

Listen to Your Customers Just Don't Believe Everything They Say

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Listen to Your Customers

- As Quality Professionals, we are conditioned to think of “quality” as meeting or exceeding customer needs.
- If we want to know what customers need, we just ask them, right?
- Right?

Listen to Your Customers

- Reality is a bit more complicated.
 - Customers will try to tell you what they need
 - Sometimes they are right, but other times, what they tell you is incomplete, misleading, or downright wrong.

Listen to Your Customers

- In the mid- to late- 1980's I worked as a Systems Engineer for an organization building computer systems for manufacturing automation.
- We spent weeks on-site interviewing customers, writing detailed functional specifications, and getting customer sign-off.

Listen to Your Customers

- But almost every time, when the system was delivered we had to implement last minute changes to make the systems work.
- This pattern repeats itself over and over.
- What is going wrong, and how can it be prevented?

Listen to Your Customers

- Customers are unable or unwilling to articulate their real needs because:
 - They think they know what they need, but they don't.
 - They are unaware of their needs.
 - They think it will reflect negatively on them.

Customers Think They Know...

- Identifying customer needs is like a doctor treating a patient.
 - There is a symptom (“chief complaint” or “presenting problem”).
 - There is a diagnosis (the underlying disease or condition responsible).
 - There is a prescription (the recommended treatment for the disease or condition).

Customers Think They Know...

- In quality as in medicine, sometimes the patient mis-diagnoses or mis-prescribes.
- If we accept the customer's diagnosis or prescription without independent verification,
 - A bacterial infection is mistaken for influenza
 - Antibiotics are prescribed for a cold

Customers Think They Know...

- Countermeasures:
 - Don't take the customer's diagnosis or prescription at face value.
 - Backtrack to the symptom and apply the necessary expertise to arrive at diagnosis and prescription.

Customers Think They Know...

- But the spec said...
 - You get a customer request for a new item, accompanied by a drawing or specification.
 - But when you ship the first lot, it's a disaster.
- What happened? It met the spec.
- Usually happens when the customer is trying to develop a second source.

But the Spec Said...

- There are two common scenarios:
 - The customer specified the item incorrectly, but the incumbent supplier has learned by trial and error what is actually needed.
 - The customer designed their product or process around a suppliers standard product, then wrote the specification based on the suppliers' product data sheets.

But the Spec Said...

- Countermeasures:
 - Be alert for specifications that seem “loose” or incomplete.
 - Ask for samples (respecting intellectual property).
 - Ask if you are a “second source”. If so, dig into the specification.
 - Make trial batches before initiating production.

Listen to Your Customer

- Sometimes its what they don't tell you.
- This typically surfaces one of three ways:
 - Old problems resurface
 - A less important problem suddenly emerges as important
 - “I didn't know you could do *that*.”

The Things They Didn't Say

- When old problems resurface:
 - A new product is intended to replace another one.
 - The old product solved a critical problem.
 - But because that problem was no longer on the radar, the customer never mentioned it.

The Things They Didn't Say

- Countermeasure:
 - Any replacement system must provide all the functionality of the one it is replacing. Identify the features of the product the customer is currently using.

The Things They Didn't Say

- A less important problem suddenly emerges
 - “When you solve your number one problem, you promote number two.” (Gerald Weinberg)
 - Customers tend to be focused on their most pressing current problem.
 - When the primary problem is resolved, secondary problems suddenly become more important.

The Things They Didn't Say

- Countermeasure:
 - Probe: Try to learn what other, less important problems exist.

The Things They Didn't Say

- “I didn't know you could do *that*.”
 - Customers tend to think of solving problems in terms of the products and tools they know and use.
 - “If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said ‘Faster horses’” (Attributed to Henry Ford)

