Working Paper Series

Customer Satisfaction:
The Driving Force for Winning Business Excellence Award

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Working Paper No 02/06

March 2002

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: THE DRIVING FORCE FOR WINNING BUSINESS EXCELLENCE AWARD

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ABSTRACT

Customer satisfaction is perhaps one of the most talked about challenges of organisations, both in the public and private sectors (Zairi 2000a). The aim of this paper is to examine the importance of customer satisfaction results to the enabler's criteria of the EFQM Business Excellence Model and Self-Assessment Firstly the current increasing interest in using the model and self-assessment process as the template for testing different business strategies. Then the little evidence of any methodology, which can assist organisations to link the areas for improvement, identified from the assessment to their business' action plans at strategic, tactical and operational levels. Also there is a lack of sufficient guidelines that assists Senior Management in optimising their efforts while collecting data and in preparing the document, which will submit for the award. Finally, an eight-step programme on how to achieve customer satisfaction is proposed.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Self-Assessment, EFQM Business Excellence Model, Performance Measurement

1.0 INTRODUCTION

McDougall et al [1997] and Witeley and Hessan [1996] agreed that customers are the ultimate source of an organisation's growth and prosperity. This can only happen when customers are identified and known, their needs are communicated throughout the entire organisation and employees evaluating various processes and tasks and sharing the decisions regarding value adding objectives to their customers. Cox [1997] believes that it is crucial for an organisation to become customer focused by keeping close-eye to its market, so that product development is aligned to what the market anticipated needs.

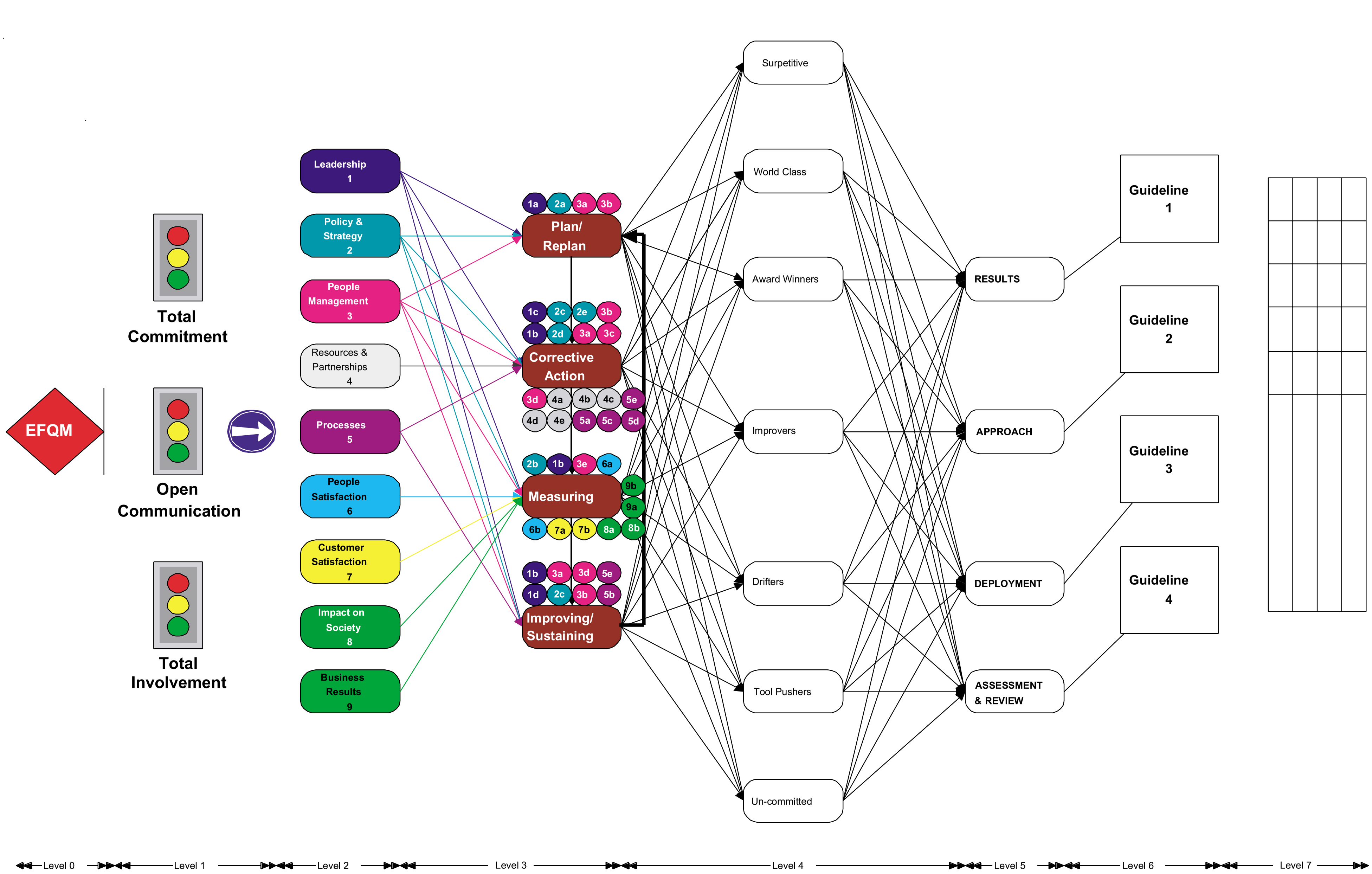
To create and deliver customer value, it is important for senior management to understand its components. Naumann and Jackson [1999] argue that at the most basic level value from a customer's perspective is the ratio of benefits to outlays. However, because customers can seldom determine objectively either the benefits or the outlays, it is their expectations and perceptions of these factors that are most important. The benefits they expect are shaped primarily by how they perceive product and service quality, whether or not their perception is valid. Because customers ultimately define quality, the concept is inherently vague. Definitions of quality, such as "fitness of use" or "conformance to customer expectations," reflect this ambiguity". Nevertheless, customers at least implicitly integrate their perceptions of product and service quality into a whole bundle of expected benefits. Because quality often cannot be observed directly, customers use product and tangible service attributes as indicators of quality (i.e. "clarity of sound" in a stereo system).

