Identifying Customer Needs

It is usually the desire of the customers that drive the development of a new product or modification of an existing product. It is thus critical to collate the need or views of the customers when starting a design project. The needs of the customers can be gathered through multiple routes.

1. Interviewing with customers

An active team should constantly meet current and potential customers to identify the strength and weakness of a product so as to examine if there is any need to upgrade.

1. Focus group

A focus group refers to a small sub-set of existing customers or potential customers. A discussion is usually facilitated in many such groups separately to identify more closely the merits and demerits of the product.

1. Customer survey

A written questionnaire is possibly the best way to know the pubic opinions for redesigning an existing product or developing a new product.

1. Customer complaints

Complaints from customers provide a significant premise to identify the requisite improvement for an existing product.

Constructing a Survey Instrument

Following are some essential steps to prepare a survey document based on the views and feed- backs from the customers.

1. Determine the purpose of the survey, its result and the how the result will be used.

2. Determine the type of possible data collection method such as face to face interview or by questionnaire or some other way.

3. Determine what specific information is needed. Each question should have a clear goal. Also the number of question should be optimized and kept at as minimum as possible.

4. Design the questions in such a way that they are unambiguous, unbiased, clear, brief and simple to understand and to answer too. There are usually three basic type of questions.

• Attitude questions: how the customer thinks or feels about something,

• Knowledge questions: Questions asked to determine whether the customer know the specifics about the product,

• Behavior questions they usually contain phrases like ‘how often’, ‘how much’, or ‘when’.

Following are some tips for developing the questions.

• Use simple language and vocabulary. Each question should have a specific goal and focus directly on one specific topic.

• Questions may include “yes – no – do not know” or “strongly disagree – mildly disagree – neutral – mildly agree – strongly agree”, etc.

• Open ended questions allow customers to express more explicitly,

• Arrange the question in such an order that it makes sense and provides content to what you are trying to learn from the customer,

• Pretest the survey on a small sample before distributing the survey. It helps to identify questions that were poorly built, misunderstood, whether the rating scale was adequate and whether the questionnaire is too long

• Administer the survey: Proper care should be taken that the sample of the survey should constitute a representative from all the key areas.

Evaluating Customer Needs

The responses of the customer should be evaluated on a relative scale, say using a scale from 1 (low importance) to 5 (high importance). Those responses with high average score should be given a greater priority when redesigning an existing product or designing a new product. It is very essential to divide the customer needs into two groups: hard constrains that should be satisfied (must) and softer needs that can be traded off against other customer needs (wants). Customer needs can best be identified from face to face interview, from a focus group survey or from the higher-ranking items in the written survey.

Customer requirements

Customer requirements must be characterized on the basis of performance, time, cost and quality. The performance would refer to the specific or intended function of a product. The time would include all the time aspects that would be involved in the design. A proper design should be able to reduce the cycle time to market a new product. The cost includes all the monetary aspects of the design and hence, quite crucial. The cost aspect also determines the buying decisions of any product by the customers. The quality is a complex characteristic with many aspects and definitions and can best be defined as the totality of features and characteristic of a product that bears on its ability to satisfy its stated needs. Another important aspect of the customers requirements is the value of a product that can be envisaged as the ratio of the function (or the quality) provided and the cost. For example, the quality of a manufactured product can be envisaged from the following eight basic dimensions.

Dimensions Description

Performance Does the product perform to its standards? Does the product perform for the

 intended service?

Features What additional benefits will be added to the product? Will they be they

 tangible or non-tangible benefits?

Reliability Is the product consistent? Will it perform well over its lifetime and perform

 consistently?

Durability How durable is your product. Will it last with daily use?

Conformance Does your product meet with any agreed internal and national

 specifications?

Serviceability Is the product easy to service.

Aesthetics Is the product appealing to the eye?

Perceived Quality What sort of quality perception does the marketing team want to convey in their marketing message? Will price charged reflect the quality of the product?

The dimensions of performance, features and conformance are often interrelated. We therefore need to recognize that there are four levels of customer requirements as

(1) Expectations that refer to the basic attributes, which one would expect to be present in the product as standard features,

(2) Spokens that refer to the specific features, which the customer would say and want as a feature in the product.

(3) Unspokens that refer to the attributes of a product that the customers would not generally ask for but are still important and hence, cannot be ignored.

(4) Exciters which are also known as delighters and are features that make the product unique and distinguish the same from their competitors.

These requirements must be satisfied at each level before we move and address those at the next level. Not all customer requirements are equal and hence it becomes very essential to identify these requirements which are important and ensure that they are delivered in the product. To do this one must adopt a strategy for actively seeking the ‘the voice of the customer’.