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The real value of customer experience programs is not in gathering customer feedback, but in putting the voice of the customer to work. While there was never a positive return on investment (ROI) for simply measuring satisfaction (no more than there is a positive ROI for taking your temperature when you are sick), today’s cost/benefit driven environment has made the need for meaningful action even more acute.

The Maritz Research Action Planning Process is a systematic approach to action planning and implementation, developed from years of experience helping organizations improve the ROI of customer experience measurement (CEM). The Maritz Research Action Planning Process aligns customer information with the right people and processes to enact meaningful change.

**At a Glance**

Most organizations invest in measuring customer experience and satisfaction with an expectation that the insights derived will lead to product and service improvements, and better customer experiences. Unfortunately, far too many organizations simply hand customer feedback to managers with instructions to “use the results to take action.” The consequences? Quite often, no action is taken, and the anticipated improvements in customer experience fail to materialize.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

This paper offers guidance about where companies are falling short and introduces a proven process for customer-driven action planning and implementation. We also provide a case illustration of the Maritz Research Action Planning Process in use.
Where Companies Fall Short

A growing body of evidence reveals that a majority of organizations are not where they want to be when it comes to “putting the voice of the customer to work.”

In 2007, Maritz Research conducted the first of two “Voice of the Customer Practices and Challenges” surveys of managers in “blue chip” companies. The results revealed that 81% of the managers surveyed indicated that their organizations were either “struggling” or “achieving mixed results” with regard to taking action based on customer feedback.1

The 2007 survey also found that a majority of organizations fail to:

- Identify the managers and parts of the organization that “own” customer-driven action items
- Clarify or furnish sufficient detail regarding what customers want the organization to do or to do differently
- Pinpoint the processes, practices, policies and other organizational performance elements that must be corrected or improved
- Communicate and implement appropriate action plans

In 2010, Maritz Research conducted a similar survey of managers in blue chip companies, and the results extended what was learned from the 2007 study. More than two-thirds of organizations are either “doing a mixed job” or “struggling” when it comes to taking action based on customer feedback. In addition, most of these organizations have not developed methods for:

- Establishing ownership of customer-driven action items
- Clarifying customer expectations and requirements in relation to these items
- Engaging managers and partners in a formal process of customer-driven action planning and implementation

How effective are organizations at...

Taking action based on the Voice of the Customer (VOC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% Not a priority</th>
<th>% Struggling</th>
<th>% Doing a mixed job</th>
<th>% Doing a good job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
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Other studies have produced findings similar to results of our 2007 and 2010 research. For example, Neil Morgan and his colleagues conducted a study of 37 companies spanning a variety of industries. They observed many of the same problems, including:

- Data are distributed to managers without identifying root causes or fixes to guide action planning
- Insights from customer satisfaction measures are not distributed to front-line employees and/or many functional areas that could and should use them to improve quality and service
- Customer satisfaction data tend to be used to support decision-making in a very narrow and tactical fashion, rather than being applied to broad-based and strategic decisions

Similarly, a study by The Gantry Group found that the two biggest challenges faced by companies trying to improve their customer satisfaction initiatives are:

- Achieving the necessary customer satisfaction data detail to pinpoint where in the organization’s business processes the problems originate
- Distilling customer satisfaction data into actionable, high-impact recommendations

The research findings described above suggest that most organizations are not where they want to be because they have not implemented the necessary methods to connect customer feedback to the right people and/or the right business processes, policies, and activities – and this is inhibiting their ability to use VOC-driven insights to improve the customer experience.

