

## The Importance of Voice of the Customer programmes

**“Any approach to listening to the customer voice is better than not listening to it.”**

In today’s times, where [Voice of the Customer](#) (VoC) has become the latest big thing in the business world, this statement is almost universally agreeable. Should it be though? Is it really true that any input from your customers into the running of your business is better than none?

We think the answer is not quite as straightforward. Imagine yourself back to childhood. You’re overhearing a conversation amongst your parents, but can only hear snippets of the actual conversation. Imagine you hear: “[...] problem [...] boarding school [...] sort it out [...].”

Now, as a child, hearing just these three parts of a conversation, you can imagine the reaction it causes. Your behaviour as a child would from now on – at least for some time – be influenced by your understanding that your parents want to send you to boarding school.

It could, of course, be just the opposite. You haven’t heard the whole conversation, and you haven’t undergone a structured approach to analysing what your parents have really said. Your future behaviour is based on partial understanding of a relevant conversation about you.

We believe that many organisations act like that child. They have the best intentions to listening to the voice of their parents (or customers), but because they do so unsystematically, they adjust their behaviour (the way they do business) to individual, isolated parts of the conversation.

We believe that a truly coherent customer experience can only come from a systematic review, adjustment and classification of the snippets that you pick up. This bears two tangible consequences:

- You should aim to identify the skew that is introduced by the mechanisms you apply to listen to your customers’ voices. Be aware of what you’re not hearing!
- You should aim to maximise the part of the conversation you can hear – i.e. you should integrate as many sources of the VoC as possible.

Now, these consequences are related, but certainly not the same.

The concept underlying the first consequence is representativeness. The ever increasing view in a world of big data, where “n = all” is that conclusions can be drawn from

customer feedback wherever it is collected. And there is certainly a place for immediate customer feedback. Providing this in real time at the point of service delivery allows for service recovery, which may impact an individual customer's experience. But it doesn't allow for a systematic change of behaviour. This requires confidence, that what you hear is a true reflection of your customers' conversations and views. To achieve this, a VoC programme based on the principles of good research, considering representativeness of a sample (be that in primary customer research or through passive collection of the Voice of the Customer), is required. We all know, and love, great case studies. In fact, our [Customer Experience Excellence Centre](#) is full of the best case studies out there, typifying many ways of providing the best experience possible. But case studies are useful to show you a way forward to improve a particular issue. They are not the diagnostic tools to identify which issue to tackle first. This can only be achieved by a representative, valid understanding of what your customers talk about.

Establishing a systematic, representative way of analysing your customers' voice does not mean your focus is narrowed. In fact, the opposite is true. By formulating a programme that provides guidance to your organisation as to how to analyse customer feedback, you can broaden the skill sets within the organisation, enabling the appropriate analysis at the appropriate levels. Again, let's think of an example: imagine you have established a programme of primary research, which enables collection of feedback from a representative subset of your customers. You have also established the framework within which you analyse this feedback. This is the time to open up the diagnosis and action planning processes to as much feedback as you can get. You identified your online presence as an issue area? Listen to Social Media to learn what you could improve. You've prioritised improvements to your IVR system? Listen in to your in the moment feedback from the call centres. It's the diagnostic stage of VoC programmes (as well as service recovery) that requires as much input as possible. Make sure your VoC programme is set up to achieve this.

Coming back to our original example, it turned out that our parents were actually talking about a case they had heard in the news – not about ourselves. It means that the two weeks of being on our best behaviour to avoid being sent to boarding school were two weeks of lost fun and excitement. Probably an affordable loss for a child. Changing organisational processes and behaviours based on incomplete information is likely to be much more costly.