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Customer Satisfaction for Laboratories

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ISO/IEC 17025, Section 4.7 provides the customer satisfaction requirements for which laboratories seeking accreditation or recognition must comply. (Handbooks 143 and 150, same section numbers are identical). The following section contains an excerpt from this section of the standard.

4.7 Service to the Customer

4.7.1 The laboratory shall be willing to cooperate with customers or their representatives in clarifying the customer's request and in monitoring the laboratory's performance in relation to the work performed, provided that the laboratory ensures confidentiality to other customers.

NOTE 1: Such cooperation may include: 1) providing the customer or the customer's representative reasonable access to relevant areas of the laboratory for the witnessing of tests and/or calibrations performed for the customer; and 2) preparation, packaging, and dispatch of test and/or calibration items needed by the customer for verification purposes.

NOTE 2: Customers value the maintenance of good communication, advice and guidance in technical matters, and opinions and interpretations based on results. Communication with the customer, especially in large assignments, should be maintained throughout the work. The laboratory should inform the customer of any delays or major deviations in the performance of the tests and/or calibrations.

4.7.2 The laboratory shall seek feedback, both positive and negative, from its customers. The feedback shall be used and analyzed to improve the management system, testing and calibration activities and customer service.

NOTE: Examples of the types of feedback include customer satisfaction surveys and review of test or calibration reports with customers.

So what does this all mean?

Are there conflicts with other sections of the standard, such as maintaining security and integrity of the standards, and maintaining environmental control? In many cases, the answer is "yes"! The laboratory's first priority is to ensure the integrity of their standards. Laboratory standards have been damaged and even stolen during laboratory tours for people who are not familiar with good laboratory practices such as "don't touch the standards!" The second priority will be to maintain acceptable environmental limits. Many laboratories have HVAC systems that are sensitive to the additional heat load from people walking through the laboratory. The additional air flow and convection currents from people walking through a laboratory can also negatively impact measurement results when measurements are being made during a tour or walk-through. So, like the Hippocratic Oath, the first order of business should be "do no harm!" If you will do

tours for people who are not familiar with good laboratory practices, an orientation discussion is appropriate.

In spite of these two priorities, it is still a good idea, and is called for in the standard to work with your customers to provide a tour or allow them to observe example calibrations. This kind of cooperation creates good will and may even be good for succession planning when you get someone excited about metrology!

Communication with the customer during all stages of the work process is also essential. From accepting a calibration item into the work load or calendar, reporting on the status for returning calibrated standards, interpreting tolerances and uncertainties, to answering questions about the calibration report – all of these provide opportunities for improved communications and relationships.

Customer surveys are also part of the standard. Gathering input and feedback from your laboratory customers provides opportunities for continual improvement (or corrective action when needed).

Since these are requirements that are expected of your laboratory – shouldn't you also be able to expect this from your calibration provider? Again, the answer is "yes"!

NIST Calibration Services are compliant with the ISO/IEC 17025 standard. You can review the NIST Quality System on our website at <http://ts.nist.gov/qualitysystem/>. Standards that are returned to you should have a "Customer Satisfaction Report Card" with them and we encourage you to fill these out! If you did not get one with your latest calibration, you can send a request to calibrations@nist.gov. Complaining to other metrologists or other NIST Divisions than those responsible for the calibrations will not necessarily help address your concerns or even pass along your praise. We encourage you to fill out the NIST surveys every time you get a NIST calibration!

What about other calibration providers? Well, according to ISO/IEC 17025 (and your laboratory quality manuals) all of your calibration service providers are supposed to be accredited (or you need to assess them against the standard). In that case, they need to provide "service to the customer" as well. So, when you get your calibrations done by another laboratory, whether State, manufacturer, or other service provider, you should expect to have good service to the customer.

I've seen a lot of articles lately about "whatever happened to good customer service?" Maybe we just need to regularly reinforce the fact that we expect it. Make your voice heard – both good and bad – to the right people!