

# Listening to the Customer

BY SHEILA ALEGRIA, KIM SWISS, AND BOBBI MARSTELLAR, P.E.

## Feedback from AISC Certified companies is making a difference in daily operations for AISC's independent auditing company.

**IN OCTOBER 2006, QUALITY MANAGEMENT COMPANY (QMC) DID SOMETHING THAT MANY COMPANIES ARE TOO AFRAID TO DO:** We started asking our customers (fabricators and erectors) for feedback. Early in 2006, our team set a goal to improve the level of service we provide to our program participants. Since customer satisfaction is often described as the gap between what the customer expects and what they get, we knew we first had to make understanding their expectations a priority.

Program participants are mailed a survey annually with their certificate. The survey is designed to measure customer satisfaction related to the audit, the on-site auditor, and the QMC staff. In the first year of the program, QMC received more than 400 completed surveys (a response rate of more than 50%!) containing extremely substantive and thoughtful comments. From them, we have gained valuable insight into how our customers think, and more importantly, what they expect of us.

The surveys have become an integral part of our continuous improvement process. As an ISO 9001:2000 certified company, QMC is required to monitor and measure the performance of our quality management system. One of those measurements pertains to customer satisfaction. How do we know that we are meeting our customer's requirements and expectations? We review each and every survey comment—more than 600 through the end of September 2007. Then we look for trends and determine which ones are actionable. (For a more detailed look at our survey process, see the figure at right.)

### Areas for Improvement

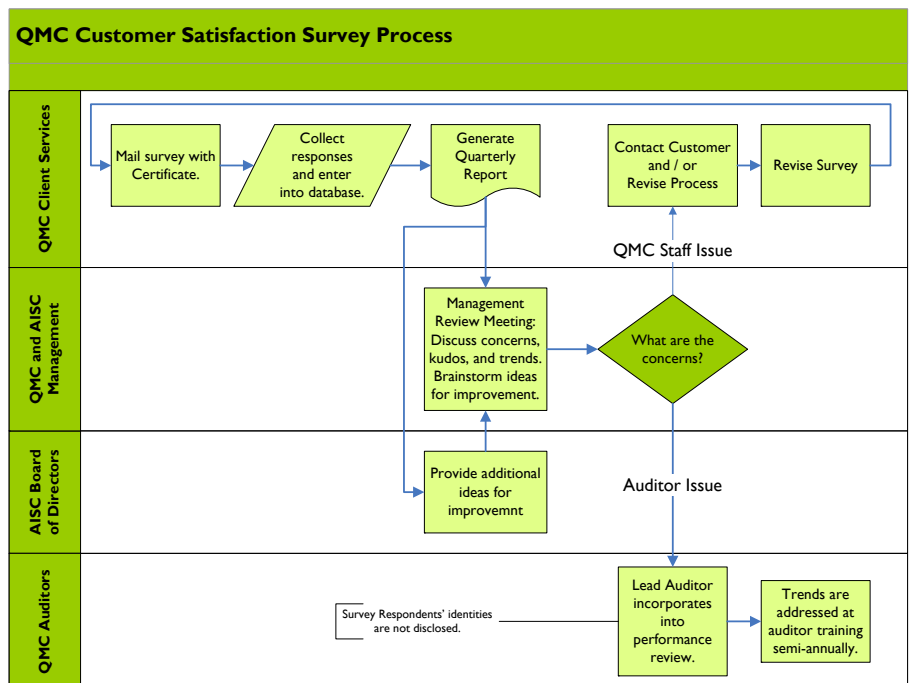
The majority of concerns we've received to date have to do with communication, auditor issues, or audit scheduling. (For a complete breakdown of the topics, see the pie chart on the next page.) We can't deny the fact that our clients would like to hear from us more often. There are times in the certification process that participants have felt ignored or concerned that their materials were lost in cyberspace.

We have also received a lot of comments regarding the differences among auditors, in particular that an auditor observed or

commented on something within a company's quality system that the previous year's auditor did not. We do our best to keep these variations to a minimum by providing individual and group training for our auditors. However, we consider the uniqueness of our auditors to be an asset. They have different strengths and areas of expertise and can provide our program participants with a fresh perspective each year.

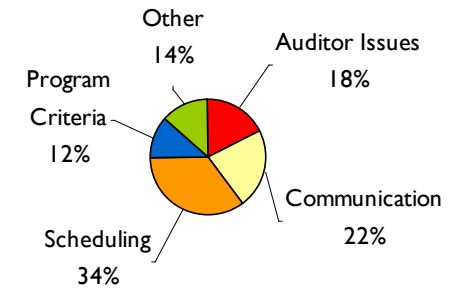
Other comments relate to the pace of the audit, some indicating that it went too slow, while others felt rushed. With so much to cover in just one or two days, it can be difficult to get the pace just right while still making sure that the experience is a beneficial one. Our auditors can adjust their pace almost immediately, so be sure to speak up during the audit if you are concerned.