Naumann and Jackson [1999] pointed that on the outlay side of the equation customers' perceptions and expectations are again the determining factors. The three components of outlays are the transaction price, life cycle costs and the degree of risk. Transaction price is what is paid for the product or service at the time of purchase. Life cycle cost is the total cost of ownership, including operating, repair, service, and disposition expenses. The degree of risk involves how certain customers are about the product and its benefits. The less certain they are the higher the cost. The transaction price, life cycle costs, and degree of risk collectively influence the customers' perceptions and expectations of outlay. If the expected benefits are greater than the expected outlays, customer value is high. Conversely, if the expected benefits are less than the expected outlays, customers perceive the product as having low value. If the expected benefits exactly match the expected outlays, customers are likely to be ambivalent about the product.

Self-Assessment has been accepted as a comprehensive, systematic and regular review of an organisation's activities and results referenced against a specific model. The EFQM Business Excellence Model is claimed to address a number of an organisation's challenges [Hillman, 1994]. The benefits for an organisation to carry out self-assessment are detailed by EFQM [1999] and include providing a powerful tool to measure performance, highlighting areas, which require immediate action and involving people at the strategic, tactical and operational levels in developing a process improvement approach to quality. The authors introduced a methodology on how to carry out self-assessment in seven levels fashionable ways (see **Fig. 1**).

Level zero represents the initial decision relating to the appropriateness of applying for the EFQM Award. Level one illustrates the ingredients required for the assessment process. Level two indicates the understanding stage with reference to the EFQM' criteria. Level three identifies which of the sub-criteria requires a focus on planning, action, measuring or improving. Level four concentrates on categorising organisations into seven categories and specifying the different characteristics associated with each category. Level five focuses on the Results, Approach, Deployment, Assessment & Review (RADAR) logic, and level six provides a comprehensive guideline for assessing each element of the EFQM criteria and its areas to address. Level seven is designed to weight the final scores of the self-assessment process. Each level is described briefly in the following sub-sections.

