Customer satisfaction measurement in a business-to-business context: a conceptual framework

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Abstract: In practice, firms measure customer satisfaction using models and theory developed for evaluating the perceptions of individual consumers rather than entire organizations. This paper develops an integrated model of customer satisfaction measurement specific to a business-to-business context and addresses the unique challenges inherent in this context by incorporating learnings from the fields of customer satisfaction, organizational buying behavior and relationship marketing. After presenting the model and its rationale, the paper illustrates practical uses of the model as a managerial tool for framing a system of customer satisfaction measurement.

Introduction
Customer satisfaction measurement (CSM) is the principal tool by which marketers assess the health of their relationships with their customers. Extensive research has been dedicated to this topic in leading marketing journals over the past decade. Relatively few of these articles, however, have addressed customer satisfaction in a business-to-business context. Academic researchers have noted a predominant focus on consumer measurements with near complete disregard for customer satisfaction research between businesses (Morris and Davis, 1992; Moore and Schlegelmilch, 1994; Swan and Trawick, 1993; Swan et al., 1995; Patterson et al., 1997; Homburg and Rudolph, 2001). In addition to the psychographic complexities of measuring the satisfaction of individuals, industrial companies also need to wrestle with the added complexities of multiple respondents, complex product/service attributes and a diverse customer base. The challenges facing marketers in this area, therefore, need to be more fully understood and efficiently addressed.

Fortunately, the context of business-to-business relationships also has a rich knowledge base. Beginning in the 1950s many researchers and practitioners saw the need to create and confirm models of organizational buying behavior as distinct from consumer purchasing behavior. This research created an overall framework to explain how organizational buying occurs, who is involved in the buying process, and what environmental, organizational,
interpersonal and individual influences affect the final decision outcome (Webster and Wind, 1972). Rather than limiting the view of supplier-customer dealings as a series of discrete transactions or purchasing events, subsequent thinking in the area of relationship marketing has provided a more macro, holistic view of long-term business partnerships.

This paper develops an integrated model of customer satisfaction measurement in a business-to-business context and addresses the unique challenges inherent in this context by incorporating learnings from the fields of customer satisfaction, organizational buying behavior and relationship marketing. After presenting the model and its rationale, the paper discusses practical uses of the model to illustrate its role as a managerial tool.

The challenges
The extant academic literature has cited several limitations with regard to this topical area. Organizational research has been primarily focused on the purchase decision process with little emphasis on post-choice consumption and subsequent purchasing behavior (Qualls and Rosa, 1995). In addition, more recent views of buyer-seller relationships as networks call for an approach to measurement that is relationship rather than simply transaction specific (Homburg and Rudolph, 2001; Tikkanen et al., 2000). Finally, many businesses have few industrial clients, which raises questions about the validity of using statistical techniques requiring significant sample sizes. Averages tend to stabilize over time, showing no significant change in customer feedback metrics (Tikkanen et al., 2000). Often these “objective” numerical results disguise the real underlying issues needed to improve customer satisfaction.

Beyond the academic literature, many businesses are skeptical of CSM’s practical applicability in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of a customer relationship. In a recent study of industrial business managers, “many say that in practice CSM becomes a superficial and trivial activity, which is significant only at the customer service level” (Piercy, 1996 p. 10). This same study reveals that in those companies where CSM is practiced, there are often problems of internal politics over:

- blame assignment;
- mistrust of the validity of the information;
- concerns over the resources required for measurement; and
- preoccupation that CSM creates dissatisfaction by focusing customers on problem areas.

This highlights the need for a more comprehensive model of customer satisfaction focused on the specific challenges of measurement in a business-to-business context.

The first challenge relates to measuring the satisfaction of an entire firm. Traditional CSM, rooted in consumer behavior, focuses on an individual’s assessment of his or her satisfaction with a specific product or service. Likewise, most business-to-business research thus far has focused on the use of a “key informant” or single client contact as a proxy reporter for the firm. Satisfaction measures of a firm must be a composite of the satisfaction evaluations of all relevant client organization members. Identification of such members, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, is thus a critical element in measuring customer satisfaction in a business-to-business setting.
Another challenge lies in the use of the satisfaction construct itself, which is often defined in terms of the psychological processes that customers use in satisfaction judgments:

Satisfaction is the consumer’s fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service, itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption related fulfillment, including levels of under- or overfulfillment (Oliver, 1997, p. 13).

