

Satisfying the King (Customer Satisfaction)

Harris Kern's Enterprise Computing Institute

While much of your IT department's time may be spent with lesser issues, customer satisfaction should be your number one goal. Harris Kern's Enterprise Computing Institute list of simple techniques can help.

One of the great revolutions in American business that began in the 1980s (and is still underway) is the ascendancy of the customer. It's now much more than a cliché that the customer is king. And today this is as true for internal customers as for external customers. The rise of packaged enterprise systems and the rapid growth of outsourcing mean that IT customers have more choices than ever, and our experience is that they'll exercise those options if they're dissatisfied. Yet we still find many IT departments that don't focus on customer satisfaction and instead use their institutional position to control their customers. But over time, by not satisfying their customers they put their budget and continued employment at risk. This article discusses some of the principles of customer satisfaction and offers suggestions for getting and staying in tune with your customers.

Why You Should Care About Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction is important because it's an indicator of service quality. If customers are dissatisfied, it's probably because their needs have not been met for some time. When customers become vocally dissatisfied about IT performance, it suggests a systemic failure to communicate and properly set expectations with the customers.

Watch for telltale signs of dissatisfied customers. Here's a brief customer-satisfaction quiz:

1. What's the size of your service request backlog in number and in time to complete?
2. Do customers resist serving on your review boards and committees?
3. Do customers control their share of your IT budget, or does IT dictate priorities and project funding?
4. Do customers have a choice of service levels, and are there auditable metrics on the quality of service?
5. Are customers going around IT departments by setting up local mini-IT functions?
6. Are you having trouble getting support for your initiatives and budget requests?

7. When you implement a new system, does the complaining die away in days, weeks, months, or never?
8. Do you have major system outages of multiple hours or even days in duration?

If you're like most of the companies we've visited you have many of these symptoms and you can easily answer yes to most of them or provide a high number as a response to the others we can guarantee you have dissatisfied customers, even if they're not complaining to you directly. In fact, if they're not communicating, you're in big trouble. In my experience, when customers stop publicly griping, it may be the calm before the storm.

Improving the Situation

What can be done to improve satisfaction? Here are some simple steps to making customers more satisfied:

➤ **Meet their expectations.**

Customers who expect more than they receive will be dissatisfied, no matter how good the service is. If your department has a reputation of giving customers "happy talk," or future promises to keep them at bay watch out!

➤ **Believe their complaints, not their vision.**

Customers are necessarily the best determiners of technology choices. They tend to define their needs based on what they know, not what's possible. However, if you offer options, customers can select among the options and articulate flaws. Customers are best able to help correct flaws in interfaces, usability issues, and functional deficiencies. These complaints should not be criticized, but noted and corrected as soon as possible.

Customers are notoriously bad at helping define directions for system development or in helping define architecture. There are some exceptions to this rule people who have had training in reengineering are a possibility[md]but IT needs to be the keeper of the IT vision, not customers.

➤ **Empower your customers.**

A common complaint we hear from IT is that customers set up their own "shadow IT" departments and don't use the institutional systems. This is particularly true in high-tech

organizations with an abundance of computer-literate staff, who are often frustrated at the slow pace of change and the lack of control over systems they use daily.

There are two solutions to this problem. One is to become an IT dictator, refusing to allow your customers the freedom to move forward on their own. This is not a very good solution, as your customers will revolt. The second solution is to empower the customers by giving them some control over setting priorities.

➤ **Involve your customers.**

Customer involvement is essential for the success of any system. We still meet IT managers who believe that they can work with the customers through a requirements-definition process, create a design document, and then turn it over to their developers for delivery. Wrong! Customers must be involved at each step, through techniques such as functional walkthroughs, conference room pilots, and frequent discussions about business plans and future needs. IT must assume that every system will change throughout its lifecycle.

➤ **Don't ask customers technical questions. That's your job.**

In a recent meeting, the discussion turned to the uptime requirement for a new customer-management system under development. The project manager was trying to decide whether the project needed a high-availability server with automatic fail-over, or whether an inexpensive, off-the-shelf server would suffice. She said her customers told her that 99% uptime would be fine and that they would put it in writing in the specification document. Therefore, she could buy a standard, single server. Wrong answer! This project manager had fallen into a common trap. She asked her customers for a technical answer. Even worse, she was going to try to hold them to it! Do the math. Ninety-nine percent uptime for a 12x5 system implies total outages of about 3 days per year, which is unlikely to be acceptable to anyone, especially for a customer-management system. Having a signed document saying that 99% is okay will not save you when the complaining starts.

➤ **Measure the quality of your service, and communicate it with your customers.**

Independently verifiable performance metrics are essential in satisfying the customer. Good IT shops measure all aspects of their performance and regularly communicate the quality of their work. There are several important impacts of metrics. First, everyone knows the quality of the work, and often can use the metrics to prevent problems from becoming critical. Second, metrics become the basis of objective discussions with customers about the acceptability of service, and the cost of making it better. Customers won't support your efforts to improve service unless you can objectively demonstrate what they receive and why.

➤ **Test yourself against outside sources your customers do.**

Every IT department should regularly benchmark itself against the standards of IT best practices and be prepared to act on the findings. There are many ways to do such a benchmark exercise. Compare yourself against the many surveys conducted in the trade press, such as *CIO* magazine or *Information Week*. Consultant organizations such as EDS, etc. or industry watchers such as Gartner Group maintain databases of best practices and standards of productivity and efficiency. Conduct benchmark discussions with your peers in other companies. As long as your benchmark partners are not direct competitors, most companies are eager to share ideas. One good source of benchmark data is suppliers, who are often eager to share ideas so that they can help improve your commercial relationship with them.

Good candidates for benchmarks are your internal service bureaus, such as help desk or data center operations, or customer service functions, such as system administration or training. If your results are seriously out of line with industry practice, begin improving them right away. Outsourcers and consultant companies who are anxious to demonstrate their capabilities are continuously approaching your customers. There are a lot of outsourcing companies who prey like wolves on weakly performing IT organizations. Compete and control your destiny or someone else will.

➤ **Keep your attitude positive and your frustrations in check.**

IT management is not primarily a technical function. It's a service business. When you become frustrated with your customers, remember that you're in your job because they have theirs. We see frustrated IT managers who wish for a better class of customers: "Why can't my customers be more technically literate and trainable?" Dream on. Take your customers as you find them.

If you become frustrated and lose your poise, you'll lose your ability to communicate, and "push back" instead of listening. Your customers will become dissatisfied with your service. Maintaining a positive attitude is the key to customer satisfaction (and indeed, to many other things in life).
