Collecting customer feedback

- What do your customers think of your products or services?
- How do you collect feedback from your customers?
- You can learn a lot from customers by being alert to their words and behaviour.

In the BS2 sessions Your customers' requirements and Meeting customer requirements, you learnt how important it is for organisations to make sure that they focussed on their customers. Customers were described as being either:

- **Internal customers**, who work in your organisation and depend on you for the supply of goods and services for them to do their work, or
- **External customers**, who are outside the organisation and buy or use the goods and services which your organisation provides.

It has also been stressed that the word customer is not necessarily what you, your team or external customers themselves would use. They may be service users, patients, passengers or donors. The important thing is to treat them as customers. This means treating their requirements as important in what you supply and how you supply it. This session is all about how you find out what they require and what they think of your performance.
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Internal customers’ feedback

It’s easier to start with internal customers because you will have direct contact with them. These may be the other teams you work with, who rely on the services or the products you supply to do their work. It could also be the teams and individuals who rely on you for information to enable them to do their job effectively. Here are some examples:

**An accounts team**

- **Our customers:**
- **We supply:**

Sales team  Invoicing and credit control on customers
Purchasing team  Payment to suppliers
All employees  Pay

**A customer service team**

- **Our customers:**
- **We supply:**

Accounts team  Details of new customers and their bank accounts
Technical support team  Details of customer problems
Marketing team  Details of customer requests

How do teams get feedback from their internal customers? By first asking them:

- what they require from the team
- how they will judge it.

*What they require* will include things like accurate information, prompt supply of goods, flexibility. *How they will judge it* means that you ask your internal customers to say how they decide if information is accurate, supply is prompt, your team is being flexible. This makes it possible for you to know what your customers really mean. Read the Case Study on the next page for an example.
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**Case Study**

Babita leads the customer service team of a photocopier supply company. Babita’s team deals with all customer enquiries. Many customers are calling for information about the organisation’s services, but some have enquiries about payment or need technicians to come out and repair equipment.

Babita has asked the technician team what they require from her team. They have replied: “Exact details of the problem, and the customers' details.”

She then asks them how they will judge the information she supplies. The technicians reply:

- Have you got the model name and age? Is the problem with the paper feed, copy quality, powder leakage, collation or stapling? (These are the main areas for problems.) What has the customer done to try and resolve the problem and what was the result?
- The customer's name and address, any previous callouts for this model, and a contact name and telephone number, plus an alternate name and number if the person isn’t available.

By asking for this information, Babita’s is now in a position to collect the information the technicians need. When she asks them for feedback on performance, she can start by asking:

- Have we done what you said you required?

This way both Babita's team and the technicians are judging the team's performance in the same way. This can all be done informally, but it should be done at regular intervals, say every three months or so, so that there is regular feedback to the team on their performance.

If the organisation is large, it may not be so easy to collect information as easily. The best solution is to ask a **sample** of customers for their feedback. A sample is a small number of people who represent the whole group. By changing the people you ask, you will gradually get feedback from most or all of the internal customers, but do so in stages.

You might also want to use a short questionnaire. There is more about these later in this session.
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External customers’ feedback

Getting feedback from external customers may not be as easy as it is for internal customers. You may not have direct contact with external customers, or external customers may not be as willing to spend the time to provide feedback. Your organisation is more likely to have some formal mechanism for collecting feedback from customers, though, and you should use any feedback collected like this to help your team judge what customers require and how well you are doing.

Formal feedback is usually collected by customers surveys, using interviews or asking people to fill in questionnaires. An interview means that a customer is asked questions about their experience of the organisation’s goods or services. This may be done by someone from your organisation or from a research organisation which has been employed to do so. A questionnaire is given or sent to customers and they are asked to answer the questions on it.

Exercise

How do you think these two methods compare? What are the advantages of each approach?

