

Suggestions Anyone? The ABC's of Customer Feedback

By [Tracy Barnhart](#), Quality Manager
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Ah the dreaded customer feedback request. Don't you hate being bombarded with those everywhere you go? Restaurants, stores, hotels, on-line retailers, customer service reps, AASHTO re:source, etc. – the list never ends! I mean, do they even do anything with that information? Yes! Or at least they should.

What exactly is “feedback,” anyway? Well, I'm not referring to the annoying high-pitched noises emanating from a loudspeaker. Instead, take a look at this definition from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

“Advice, criticism or information about how good or useful something or somebody's work is.”



is for **Advice**

Advice? Granted, sometimes the “advice” from customers may remind you of a loudspeaker squealing, but customer perceptions should never really be thought of as bothersome or negative. The information received can and should be used to help your organization improve. Think of it as constructive criticism. Remember, the key to quality is continual improvement, and meeting your customers' expectations should always be a top priority. You can learn more about that in my previous article, "[What is Quality, Anyway?](#)" In fact, *ISO/IEC 17025 General Requirements for the Competence of Testing and Calibration Laboratories* actually requires laboratories to seek feedback from their customers, and to use the feedback to improve the management system, testing activities, and customer service.

To get started, think about who your customers really are. If you are a commercial testing laboratory, your customers are probably the clients that pay you to perform testing for them. For governmental or user/producer organizations, your “customers” may actually be internal ones, i.e., various employees of your own organization, such as engineers, project managers, etc. Believe it or not, these internal customers are just as important to your organization's success as the paying ones. If your organization hosts meetings or provides training courses, don't forget about those “customers” too – it could be an entirely different group of people.

Next, decide what you really want to know. Going back to the definition of feedback, how do you know how “good” your products or services really are? “Good” describes the quality of something, and quality can actually be measured with customer feedback. In Part 1 of my newsletter article series "[The Road to Developing an Effective Quality Management System \(QMS\)](#)," I discussed how and why specific quality objectives, or goals, should be developed by an organization. Measuring and tracking those goals with customer feedback results is a great way to ensure that your QMS is effective.



isn't necessarily for **Bad**

You probably shouldn't stop at just determining whether your products and services are “good” or “bad.” However, that is certainly a great place to start, and ultimately what you want to know. Keep in mind that “good” and “bad” are somewhat nondescript words. For instance, if you want to measure overall customer satisfaction, it is probably better to use a scale of 1 to 5, or Poor to Excellent, on your questionnaire instead of just using “Satisfied” and “Unsatisfied” check boxes. That way, you can actually measure and track the responses, and detect any trends over time. It is also important to leave a field for customers to include comments. If someone has rated your customer service as “Poor,” give them an opportunity to explain what happened so that you can follow up. That being said, give customers the option of providing contact information, and ask them if they actually want to be contacted. Some folks are hesitant about registering a complaint if it can be traced back to them, and others simply don't want to be bothered with a follow-up call. It's important that you provide an avenue for customers to give you their honest opinions without any fear of repercussion.



is for **Caring**

That leads me to another important point. Show your customers that you care by following up promptly when questions or complaints are received. In fact, both *AASHTO R 18* and *ISO/IEC 17025* require that the actions resulting from customer complaints be retained. I'm sure I'm not the only one that has

taken the time to write a complaint letter, only to never hear a word back from anyone. Talk about frustrating. No wonder people often ignore feedback solicitations – they think it’s a waste of time, and it shouldn’t be. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard “I didn’t think anyone ever read those comments!” when I’ve followed up with our customers. One thing’s for sure – customers want to feel appreciated. Make it happen. A little effort goes a long way.

Since customer feedback is all about continual improvement, be sure to ask some open-ended questions too. This is typically where you will get the most useful information, rather than focusing solely on the “grades” that you receive. Come right out and ask for ways that you can improve what you are doing. Who better to ask than your own customers? You may also want to ask what your customers like the most, and the least, about your products and services. Don’t be afraid to ask the tough questions. Your customers, even the happiest ones, will appreciate the opportunity to provide constructive criticism. Listen to what they have to say, and act on it. If the suggestions you receive are good ones, implement them and be sure to let your customers know about it. They will be thrilled to know that their opinion matters.



is for **Delivery**

Now, how should you actually go about getting feedback? There are lots of different ways to do this. Old-school methods such as directly calling your customers or mailing them a questionnaire are fine, but you might want to join the Information Age and try e-mail, online survey tools, or a feedback link on your website or in your email signature line. If you are doing an e-mail blast to a group of customers, avoid Monday mornings when people are filtering through their emails after the weekend. Your e-mail may be overlooked. If you use U.S. mail, be sure to include a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope or postcard. You probably won’t get many responses if customers have to address an envelope and provide the stamp. Same goes with emailing a form that must be printed, filled out, scanned, and emailed back to the sender. Try to make the system as painless as possible.



is for **Expedite**

In that vein, keep the survey short, sweet, and to the point. Ten questions is plenty – don’t overwhelm people with pointless and repetitive questions. The questionnaire should look simple and uncluttered upon first glance. These are busy times. Nobody wants to be bothered with a survey that takes 15 minutes to complete. The longer the survey, the lower the response rate. In fact, a response rate of only 25% is considered to be pretty good these days. You may be able to improve that rate with email reminders (but only one, please!) or by offering incentives such as discounts or small gifts. Also, avoid badgering your customers repeatedly for feedback – requesting feedback once or twice a year is enough. Periodically change the look of the survey with subtle format changes or moving the order of the questions around. This will help keep your questionnaire looking fresh and inviting.



is for **Follow Through**

Once you’ve received the information, do something useful with it. Gathering and tracking the feedback results can be done in a variety of ways – spreadsheets, online survey tools, graphs, etc. And don’t stop there! Be sure to share the feedback results with your employees. Ensure that everyone in your company knows what your customers are thinking. This information can be a great morale booster, and it can also motivate employees to do a better job. Also, why not share the feedback results with your customers, and potential customers, too? Results can be posted on your website or included in your company newsletter. This will show customers that your organization is transparent and committed to continual improvement, thus gaining their trust and respect.



is for **Grateful** (for your feedback!)

Speaking of respect...would you please submit your [feedback on this article](#)? You knew that was coming, didn’t you? We practice what we preach at AASHTO re:source! We welcome all feedback, including ideas for future articles. And I promise that we will read each and every comment received.