This definition presents two problems, when applied in a business-to-business context. First, many client employees will not have direct consumption experience with the product or service on which to base their satisfaction judgements. Second, in addition to the psychological or personal dimension reflected in this definition, business customers incorporate concrete, rational objectives directly related to the execution of a particular business function in their satisfaction judgement process (Webster and Wind, 1972; Sheth et al., 1999). The CSM instrument, therefore, must measure those elements of satisfaction relevant to each client contact.

The final challenge is to design a CSM model which is robust across all types of supplier-customer relationships. Although much recent research has focused on the importance of long-term strategic relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Wilson, 1995), an exclusionary emphasis on these relationships is limiting. Cannon and Perreault (1999) found that more closely-coupled relationships between businesses did not necessarily result in higher levels of customer satisfaction. Also, many businesses achieve higher profits with their transactional, opportunistic clients (Blois, 1998) and are therefore interested in measuring the satisfaction of these clients as well.

From the onset of organizational research, researchers have defined classifications (or buyclasses) to group together similar types of business-to-business relationships. The Robinson et al. (1967) model is the earliest and perhaps best known scheme partitioning all business-to-business transactions into new tasks (or first-time purchases), straight rebuys of existing products and modified rebuys. Recent work (Cannon and Perreault, 1999) extends this model by using the idea of relationship connectors (such as information exchange, operational linkages, etc.) rather than type of transaction to define a taxonomy of six classes of relationships. The CSM model presented here is designed to deal with the full range of customer relationships – from purely transactional exchanges to strategic partnerships. Later in the section on “Managerial implications”, a CSM system is developed for sample buyclass scenarios to illustrate the model’s application across varying buyer-seller relationships.

A conceptual model

Description and overview

The conceptual model pictured in Figure 1 visualizes business buyer-seller relationships as multiple individual “strands of contact” forming dyads between the buying and selling organizations (Anderson, 1995). These strands of contact can be seen as composing the “weave” of the overall relationship “fabric” between two businesses. The “influence screen” or the amount of influence the buyer contact has on the purchasing process determines the strength of these strands with regard to CSM. The ongoing product/service transactions between two companies, or lengthwise strands, determine the strength of the overall customer-supplier relationship as measured through the purchase cycle. Companies can then view CSM as integrated with a customer’s business processes, rather than isolated
evaluations of discrete product/service performance. In this model, CSM, in a business-to-business context, is seen as a composite of the satisfaction measures of each buyer-seller dyad through the decision and usage events of pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase.

The specific objectives of this model are to serve as a framework for the following:

1. identify in a comprehensive yet parsimonious manner those key buyer-seller dyads to be measured;
2. determine those elements of satisfaction that must be measured in a business-to-business context; and
3. develop measures for these satisfaction elements that can be combined in a survey instrument appropriate to each identified key client contact.

**Determination of key buyer-seller dyads**

The use of a key informant, or one representative contact, to respond on the behalf of the entire organization is a widely used approach both in practice and in organizational behavior research. Many researchers defend the use of the key informant as a reasonable technique that does not significantly affect the results of the organizational study (Conant et al., 1990). Depending on the study focus, researchers have observed professional buyers (Bunn, 1993, 1994), sales managers (Anderson et al., 1987) and customer service managers (Morris and Davis, 1992). Pennings (1979) and Phillips (1981) studied senior managers or owners with the assumption that they can respond authoritatively on behalf of the organization and provide more reliable information. To ensure their key informant was a reliable proxy, Patterson and colleagues (1997) selected only those individuals who had participated in a majority of the possible buying decision stages.

All of the above studies, however, have also cited the use of a single key informant as a limitation in their research. Phillips (1981) empirically demonstrates that the informant reporting process is a problematic measure in assessing organizational characteristics. In another empirical test, Silk and
Kalwani (1982) show a lack of consensus about purchase influence between pairs of informants from the same organization. Recent studies (Homburg and Rudolph, 2001; Qualls and Rosa, 1995) specifically focus on industrial CSM demonstrating differences in importance ratings of satisfaction measures among manufacturing, purchasing and engineering client personnel.