- Interviews:

- Questionnaires:

Both approaches are used to collect standardised information. Standardised simply means that each customer is asked the same basic questions. The advantage of this is that it can be compared with other organisations and with the results of previous surveys. This allows an organisation to judge how well it is doing and whether it is improving or not.
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Interviews mean that the organisation can select who to ask and can explain questions if there are problems. It also allows interviewers to probe customers. Probing doesn’t mean that they stick things into them! It means that they can ask follow-up questions to make sure that they have understood customers fully and to collect additional information.

Questionnaires can be given out (or posted to) customers, but there is no guarantee that they will be completed. It is possible that the sample of people who answer have special reasons for doing so. This could be because they are very happy with the organisation, or very disappointed. People ‘in the middle’ are least likely to respond. However, questionnaires are much cheaper to use and they can be given to people as soon as they have bought something or used a service, when the experience is fresh. This is often done on Internet sites, for example, as people complete a transaction. It is particularly effective if very short questionnaires are used.

Case Study

One Internet sales site, selling ink cartridges for printers, has a customer service questionnaire at the end of every transaction. As the sale is completed it asks customers to rate the service on a scale of one to ten. It doesn't find out how the customers judge the service, but it at least gets constant feedback.

Interviews and questionnaires tend to ask people closed questions. A closed question is one that has only certain possible answers, such as ‘Yes’ or ‘No’. Often they will use multiple choice questions. A multiple choice question offers people a choice of answers. An example is:

“Have you shopped at any of these stores in the last week?”

Marks & Spencer
Next
Top Shop
H&M

Sometimes multiple choice questions give people the chance to add in an answer of their own (“Any others? Please specify which.”). This is an example of an open question. An open question is one where customers get to choose their own answer.
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However, most customer feedback interviews or questionnaires will ask customers to give satisfaction ratings for the products or service they have experienced. Ratings mean that they use some sort of scale to say how satisfied they are. The examples below show two different rating scales for measuring responses to the question “How satisfied were you with the quality of service you received?”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The quality of service was:</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Very poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On a scale from 1 (Very poor) to 5 (Very good), the service was:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first scale uses words, whereas the second uses numbers. This makes the answers easier to analyse and produces an overall score. However, the first could also be converted to scores by making each rating equal a number (Very good = 5, etc.). You need to be careful to check how the numbers are being used, though. Does 1 = very good or very bad? The session Analysing and presenting customer feedback shows you how you can use the data being collected.

If your organisation uses questionnaires, you may be asked to give them out to a sample of customers, or to everyone. If it’s only a sample, make sure that you pick them as randomly as possible. Random means that you don’t influence the results by picking customers who are likely to be unrepresentative. (This could happen if you only gave them to men and not women, or younger people.)

Another source of formal feedback is from focus groups. Focus groups are small groups (usually about six or seven people) who are brought together to discuss their views and experiences. They are more likely to be used to find out what people require from your organisation, but they may be used to find out why people like or don’t like some aspect of the products and services you supply. For example, if questionnaires keep telling you that people don’t think that a product is well made, a focus group may find out why they think that. What do they mean by ‘well made’?

You may get a summary of a focus group session, or the main points of what has been said. Whereas interviews or questionnaires are likely to contain measures of performance, focus groups will contain comments and judgements about it. They may not look so accurate in what they measure, because they don’t have numbers, but they can be far more informative to you and your team.
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Using informal feedback

So far we've looked at formal feedback. This is feedback that is collected specifically to monitor customer satisfaction. However, informal feedback can be just as useful. It is most likely to be available if you deal directly with your customers. Informal feedback includes:

- Comments (or complaints) made by customers about the quality of goods or services.
- Suggestions made by customers about improving the quality of goods or services.
- The attitude or behaviour of customers when buying or using goods or services.

This Case Study illustrates all three of these.

Case Study

Nancy works for a County Council, in the Highways Department. She deals with enquiries by local people. She has just taken a phone call from a resident, Mr Shah, to complain about the repairs that have just been made to the road outside his house.

Mr Shah: “They have left a huge great bump outside the house and every vehicle going past makes a loud noise. It kept us awake half the night. Why can't they flatten it properly? It's such shoddy workmanship. What are you going to do about it?”

