

## Oregon State Department of Motor Vehicles: Understanding Customer Needs

### Description

Anyone who has ever gone to renew a driver's license or register a vehicle knows that slow, heavy traffic is not restricted to roadways. When the Oregon State Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) decided to upgrade the quality of its service to customers, it assumed, rather understandably, that the biggest complaint among Oregon-licensed drivers was the interminably long lines at the DMV. The DMV therefore started to devise a strategy—more clerks, automated processes, and the like—to reduce the waiting time in its offices.

Fortunately, before implementing the plan, the DMV decided to ask its customers what issues were *most* important to them. Surprisingly enough, long lines were not the most serious complaint voiced by Oregon drivers. The greatest cause of dissatisfaction was the esthetic quality of the pictures plastered on the individual driver's licenses. Oregon drivers had to tolerate long lines for license renewals only once every five years, but they had to live with unflattering portraits on those licenses for every day in between, with no assurance that the next picture would be any better.

The Oregon DMV decided to redesign the photographing process. Instead of one quick still shot, the DMV now uses a video system to create the driver's portrait. While the new system adds time to the renewal process, it also allows the driver to select a personal favorite from a variety of shots.

By taking the time to ask customers about their needs, rather than just making assumptions for them, the Oregon State DMV was able to enhance customer satisfaction even while increasing the license processing time.

### Learning Points

When an organization makes assumptions regarding its customers' needs, it can result in a disappointment in the marketplace. In analyzing customer needs, note that your organization's perception often differs from the customer's perception. A difference between your perception and that of your customer is evidence of an unmet customer need and requires immediate attention. The good news, though, is that when you uncover such a difference, you uncover a new opportunity.

Customers understandably state their needs based on their own perceptions, which may differ dramatically from a supplier's perceptions. A quality team should *not* consider whether the customers' perceptions are right or wrong, but rather how customer perceptions influence their satisfaction with the service or product.

The Oregon DMV thought that its customers wanted shorter lines and faster service. It was only by *asking* the customers directly what they wanted that they were able to determine that their customers' most important need was driver's license portraits that did them justice.

### Discussion Questions

**Question:** Has your organization ever been penalized because it has misread the needs of your customers, i.e., because customers perceive their needs very differently than you anticipated?

**Answer:** Responses will vary. Probe: What were the consequences of misreading the customers' needs? How can you avoid misreading your customers' needs in the future?

**Question:** What advantages are there to 1) involving the customers in the design of a product or 2) surveying them about their needs on a regular basis?

**Answer:** Customer satisfaction and loyalty can be improved when we provide products that meet all customers' expectations. When customers are delighted with our products, they not only return again and again, they also consistently refer others to our products. While the Oregon DMV may have an uncontested corner on the driver's license market, its desire to respond to the needs of the customer can reduce the frustration level among its customers and employees and result in a more pleasant experience for everyone involved in the process.