**A Process of Customer-Driven Action Planning and Implementation**

Most companies are successful at setting priorities for action yet fall short in acting on those priorities. We developed the Maritz Research Action Planning Process based upon our years of experience helping organizations improve the return on their CEM investment. Essentially, the process is a systematic approach to moving from data to action. It is designed to facilitate customer-driven action planning and implementation by addressing three of the most vexing obstacles faced by organizations that are trying to translate customer feedback into actions to improve customer experience:

1. Identifying the people/parts of the organization who “own” or are responsible for the element of the customer experience targeted for action and improvement
2. Providing sufficient detail and understanding of what the customer wants the organization to do or do differently with respect to this customer experience element
3. Pinpointing the organizational processes, policies, practices and other performance areas connected to the targeted element of the customer experience, so the owners know where to focus their root cause analysis and action planning efforts

**Step 1. Identify High Priority Customer-Driven Action Items**

Quite often, analysis of customer survey items – each of which represents a specific element of the customer experience – is the starting point for defining action items. Specifically, items identified as “key drivers” of overall customer satisfaction and loyalty, and that also receive relatively unfavorable customer ratings are designated as customer-driven...
priorities for improvement. Many organizations also look at additional VOC data sources (e.g., inbound customer comments and complaints, user-generated media, etc.) to corroborate initial conclusions based on analysis of survey data. In any event, the analysis of customer feedback enables the organization to define customer-driven action items.

**Step 2. Determine Owners of the Customer-Driven Action Items**

The next step in the process involves a review of customer feedback by a cross-functional team of managers. These managers collectively determine the people and parts of the organization that impact (and therefore, have some level of ownership of) each action item. It is the “owners” that must take the lead in developing and implementing an appropriate action plan.

**Maritz Research Action Planning Process**

**A Five-Step Process Built Upon Best Practices**

1. **Customer Driven Action Item Identified**
2. **Do We Know Who Is Responsible for This Action Item?**
   - **NO**
3. **Determine Owners of Customer Driven Action Item**
   - **NO**
4. **“Drill Down” For Clarity and Granularity**
5. **Have the Relevant Business “Enablers” Been Identified?**
   - **NO**
6. **Pinpoint Relevant Policies, Processes, Operations & Other Business Enablers**
7. **Develop & Implement Appropriate Action Plan**

**Step 3. “Drill Down” for Clarity and Granularity**

As mentioned, analysis of survey items often provides the starting point for customer-driven action planning and implementation. However, often, the survey instruments were not designed to provide enough detail or granularity to enable an organization to determine
the specific action to take. As a result, the action-item owners find themselves limited by an incomplete understanding of “what to do.” This leads to one of two unfortunate outcomes:

- The actions taken to respond to the voice of the customer are misguided and, therefore, ineffective
- Managers and employees end up taking no action at all because they lack clarity regarding what the customer wants or needs

In contrast, organizations that are successful in applying customer feedback to drive improvement ask themselves a simple question before developing and implementing action plans: **Do we understand what the customer wants us to do or do differently?**

Thus, the third step in the process requires that owners of a customer-driven action item confirm that they have sufficient understanding of what customers actually want the company to do or do differently. If not, the group must determine the questions to address and areas requiring “drill-down” for clarity and granularity.

### Social Media May Provide Insight About What Customers Want or Expect

In recent years, thousands of Web sites, message boards and blogs sprouted up to allow customers to share their opinions with the world. The comments posted on these sites can provide great detail about customer experience challenges. Depending on the industry and company, user-generated media can be an excellent way for action-item owners to gain additional clarity around what customers want the organization to do differently.

**Step 4. Pinpoint the Business Policies, Processes and Operations Associated with High-Priority Action Items**

Once a customer issue is clarified and ownership for action established, a fourth critical step in the process is to identify and target the relevant business enablers. What are the organizational processes, policies, practices and other aspects of performance that are connected to the targeted element of the customer experience? The owners must answer this question to ensure that they identify and fix the “right things.”

**Step 5. Develop and Implement Appropriate Action Plans**

Upon completion of these first four process steps, the organization has put itself in a very good position to develop and implement an appropriate customer experience improvement plan, because:

- The people and parts of the organization that impact the customer-driven action item have been identified
- These owners understand what customers want the organization to do
- The owners have pinpointed the organizational processes, practices, policies and other performances issues that need to be changed and improved

Essentially, the “guess work” has been taken out of developing and implementing an appropriate customer driven action plan. Now, it’s time for the owners to develop the plan.

