Hearing the voice of the customer part 2: Gathering VOC

Note: This article primarily refers to gathering voice of customer information about services; however, this concept applies to both products and services. The term customer refers to someone to whom you provide any type of service.

In “Hearing the voice of the customer part 1: Identifying your customers,” I talked about the need to correctly identify who your customers are so that you can gather meaningful voice of customer (VOC) feedback about what services they need, what features and value your services must provide, and what type of customer experience they expect.

Once you have identified your customers there is a wide variety of methods that you can employ in the actual collection of feedback. Each method has a number of variants, so it is very likely that you will be able to find one or more ways to collect the VOC you need. Some of these methods will require action on your part to seek out and collect the information while others will passively gather data from customers when they choose to provide it. Popular methods for collecting VOC are:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Suggestion boxes
- Direct contact from customers
- Observation
- Customer advisory committees
- Focus groups
- Social media

I recommend you use more than one method to collect data. This will allow you to get feedback through a variety of diverse channels and compare the information between them to make sure you are getting consistent feedback. The following sections provide brief overviews of the VOC gathering methods listed above.

Surveys

I want to address surveys first because they are the tool that most people turn to when they think about collecting information from their customers. Surveys are very good at quickly collecting information and can effectively sample a large population when they are executed well and used appropriately. They are also one of the most misused and abused tools. If surveys are not carefully planned they can provide poor and misleading information, be very difficult to analyze, and become a source of irritation for your customers. There is a definite art and science to designing, building, distributing and analyzing surveys. Consider the following benefits and drawbacks of the tool:
Benefits
- Can be used to quickly collect data from a large number of people.
- Relatively inexpensive to conduct.
- Can be deployed in a number of variations (e.g. online, on paper, telephone, in-person, etc.).
- Can be set up to track respondents or provide them with anonymity based on the survey objectives. Allowing respondents to remain anonymous encourages them to provide honest feedback, especially when asking questions about sensitive subjects (e.g. age, salary, political views, divisive subjects, etc.).
- Presents standardized questions and potential answers to all respondents which will provide relatively consistent feedback.
- A variety of available software packages allow for the easy development and distribution of surveys, and make the tabulation of results very easy.

Drawbacks
- Can be over-used to the point that people get tired of receiving them and refuse to provide feedback.
- Can be designed improperly and result in gathering useless or incorrect information, and you may miss gathering critical information entirely.
- Responses are generally predetermined for the respondents, which restricts the quantity and content of responses they can provide.
- Results can be biased by factors such as improper design, poorly worded questions, having too small of a sample, or distribution to the wrong people.

Interviews
An interview is a way to collect focused information from customers individually or in very small groups (2-3 people maximum). The idea is to have the customer sit down with an interviewer who is prepared with a list of questions to be answered. The interviewer then asks the interviewees questions and lets them freely answer them. The benefits and drawbacks of the tool are:

Benefits
- Can focus on feedback from key customers.
- Using open ended questions can elicit a great deal of information and detail from interviewees.
- Interviewers can actively use probing questions to encourage interviewees to provide more detail.
• During the interview, dialogue can take many paths and uncover valuable information about issues not initially known or considered by the interviewer.

**Drawbacks**

• This approach is time consuming for the interviewer and interviewees.
• Capturing information completely and accurately can be a challenge. The interviewer must be a good listener and note taker, or record the interview electronically.
• Organizing information from multiple interviews can be difficult and requires time to review and compile the material from notes or recordings.

**Suggestion box**

A simple way to collect VOC is to provide customers with a suggestion box where they can write down service issues they are encountering or ideas they have for improving services. Customers are provided with a plain piece of paper or short form that they can write on and place in a secure box. Some forms include a couple of survey-type question (3-5 questions) about the service the customer received and then gives them space to write their feedback.

**Benefits**

• Suggestion boxes are easy to implement.
• It is relatively easy to compile and tabulate the feedback that is received.
• They provide an ongoing feedback channel for customers to use.
• Generally suggestion boxes provide for anonymity unless respondents want someone to contact them with a response to the feedback they provided.