The objective of CSM in a business-to-business context is to completely assess the entire relationship between a supplier and its customers. As such, there is a clear need to move from a key informant approach to a “high order of network structure, such as an inter-organizational dyad” (Dawes et al., 1998, p. 166). The unit of measure presented here, therefore, is a specific buyer-seller contact relationship, or Anderson’s (1995) “strand of contact.”

These buyer-seller dyads are better visualized through the role each plays in the purchase/usage process rather than through specific organizational titles. Roles are more robust in their application across a broad array of businesses and the dynamic nature of persons assigned to buying and selling teams. Since this concept is critical to the model’s richness, it is appropriate to define the supplier roles, the customer roles and then, the logistical process for determining the individuals to measure within each of these roles.

Supplier roles. On the supplier side, this model utilizes the concept of boundary roles – or those employees who act on the boundary between their organization and other outside organizations. In the context of CSM, the model isolates those roles that have the most significant interaction from the customer’s perspective. Key contact employees occupy these roles and best represent the face of the company to the customer. Designing satisfaction studies around business functions and processes helps managers identify specific areas having greatest positive impact. The model illustrates these roles through common departmental labels such as sales, technical resources, customer service/supply chain, and post-sales service and support.

Incorporating employees from the supplier firm into the design and implementation of CSM results in several benefits. First, initiating the CSM process with key contact employees tangibly recognizes the value of employee information about customers and motivates the sharing of this information (Bendapudi and Leone, 2000). Second, employees are more likely to support the CSM process rather than view it as a disguised management tool for finger-pointing, coercing or blaming (Ferency, 1996). Finally, customers are most likely to evaluate their satisfaction with a supplier, at least in part, based on their relationship with their key contact(s) (Lambert et al., 1997).

Customer roles. Since the ultimate benefits of satisfied customers are repurchase or the expansion of current business, it is critical to measure the satisfaction of client employees having a direct or indirect impact on current and future purchases. Organizational buying behavior literature has contributed much to our understanding of the key roles of a buying center or DMU (decision-making unit) (Dawes et al., 1998; Webster and Wind, 1972); therefore, each of these roles has been incorporated into the CSM model:

- **Deciders** exercise formal or informal power to select or approve the final suppliers.
- **Gatekeepers** control the flow of information to other members of the DMU.
• **Influencers** define specifications and provide information for defining alternatives. Examples include external consultants as well as internal technical resources.

• **Buyers** have the formal authority to select suppliers and arrange the terms of purchase.

• **Users** are those employees who will have experience with the product or service. Users often initiate the buying proposal and help to define the product/service specifications.

Customer roles in the model are generally arranged in order of frequency of contact, with those roles involved primarily in the pre-purchase process (deciders, influencers, gatekeepers) having fewer exchange episodes than roles participating in the purchase and post-purchase events (buyers and users). Although some industrial researchers suggest a more parsimonious focus on deciders, buyers and users (Sheth et al., 1999), influencers and gatekeepers are included, as their dissatisfaction can be a critical factor in a customer’s decision to reduce or stop purchases from a supplier. Several individuals may occupy the same role within the buying center (such as several users). Likewise, a single individual may occupy two or more roles (such as a buyer also acting as a gatekeeper of information).

Although the organizational buying behavior literature defines these roles in terms of their influence on the purchase decision, the CSM conceptual model emphasizes linkages to events other than just the pre-purchase buying decision. While each role has varying degrees of involvement in each stage of the purchase cycle, the associations shown here are the primary connections between the role and pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase events. These linkages are important in the context of CSM in that they define the main dyad or relationship of the role with their counterpart in the supplier organization. Also, whether or not the role has direct product or usage experience determines the context for the satisfaction construct itself; does the customer contact look at his or her relationship with the supplier based on actual product or service usage experience, or are other factors also part of their evaluation process (such as personal relationships with supplier employees, information, etc.)?