Well-conceived action plans require solid information about what to change and how to change it. Integrating action items identified through the customer feedback process with operational training tools to guide action is a best practice to drive improvement.
with operational training tools to guide action is a best practice to drive improvement. For many organizations, integrating these elements within the reporting platform is the most effective way to arm corporate and front-line managers with the tools they need to address improvement areas.

**Blueprinting**

To help organizations better connect customer feedback to business activities, we recommend companies create a Customer-Centric Business Blueprint: a graphical representation of how processes translate into what customers experience and evaluate, and how those experiences and evaluations result in customer behaviors that drive business outcomes. Companies that complete Blueprinting jump start the process by gaining answers to two of the five steps in the Maritz Research Action Planning Process (Steps 2 and 4). In addition, the Customer-Centric Business Blueprint furnishes the foundation for linking customer experience data to financial and operational metrics.

**The Process in Action: A Case Example**

Maritz recently used the process described above to assist a client in the financial services sector in developing and implementing a customer-driven action plan. Some details pertaining to this company’s customer information and actions cannot be revealed, but every effort has been made to preserve the authenticity of this case illustration.

Step 1 of the Maritz Research Action Planning Process is to define the customer-driven action item. In this case, the client targeted “promptness of responding to problems and requests” for improvement. This item is one of the top three drivers of overall customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. As well, while customer ratings of the company’s performance were generally favorable, overall satisfaction and likelihood of retention were significantly lower among customers who have to make more than one contact to resolve a problem or request. Thus, the action item requiring company action boiled down to the following question:

“How can we ensure that when a customer contacts our company with a problem or request, his/her problem or request is resolved satisfactorily on the first contact?”

The company convened a cross-functional team of managers (Step 2) from customer service, sales, the call center, finance and accounting, IT, billing and several other key functional areas. This team discussed how customer problems/requests are resolved, asking questions like:

- Who touches or interacts with customers to resolve problems or requests?
- Who provides information or resources to support these customer-facing employees?
- Who establishes policies and procedures for dealing with customer problems or requests?

The answers to these questions enabled the team to identify owners of the customer-driven action item. In this case, four functional areas were identified:

- Customer Service Representatives: These individuals interact directly with customers
- Front-Line Managers: These individuals interact directly with customers
- IT/CRM: This includes the systems and people who provide customer data and other information to support the employees who interact with customers

“How can we ensure that when a customer contacts our company with a problem or request, his/her problem or request is resolved satisfactorily on the first contact?”
• Corporate Management: These individuals establish policies and procedures regarding the handling of customer problems and requests.

With these four groups represented during the session, we continued through the next process steps. We asked “do the owners have sufficient understanding of what customers want or expect with regard to promptness of handling problems or requests?” The “owners” identified questions and issues requiring clarification (Step 3). For example, two questions that the owners agreed needed clarification were:

• Does the company’s ability to resolve customer problems or requests on the first contact vary by the type of customer problem or request?
• What policies, processes and/or systems do customer service representatives and agents believe facilitate or inhibit their ability to resolve customer problems and requests on the first contact?

The team also identified data sources and methods to answer the questions identified and made assignments regarding who would do the investigation and when they would share their findings. These follow-up investigations ultimately produced the clarity and granularity needed to understand what customers wanted the company to do or do differently with regard to promptness of resolving problems and requests.

Having identified action-item owners, and having addressed issues needed to ensure sufficient understanding of customer expectations and requirements, the team turned its attention to identifying the relevant “business enablers.” This required the team to pinpoint specific company systems, processes, policies, practices and other performance issues connected to promptness of resolving customer problems and requests (Step 4). The Ishikawa or “fishbone” diagram below illustrates the results. The team identified business performance issues/potential root causes of customer dissatisfaction and grouped them into three basic categories: systems, processes and people.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYSTEMS</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems Availability</td>
<td>Policy of “Investigate First” and “Resolve Second”</td>
<td>“Ability to Resolve Problems or Questions on First Contact”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easier to Use Systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rep. Time with Customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rep. After Call Work Time</td>
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After completing the first four steps of the Maritz Research Action Planning Process, the owners were ready to develop and implement an appropriate action plan. Their plan incorporated steps to address each of the three categories of business performance issues: systems, processes and people.
## Business Performance Element / Potential Root Cause