FIGURE 1: THE PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS



1.1 GUIDELINE SELECTION

There were two problems facing the authors in deciding which elements are generic to include in the guideline list in level 6 (see **Fig. 1**) and what weight should be assigned to each element. EFQM [1999] provided some information about a number of these elements. Others were extracted from various sources mainly interviews with senior managers and consultants. An illustrative example of the award winner guidelines for the customer results criteria and leadership sub-sub criteria approach, deployment and assessment and review is provided in the following sections.

Award Winners Customer Perception Measures Results

INFORMATION OVERVIEW: Provides 65% of the holistic picture of the business.

TRENDS: Positive and provides 65% of the measures required for the relevant approaches and deployment and covers 65% of the stakeholders' data.

TARGETS: Shows 65% of the targets being set and compares with own targets and other external organisations.

COMPARISONS: Compares with 65% of others industry averages or 'best in class'.

CAUSES: Cause and effect analysis is used in 65% of business areas.

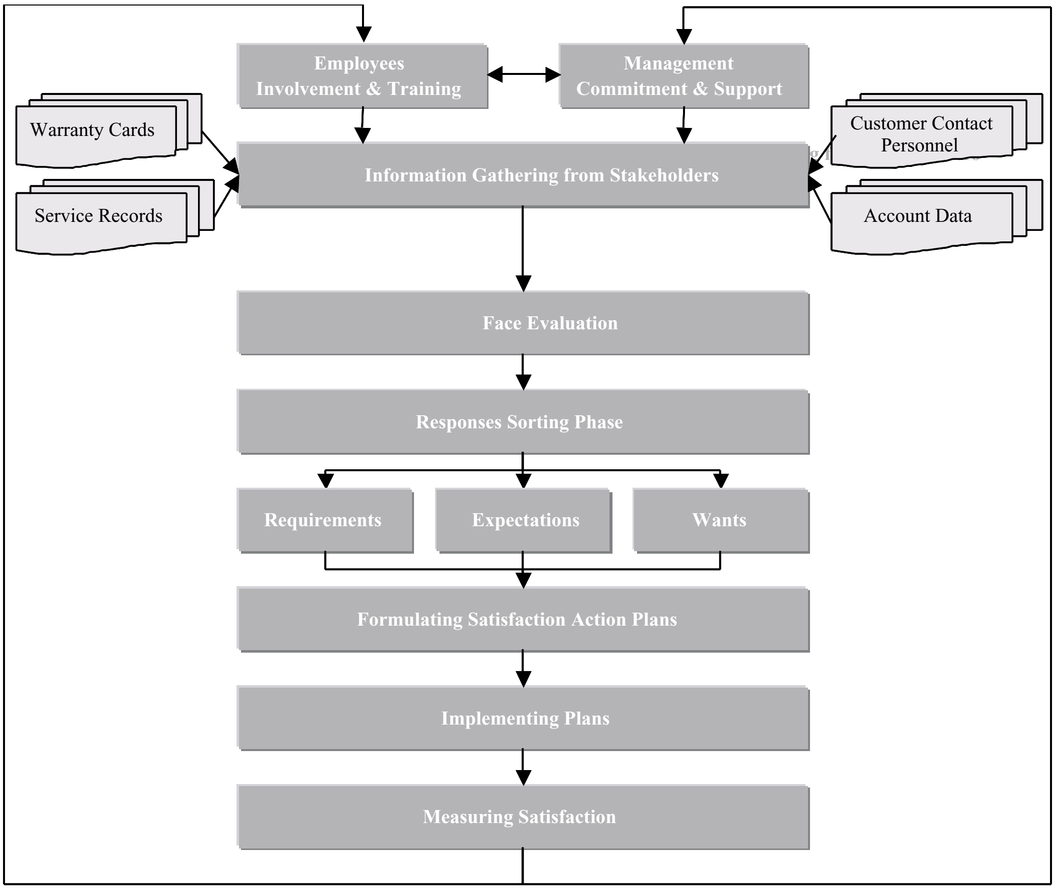
SCOPE: Measures 65% of the balanced set of factors for now and for the future and addresses 65% of the relevant areas and activities.

