

## Auditing Customer Communications

### 1. Introduction

An effective customer communication process contributes to the success of any organization's quality management system and ultimately to the success of the organization itself. Conversely, many problems that an organization experiences with its customers can often be traced back to *poor* communication.

### 2. Requirements and Guidance

2.1 ISO 9001:2000 clause 7.2.3 states as follows:

#### **"Customer communication**

The organization shall determine and implement effective arrangements for communicating with customers in relation to:

- product information
- enquiries, contracts or order handling, including amendments
- customer feedback, including customer complaints."

2.2 An APG paper on auditing customer feedback and customer complaint processes has been published.

2.3 Other ISO 9001:2000 requirements regarding customer communication:

There are a number of other requirements in ISO 9001:2000 where reference is made directly, or indirectly, to customer communication.

- Top management shall ensure that customer requirements are determined and are met with the aim of enhancing customer satisfaction (clause 5.2)
- The organization's review of the requirements related to the product conducted prior to the organization's commitment to supply a product to the customer (e.g. submission of tenders, acceptance of contracts or orders, acceptance of changes to contracts or orders); (clause 7.2.2).
- Where the customer provides no documented statement of requirement, the customer requirements shall be confirmed by the organization before acceptance (clause 7.2.2); the organization needs to have a system in place to obtain those requirements.
- Authorizing the use of non conforming product by release or acceptance under concession by a relevant authority and, where applicable, by the customer (clause 8.3b).

2.4 Guidance from ISO 9004:2000 (clause 7.2):

**“Processes related to interested parties**

Management should ensure that the organization has defined mutually acceptable processes for communicating effectively and efficiently with its customers and other interested parties. The organization should implement and maintain such processes to ensure adequate understanding of the needs and expectations of its interested parties, and for translation into requirements for the organization...”

### 3. Verifying the effectiveness of customer communications

Verifying the effectiveness of customer communication is therefore a critical component for achieving customer satisfaction. Although there is no specific requirement in ISO 9001:2000 for a documented procedure, depending on the size, complexity and culture of the organization it may be necessary to have one in order to ensure effective implementation of the customer communication process.

ISO 9000 defines the term ‘customer’ as the recipient of the product. It further gives examples of customers including the ‘end user’.

Many organizations sell their products / services through dealers and retailers and may not be receiving orders directly from the end users. It is important for the auditor to verify how the organization communicates about the quality of its product / service to the end users and also the mechanism for obtaining a feedback (besides complaints) from the end users. It should be recognized that the needs of the dealers / retailers may at times be different from those of the end users.

### 4. The auditor’s approach

4.1 Customer communication falls in three general categories:

- an organization’s general communication to existing or potential customers – such as advertisements or marketing information
- specific information relating to a customer enquiry, requirement or order
- communication in response on customer feedback and complaints.

4.2 Some or all of the following means of an organization’s general customer communication may be observed by the auditor:

**Product information**, which includes

- advertising material
- web sites
- product catalogues

Where the organization receives orders from dealers and not the end users, the auditor should establish that the product information available to the end users (pamphlets, brochures, web sites etc) describes the product / service adequately and accurately. The auditor should also try to establish how the customer needs have been identified and product specifications arrived at.

4.3 The auditor would verify the product information to confirm that it is readily available to customers or potential customers and provides information that is up-to-date and accurate. The auditor could also query, for example, how often advertising material, web sites and product catalogues are reviewed to reflect the organizations current product offerings and services and what measures are taken if a particular product is modified, discontinued or no longer available.

4.4 Some or all of the following means of an organization's specific customer communication may be observed by the auditor:

#### **Enquiries, contracts or order handling, including amendments**

- quotations
- order forms
- confirmation of order
- amendment to order
- delivery documentation
- invoices
- credit notes
- e-mail & general correspondence
- visit reports or notes to/from customer

#### **Customer feedback and complaints management process**

- Letters in response to complaints
- Acknowledgments

4.5 There are also further instances where the auditor will experience the organization's communication with the customer:

- During the ordering process where the customer provides no documented statement of requirement, the organization needs to have a system in place to obtain or confirm these customer requirements before the organization accepts the order.
- During the design/development process there may be considerable communication between the organization and the customer.
- During the process of authorizing the use of non conforming product by release or acceptance under concession by a relevant authority and, where applicable, by the customer

4.6 The auditor would use normal trace methods to verify compliance with the customer communications requirements of ISO 9001 and whether the organization communicated effectively with the customer in the execution of the enquiry, contract or order.

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The ISO 9001 Auditing Practices Group is an informal group of QMS experts, auditors and practitioners drawn from the ISO Technical Committee 176 Quality Management and Quality Assurance (ISO/TC 176) and the IAF. It has developed a number of guidance papers and presentations that contain explanations about the auditing of QMSs. These reflect the process-based approach that is essential for auditing the requirements of ISO 9001.

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