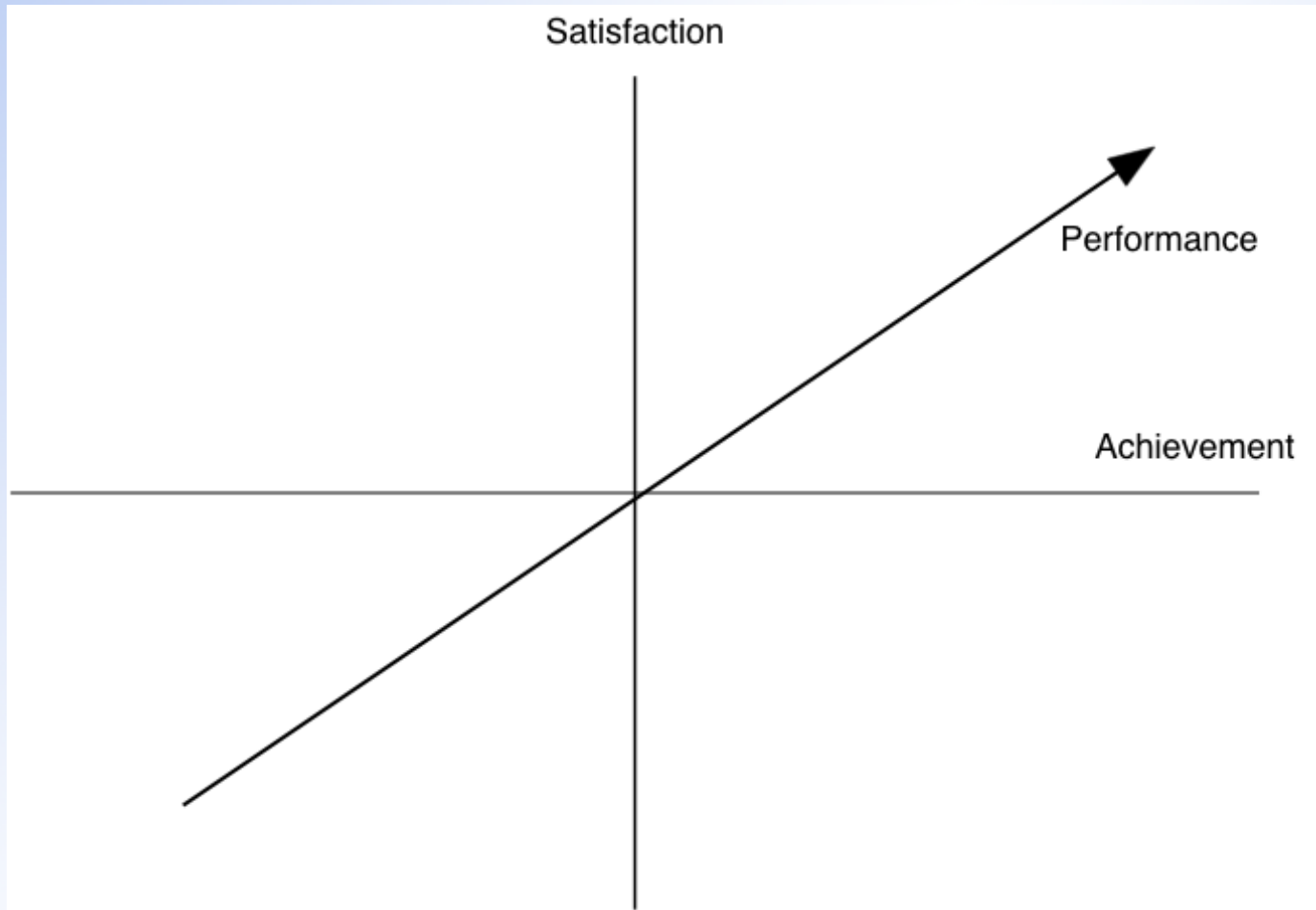
The Things They Didn't Say

- Countermeasure:
 - Try to get customers to take a “big picture” view. What is the underlying issue?
 - Expose customers to the possibilities of technology.