**Determination of key supplier and customer contacts.** Once the important dyads forming the relationship web have been defined, specific individuals occupying each supplier and customer role must be identified in order to conduct a valid CSM study. To exhaustively survey the entire DMU, some researchers have used the “snowballing” technique (Moriarty and Bateson, 1982; McQuiston, 1989; Wilson et al., 1991; Tanner, 1998). Traditionally, a key informant is identified, who then provides a list of all buying center participants. These contacts then add additional contacts to the list until all members of the buying center are uncovered.

The snowballing technique is applied here by asking each boundary role within the selling organization to identify their key contact(s) in the buying organization. The advantage of this approach is that actual names are assigned to each critical dyad to tailor a measurement instrument to the particulars of that relationship. Also, survey bias is reduced in using multiple supplier contacts.

From a practical standpoint, measuring all users of a product, such as a computer system, can quickly become unwieldy. A more parsimonious approach is to identify those contacts most likely to participate in future
purchase decisions. Again, organizational buying behavior research has shown several key individual variables affecting an individual’s influence in the DMU:

- status or influence over other members of the buying group (McQuiston, 1989; Kohli, 1989; Silk and Kalwani, 1982);
- high levels of stakeholding or strong perceived personal risk in the final outcome of a purchase (Dawes et al., 1998);
- perceived risk or the perception of adverse consequences felt by the contact if he or she makes a wrong choice (Kohli, 1989) (two dimensions of this variable are uncertainty – the chance that product will not perform as expected – and significant financial commitment or purchase importance);
- significant information control as pertains to information critical in the purchase process (Dawes et al., 1998).

These characteristics can be used as an “influence screen” to select the most important buyer participants for a CSM study. Figure 2 lists a sample pre-CSM survey whereby supplier employees can list their key customer contacts and quickly rate each on the above factors. In practice, key supplier contacts can prioritize their CSM customer list based on each contact’s rating on these variables.

Determination of satisfaction elements
Customer satisfaction is a complex construct and still a critical area for research and debate. The dominant model in the literature is the disconfirmation of expectations or comparison standards paradigm (Oliver, 1980; Tse and Wilton, 1988; Woodruff et al., 1983), listed below with specific considerations for application in a business-to-business context:

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**Figure 2. Sample survey to screen key customer contacts**
Customers have some predetermined product or service standard. Pre-consumption norms or standards differ for each business customer contact.

Customers experience the post-consumption performance of the product or service. Post-consumption performance must be defined in a broader sense, especially relative to those customer contacts not having direct experience with the performance of the product or service.

Customers compare this performance with their pre-consumption standard and form confirmation or disconfirmation perceptions. The number and frequency of exchange episodes with both supplier contacts and the product or service itself will affect the extent to which satisfaction is processed as either a global construct or as a series of more specific measures of satisfaction.

Customers formulate summary satisfaction judgments on the overall experience. Customer roles form satisfaction judgments based both on personal, and often subconscious, preferences as well as more rational evaluations of supplier performance on formal organizational “tasks.” Both these task and non-task variables influence overall satisfaction for each customer role.

Previous CSM research with consumers has defined and measured certain “satisfaction elements” that act as determinants of a customer’s overall or summary satisfaction judgment. The business-to-business model proposed here incorporates these more specific satisfaction elements to better measure the varying experiences and perceptions of different customer roles. Satisfaction elements are conceptually aligned with a particular stage of the buy cycle where they are likely to have the greatest impact on final satisfaction judgments. While all elements are important, those customer roles most influenced by a particular satisfaction element are defined in italic type:

- **Information satisfaction** is satisfaction with the information used to choose a product, and is frequently based upon seller-supplied marketing and sales literature (Spreng et al., 1996). This information influences pre-purchase expectations and the evaluation of post-purchase performance for those roles where information is the primary outcome of interest (Moriarty and Spekman, 1984) (*deciders, gatekeepers, influencers*).

- **Performance satisfaction** is a general construct demonstrated by Wilson (1995) to be a key relationship variable. It is the degree to which fundamentals of the business transaction meet the business performance expectations of the partner. It satisfies a broader definition of post-purchase performance reflecting the overall performance of the supplier to deliver and support the transaction (*deciders, buyers*).

