Customer Satisfaction Techniques Applied to the Transport of Nuclear Fuels to meet ISO 9001:2000 Requirements

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Abstract

Understanding the needs of potential and existing customers is seen as essential to the continuing success of the nuclear fuel transport business. A recognised process utilised for this is the recording and measurement of customer satisfaction.

This paper looks at what customer satisfaction means to BNFL International Transport in terms of, understanding what the customers needs are, supplying those needs or proposing appropriate alternatives, delivering on contractual obligations, in terms of the product or service being supplied to cost and time, listening to the changing needs of customers should this occur and monitoring the perception of customers in terms of performance. Within BNFL as a whole customer satisfaction is managed through the application of a Management Framework. Within this framework are set a number of values, these are focused on acknowledging social and environmental responsibilities while satisfying the needs of customers. Customer satisfaction is a key aspect of this philosophy.

To implement these requirements BNFL International Transport and its subsidiary companies Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited and BNFL SA (France) adopted the ISO9001 Quality Management Systems model within which the application of customer satisfaction processes is mandatory.

Several tried and trusted methods by which data on customer perception can be acquired analysed and then measured. Each method described has positive and negative aspects. Examples of these methods are;

- to formulate questionnaires, either generic or customer specific;
- use the services of consultants, to conduct independent measurements of our customer perceptions;
- perform self analysis based on previous performance and customer interactions;
- meet with customers; agree milestones that customers perceive as key to the success of their business, and that can be achieved.

Introduction

The philosophy behind the application of customer satisfaction techniques, as applied to nuclear fuel transportation companies has been enhanced since the publication of the ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management Systems Standard. The original concept required by previous Management Systems models was that if there was no gap between a customers expectation and what a nuclear

transportation company provided, then it was assumed that a customer would be satisfied. The ISO 9001:2000 standard introduced a view, that is, not to dwell on existing levels of satisfaction but to put measures in place to further enhance customer satisfaction. That is to go from an acceptable transporter, to the customers' transporter of choice.

It is imperative that the Transportation Company has a deep understanding of how its customers operate and what they expect from their chosen transporter. ISO 9001:2000 requires that the transporters' senior management commit themselves to ensuring that customers' needs are met

Within any supply chain there may be several 'interested parties' that could input to the customer satisfaction process, like subcontractors, sub-suppliers and other influencing parties

The philosophy applied in this paper is that the transporter should involve customers and subcontractors/sub-suppliers in

- developing the customer satisfaction processes
- The collection of appropriate data as viewed by both parties, by those requesting the data (transporter) and those providing the data (customer).
- giving feeding back to customers on how the data is being used, and how it will be used to benefit the contractual relationship
- identifying where improvements to the product or service can be made

Developing Management Systems to incorporate the Measurement and Monitoring of Customer Satisfaction

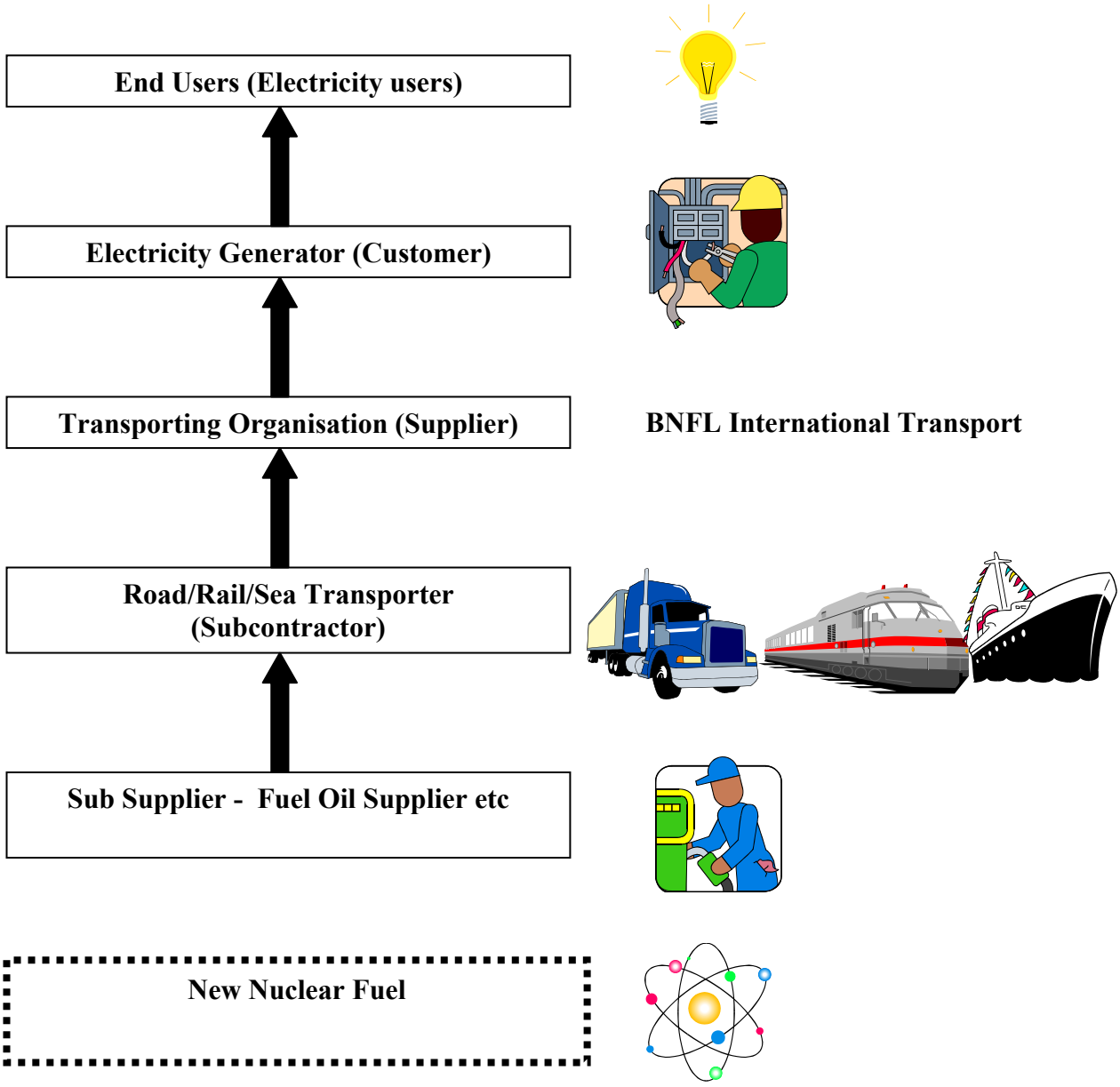
Where no processes exists a new Customer Satisfaction process will need to be developed, ISO 9001:2000 (8.2.1) defines requirements and ISO 9004:2000 (8.2.1.2) gives guidelines for performance improvement. Where the transporter already applies processes to monitor customer's perceptions and expectations, it is recommended that these processes be reviewed to establish their effectiveness. It is essential that management system processes are established before any tools and techniques are applied to ensure a consistent approach in obtaining data, and the use of that data. An approach that is not co-ordinated could result in a detrimental effect on the transporters' relationship with the customer.

