

NPD Viewpoint

Is QFD Making a Comeback?

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Quality Function Deployment (QFD) fell out of favor during the last decade, but today a number of forces seem to be causing a resurgence of interest in this Japanese product development methodology, as we see in this article by Contributing Editor Gerry Katz.

In the past year or so, there has been an unexpected resurgence of interest in *Quality Function Deployment (QFD)*, the Japanese product development methodology that helps companies translate customer needs into product and service design features. Not only has this become apparent in our own consulting practice, but also in the growing number of conference presentations and articles about QFD. (Witness this very issue of *Visions* and the September, 2002 issue of *JPIM*.)

Just a few short years ago, the buzz was that QFD was headed for the waste dump of failed new product development methodologies.

So, what's going on here? One can't really say for certain. But I'd like to offer my own

set of hypotheses as one practitioner who has been in the trenches with QFD for much of its existence since it made its way here from Asia in the mid-1980s.

Why did it seem to have fallen into disfavor in the first place? Well, my first hypothesis is that QFD was cursed with that horrible name! "Quality Function Deployment" is a translation from three Japanese words: "Hin-shitsu Ki-no Ten-kai". Apparently, there were several other ways of translating it, but this is the one that stuck. And while the words are supposedly filled with rich, multi-layered connotation in Japanese, unfortunately, the name has absolutely no intuitive meaning in English!

Second, the name itself includes the dreaded "Q" word. While QFD emerged from a rather distant corner of the "Quality" movement of the late 1980s—the part with real substance, in my view, rather than the overly simplistic sloganeering that characterized too much of the movement—it often got painted with the same brush. So, when the movement began to decline in the mid-1990s, QFD seemed to get taken down along with it. The great irony, of course, is that even though no one wants to talk about "quality" much anymore, the movement's principles remain deeply imbedded in our daily thinking and practice.

Third, there was the issue of QFD's often overwhelming tedium. Many companies who tried it reported that their product development teams were nearly brought to their knees, locked in conference rooms for days, weeks, and sometimes months on end dealing with the multitude of matrices and all of the detail. For many, it just didn't seem practical or worth the pain.

So, what's changed? Well, for starters, there are now several new management movements which deal with many of the same issues as the Quality movement, and that still benefit from the use of QFD. For instance, *Customer Relationship Management (CRM)* deals with the same set of problems as the Customer Satisfaction movement that was (and still is) a pillar of Quality programs to this day. And the *Design for Six Sigma (DFSS)* movement that is currently in vogue has always espoused the use of QFD. It just uses a slightly different vocabulary. For instance, the names that QFDers use



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for the columns in a House of Quality matrix—Engineering Characteristics, Technical Quality Characteristics, Performance Measures, etc.—are referred to in Six Sigma programs as CTQ's or "Critical To Quality" metrics. Same thing! And as interest in DFSS has grown from its early days at Motorola and GE—with no less a figure than Jack Welch as one of its key proselytizers—QFD has gone along for the ride.

Second, there is now a growing generation of QFD trainers, facilitators, and software developers who have developed significant new tools and better, more creative processes to reduce the tedium. They have traded in the original academic purist approach to QFD, with its multiple houses and enormous data requirements, for a more practical approach which teams are now more willing to undertake. And they are getting really good results without sacrificing too much of the rigor.

Finally, the primary reason for QFD's resurgence is that the underlying need still exists. Product development teams are still faced with the problem of translating customer needs into product design specifications, process design metrics, and superior product features. One doesn't *have* to use QFD to do this, but it remains quite simply the best way to do it—the most thorough, the most objective, and the most dispassionate way to sift through all of the conflicting data and emotional points of view, and to come up with better, more innovative ways to respond to customer needs.

Whatever else is going on, so long as this need remains a key hurdle in new product development, there will always be a good place for QFD—despite the horrible name. And by the way, just in case you were wondering, it's still okay to utter the "Q" word in polite company! ♠

Applied Marketing Science is an established leader in Voice of the Customer market research applications. Using pioneering methodologies developed at the MIT Sloan School of Management, we help clients truly understand the needs of their customers and translate those needs into superior new product and service designs.

Gerry Katz is a recognized authority in the areas of new product development, design of new services, product marketing, and market research, with more than 30 years of consulting experience. At AMS, he has led more than 75 major client engagements employing The Voice of the Customer, Quality Function Deployment (QFD), and a large number of other marketing science applications. He is the author of several award-winning papers, and received the William O'Dell Prize from the American Marketing Association in 1988. Mr. Katz has appeared on the *Today* show and in *The Wall Street Journal*. He can be reached at (781) 684-1230, ext. 128.