Nancy: “I expect the lump is there because they expect the road to subside. Once it's had a few days' traffic it will be flattened and you won't hear it.”

Mr Shah: “Why can't the traffic be slowed down going over it until then, that would stop the noise being so bad. Drivers don’t see it until it's too late to slow down. If it was a traffic calming hump it would be painted white or something. Why can’t you do that?”

Nancy: “I'll suggest to the Highway Engineer that they put a temporary warning sign up. Will that be OK do you think?

Mr Shah: “I suppose it's the best I can expect from you lot. As long as it happens before tonight. I need a good night’s sleep.”
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How do you think Mr Shah felt? He sounded pretty angry and he wasn’t really that happy with the solution. His words suggested that he was still upset. If you could hear him it would confirm that. How people speak and how they behave, in person, will tell you a lot about how someone feels. This is called non-verbal communication. Verbal means ‘by words’, so non-verbal communication is not by words but by tone of voice, the look on someone’s face, and so on. There’s more about this in the sessions on communication.

You and your team need to be alert to customers’ attitudes and feelings, from what they say to you and what they don’t say. Mr Shah wasn’t really satisfied by the service he received. Although the notice might make the problem a lot less serious, it doesn’t do anything to get back last night’s lack of sleep. An organisation that listens to customers’ feedback will not just try to solve the problem, but prevent it happening again. If the warning notice is always used when there is a bump in the road, it will prevent so many people having their sleep disturbed.

Your role as team leader

If your organisation collects customer feedback you should make sure that you are informed about those aspects that are affected by what your team does. If your team are responsible for encouraging customers to supply feedback, make sure it is done properly, so useful feedback is obtained.

If your organisation doesn’t collect formal feedback, you could suggest that they do. In any case, you should also be able to use informal feedback to help understand how well your customers’ requirements are being met.

Encourage your team to use customer feedback to review the way that the team works and the quality of goods and services it supplies. By being aware of the importance of satisfying customer requirements, you will help to create a customer-focussed team.
Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. What names are given to the two different types of customers?
   1. Customers who work in your organisation and depend on you for the supply of goods and services for them to do their work are called __________ customers.
   2. Customers who are outside the organisation and buy or use the goods and services which your organisation provides are called __________ customers.

B. A team should ask their internal customers two questions to help them ensure that they meet their requirements. These two questions are:
   1. ______________
   2. ______________

C. An organisation can collect formal feedback from its customers by using three main methods. These are:
   1. ______________
   2. ______________
   3. ______________

D. Complete the following statements.
   1. A __________ question offers a customer a set of answers to choose from.
   2. An __________ question allows customers to choose their own answer.
   3. A __________ asks customers to say how satisfied they are with a product or service.
   4. By observing customers and listening to their comments, a team can get __________ from them.
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Making Connections

Answer the questions following the case.

Tom leads a team of people working as volunteers for a charity that helps children suffering from the effects of war and violence. The team that Tom leads telephones people who have made donations to ask them if they will make a regular, monthly donation by direct debit. This means that the money is paid directly from their bank accounts. Although they only call people who have previously made donations, they still find it difficult to persuade people to give regularly.

They work between 6.00 pm and 9.00 pm, three nights a week. Different team members are on each night, so people generally only work one night per week. Tom realises that although people are very supportive of the charity, some object to being called like this. On the other hand, the charity has found that this is the most cost-effective way of doing it. For every pound they spend on calling people, they get about £5 a year in donations. That’s better than any other method they use.

Tom wants to know how people feel, and if there is any way that his team could make people happier, about being called like this. A friend has told him about using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups. Tom wonders if any of these methods would give him feedback from the donors to help improve their response rate.

What advice would you give Tom?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________________________________
Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session?

- Do you collect formal or informal feedback from your internal or external customers?
- If you do, how do you use that feedback to improve your products or services?
- If you don’t, how do you know what customers feel about your products or services?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>strengths &lt;-&gt; weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'm good at this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collecting feedback from internal customers</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collecting feedback from external customers</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognising different methods for collecting formal feedback.</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>using customer feedback to improve the quality of products or services your team supplies</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)