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VOC VS. HOQ

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Many of us remember the traditional approach to voice of the customer (VOC). Usually it was driven by an idea, and we wanted to find out whether it would sell. Or, worse, we had no ideas and we hoped our customers would give us both the idea and the selling logic at the same time. What resulted were products that neither met the expectations of the customer nor our internal forecasts.

The program failure analysis that followed new product introduction was usually brief, since we needed to move on quickly to the new ideas that had surfaced because the “old” ideas had failed. These launch failures were very humbling. Sales and marketing staff wanted to focus on regaining credibility rather than spend time revisiting the past.

The stated failure causes were many and varied:

- Timing was not right
- Price point was not right
- Product was not ready on time
- Product features were not what customer really was looking for
- Initial products did not meet expectations
- Hard tooling was not available and soft tooled products were poor quality
- Product missed the mark
- Development was based on limited customer input (from our friends)

The list of reasons can go on, yet if you asked anyone in the company, the voice of the customer was always “listened to” before developing a new product.

What went wrong? We found we had no standard process for collecting the information we so desperately sought from our customers and the marketplace. Our scouts were ill-prepared to collect the intelligence we needed, and once they had collected the information, we did not internally pull together with the various functional areas to analyze the data and select the best course of action. Our techniques were flawed for the following reasons:

- We did not talk to the unhappy, lost, or “yet to be” customers
- We did not observe enough, but instead held conference room meetings
- We heard solutions as opposed to problems and opportunities
- We diluted customer need by writing specification sheets rather than listing needs
- We substituted perceived competitive intelligence for real VOC

How do we stop repeating these mistakes, especially when new products, features, and solutions are transforming unknown companies into industry leaders in a fraction of the time it used to take? Not only is success recognized more quickly today, but so is the unacceptable alternative, failure.

To maximize your success and minimize the possibility of failure use Toyota’s House of Quality (HOQ) as an integral part of your product development process. By its name, HOQ implies that it is oriented toward ensuring product quality; however, it actually is a process to create a marketing specification. In other words, it assures the quality of the product development process and lays the foundation to proceed with a true, clear VOC. It is a very structured process for ensuring that the new product is the most effective solution to meet customer and market expectations and provide a breakthrough competitive advantage with higher than average margins. The HOQ tool brings into focus a number of issues that must be considered for successful creation of a new product:

- The requirements, wants, and needs of the customer
- The technical characteristics of the product
- The interrelationships between people and functions, with cross-functional consensus building
- Competitive analysis as it relates to the customer rather than the company
- The importance of technical requirements to eliminate feature creep
- Specification values related to the “vital few” customer expectations
- A functional deployment roadmap from concept through launch

Once you use HOQ, you are well-prepared to continue with the next steps in Design for LeanSigma® with the best possible assurance that your launch will meet or exceed your customers’ expectations, and your own revenue and profitability projections. ■