

Internal Product Quality Is Not Customer Experienced Quality

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When a product leaves our factory, it is handled, shipped, repackaged, and often modified before it gets to the end-user. We need to understand how the final product is received to fully understand our customer's satisfaction with it. We have found that internally focused measures of quality may not fully reflect the quality that the end customer experiences; the best way to close that gap and link your operations to your customers is through data. Using data takes the guess work out of the process and allows us to make more accurate adjustments to our operations. When we are proactive about the design and implementation of our quality systems we can quickly resolve any issues which arise and thereby maintain high levels of customer satisfaction. Our quality strategy should allow us to maximize the potential for success with our customers.

There are four key components to building the link between operations and customers:

1. **Understand the customer's decision criteria.** One of the biggest challenges in today's intensely competitive marketplace is to know what your customers want and why they buy. This is critical not only when developing new products but also to remain competitive with your existing products. It relies upon "delivering on the promise of the brand" or simply "product quality as delivered". When product quality aligns with the customer's buying criteria, product quality can assure us that we stay on track with our customer's needs. Bottom line: product quality data must link to the customer's buying criteria in order to win in the marketplace.
2. **Develop a definition of quality that focuses on the point of purchase.** In most companies, the information we gather in quality systems is only half as useful as it can be. We often simply use it to meet internal quality goals. If we focus solely on the production operations, we miss critical areas of importance to our customers. We assume that a good quality product is all they want, when how and where that product arrives to them can be as important. In addition, we may miss the overall impression our products (as delivered) leave on them. The solution is to do a better job of linking what we measure internally to what our customers care about most at the point of purchase.

One of our partners recently told me a story that illustrates this well. In the early 1990s, the VW dealerships in the US were begging the manufacturing headquarters in Germany to build in an adjustable steering wheel, since competitors had it and the US customer was expecting it. Rather than consider end customer data, the HQ group sent a group of ergonomic engineers to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that by adjusting the seat you achieved the same relationship to the steering wheel and so no adjustable steering wheel was necessary. They were technically correct but totally wrong for the marketplace. Eventually, VW figured that out. Organizations all have their own filters, and if you are an engineering oriented culture you better work hard at really understanding what the customer is wanting—it's almost always about the experience not the features.

3. **Create a model that links operations and customer measures.** There is no question that product quality information is essential. It gives us a clear picture of how consistently we meet our internal design goals. In order to link the operation

externally to the customer, we must understand what about “operational quality” is important to those customers. The output of our operations is what the customers experience, and yet we often do not measure quality as delivered, in enough detail to either predict the customer experience or to anticipate the final buying decision.

4. **Test the link between operations and customers through purchase trending.**

Having worked with several companies to introduce Six Sigma concepts, we have learned that there are critical steps to making sure that what we measure in the operation correlates to how customers make buying decisions. Inevitably, we measure many things to manage production but only certain things will matter where the purchase decision occurs. Customers “sum it all up” when they make a purchase decision and it is important to know how the specific things we measure internally impact that final decision. Much can be gained by making our quality measurements more “customer-focused”.

Summary

Building a customer-focused quality system is not easy, but it can certainly leverage an existing manufacturing quality system. Available data is a great start, but what we measure must be important to the customer. The ultimate challenge is to “connect” the needs of our operations and those of our customers.