The list could go on. If you provide advising services to students, then their academic program and academic level would probably play a bigger role in the type and level of services you provide to them than their cultural background. On the other hand, if you are concerned with providing meal services to students, you might be more concerned with being sensitive to dietary restrictions due to cultural background or health needs rather than whether the person sitting at the table is studying engineering or anthropology. You will have to be the ultimate judge of which factors to use and how much to segment your customers into sub-groups.

For many, getting your customers defined in these smaller, more descriptive sub-groups will be as far as you are able to go. However, if you have the ability to do so, the best option is to define your customers all the way down to the individual level. If you can get to know your customers as individuals, preferably by name, then you have the opportunity to discover their unique needs and can provide services that are specifically tailored to meet those needs. I admit that when you have a large customer base that is changing every four years or so, understanding your customers at the individual level and customizing services for very small groups of people is not always logistically or financially viable; but when you can, this is the ideal approach.

Once you have your customer groups defined you are ready to decide how to collect the VOC information and put your data collection plan into action. We will address this in the next article Hearing the voice of the customer part 2: Gathering VOC. As always, I welcome your questions or comments. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

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