

VOC in DFSS: Taking Out the Garbage

Jack Welch's impact on General Electric is nothing short of legendary, but in time he may be best remembered for championing, though not inventing, the "Six Sigma" approach to quality management. Originally applied to product manufacturing, Six Sigma has been adopted with an almost religious fervor across business functions at both global corporations and start-ups alike, with terms like "Master Black Belt" regularly appearing on business cards and help wanted ads.

In recent years, a sub-specialty known as Design for Six Sigma (DFSS) has gained prominence as a best practice in New Product Development. Briefly, DFSS comprises two methodical processes (known by the acronyms DMAIC and DMADV) that outline concrete steps for transforming defined customer needs – i.e., the Voice of the Customer (VOC) – into "critical-to-quality" specifications (CTQs), designing a product that meets those specifications, and then verifying that the specifications have actually been met.

Entire books have been written on DFSS, but you don't need to be a Master Black Belt to understand that without first understanding customer needs, new product development is little more than a risky guess. If you guess wrong, you will face costly rework while the competition beats you to market.

Yet while both DFSS amateurs and experts understand the value of VOC, many have no idea how to collect it. In our experience, even the most respected and experienced DFSS consultants pay little more than lip service to gathering VOC data. As a result, most know what to do with VOC data once they have it, but remain ignorant of how to get it. Even worse, they may employ

faulty techniques that paint a dangerously inaccurate picture of customer needs – a painful reminder of the maxim, "Garbage In, Garbage Out." Ironically, a process as disciplined and analytical as DFSS, winds up relying on fuzzy and unreliable methods for gathering the most important input: "What The Customer Wants."

Voice of the Customer is more than simply picking up the phone and calling a few key accounts, commissioning a dozen focus groups, or sending a web survey to a few thousand end-users. In fact, effective VOC is just as rigorous and systematic as any other step in DFSS. A VOC plan should address key questions: whom to interview, how to interview them, what to ask, how to ask it, and how to analyze the results. Done right, the output of VOC will be tailor-made for the next step in the DFSS process: using Quality Function Deployment to translate needs into CTQs.

Whether you are just starting down the DFSS road or DMAIC and DMADV are as familiar as ROI and P&L, recognize that there are many defined and tested approaches to gathering the Voice of the Customer. Yet to be truly called VOC, each accomplishes the same objective. Each takes a wide swath of raw customer insight and gradually distills it into an organized hierarchy of needs, stated in the customer's own language, and prioritized by the customer. Only then can you be confident that your understanding of "What The Customer Wants" is truly accurate.

— *John Mitchell*

Why It's Smart to Ask the "Stupid" Questions

The Voice of the Customer is all about asking questions to elicit customer needs. Companies go to great lengths to formulate specific, detailed questions to probe the depths of customer opinion. But sometimes the best answers come from "stupid" questions – basic inquiries that border on the naïve, but that can reveal important, unmet customer needs.

All interviewers come to the interview setting with preconceived notions about what is important to their customers. Yet by glossing over the most basic questions, interviewers may completely overlook their customers' core wants and needs, and misinterpret how customers think about, use, and interact with the company's product or service. The end result can be incomplete and potentially inaccurate data that is unreliable as a basis for developing future products and services. Therefore, interviewers must learn to embrace "stupid" questions as an essential tool in uncovering these critical drivers of customer satisfaction.

Because no one likes to look ignorant, many product developers shy away from asking questions they fear may lead the respondent to question the interviewer's knowledge of the industry. This fear is greatest when a company uses its own staff to conduct the research on an "identified" basis (i.e., the respondent knows who the interviewer works for), because there is an assumption that the interviewer is an expert in the industry.

One way to avoid looking stupid is to use an outside interviewer who is not necessarily an expert in the field and who can "play dumb" without much consequence. This can also avoid the problem of potentially biasing the responses by disclosing the identity of the sponsor. Barring that, there are some tried and true methods to ease the burden of asking the "stupid" questions. These simple strategies will enable your employees to elicit the information they need, while keeping their self-respect intact:

Lay the groundwork for the interview up-front.

Explain the need to capture exact words and phrases with an introduction like this: "I may be asking you some basic or naïve questions today, but it is very important that I hear in your own words what is important to you and how your company approaches these issues. Please bear with me."

Preface a "stupid" question appropriately. Simply stating, "This may sound like a stupid question," can signal to a respondent that you understand that a question is important even though it's basic. Use this technique sparingly, however, so it doesn't become annoying.

Force the interviewee to express each idea on his or her own. Keep in mind that customers may use the same words as the company's employees, but mean something totally different. Responses such as "I think I understand what you're saying, but I want to hear the words you would use to describe it" are essential in correctly capturing needs. Another useful phrase is "walk me through your process," which helps the respondent determine the appropriate level of detail.

Leave plenty of pregnant pauses. By not jumping in with a new question immediately after a respondent stops speaking, interviewers can often get respondents to elaborate on their answers, providing the detail needed to avoid endless follow-up questions.

Of course, your employees will still have to accept the occasional "stupid" question as just another part of the job. So feel free to remind them this is one time to take to heart that old classroom adage and remember: there really is no such thing as a stupid question.

— *Greg Fitzgerald and John Mitchell*

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