

Voice-of-the-Customer Programs



The Folding Chair

[Trilogy Associates](#)

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What's the most valuable asset in your company?

Employees

Distributors

Capital

Investors

Real Estate

Advisors

Intellectual Property

Production Capacity

Know-how

Industry Intelligence



It's none of those! Your most valuable asset is ...

YOUR CUSTOMERS

You owe all your business success, and your very livelihood,
to your customers

Without them you cannot survive for long





So maybe – just maybe – it’s a good idea to hear their views (their “voices”) from time to time

A voice-of-the-customer (VOC) program is a channel for acquiring *business insight* about customers and what is important *to them*; simple as that





The Folding Chair

Don Peppers, founding partner of Peppers & Rogers Group, related this story in 2008:

A sales manager at Siemens AG often carried a folding chair into internal meetings. At first, the other sales representatives in the meeting were puzzled. “Who are you expecting to join us?” some asked. “Shouldn’t we just get some more chairs brought in here?” others suggested.

“No”, the manager replied, “this is my customer’s chair. I brought it into the meeting so my customer can sit right here and listen to our discussion.”

The simple presence of the folding chair always changed the character of the conversation. It reminded everyone of the importance of customers and caused all to ask, “What would our customer say?” and “How would our customer react?”



I'm going to assume that you agree that the needs of your customers and their perceptions of your products, your services and your company are extremely important to you ...

... if not, you can stop reading right now



Trilogy VOC programs

Our management consulting practice is focused primarily on innovation and new-product commercialization for business customers

Therefore, our VOC programs primarily serve the following constituencies:

- C-Suite
- Marketing
- Product Development
- Research / Technology Development

And our messages are most apt for these audiences



No customers yet?

What if you're an early-stage, pre-sales enterprise? You have no customers.

It doesn't matter. Your prospective, future customers are your most important asset. If they don't exist, or if you cannot convert them, then you won't exist for long.

You must establish a dialog of some kind with prospective customers. **This is among the most important things you must do to survive.**



The VOC goal

The most successful VOC programs achieve ...

positive ...

proactive ...

engagement ...



Between the company and its customers

All three ingredients are key to success



The methods

VOC methods are numerous and well-known ...

In-depth phone interviews	Online surveys
Online panels	In-person interviews
Focus groups	Trade show research
Conference buttonholing	Mail surveys
Social media	Web intercepts

The method must be fit for the purpose



**From here on I'd like to share 10 hints
that will help make your VOC program
a smashing success!**



1. Know your customers

Don't think of your customers as "accounts"; think of them as individuals within organizational departments ...
... and treat them as such

Who are they?

Where are they?

What roles do they serve?

Do they have purchase influence?

Which of your products and services do they buy?

Why do they buy, and why don't they buy?

In what other meaningful ways can they be segmented?



2. Users versus buyers

This is often an important distinction; both must be heard from and ultimately satisfied

Do you really know who the buyers are? If not, find out

You must collect different information from each



3. Finding sources

Your own customer lists are the best starting point

Targeted “opt in” panels and lists are next best

Secondary research can identify valued thought leaders

Social media and targeted blogs can work for consumers, not so much for clinicians and industry types

Purchased lists are a last resort



4. Know your subject matter

Don't play dumb; you must understand the issues and your customer's lingo and frame of reference before engagement

- Especially important for prospective customers in unfamiliar markets

This helps to know what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how to interpret the answers



5. Hone your objective

Have a clear, meaningful objective for each encounter

- Focus, focus, focus

Do not overreach by covering too many topics lest your customer become impatient, feel exploited, and bail out

Know, in advance, how you will act on the information received



6. Once is not enough

A single customer encounter is rarely sufficient; clarifications, extensions and further detail are nearly always required

Repeated inquiries to “premier responders” pay real dividends

- But don't overstay your welcome
- And beware undue influence by a few respondents

Mixed methods can offer variety and maintain interest



7. When anonymity matters

Sometimes you don't want your customer to know who you are, e.g.

- You seek the impolite, unvarnished truth
- You're testing a new-product concept
- You're seeking impressions of a competitor

Engage a third party to conduct a VOC program, or a single encounter, on your behalf

Beware: anonymous encounters are sometimes not really anonymous; customers can make educated guesses

Anonymous encounters do not contribute to relationship-building



8. For value received

Always fairly compensate your respondents for sharing their time, opinions and expertise

- How do you feel when a survey-taker says “Your opinions are extremely valuable to us” but s/he is not willing to share any of that great value with you?

Subject-matter interest can go a long way, but cash is king

- Certain professionals (thought leaders, physicians, attorneys, etc.) demand much greater incentives than consumers

Respond promptly with the promised incentive



9. Dealing with bad news

There's no such thing as "bad news" in a VOC encounter; all customer-derived information is good

If you're not prepared to be disappointed, don't ask

Deal effectively with the reality

- Lemons → lemonade



10. Convert findings to action

VOC findings that do not result in some action are without value

Establish an internal vehicle for compiling and interpreting VOC findings and recommending change that should result

- Follow up, follow up, follow up

Significant findings deserve C-suite attention

Check back with customers to assess the effects of change



Your VOC partner

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