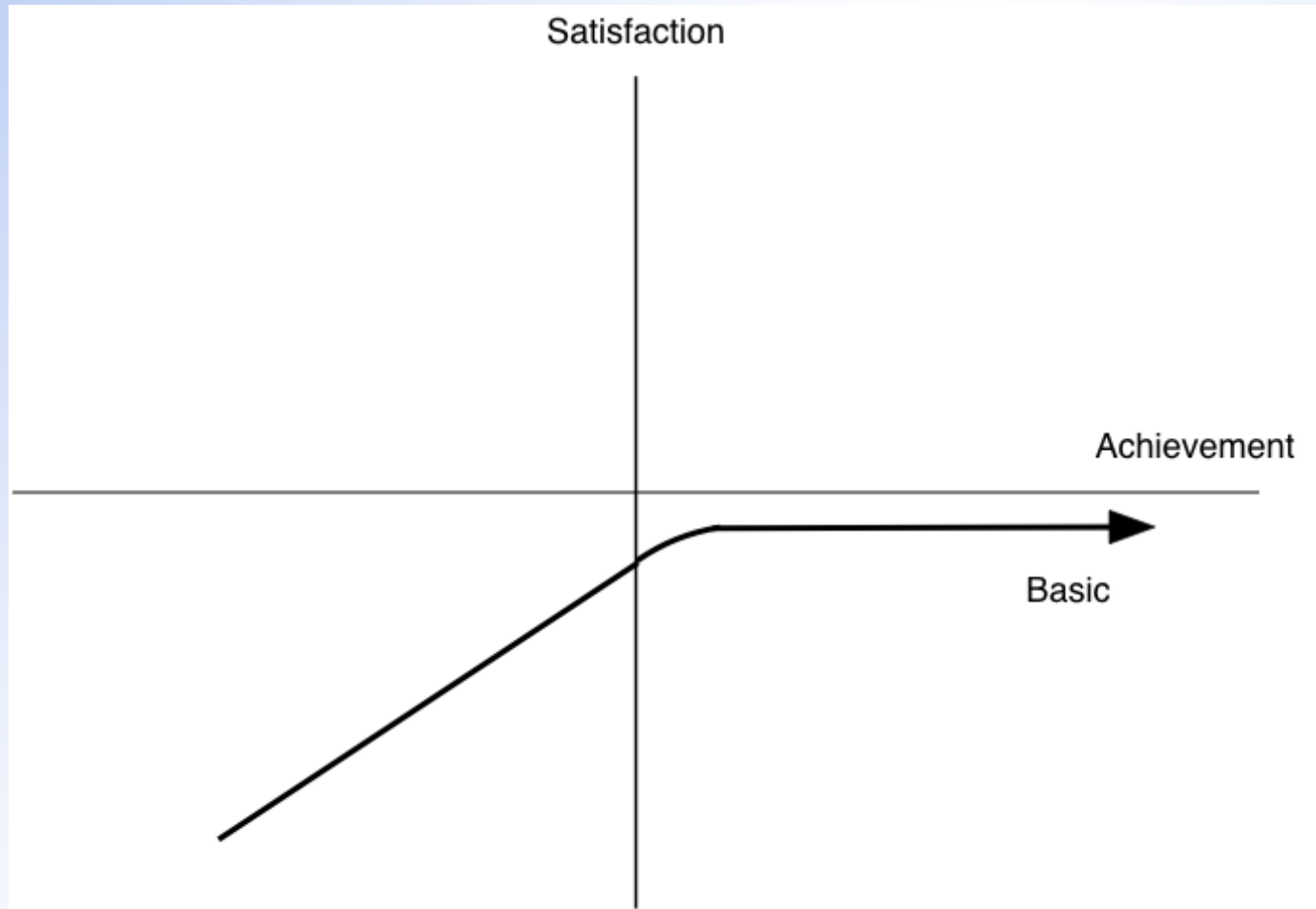
The Things They Didn't Say

- In the 1980's, Dr. Noriaki Kano developed a theoretical model to describe this phenomenon.
- It identifies three kinds of customer needs:
 - Performance Needs
 - Basic Needs
 - Delighters