2.0 PROPOSED PROGRAMME

The exact mean for creating an effective customer satisfaction programme is not easy. McCarthy [1997] argue that customer satisfaction is highly related to loyalty, which in turn leads to increasing profitability, market share, and growth. Naumann [2001] agree with this view and emphasis that the importance of developing an effective programme is clear. According to a study conducted by Arthur D. Little and McKinsey to examine the viability of the existing programmes, Duffin [1993] concluded that less than one-third of all customer satisfaction initiatives accomplished anything, and two-thirds of them ground to a halt. The major reasons for these failures cited in the literature e.g. Ahire [1996] includes lack of top management commitment, unrealistic expectations about the time frame and cost of implementing them, over or under reliance on statistical methods, and the failure to develop and sustain a quality-oriented corporate culture. Naumann [2001] highlight another problem associated with the existing programmes, is that they begin with sending an "off-the-shelf" survey, or one from another company, to probe their attitudes about customer service. Although this seems to be an easy and inexpensive method, the results are generally less than satisfactory. Each firm should take the initiative to develop its own measurement program based on its needs and the needs of its customers. Only then will survey results be useful to management and lead to future improvements. Review the literature such as Naumann and Jackson [1999], Naumann [2001], McDougall et al [1997] and McCarthey [1997] shows that initiatives towards the need for structured programme is critical for an organisation to compete in the global market. But these initiatives concentrated only on providing explicit knowledge. Know how based on a clear route map to follow was lacking. Also the use of Information Technology (IT) as an important supportive mechanism in the decision making process was not discussed. For these reasons, the authors' felt that this research work should combine both missing elements to fulfil this gap exists in the literature in a practical approach.

Figure 5, illustrates the proposed eight steps programme for achieving customer satisfaction. Each of these steps is now described in brief.
Figure 5: Customer Satisfaction Programme

FIGURE 5: CUSTOMERS SATISAFACTION PROGRAMME



2.1 SEEDING

This first step of the proposed programme focuses on senior management commitment, which plays one of the key roles in the success or failure of this program. No firm can truly satisfy its customers unless top management is committed to meet their perception and expectations and be supportive by paving the way for all business units and employees to share this responsibility. McCarthy (1997) indicated that an organisation does not increase its customer value simply by meeting expectations; it has to exceed them. However, the only way employees will put forth the extra effort required to exceed customer expectations is when they believe management is focused on their well-being. Any customer service initiative that does not take into account employees, who they are, how they are trained, how they are treated, how aware they are of their customers' needs, and how easy (or difficult) the culture and working environment are, is doomed from the start.

2.2 INFORMATION GATHERING

At this step, there are three groups of customers that are often neglected in the existing customer satisfaction programmes: internal customers, channel members in consumer markets, and buying center members in business-to-business markets. As power has shifted more clearly to consumers, channel intermediaries (particularly those close to the consumer) have gained power as well. For example, because of the diversity of brands competing for shelf space, retailers play more of a gatekeeper role than ever before. Ensuring that they remain satisfied is obviously important. However, channels may also include brokers, wholesalers, and distribution centers, each of which may have different decision criteria. Business2business marketing often implies satisfying the purchasing manager. However, the power to formulate purchase decisions is dispersed among various individuals in most firms. In a high-tech industry for example, people from such departments as engineering, production, purchasing, quality assurance, and research and development may be involved in the purchase decision process. Because each department evaluates suppliers differently, an effective customer satisfaction program needs to pursue the multiple views normally found in the buying decision.