Material submission requirements made the list as well. Many of the program participants felt it was unnecessary to resubmit their quality documentation every year, and we couldn't agree more! Beginning in October 2007, participants are only asked to submit their materials every third year, when a full audit is scheduled. Material submission requirements are outlined in the renewal packets.



**Quality Corner** is a monthly feature that covers topics ranging from how to specify a certified company to how long it takes to become a certified company. If you are interested in browsing our electronic archive, please visit [www.aisc.org/QualityCorner](http://www.aisc.org/QualityCorner).

% "completely" and "mostly" satisfied	2006	2007		
	4Q	1Q	2Q	3Q
Total # of respondents	76	105	104	115
Overall satisfaction with your AUDIT this year	96%	99%	99%	100%
Overall satisfaction with QMC	93%	95%	94%	97%
How satisfied are you with QMC staff with regard to:				
courteousness	95%	100%	98%	100%
program knowledge	96%	97%	96%	97%
explanation of deadlines and requirements	95%	96%	95%	92%
ability to resolve problems	86%	95%	92%	89%
how quickly your call was answered	83%	88%	85%	83%
how quickly you received a reply to your e-mail	76%	85%	79%	80%
frequency of phone and e-mail communication	82%	88%	85%	88%



Survey comments by category.

Audit scheduling received a significant amount of feedback, specifically how clients would prefer to pick their audit date. We agree that this would be ideal; however, attempts at this in the past have proven more costly and time consuming and still we had unhappy customers. We currently schedule the audits for the fabricator program four months ahead of time, which we hope can give ample time to prepare for the audit. (For more information on audit scheduling, please see the September 2007 Quality Corner at [www.aisc.org/qualitycorner](http://www.aisc.org/qualitycorner).)

### Taking Action

As it turns out, collecting the data is the easy part. It's taking action that presents the real challenge. We knew when we implemented the program that we couldn't ask for feedback unless we were prepared to act on it. We react to the comments we receive and trends we identify in the following ways:

- Call or e-mail to the program participant to further discuss their comments.
- Implement a new process.
- Modify an existing process.
- Incorporate feedback anonymously into auditor performance evaluations.
- Include as an agenda item at auditor training.

Some concerns and ideas can be addressed or implemented immediately, while others take time. As a direct result of the survey responses, we've made the following changes over the past year:

- When Corrective Action Requests (CARs) are closed, an e-mail is sent to the program participant.
- When materials are received, a postcard is sent to the program participant.
- Auditors are required to send their audit agendas and introduction letters

to QMC.

- Auditors are required to obtain confirmation from program participants that their audit agenda has been received.
- Audit materials are no longer required for Annual audits (AR1/2), only Initial and Full audits.
- A new, comprehensive list of documentation required for certification has been created. This list is mailed annually with the renewal packet and is also available in the Resources section of the QMC website at [www.qmconline.com](http://www.qmconline.com).
- We revised our customer appreciation survey for surveys mailed after October 1, 2007.
- QMC has increased the number of days that auditor training takes place to allow more time for "calibration."
- An "Auditors Forum" now exists where auditors can post messages, ask questions, and share their thoughts with one another.
- We have redesigned our audit report so our auditors can communicate their findings more efficiently.

Some of these points can be considered the proverbial low-hanging fruit, but we never underestimate the significance that a small change can make. As for our long-term goals, we are currently exploring our customer service program in its entirety, from mailing the invoice to mailing the certificate, in an effort to close the remaining cracks and ultimately improve our overall satisfaction scores. Plans are also underway for revamping both the QMC web site and the AISC web site ([www.aisc.org](http://www.aisc.org)).

In October 2007, we began mailing a new version of the survey to our customers. Please look for it in the mail with your certificate. It's a little shorter than the first

version and concentrates more on the specifics of how and when we communicate with our program participants. For those of you that have taken the time to submit a survey to QMC: Thank you! We hope that you will continue to take the time to do so each year, not only because it enters you in a drawing to win a free audit, but also because what you say is essential to our continuous improvement. If you have an idea or concern, please don't wait for the annual survey. You can contact us at any time: [certinfo@QMConline.com](mailto:certinfo@QMConline.com) or 312.670.7520. We look forward to hearing from you!

MSC

*Sheila Alegria is client services coordinator, Kimberly Swiss is manager of certification administration, and Bobbi Marsteller is vice president with Quality Management Company.*