- **Attribute satisfaction** is a more specific subjective satisfaction judgment resulting from observations of the performance of a product or service feature or dimension (Oliver, 1993). This micro-measure of satisfaction is important to identify problem areas with the actual product or service itself (*users*).

- **Personal satisfaction** relates to the traditional definition of satisfaction presented earlier in a consumer context. This measure refers to the individual psychological judgments of pleasure or comfort surrounding the relationship with the supplier (*all roles*).
**Measures for satisfaction elements**

The model described thus far provides the framework for determining the dyadic relationships as well as the appropriate satisfaction elements to include in a CSM study. The final step is to translate this framework into a concrete set of measures or sample attributes.

Table I assigns measures for satisfaction elements for each of the customer roles. Personal satisfaction measures are relevant to all customer roles. Although Table I serves as an example based on specific published case studies (Qualls and Rosa, 1995; Bunn, 1994) and not an empirically tested set of measurement items, this general approach serves as a template for mapping specific satisfaction measures to key customer roles. In addition to this qualitative framework, Homburg and Rudolph (2001) recently developed INDSAT, a customer satisfaction measurement instrument specific to industrial customers. Although each customer role may incorporate different variables in framing their overall satisfaction judgments, primary measures are denoted in bold type.

**Managerial implications**

Before discussing the practical implementation of the CSM model proposed here, managers must be convinced of the importance of customer satisfaction in determining long-term profitability. An effective customer satisfaction measurement system specifically designed for a business-to-business context guides businesses in dedicating resources to critical areas (Emerson and Grimm, 1998, 1999; Sharma *et al.*, 1999). Owing to the critical nature of client retention in industrial markets, CSM provides the ability to diagnose and strengthen relationships with “at risk” customers – those clients with negative service experiences, new customers, and customers in competitive markets (Heskett *et al.*, 1994). Likewise, CSM can help define and maintain an “ideal subset” of customers where the firm can consistently deliver superior value (Reichheld, 1996).

**Integration**

Another critical issue especially complex in a business-to-business context is in integrating these different sources and types of data. Past research has focused on statistical techniques for deriving general trends in customer satisfaction across customers. Industrial customer bases, however, tend to be small in number yet diverse in needs. The approach presented here suggests a hybrid approach using both qualitative as well as quantitative techniques. Again using the dyad as the basic unit of measure, supplier management can look at quantitatively aggregate results for user and buyer groups to gain key insights into key strengths and weaknesses within their post-sales service and support and customer service/supply chain. For those customer roles having fewer yet strategic interactions (deciders, influencers, gatekeepers), supplier management can synthesize this qualitative data along with the results of the quantitative analysis to focus on those weak “threads” which may threaten the strength of the overall relationship fabric.

**Internet environment**

In the Internet environment, radical shifts are occurring in business-to-business exchanges (Kaplan and Sawhney, 2000). Lower information search costs allow buyers to locate more suppliers and industrial marketers to capture new customers. Despite the fear that reverse auctions and increased global competition will drive industrial markets to purely price-based competition, many suppliers are using these changes as impetus to dedicate resources toward becoming a preferred supplier – and thereby avoid the auction process altogether (Jap, 2000). Integrating CSM into the e-procurement process is one way to ensure this status. For example, a
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer role</th>
<th>Performance satisfaction</th>
<th>Information satisfaction</th>
<th>Attribute satisfaction</th>
<th>Personal satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decider</td>
<td>ROI</td>
<td>Total costs of operation</td>
<td>Upgradability/expansion</td>
<td>Perceived personal risk</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Impact on business operations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Supplier reputation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Problems reported up through organization</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Past experience with supplier</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-anticipated savings or expenses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Past experience with similar products/services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Ability to interface with existing products and/or processes</td>
<td>Technical specifications</td>
<td>Marketing literature</td>
<td>Personal relationship with supplier contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Technical specifications</td>
<td>Participation in industry events and benchmarks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Smooth transactional processes</td>
<td>Pricing and payment schedules</td>
<td>Delivery schedules</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Source loyalty</td>
<td></td>
<td>Shipping information</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adherence to established procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>User</td>
<td></td>
<td>Training literature</td>
<td>Product reliability</td>
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<td>Technical support</td>
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<td>Training</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Post-sales service</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Primary measures are denoted in bold type

Table 1. Satisfaction elements and sample attributes
routine follow-up survey on performance satisfaction with ordering and delivery integrated with the e-procurement system can solidify an otherwise “impersonal” relationship.