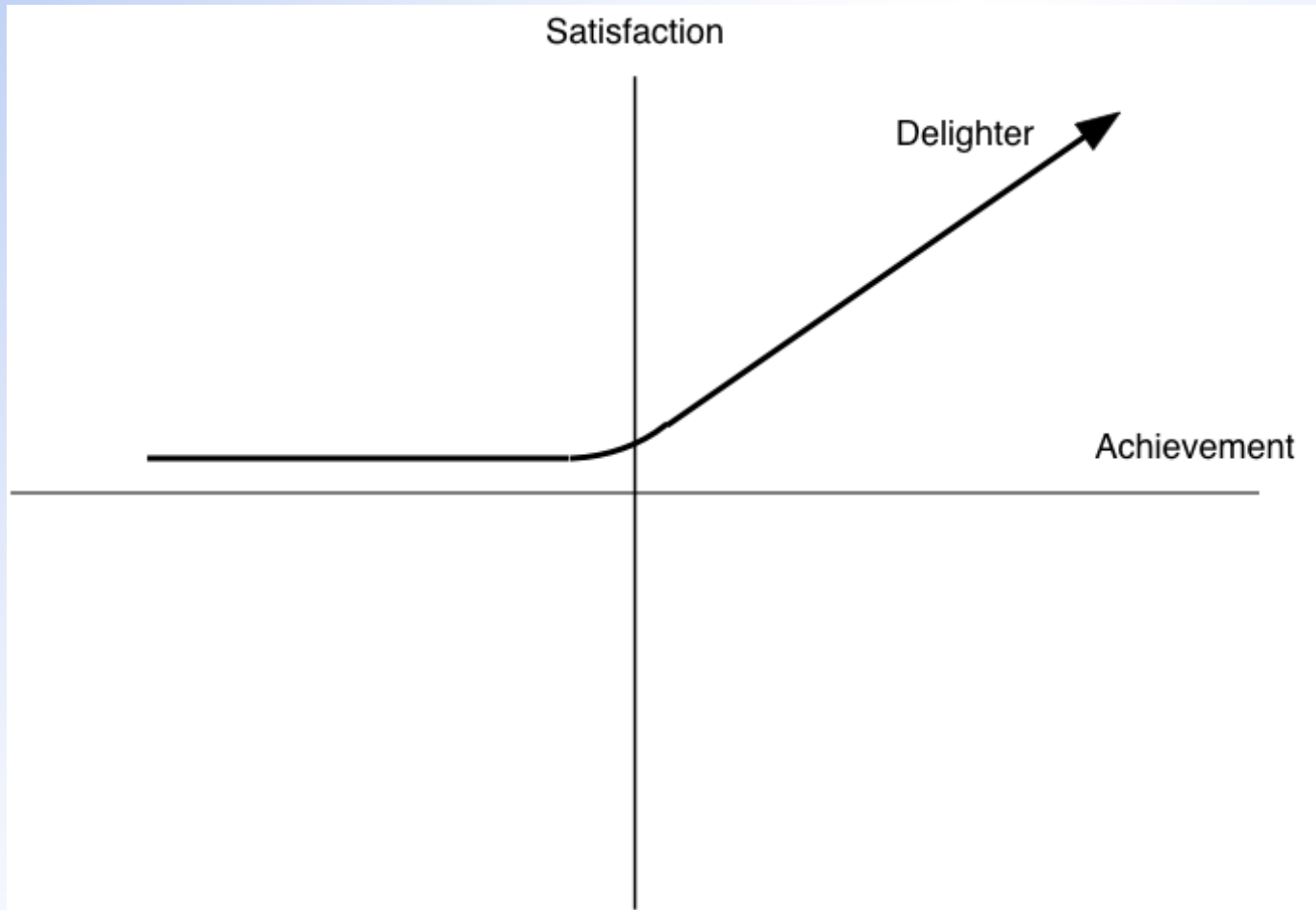
Performance Needs



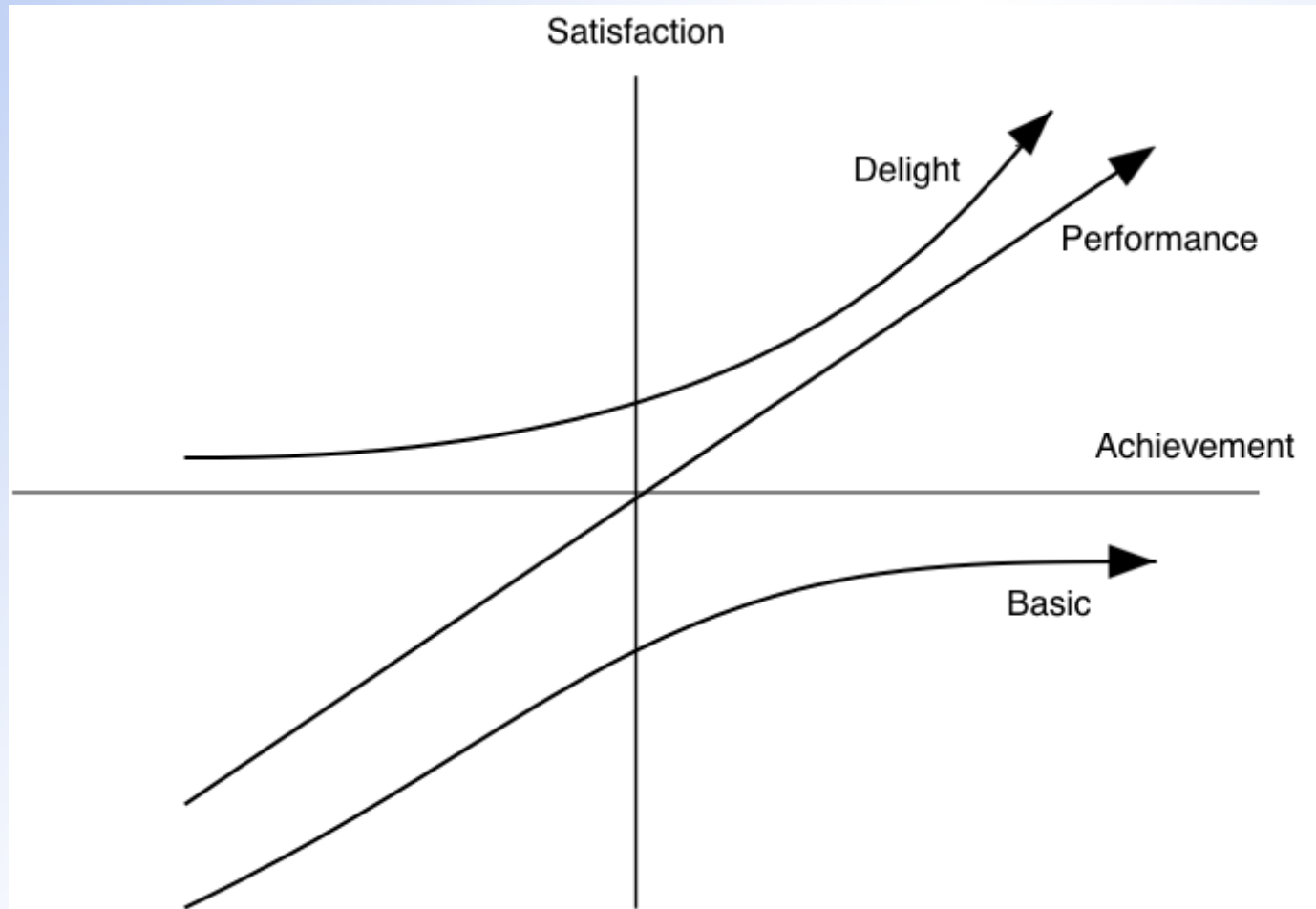
Basic Needs



Delighters



Kano Model



Discovering Basic Needs

- Any new product must at least offer the level of functionality of the products it seeks to replace.
- Investigate the features of competitive products.

Discovering Delighters

- Try to understand the underlying problems the customer is facing.
- Understand broader societal trends.

Discovering Delighters

- Ethnography is a branch of anthropology that studies how a people lives their daily lives.
- Market researchers have adopted some of the same techniques to identify latent product needs:
 - Asking people to keep diaries and logs
 - Passively observing people go about their daily activities, either directly or with video equipment

One Final Reason

- People want to be thought well of.
- They are reluctant to reveal things that they think reflect poorly on them.
- Survey researchers call this “Social Desirability Bias”.
- Social Desirability Bias results in under-reporting of “bad” things and over-reporting of “good” things.

One Final Reason

- Social Desirability Bias
 - Is particularly important when dealing with sensitive topics like alcohol and drug use, sexual behavior, or criminal activity.
 - But it can also influence more common subjects like environmental concerns, unsafe driving, status symbols, diet & exercise, tobacco use, charitable activities, etc.

One Final Reason

- Countermeasures:
 - Offer anonymity or confidentiality.
 - Administer surveys by computer rather than in person.
 - Use indirect questioning; ask for a response from the perspective of another person or group.
 - Word questions as neutrally as possible.
 - Use derived measures of importance.

