

Title:

Quality Lives in the Eye of the Beholder

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Summary:

Regardless of how good you believe your offerings or project solutions are, your clients and customers will be responding to "quality in perception" even more than "quality in fact." Quality in perception refers to things like courtesies, special considerations, a caring and personalized attitude, and a host of other subtleties that can lead us to believe that we are receiving something above and beyond what we're paying for.

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Article Body:

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Regardless of how good you believe your offerings or project solutions are, your clients and customers will be responding to "quality in perception" even more than "quality in fact." Quality in perception refers to things like courtesies, special considerations, a caring and personalized attitude, and a host of other subtleties that can lead us to believe that we are receiving something above and beyond what we're paying for.

Those things speak just as loudly, if not more loudly, to our customers and clients than the actual quality in fact we provide through our products, services, and project solutions. Effective quality in perception can help compensate for any gaps in quality in fact that could otherwise irritate or inconvenience consumers. Through examples, this article explains how to recognize deficiencies in quality in perception, and what to do about them.

Example 1 - Driving Your Customers Away

Imagine a car repair service that repeatedly fails to diagnose a problem with a car and cannot fix it correctly after numerous attempts. The car is in the shop off and on for days; the customer, who is a single mom, misses time from work from having to shuttle the car back and forth. The car repair shop has no loaner

vehicle, and it does not offer a pickup or drop-off service. The car owner cannot afford a rental car, nor does she have insurance coverage for this need.

In addition to not getting her car fixed, the customer is having her pay docked for missed time at work, plus she's been given a reprimand. To top it off, she cannot respond to an emergency call from her child's school when her child is injured on the playground and has to be taken to the hospital. This example shows how one set of poor quality-in-fact circumstances can compound, as the ripple effects expand outward. Yet even with poor quality in fact (the inability to fix the car), the repair shop might have been able to salvage the customer relationship if it had increased its quality in perception, such as by offering sympathy along with a loaner vehicle.

#### Example 2 - Often, It's Not about Cost

Some time ago, I was a volunteer mediator in the Small Claims Court system. Over a period of months, I was fascinated with the proportion of cases involving alleged wrongdoing or incompetence. People were suing businesses such as termite services and auto body painters, and even former best friends and health care providers over a variety of grievances. The suits often sought fairly small amounts of compensation, which meant that the financial aspects were not the primary concern.

What repeatedly emerged in the mediation sessions was that each plaintiff felt that the vendor, service provider, health care provider, or ex-friend had not listened to his or her concerns. The plaintiffs frequently believed that their complaints about shortcomings in services, products, or communications had been dismissed. Had the defendants in these cases earlier offered something as simple as an apology -- and had they made a sincere effort to communicate while taking timely remedial action -- I believe the resulting quality in perception could have prevented many of these lawsuits, even if the quality in fact still left something to be desired.

#### Example 3 - Honest Communication Matters

A group of consultants took on a major project (a Web site to collect and process data) that their clients truly believed would be easy. The group had not tackled anything like it before, but they, too, thought it would be possible to complete the project quickly. After all, it looked simple. How complicated could a Web site be?

Little did they realize it would be many times more complex than the client's basic home page. The project finally turned out to be nearly impossible for the

consulting group to complete. The consultants finally got the system to work after many delays and dozens of mishaps. The clients, however, were very unhappy, even though the consultants ultimately fulfilled the project requirements (quality in fact).

Whose fault was it? The clients didn't understand what they were asking for. To top it off, they insisted on a short schedule that reflected their simplistic view of the effort. The consulting group, on the other hand, was not forthright about its own limitations. The partners scurried to find people who claimed to be able to do the work. They kept quiet about their own difficulties and did not reveal their growing problems. The group's ongoing failure to communicate greatly reduced the clients' confidence, and drastically shortchanged their quality in perception.

In conclusion, quality in perception can profoundly affect your customers' and clients' experiences with your products, services, and project solutions. To make sure you're not overlooking opportunities to create quality in perception, consider:

- 1) Special courtesies that can set your offerings apart from your competitors'
- 2) Your ability to listen to and handle complaints quickly and diplomatically
- 3) Your willingness to be honest with clients about problems and shortcomings

Remember that quality in perception is not a substitute for quality in fact. But it can go a long way toward minimizing customer and client dissatisfaction, as well as powerfully reinforcing stellar quality when you ultimately deliver it.