As an applied example, Figure 3 describes a specific straight rebuy scenario between an office supplies vendor and an established, regular customer. The client’s purchasing department, via a Web page, routinely purchases office supplies for internal company use. Relative to this scenario, the strengths of the business-to-business CSM model are as follows:

- **The model is comprehensive enough to allow for using different overall CSM strategies depending on the customer relationship.** Because the purchase is not of high monetary or strategic value, only the buyer and user functions are involved on the customer side. The customer service role is the only function active on the supplier side and this role is performed primarily through a Web interface with questions directed to a customer service employee.

- **The model guides the development of unique CSM instruments tailored to the dyadic relationship to be measured.** Because each dyad defines “satisfaction” differently, it is appropriate to capture the perceptions of each client role. A survey should therefore be designed (whether quantitative and more structured, or qualitative and more open-ended) for each appropriate dyad in the relationship. In this case an automatic follow-up e-mail survey can be sent after each shipment to monitor customer satisfaction with the buying function.

- **The model allows for parsimony in determining who should be measured.** Rather than measuring all client employees, only those contacts important in maintaining or growing future sales are included. In the Figure 3 example, client employees typically do not specify the brand or type of office products. CSM, therefore, focuses only on the buyer-customer service dyad. The influence screen blocks the participation of the user role in a CSM study due to their lack of influence in the buying decision.

![Figure 3. Transactional relationship example](image-url)

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The model allows for parsimony in determining when to measure a particular customer contact. Customer satisfaction evaluations are influenced by the proximity to the purchase event (Fisk et al., 1990; Peterson and Wilson, 1992). For those roles directly experiencing the product or service, CSM may be formally monitored through frequent and regular surveys due to the transactional nature of the relationship. However, for managerial “deciders” it would be more appropriate to conduct qualitative, high-level management dialogues to discuss the overall nature and future of the relationship (Berry and Parasuraman, 1997). Table II proposes types of CSM instruments and timing of administration for each critical dyad in the model.

### Steps

1. Segment the existing customer base by type of relationship.
2. Using the model in Figure 1, determine those roles within the organization who act as key contact interfaces (employees, Web pages, toll-free telephone lines, etc.).
3. Have each key contact employee identify his or her key contact within the customer organization, using some version of the questionnaire proposed in Figure 2. (If the contact is a Web interface or toll-free telephone number, a frequency of contact metric can be used.)
4. Using the score on the influence screen, determine a final customer list to be surveyed tied with the corresponding key contact employee.
5. Design appropriate CSM instruments for each appropriate dyad (as seen in Tables I and II).
6. Survey the client contact via the appropriate CSM instrument.
7. Report the results by customer, and summarized for the entire customer segment. (Note: Rather than searching for a composite score of the satisfaction scores of each client contact within a particular company, it is better to summarize average ratings for each role. These scores can then be compared to average ratings per role in that segment rather than trying to determine the importance of the opinions of ten users, for example, versus that of one decision maker).

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Customer role</th>
<th>Supplier role</th>
<th>Type of CSM technique</th>
<th>Training of administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influencer</td>
<td>Sales, Technical resource</td>
<td>Informal, verbal follow-up</td>
<td>Event driven – e.g. after sending information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeper</td>
<td>Sales, Technical resource</td>
<td>Information, verbal follow-up</td>
<td>Event driven – e.g. after sending information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decider</td>
<td>Sales, Technical resource, Customer service</td>
<td>Formal face-to-face executive review</td>
<td>Annual or at critical points in relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Customer service</td>
<td>Survey on ease of ordering and delivery accuracy</td>
<td>All regular intervals if continuous transaction (Monthly, quarterly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User</td>
<td>Post-sales service and support</td>
<td>Survey on product attributes, training courses, support</td>
<td>Event driven – e.g. immediately after sale and installation, training courses and support calls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table II. Type and timing of CSM instruments by customer supplier dyad*
Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that significant gaps exist in both the academic and trade literature with regard to effective customer satisfaction measurement of business-to-business exchanges. As with the pioneering literature from the early 1980s noting the issues of evaluating service rather than product quality, the unique challenges in assessing business-to-business relationships must be addressed separately from business-to-consumer interactions. The model presented here, rooted in existing knowledge of organizational behavior and customer satisfaction processes, provides a practical framework for managers in evaluating the strength of their customer relationships.

