

Customer satisfaction

For technology vendors, customer satisfaction means action



The right questions can help you determine whether prospective providers are really committed to meeting your needs.

Organizations invest significant time and effort in the selection of technology. Some compare performance metrics such as speed, accuracy and throughput. Others conduct side-by-side tests before making a commitment. Most technology buyers understand, however, that such system capabilities represent only one part of the buying decision. Service after the sale, ease of doing business and a commitment to meeting customer needs also play critical roles in overall satisfaction.

Most vendors talk a good game when it comes to customer service, but these factors may seem difficult to assess in advance. Referrals and case studies, for example, may or may not serve as representative samples. Fortunately, one time-honored adage holds true: you are what you measure.

How a vendor or technology provider measures customer satisfaction says a lot about how they will deliver satisfaction going forward. By learning more about a firm's approach to capturing and managing customer feedback, buyers can gain insight into the level of satisfaction they may expect after becoming a client.

Leaders in this discipline, including Pitney Bowes, employ dedicated resources to measure customer satisfaction. Such vendors constantly search for new ways to exceed expectations and act upon the insights they collect. They understand that there are limited pools of potential customers and that satisfaction, loyalty and purchase behavior are closely aligned.

These technology providers measure satisfaction on many levels and don't try to rationalize poor service scores. Above all, they measure satisfaction for the purpose of improving the overall customer experience. The ability to identify one of these top performers before signing a technology contract is an essential skill in today's market.

The five things one needs to know before selecting a technology vendor.

The right questions help determine whether prospective providers are really committed to meeting business needs. In simplest terms, taking a moment to ask who, what, when, how and why can help distill the players from the posers.

Who. When it comes to customer satisfaction, whose opinion matters?

Measuring satisfaction in business-to-business situations is more complex than consumer technology because there are multiple stakeholders. Companies who are serious about measuring customer satisfaction will gain feedback from multiple levels.

- Users work with the technology on a daily basis. Their feedback is important for vendors when it comes to monitoring ease of use, system performance and overall employee productivity.
- Project managers are responsible for installation, vendor management and end results. Their input can help shape how relationships are managed and are critical to overall satisfaction.
- Business heads and executives look more at the big picture. Their observations help uncover ways to improve the long-term return on investment.

A best-in-class measurement program will solicit feedback from more than one individual in a company. For prospective buyers, the “who” question offers a quick way to assess whether a vendor understands the nuances of a business relationship.

What. When it comes to customer satisfaction, what does the vendor actually measure?

When a company says “90% of our customers are satisfied” what exactly does that mean? Actually, leading technology vendors do not measure whether or not a customer is satisfied. They only care about whether a customer is very satisfied.

While surveys and feedback mechanisms vary from company to company, most employ a sliding scale that runs from Very Satisfied, Satisfied and Somewhat Satisfied down to Neutral, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied and Very Dissatisfied. Buyers should be wary of providers who cite anything other than “top box” statistics.

In many countries, including the United States, “satisfaction” is akin to cultural politeness. When a customer claims they are “Satisfied” or “Somewhat Satisfied,” that often means there are underlying issues with the vendor that have yet to be addressed.

“Very Satisfied” is the gold standard. While few companies will be able to cite numbers in the 90%+ range when using this scale, it says a lot when vendors set this as the goal. Companies that measure themselves against this top box standard are more likely to find ways to delight their customers over time. Another variation of the “Very Satisfied” measurement is a “Net Sat” score. Here, companies take the number of customers who are “Very Satisfied” and subtract anyone “Dissatisfied” or “Very Dissatisfied.”

Vendors who measure customer satisfaction well dig much deeper than a single question. The specific questions a company asks will depend on the type of technology and the businesses they serve. Successful companies look for ways to align their operations to customer needs. In general, four aspects of customer satisfaction are consistent across all technology vendors.

- Sales and sales relationship
- Service and service support
- Technology performance
- Ease of doing business

It is appropriate to ask a prospective vendor how they measure satisfaction across each of these four aspects.

“Very Satisfied” is the gold standard. Companies that measure themselves against this top box standard are more likely to find ways to delight their customers over time.

When. How often does a vendor measure customer satisfaction?

To be successful, a customer satisfaction measurement program needs to be ongoing, a best practice that is often misperceived. Requesting feedback from customers once a year is not enough for anyone looking to improve business processes.

Given the critical nature of technology, software and systems need to demonstrate success in the eyes of a customer every day. Business needs and market conditions may change quickly, which is why many vendors conduct satisfaction surveys on a monthly basis.

How. How exactly do you measure and manage customer satisfaction?

When a vendor claims that their customers are highly satisfied, it makes sense to question how they have come to that conclusion. There are several valid approaches to surveying customers, so buyers will have to use judgment to assess whether the survey mechanisms make sense given the technology in question.

For mass-marketed business technologies that perform a limited number of functions, it is possible that customers do not have a specific sales or account representative. Organizations may interact with the vendor remotely, via customer care centers, correspondence and the Web. In such cases, Web and email surveys are effective. Questions should measure satisfaction across different touchpoints and should always include a section to capture verbatim responses.

When it comes to specialized, high-tech, big-budget systems, however, it makes sense to go deeper than a simple check-box survey. Here, vendors are more likely to employ methods that provide opportunities for in-depth dialogue, such as telephone or face-to-face surveys.

Some people question whether customer satisfaction surveys should be conducted in-house or outsourced to a third-party. In general, outsourcing does not indicate a lack of commitment. Third-party survey specialists often employ best-in-class technologies and customers may also feel more comfortable providing honest feedback to a third-party. In-house programs can also be effective at measuring satisfaction as long as the department conducting the surveys is not the same team responsible for delivering the service.

