

Defining the Customer's Needs

For successful planning, information about customer needs must be systematically translated into technical terms - those factors over which the organisation has control. The focus should be on the most important items, including those which would provide a competitive advantage. It is important to distribute knowledge of the customer's needs throughout the organisation, in particular to those who can affect the achievement of quality objectives.

The "Deployment" Process

This process has two components:

- è The translation of the "*Voice of the Customer*" (the customer's needs described in their terms), and the "*Voice of the Process*" (information about the abilities of the process) into the "*Counterpart Characteristics*" (the customer's requirements translated into meaningful - usually technical - language appropriate to the organisation).
- è Deployment of quality information to those who need it. This process defines who does what to make sure it happens.

This distribution of information and tasks throughout the organisation is known as Quality Function Deployment.

The Nature of Customer Needs

There are four different types of customer needs:

Basics (Functions)

These are basic functional requirements, which must be included for the product to fully meet the needs of the customer. The customer would expect them no matter how cheap the product is, but, because of their fundamental nature, they are assumed, and frequently not noticed if successfully included. However, if

they are omitted, or not included acceptably, strong dissatisfaction results, and the customer is likely to complain and seek correction. Again, because they are assumed, they can easily be forgotten during the design process, and omitted or not satisfactorily included. Only a disciplined approach to product development, and careful design review, will overcome this problem.

Options (Features)

These are features that are available in current products, but are frequently added cost options or standard in more expensive, "up-market" models. Customers will judge whether their budget for the product matches the costs of the added feature, and will consequently evaluate products on a value basis. Omission would be expected in a budget product, but would generate market resistance in a premium model. For the supplier, wants are less likely to be overlooked than needs, but a careful evaluation of markets and competitive products will need to be undertaken to ensure that the correct mix of features is found.

Innovations

These are innovations for which some customers may feel or express a desire, but which is not currently available in the market (or at the price, as price often defines a market). These features are less likely to be on the customer's feature "shopping list", but will probably weigh strongly in a comparison between two otherwise equivalent products.

Dispensables

These are essentially innovations that go wrong: they are at extra cost, but the customer has no use for them, so their inclusion is ignored at best, or resented at worst. They can result from the desire to have "more" than the

When skinning your customers, you should leave some skin on to grow so that you can skin them again. (N. Krushchev)

competition, without any real ideas of what the customer wants. The trick with dispensables is to recognise them as soon as they occur, and act quickly to exclude them: customers don't like paying for something that they feel to be useless or of nuisance value.

In listing customer's requirements, care should be taken to ensure that the needs of internal customers are also considered: in particular, that requirements of Design for Manufacture, Design for Assembly, etc, are taken into account.