References


Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

Where existing ways of measuring business-to-business customer satisfaction fail

Firms measure customer satisfaction using models and theory developed for evaluating the perceptions of individual customers. But business-to-business marketers face added complexities. They have to measure the satisfaction of an entire firm rather than a single individual. Many employees in the customer firm will not have the direct experience of consuming the product or service on which to base a satisfaction judgement. Business customers judge satisfaction not only on how the product or service affects them personally, but also on the basis of rational objectives directly related to the execution of a particular business function. Although much recent research has focused on the importance of long-term strategic relationships, these do not always result in higher levels of customer satisfaction. Many businesses achieve higher profits with their transactional, opportunistic clients and are therefore interested in measuring the satisfaction of those clients too. A further problem is that many businesses have few industrial clients, which raises questions about the validity of using statistical techniques requiring significant sample sizes, when assessing customer satisfaction.

A new integrated model of customer satisfaction measurement

Rossomme develops an integrated model of customer satisfaction measurement in a business-to-business context that incorporates lessons from the fields of customer satisfaction, organizational buying behaviour and relationship marketing. The model visualises buyer-seller relationships as multiple individual “strands of contact” between the buying and selling companies. These strands of contact compose the “weave” of the overall relationship “fabric” between two businesses. The amount of influence the buyer contact has on the purchasing process determines the strength of these strands with regard to customer satisfaction measurement. The ongoing product or service transactions between two companies, or lengthwise strands, determine the strength of the overall customer-supplier relationship as measured through the purchase cycle. Companies can then view customer satisfaction measurement as integrated with a customer’s business processes, rather than isolated evaluations of discrete product or service performance. The model enables customer satisfaction measurement in a business-to-business context to be seen as a composite of the satisfaction measures of each buyer-seller relationship, through the decision-making process and usage of the product or service. This therefore covers pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages.

Determination of key buyer-seller relationships

Rossomme’s model incorporates employees from the supplier firm as well as the customer firm. The model concentrates on job roles rather than job titles. In the context of customer satisfaction measurement, the model isolates those roles in the supplier firm that represent the face of the company to the customer. They could be in, for example, sales, technical resources, customer service, the supply chain, or post-sales service and support.

In the customer firm, the roles could include: deciders, who exercise formal or informal power to select or approve the final suppliers; gatekeepers, who control the flow of information to other decision makers; influencers, who define specifications and provide information for defining alternatives;
buyers, who have the formal authority to select suppliers and arrange the terms of purchase; and users, who have direct experience with the product or service.

**Determination of satisfaction elements**

Rossomme’s model incorporates specific satisfaction elements: satisfaction with the information used to choose a product; the degree to which fundamentals of the business transaction meet the business performance expectations of the partner; a more specific satisfaction judgement resulting from observations of the performance of a product or service feature or dimension; and the individual psychological judgements of pleasure or comfort surrounding the relationship with the supplier.

**Measures for satisfaction elements**

Each customer role may incorporate different variables in framing their overall satisfaction judgements. The final step is to develop measures for the satisfaction elements that can be combined in a survey instrument appropriate to each identified key client. Supplier management can look at quantitatively aggregate results for user and buyer groups to gain insights into key strengths and weaknesses within their post-sales service and support and customer service and supply chain. And for customer roles such as deciders, influencers and gatekeepers, who may have fewer yet strategic interactions, supplier management can synthesize this qualitative data along with the results of the quantitative analysis to focus on the “weak” threads that may threaten the strength of the overall relationship fabric.

(A précis of the article “Customer satisfaction measurement in a business-to-business context: a conceptual framework”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)