Whether surveys are conducted in-house or outsourced, your vendor of choice should have a person or team in place to manage customer satisfaction measurement. With centrally managed programs, vendors can look at satisfaction from beginning to end. They can also coordinate when and how surveys are fielded to ensure that each customer is never over-surveyed.

When a vendor claims that their customers are highly satisfied, it makes sense to question how they have come to that conclusion.

Why. Why exactly do you measure customer satisfaction?

There is one main reason vendors should measure customer satisfaction—to identify gaps and improve overall service delivery.

Be cautious of any technology provider who surveys customers solely for the sake of publishing a number or issuing a report. Companies that excel in customer satisfaction look to improve future performance and not only to record past results.

As a buyer, the key is to learn what vendors do with the information they receive. Do they monitor results? How do they act upon them?

Within top companies, action teams respond immediately to any customer who is not satisfied. These teams or individuals will take responsibility and own the problem, and the solution. Instead of managing numbers, leading technology providers look for ways to manage customer needs.

Firms that are serious about customer satisfaction don't bother asking questions unless they have infrastructure in place to take action. Surveys and systems are designed so that the information gathered is actionable; and senior management will be involved in review and planning sessions.

In many ways, learning the who, what, when, how and why of customer satisfaction processes may provide more important insights than any statistics. Organizations that set aggressive goals, acknowledge shortfalls and have a plan in place to address issues may be more responsive than those who have no formal plans.

Case in Point: Customer Satisfaction at Pitney Bowes

As a benchmark, buyers may want to consider how a prospective technology vendor matches up to Pitney Bowes. Over the past ten years, Pitney Bowes has re-engineered their approach to measuring customer satisfaction.

As a large and diverse company, Pitney Bowes does not employ a one-sized-fits-all approach. Customer satisfaction measurement programs are built, designed and managed around the distinct needs of customers.

Some divisions within Pitney Bowes provide high-end, integrated multi-million dollar systems and services. Here, dedicated sales and service executives may have close relationships with a few hundred enterprise-level accounts.

"Every single customer is vital to our organization's success," notes Michael Calderwood, Vice President of Customer Loyalty at Pitney Bowes Document Messaging Technologies "We have in-depth conversations with multiple people in an organization to dig deep. We talk about specifics, but we also explore whether they would recommend us, and how Pitney Bowes ranks among their most trusted providers. If we are not the absolute best, we want to find out what we need to do to become tops in their eyes."

High-end program highlights:

- Monthly in-depth telephone surveys with multiple contacts at each customer company explore sales support, machine performance, response time, satisfaction with service reps, ease of doing business and overall satisfaction.
- If customers report that they are merely "satisfied," service managers have three days to resolve problems and develop an action plan to make customers happy.
- Managers review satisfaction results each week, and analytic teams look for trends by region, sales rep, models, etc. to drive strategies and new programs. Reports track satisfaction but, more importantly, help uncover what drives satisfaction.

Since re-engineering their measurement program several years ago, Pitney Bowes has seen a dramatic increase in customer satisfaction and business performance. Today, 86% of customers report that they are very satisfied and 96% of customers would recommend Pitney Bowes.

Other divisions within Pitney Bowes provide desktop applications to millions of customers who conduct millions of transactions each and every day.

“Many of our customers purchase technology online and never actually meet with a Pitney Bowes representative, so we needed to build a robust mechanism that made it easy for us to capture, hear and analyze customer concerns,” notes Gael Lundeen, Vice President of Customer Experience for Pitney Bowes Inc.

Core customer program highlights:

- Monthly email surveys focus on 20 critical customer-facing processes. Over the past 16 months, more than 180,000 customer satisfaction surveys have been completed.
- If any customer reports that they are dissatisfied, the appropriate business units are alerted, respond and are required to report results.
- As part of the survey process, customers are also asked to contribute ideas and suggestions. To date, 25% of customers have responded, which has led to 44,000 new ideas.

This type of high-volume, systematic approach helps the company uncover “secret” problems that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. For example, over the course of a few weeks twelve customers complained about not receiving an order – a miniscule number given the tens of thousands of daily customer contacts. In-depth analysis uncovered an unusual bug in the order processing systems; a problem that otherwise may have gone unnoticed for months.

Vendors manage what they measure

When organizations procure new technology, they also enter into a relationship with a technology provider. Often, the success of that relationship will go a long way in determining whether the actual software or systems deliver as promised.

Satisfaction with technology goes far beyond system capabilities. Do sales representatives listen, care and understand? How does the company handle upgrades? Can the customer reach the right person if there is a problem? Are billing statements clear and accurate?

Understanding how a technology provider measures and manages customer satisfaction can provide insight into how they deliver service on a day-to-day basis. Best-in-class vendors solicit feedback from customers on a regular basis and act upon the information they receive to rapidly resolve customer issues. Taking the time to learn more about the who, what, when, how and why of a prospective vendor’s approach to customer satisfaction helps buyers make smarter, more informed decisions. To learn more about Pitney Bowes solutions, please visit www.pb.com.



Pitney Bowes, Inc.
1 Elmcroft Road
Stamford, CT 06926-0700
USA
T: 203 356 5000

www.pitneybowes.com

© 2010 Pitney Bowes Ltd. All rights reserved.
Pitney Bowes is a \$5.6 billion global technology leader whose products, services and solutions deliver value within the mailstream and beyond. Founded in 1920, our company’s 33,000 employees deliver technology, service and innovation to more than two million customers worldwide. For more information about Pitney Bowes, its products, services and solutions, visit www.pb.com.