

# VALUE: How Your Customers Spell Quality

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For any organization concentrating on improving the quality of its products and services, one fact quickly becomes clear: Quality ain't cheap.

Quality requires a tremendous amount of work and concentration on the part of everyone in your company – from the salespeople involved with the initial contact to the people who provide the products and every related service.

But all of your investment in quality will do very little for your organization if your efforts are driven solely – even partially – by your internal definition of what quality should be. Quality that brings returns in the marketplace is defined by the customer.

And, in fact, the customer isn't even focusing on the big q-word like we are internally. The customer is focusing on the v-word: VALUE. Each one of your customers is constantly evaluating your products and/or services against your competitors – not for who has the best quality, but for who provides the greater VALUE.

Do you know how your customers RATE the VALUE that you provide?

**Different concepts of value.** It's not an easy question. First, each customer has a different concept of value in relation to your products and services. It differs not only from your other customers' concepts, but also differs product by product and service by service based on how that customer uses each product or service.

To complicate matters, each customer's concept of value is always changing. Value is a moving target and customers' expectations are constantly changing – the bar is always being raised by you and your competitors.

Do you know each customer's DEFINITION of VALUE in relation to your products and services?

It takes more than a gut instinct, or even a generalized notion. In a smart organization that is truly dedicated to delivering quality, on going effort is made by everyone having contact with customers to flush out, confirm and update each customer's perception of value in relation to each product and service.

This means that everyone in your company must be cued on how to ask for their customers' definition of value, and that they must also know how to listen to their responses. Listening is key – making your customers aware that you want to know, that you are listening, that you care.

Everyone should also know how to “listen between the lines.” In other words, to pick up on comments and reactions that customers might not even intend as expressions of their perception of value. Then, they should also be proactive in following up to confirm what those reactions might mean. Don't let them slip by – they might be indicators of your customers' shift to the next level of expectation.

**Be careful what you promise.** Does your company ever overpromise and underdeliver? Or do you take care to underpromise and overdeliver? Of course, we all like to believe that we overdeliver. But is that what your customers believe?

On the other hand, just because some customers express that they would like certain value enhancers added to your product or service, you should not automatically add them. Value-adders are part of an ongoing product management strategy, not a knee-jerk response.

One of the most dangerous things you can do is introduce a value-added feature and then withdraw or abandon it because it either turns out to be too hard to deliver, or you tire of it. That leads to customer confusion. And customer confusion breeds lack of trust.

In short, value can be as basic, from the customer's perspective, as "getting what you paid for" – satisfaction, even delight. Customers will go out of their way to achieve that feeling.

Stop and think about the last time you felt you were getting your money's worth – when you went out of your way to enjoy the satisfaction of knowing you were paying for what you perceive as value.

When did you last know that your organization's internal quality efforts met your customers' value expectations, giving them that same feeling? Always? Frequently? Seldom?

If you can't answer these questions and recall specific examples, you can't really be sure that your quality efforts are translating into value for your customers. You'd better get to work at finding out before your competitors blindside you and turn your assumptions into their opportunity.