2.3 EVALUATING

This is the follow-up stage to information gathering, which focuses on customers' priorities and their degree of satisfaction with the current state of processes. The mechanism used at this stage is to talk directly to customers. Customers are rarely completely honest with companies during face-to-face evaluations, however; often they tend to be overly complimentary. So the goal should be to discover everything that is important to them rather than solicit straightforward opinions about their satisfaction with the company. In particular, this valuable data should include their perceptions of not only product quality but also service quality and price. And customer viewpoints should transcend the entire life of the product, not just right after the purchase transaction. During open-ended interviews, customers can be asked to define critical incidents or situations in which they were either very satisfied or very dissatisfied.

2.4 SORTING

Once the company has obtained customer information, it must sort the responses into three categories: requirements, expectations, and wants. Requirements are those product and service attributes that customers must possess. For example, if the customer purchases a computer and needs delivery next day, that becomes a requirement. In contrast, expectations are product or service quality standards that the product should possess, such as a warranty and guarantee. The wants are those things customers would like to have but do not really expect, such as unusually outstanding service.

Customer views are in the state of dynamic. Their expectations are not static. For example, an expectation this year may be a requirement next year, so the company performance must respond quickly and efficiently to these variables. The rate of change is often determined by the speed in developing the products or services offered by the competition.

2.5 FORMULATING ACTION PLANS

The real purpose of this program is to generate detailed action plans to follow. If a company chooses not to practice continuous improvement and does not make any changes to increase customer satisfaction level based on the credible data and information about their customers, then Senior Management has missed a key opportunity. The real litmus test of this proposed programme is to provide direction for organizational change and improvement. Action plans should logically flow from the information gathered in the previous two steps.

2.6 IMPLEMENTING PLANS

Because many of the issues that affect customer satisfaction span functional boundaries, firms must establish cross-functional teams to develop and implement action plans. Not taking actions allows your customer base to decay while permitting your competition to gain market share.

2.7 MEASURING SATISFACTION

This is a continuous process that infuses the voice of the customer into the firm's decision-making processes. There are three reasons for this. First, very few firms ever achieve 100 percent customer satisfaction. But by striving for it, a company will continuously improve, along with employee morale and satisfaction. Second, because customers' views are constantly changing, if a customer satisfaction program presents only one-shot glimpses of those views, the customers may drift away. If their needs are dynamic and the firm is static, gaps will emerge. The third reason involves competition.

2.8 REPEATING

The previous steps must be repeated on a regular bases to enable continuous improvement (see **Fig. 1**).

3.0 CONCLUSIONS

The EFQM Business Excellence Model is a flowchart of how an excellent company operates. Increasingly, many companies seeking business excellence are assessing themselves against the nine criteria of the model first to understand fully their position today and then to use this benchmark to pursue continuous improvement. Self-assessment is the regular, comprehensive and systematic review of an organisation's activities and results against tangible and relevant criteria. Most organisations use self-assessment to get a better focus on continuous improvement and also to measure the progress of their improvement initiatives.

Customer satisfaction is fundamental to the well being of individual consumers, to the profits of firms supported through purchasing and patronisation, and to the stability of economic and political structures. All these entities benefit from the provision and receipt of satisfying life outcomes, particularly in the global market. Delivering quality to customers in a competitive marketplace dictates the need to continually enhance a customer's experience and satisfaction. However, evidence indicates that satisfying customers is not enough to retain them because even satisfied customers defect at a high rate in many industries. For example, Xerox found that its "totally satisfied" customers were six times more likely to repurchase Xerox products during the following eighteen months than its "merely satisfied" customers were. "Totally satisfied" rank only two scale points higher than "merely satisfied," although it earns six times more loyalty. Apparently, the scales that researchers commonly use to measure satisfaction do not translate linearly into outcomes such as loyalty in terms of purchases. This also suggests that businesses must strive for 100 percent, or total, customer satisfaction and even delight to achieve the kind of loyalty they desire. The proposed programme discussed in this paper is a step in this direction

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