**Drawbacks**

• It can be hard to read the handwriting of some respondents. Survey software or dedicated email addresses can provide an option for collecting suggestions electronically.
• This is a passive method for collecting feedback and can easily be overlooked by customers.
• Customers may not provide suggestions if they do not feel anyone will read or take action on their feedback. Communicating what actions have been taken based on this input is important to keeping this communication channel open.

**Direct Contact From Customers**
There will be occasions when your customers will contact you or someone in the service chain with feedback that you did not directly solicit. This can be good VOC and I strongly urge you to implement a way to collect, tabulate and quickly get this information to the right person for a response. If someone has taken the time to contact you, the service you provided – good or bad - has moved them to do so. Take advantage of this opportunity. When a member of your staff gets a compliment, make sure to pass it on so the feedback reinforces the good service they provided and can boost their morale. Use customer suggestions to identify unknown or emerging issues and take action to capitalize on good ideas and make changes when appropriate.

Addressing customer complaints can be uncomfortable and one of the hardest direct customer contacts received; but they are gifts in disguise, so embrace them! Complaints give you a chance to view your service from the customer’s perspective and take action to make improvements when needed. You now have a chance to retain that existing customer and avoid providing poor service to others in the future.

**Observation**

A great way to gather information about how your customers interact with your staff and use your services is to simply stand back and watch them. You can get a very good idea of how people queue up to wait for services, see if they are comfortable in the environment and how they interact with it, observe their interactions with staff, and observe any service failures they may encounter. You may also overhear snippets of conversation that provide information about customer needs and how they perceive the service being provided.

The observation cannot be obvious or customers and staff may change their behaviors and you will not get an accurate picture of the service experience. You will have to make some assumptions and draw conclusions about what you are observing and there is a potential that you may misinterpret what you are seeing. For this reason, I recommend that you use information from other VOC channels to corroborate your assumptions and conclusions.

**Customer Advisory Committees**

There may be times when you want consistent, ongoing input and feedback from your customers; and assembling an advisory committee made up of key customers or representatives of key customer groups can be valuable. These are formal groups that meet periodically to serve as advisors regarding customer needs, how services are being perceived, and provide suggestions for making improvements. The feedback they provide is limited to the expertise and experience the members bring to the group individually and may not completely represent all of your customers. When the committee meets they can be presented with topics for discussion or they can be asked to bring their own issues and concerns to the table.
Focus Groups
A focus group is a facilitated discussion between 6-12 people regarding their needs, wants, opinions and attitudes. There are a number of different types of focus groups and methods for conducting them, and they are often used in the early development stages of creating a new service. They can, however, be used to collect VOC about an existing service.

Focus groups are led by a facilitator who presents a topic to the participants and encourages them to discuss it with each other. The facilitator’s role is to keep the discussion moving forward by asking questions, and keep the focus on the selected topic and not let the discussion wander too far from it.

Opinions vary on the effectiveness of focus groups. Critics point out that these groups can be susceptible to bias through groupthink, the discussion being dominated by one or two people, or by participants only saying what they think the facilitators want to hear. That said, if care is taken and the focus group planned out carefully, they can be a useful method for gathering customer feedback.

Roger A. Rennekamp, Ph.D. and Martha A. Nall, Ed.D. wrote a good introduction to focus groups titled “Using focus groups in program development and evaluation.” You can access it via this link: http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/focus.pdf

Social Media / Internet Searches
With easy access to the internet and an explosion of social media sites, customers are able to tell hundreds (or sometimes thousands) of people about their experiences. Granted a web search is not the most scientific way to collect information and they can be somewhat time consuming; but looking at posts on popular social media sites or searching review web sites will help you to gain a general understanding of what customers are saying about the service you provide. You may find a mix of comments about both good and poor service, which can guide you to opportunities to maximize some service experiences and make improvements to others.

Closing The Communication Loop
When people provide feedback they want to know that it makes a difference, so a key element to keep in mind is that you have to close the communication loop and let customers know what actions you have or will be taking based on the feedback they provided.

Once you have collected feedback from your customers you have to turn it into useful information. I will address this in the next article Hearing the voice of the customer part 3: Making your VOC useful. As always, I welcome your questions or comments. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.
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