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systems</th>
<th>Recommended Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems Availability</td>
<td>Enhancement &amp; Improved Integration of IT/CRM Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems Usability</td>
<td>Usability Testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Revise Policy and Process to Emphasize First &amp; Analysis / Investigation Second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Policy Changes to Increase CSR Agent Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR/Agent Empowerment</td>
<td>Add Staff During Peak Hours to Allow More Customer Interaction Post-Contact Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Spent with Customer</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

In general, each recommended action was designed to more effectively resolve customer problems and requests at the point of initial contact by:

- Revising the company's problem/request handling philosophy and approach to emphasize “resolution first and internal analysis/investigation second”
- Empowering agents and customer service representatives, and making it possible for them to spend more time with the customer
- Improving the performance and integration of different customer and business databases and systems, so that information needed to resolve customer problems and requests could be accessed and utilized more rapidly

While improving first call resolution would have been addressed at some point, all on the team agreed that the Maritz Action Planning Process expedited appropriate action by making it relatively easy to move “from data to action.”

By targeting a key element of the customer experience in need of improvement, clearly establishing ownership of this targeted customer experience element, clarifying customer wants and expectations, pinpointing the things to fix, and bringing together the right group of people to affect change, this company was able to take appropriate action with improved speed, agility and effectiveness.

## Summary

Companies investing in capturing, crunching, and sharing insights derived from customer feedback will make some progress toward putting the voice of the customer to work. However, unless these organizations implement a process to connect customer feedback to the right people, and the right business processes, policies and activities, progress likely will be stalled.

By adopting the Maritz Research Action Planning Process, companies create a bridge from data to action and enable the organization to meaningfully improve the customer experience.
References


iv. “Convergence analysis” is a method that often is used to integrate data from multiple VOC data sources in order to define customer-driven action items. See Brandt, D. R. (2005). “Voice Lessons.” Quirk’s Marketing Research Review (November); p.3-4.

v. Typically, a senior executive takes responsibility for engaging representatives from different parts of the organization in order to perform the cross-functional review of customer feedback. A recent study reported by the Tempkin Group indicates that such reviews are regularly performed in 55% of companies that have annual revenues of $500 million or more and that also have a formal customer experience initiative in place. Thus, while it is not practiced in a majority of organizations (only 29% of all companies surveyed), such a review process does appear to be fairly common in organizations having a formal customer experience management process. See Tempkin, B. (2010). “The Current State of Customer Experience.” A copy of this study may be obtained at www.experiencematters.wordpress.com.
Maritz Voice of the Customer Framework

In the Maritz Research white paper “The Three Dimensions of Customer Experience Measurement,” we define the Maritz CE-3D Framework. Deploying a consistent action-planning process is one of several recommendations for creating a next generation customer experience program. Companies wishing to adopt a comprehensive customer experience program may also consider:

- Creating a more customer-centric feedback process
- Planning for results by “designing with the end in mind”
- Involving front-line managers and employees in program design
- Integrating multiple customer feedback sources
- Conducting convergence analysis
- Building a Customer Experience Blueprint to highlight how the customer experience impacts business results and operations
- Linking survey insights to business and operational metrics
- Better communicating customer feedback to those taking action upon it

Our paper “The Three Dimensions of Customer Experience Measurement” includes many ideas for moving CEM programs towards a greater future. Putting these ideas into practice requires a deep understanding of your company’s customers, insight teams, and front-line managers and employees. To help our clients and companies like yours, Maritz Research recommends a Voice of the Customer Assessment. The assessment will help you better understand your stakeholders’ challenges, identify the highest impact program changes and systematically manage a migration to an evolved CEM program. We invite you to contact us today to learn more about the ideas proposed in this paper and our consultative CEM Assessment Process.

For more information visit Maritz Research at www.maritzresearch.com or call (877) 4 MARITZ.