

The problem

'I'm trying to get to grips with ISO 9001's customer satisfaction requirements. Where should I start when reviewing customer feedback?'

Over to the expert

Next month's problem

I'm the facilities manager of a large private sector organisation. Staff are coming to me with concerns about a possible avian flu outbreak. How should I go about preparing the business for an epidemic?

Many organisations see the feedback process as a box that has to be ticked in order to keep their quality management system (QMS) certification. A basic system involves a feedback form being sent to the client, with the few replies that do trickle back logged onto a spreadsheet, and a file of forms stuffed into a drawer somewhere in case it is ever needed for an audit.

Clause 8.2.1 of ISO 9001 is clear about what measurements of customer satisfaction should be achieved with a QMS. Although there is no specific requirement for formal customer satisfaction surveys to meet ISO 9001, the auditor will look for a transparent customer feedback process which includes relevant, representative and reliable information that can be analysed, with the results used to drive continual improvement.

Whether you have ISO 9001 or not, the opportunity to really see things from a customer's point of view should never be ignored. No business relationship should be taken for granted as complacency can lead to lowering of standards. Satisfaction surveys are also a good tool for checking that key clients are aware of enhanced capability. Never assume that clients know what changes you are making to your service. Find out what they know, and what they don't know.

The first step is to agree what your firm wants to achieve from a customer satisfaction process. Establishing desired outcomes will ensure that feedback collected is going to be of use. Develop the right questions to influence long-term management and enhance client relationships, covering all key professional relationships as well as client organisations.

Agree a process at the start for sharing the feedback, so that those responsible for


developing marketing, staff training, business development and running projects all get to hear the things that are most relevant.

There are many different ways to collect feedback – most frequently face-to-face or telephone interviews, and post or email questionnaires. The most in-depth analysis will come from qualitative one-to-one interviews.

It only takes five or six in-depth interviews with customers for themes to emerge. The results can give recognition to the company's strengths, while identifying areas where there is room for improvement. Clients seem to like being asked to give feedback in this way, and even the busiest of people will set aside time as they can see the benefits to their future working relationships.

Don't be complacent about the firms or individuals surveyed – it is tempting to send your interviewer to speak to people that you know will send back a positive message. But will you learn anything from this? Probably not.

More constructive information comes from being brave enough to speak with past clients, and current clients where things may have got a bit sticky. Pick clients strategically, from different market sectors and geographical locations, or served by different offices or departments.

Whatever method chosen, make sure that the system is set up professionally. Confirm interview times in writing, and send a thank you letter immediately afterwards, with another a few months later explaining how the feedback gained has been collected and used to help the development of the company .

Kim Birchall and Helen Elias are consultants with experience in setting up and delivering customer satisfaction survey programmes. For further information visit www.ateliercommunications.co.uk

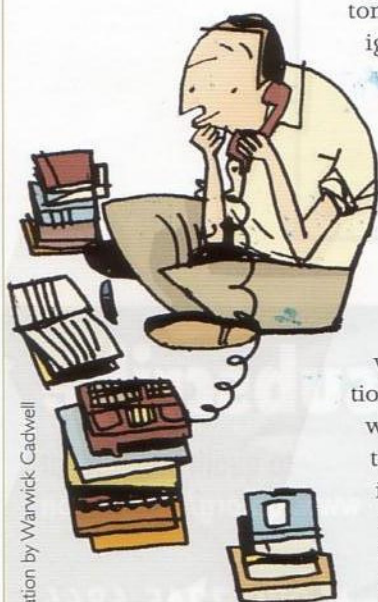


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