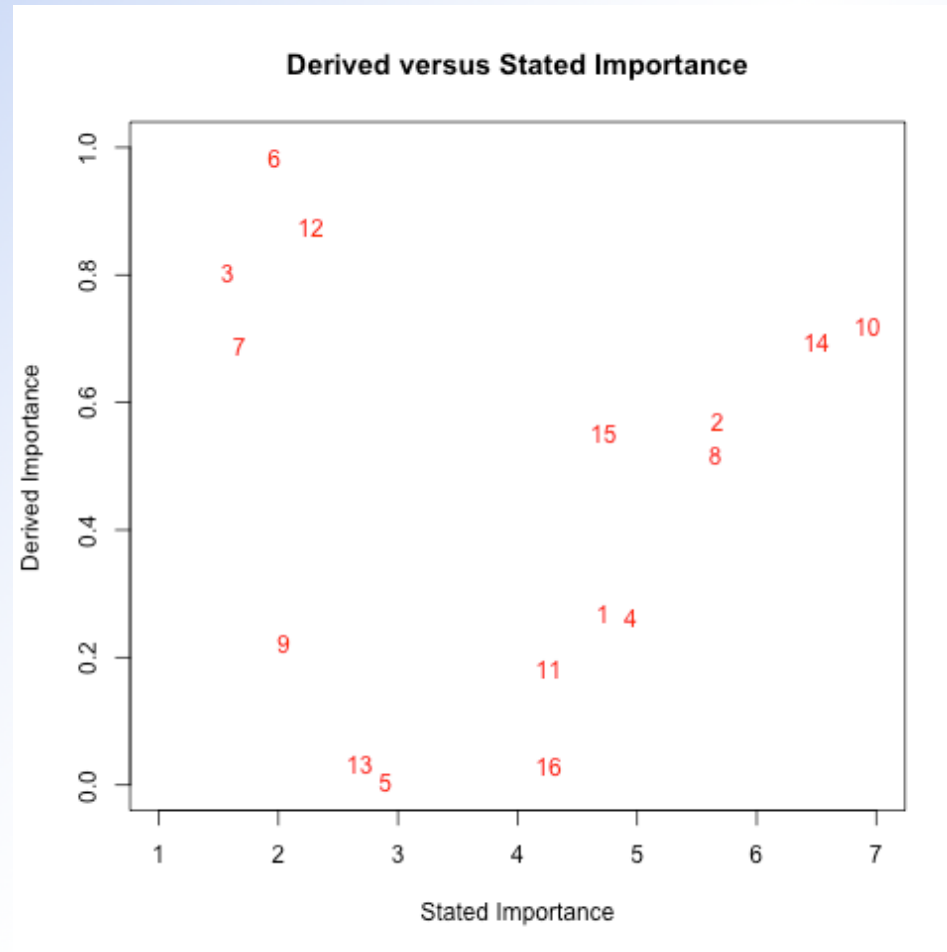
Derived versus Stated Importance

- Derived versus Stated Importance
 - A technique used by market researchers to determine how customers' actual preferences differ from their stated preferences

Derived versus Stated Importance

- Derived versus Stated Importance
 - Ask three questions:
 - How satisfied are you with the product?
 - How important is the feature?
 - How well does the product deliver the feature?
 - Derived importance is the correlation between performance and satisfaction

Derived versus Stated Importance



In Summary

- Customers are unable or unwilling to articulate their real needs for primarily three reasons:
 - They think they know what they need, but they actually do not.
 - They are unaware of their needs.
 - They believe it will reflect negatively on them if they express their true desires.

In Summary

- Countermeasures include:
 - Try to identify the underlying customer problem, particularly when they offer a diagnosis or prescription. Bring expertise in diagnosis and prescription.
 - Ask questions about customer generated specifications, particularly if you suspect you are a second supplier. Get samples. Make samples.
 - Find out what they currently do. Include all the “basic” requirements being met by what they are currently using.
 - Look for opportunities for delight: higher level underlying problem, ethnography.
 - Take steps to avoid social desirability bias.

For Further Study

- There are other potential sources of misinformation you should understand:
 - Acquiescence bias
 - Extreme responding bias
 - Non-response bias
 - Volunteer bias (self-selected samples)
 - Researcher bias

Contact Information

The presentation and the paper from which it is derived will be posted on the “Whitepapers” page at www.rowequality.com.

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