Understanding what the customers needs are and the supply chain

It is important the most appropriate form of tools and techniques for data gathering techniques are chosen.

It is imperative that as a transporter you understand the needs of each customer and who is involved in the supply chain to satisfy the needs of that particular customer. The illustration below is that of a typical supply chain that may be applied to the transportation of new fuel from a fuel supplier to a customer/end user

Figure 1 Transportation Supply Chain (typical)



Techniques that can be used and how they are applied

The first step is to ensure that the communication links with your customer are established, and that you as a transporter have dialogue with the appropriate person/functions with your customers' organisation.
There are several tried and trusted methods by which data on a customer's perception of performance can be acquired analysed and then measured. There is no common solution that fits all, each customer has different requirements and different levels of perceived satisfaction. It is important that exploratory research is performed to ensure that when asked to participate in your data gathering scheme the customer sees a benefit to the customer/supplier relationship

Each method described in this paper has positive and negative aspects. It is important that management judgement is applied to applying the right tools and techniques to each customer. They are;

- questionnaires – generic questionnaires, one for all customers or one style for a specific customer type
- specific questionnaires – tailored to suit individual customers
- direct discussion - using telephone or other communication devices
- direct face to face customer discussion - agree milestones that customers perceive as key to the success of their business, and that can be achieved.
- use the services of consultants, to conduct independent measurements of our customer perceptions and expectations;
- perform self analysis based on previous performance and customer interactions;

Questionnaires

The most common form of data gathering is the questionnaire, the design of this and its impact on your customer is just as important as the data it provides is to you. It should be developed to ensure that data from as many areas of performance as possible are measured.

Generic questionnaires
This is the most common form of data gatherer used across all businesses; the positive side is that the questions asked are consistent across all customers. Giving a comparable measurement process. The negative side is that all customers needs are different, you may alienate your customer if they perceive that your understanding of there requirements is not as they would expect, or if there perception is that you already have the information you are requesting. The response rate to this method is usually the lowest of all the data gathering techniques

Customer specific questionnaire
A more proactive approach to the use of questionnaires, this method of data gathering is more labour intensive but the results are more rewarding.

Direct Dialogue with Customers

There is nothing like talking to your customers to find out what they really think. There are many ways of achieving successful dialogue with customers on customer satisfaction issues. You may have direct communication or you may wish to involve a third party data gathering organisation (consultant). Direct communication can be undertaken in several forms, a transporter with many customers, like those transporting instrument sources, radioactive samples etc. may wish to utilise telemarketing to obtain there data. Companies like my own (BNFL International Transport) with a relatively small customer base prefer to carry out face to face discussion, where the customer agrees to participate. My own organisation uses these face to face meetings to agree milestones that our customers perceive as key to the success of their business, that are achievable and where progress performance against those milestones can be reported back to the customer.

Both of these methods have their merits. Experience has shown that the latter provides the best useable data for both parties (transporter and customer)

Where external consultants are utilised it is important that they have a good business understanding of the transporter and the customer. Consultants are usually used where an impartial unbiased assessment of customer's views is required. This method of data gathering will produce useful data.

Self analysis

As an alternative or addition to the above it is possible for the transporter to perform self analysis of customer relationships, this has obvious disadvantages in that it gives the view of how the transporter views there own performance. The output data is subjective and must be considered useful for guidance only

Conclusions

Customer satisfaction as a requirement of ISO 9001 is here to stay transporters that wish to operate to this standard or take the next step and achieve certification must apply a customer satisfaction process. A successful customer satisfaction process is one, which enhances the relationship with your customer and hopefully leads to improvements to the service being supplied. There is no perfect method of obtaining useful data on customer satisfaction; the method used must be the one best suited to the individual customer.

References

ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management Systems – Requirements (published by the International Organization of Standardisation)

ISO 9004:2000 Quality Management Systems – Guidelines for performance improvements (published by the International Organization of Standardisation)