

## **QUALITY: A MOVING TARGET**

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Have your expectations of quality changed. Over the last decade? Over the last year? The last month? The last week? Since yesterday?

Be honest. Isn't your concept of quality a moving target -- racing toward ever new standards of excellence? I know mine is.

I remember in the early 1970s when I bought my first new car. It wasn't long before I noticed it had a few problems. At first I kept track of them in my head. As they mounted, I began keeping a list. When my list hit 15 problems, I took it and my car back to the dealer and stuck both under his nose, demanding a response.

His response was, "Every car is made up of thousands of parts. It's only reasonable to expect that a few of them will go wrong." And I bought it! So did most of the auto industry's customers in the 1970s. But things were soon to change. Today I wouldn't buy that explanation, nor would any new car buyer. No way.

In a quick 20 years, the public's expectations of quality in an automobile -- and of nearly every product or service -- have changed dramatically, spiraling toward perfection.

In short, quality is a personal thing -- a personal perception closely allied to trust. And like the person, it evolves, matures, and grows to encompass more and more.

Rather than deny it, the smart organization positions itself to anticipate its customers' ever-expanding quality expectations -- to get out in front of the target. It does this by focusing on three key strategies.

*Responsiveness.* How well do you respond when your customers begin signaling that their expectations are changing? Some of the signals include: rejects and/or complaints in areas where products or services have long been acceptable; expressions of concern about various aspects of your product or service that have long been standard; questions about why your organization is doing things the way it has routinely been doing them -- design approaches, production processes, materials standards, delivery scheduling...

Most organizations react to these customer behaviors by taking them in stride: fine-tuning and replacing rejects, defending against complaints, listening politely to concerns, answering questions. But today that's not enough. These are the responses of the unresponsive organization. The responsive organization acknowledges these signals by becoming proactive, using them as opportunities

-- door openers -- to interview, investigate, probe, interrogate if necessary to get at the customer's new expectations of quality, then adapt to fulfill the new standards.

*Intelligence gathering.* What is your system for gathering information on your customer's perceptions and expectations? For every customer who expresses quality concerns, you probably have four or five that are holding their comments and may never address them with you openly unless you pursue them. In today's business environment, the old adage, "No news is good news," is being turned on its head. No news can be bad news because we are finding that customers that don't bitch switch.

One of your most important resources for intelligence gathering is your sales force. Have you trained your salespeople to constantly monitor and protect the current customer base by probing for changes in quality expectations? Or do you primarily assign salespeople the responsibility of -- and reward them for -- chasing new business? Think a moment about one of the major steps in the sales process: countering objections. Everyday your competitors get before your current customers and elicit their objections and current expectations. If your salespeople don't do the same, your organization will never find out what they are until your competitor gets in there and proves that he or she is more concerned about the customer's concerns, is more responsive to them than you are, and has no intention of taking the customer's needs for granted. Then you are too late.

*Flexibility.* Are your business processes so complex, so long in lead time for change, that you couldn't respond in a timely manner if you had to? Then the first two strategies can be dangerous. You are better off to avoid learning of your customers' objections because nothing angers your customers more or destroys their trust faster than to elicit their objections and current standards, then drag your feet in fulfilling them. Flexibility is required in every area of your business processes if you hope to hit that moving target in your customer's minds: total quality.

Customer service. Customer satisfaction. They're not enough. Today you have to aim at delivering customer delight. That means you have to deliver the wow, sizzle, fascination, excitement -- as well as the product or service -- that makes them aware that you know their expectations are always changing, and that you are always open, available, eager and capable to understand and meet their quality needs.