How to Find the Key Differences Between Leading VoC Applications

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Even with the right hierarchy of criteria to guide selection, choosing the right VoC application can still be a complex process. To generate the most business value from VoC, application leaders for CX should evaluate key differences in the areas of technology, usability, services and functionality.

Overview

Key Findings

- Voice of the customer (VoC) applications often appear to be similar across vendors despite significant price variations, leading to buyer confusion and potential missed opportunities.

- Organizations lack a set of more detailed evaluation criteria to successfully pick apart the key differences between the various solutions in the marketplace.

Recommendations

Application leaders supporting CRM strategy and customer experience (CX) should:

- Embrace advanced functional capabilities to maximize VoC value.

- Investigate the usability of a VoC application and its ability to manage user adoption to ensure the health of the program with a sustained high level of application usage.

- Investigate the appropriateness of the architecture to ensure it can fully operationalize your scale of VoC program.

- Assess the availability of services tied to the VoC application, from initial configuration to ongoing value measurement, to ensure you have the potential to plug internal skills gaps and thus optimize the potential value of the VoC program.

Introduction
Selecting an appropriate VoC solution is a difficult task for application leaders. Vendors articulate their high-level capabilities in similar ways. It is sometimes difficult for even an experienced CX practitioner to perceive the difference between solutions that may differ in price by hundreds of thousands of dollars, let alone those that are similar in price.

Choosing an incorrect VoC vendor can result in frustration, initially from not knowing whom to select, followed by frustration a year on when organizations realize they haven't chosen the right application as it is missing key functionality, or users are only using a fraction of the application's capabilities.

This research provides a useful list of capabilities that clients should explore in depth when selecting an advanced VoC application, to help them look beyond traditional procurement considerations. These considerations should be integral to a broader procurement process that leverages a hierarchical, weighted vendor evaluation model (see How to Develop a Hierarchy of Criteria for VoC Vendor Selection).

The capabilities examined in this research touch upon four of the eight overall selection criteria that should be taken into consideration: functionality, usability, technology and services. It calls out key aspects that are often overlooked in relation to these four (see Figure 1). The remaining four — cost, speed, risk and vision — should not be ignored, but are somewhat easier to assess.
**Figure 1. Often-Overlooked Factors of Four VoC Selection Criteria**

By delving deeply into these domains when creating the associated sections of the hierarchical evaluation model, application leaders will discover the best-suited application and vendor, thus ensure a more appropriate long-term procurement decision.

**Analysis**

**Functionality: Embrace Advanced Functional Capabilities to Maximize VoC Value**

**Feedback Diversity and Collection Optimization**

When evaluating VoC applications, take time to consider what sort of surveys you will need, along with other sources of customer insight. Defining the surveys and survey channels will help vendors to provide a better sense of their capabilities and costs. Moreover, surveys are just one component of a VoC program. Understanding what other listening approaches you may need and the sources of data you will integrate can help to improve the responses you will receive.

Most feedback programs start with surveying as their main approach to gathering customer feedback. Every VoC vendor supports this mode of data collection, making it difficult to differentiate them on this basis. All vendors support numerous channels, complex flow logic and question types. They can detect
events for survey triggering along the customer journey, and can personalize the survey invitation and questions based on relevant operational data.

However, some aspects of survey management are still differentiated and will appeal to more complex environments. Managing which users can launch a survey among which customers, when they can do it, and who can see the resultant data across the organization can require extensive governance, which several solutions lack. A process may need to be in place for the official testing and approval of a survey. Sample size management may need to be applied to ensure the objective of the survey can be achieved but at minimal disruption to the customer base overall. Consequently, you should delve beyond the high-level aspects of survey provision to explore the deeper operational and management considerations of running a survey program — this is still a good place to help differentiate the vendors.

One important emerging evolution within the direct survey market is an ability to take a more conversational approach to surveying customers, moving away from the more structured Q&A format. With their rapid progression, text analytics and AI are increasingly automating the customer support function via a bot-driven chat channel and online "virtual assistants."

There is an opportunity to use the same technology to have more of a conversation with a customer. Rather than pose five rigid questions, the aspiration is to have a more open and free-flowing dialogue, where the customer is encouraged to express their thoughts. This would be supported by AI-driven technology that encourages the customer to elaborate, while at the same time ensuring key aspects are captured before the dialogue is terminated. This is a work in progress for several leading vendors, but will become an important dimension in the future and is worthy of investigation.

Whether structured or conversation, the survey is just one form of feedback. Increasingly, organizations are bolstering — not yet replacing — their survey program with an ability to ingest other forms of indirect feedback, such as from review sites, social networks and customer care interactions via phone, email and chat sessions. In these situations, your organization has not asked for customer feedback but has received it nonetheless.

Most vendors are gaining maturity in the area of indirect feedback, particularly with respect to their ability to process text (although there is some variety, and not all vendors would be classed as best of breed for text analytics). However, the ability to process speech, from call recordings to YouTube clips, is something most vendors do not currently have, and is an important differentiation. Some rely on application partners, while others do not yet support this form of feedback at all. You may decide that you like all other aspects of a VoC application, but that the text analytics is not accurate enough for your requirements, and so choose to use a specialist text analytics application (such as Clarabridge, Callminer or Lexalytics) and integrate it with the VoC application.

In addition, the ability to be able to seamlessly centralize all feedback, regardless of origin and format, to provide a holistic understanding of the VoC varies from vendor to vendor.

Customer Journey Alignment
If understanding the customer journey is a critical CX consideration, specify your expectations as part of the evaluation. If you already have defined your customer journeys and want to track VoC data by touchpoint, specify so in your RFI or RFP. Or, if you’re seeking data that can help you to identify your actual customer journeys (through integration of the associated cross-channel operational data), indicate this as an expectation. VoC solutions can help further this understanding, combining operational and behavioral data with customer feedback, and tracking different metrics across the customer journey for analysis and better decision making.

Every VoC vendor claims to support customer-journey-based insight, but the reality is that there are many varied approaches and most lack sophistication. Some vendors claim to design their UX around the customer journey. The reality is that it’s more aligned to a theoretical customer life cycle such as “gather information-buy-deploy-use,” rather than actual customer journeys that you have designed.

Real customer journeys are more chaotic, and a linear path from end to end is a wishful fantasy. Most VoC vendors can trigger contextual surveys at key touchpoints along the journey, and combine this with the associated operational data (e.g., wait time in customer service). In this way, they find relevant insights that can be used to help improve the journey while it is happening, as well as to make strategic recommendations for long-term CX improvement. However, these isolated “touchpoint-specific” views do not reflect the full end-to-end journey the customer has embarked on. Some vendors try to overcome this by seeking out references to other channels in feedback verbatim (e.g., a postcall survey where the customer comments on their web experience before calling customer service).

What is more powerful is the ability to identify and track the customer as they transcend channels via the associated operational data trail, to fully articulate the actual journey they have undergone regardless of touchpoint and life cycle phase. This is called customer journey analytics (CJA) and is an established software market (see Market Guide for Customer Journey Analytics). Very few VoC vendors appear in this market, and it is an important area of development for most.

An understanding of the customer journey and how channels influence each other needs to be built into not only the survey approach, but also the associated operational data and connective tissue that helps visualize the customer’s reality. Assessing this aspect of a VoC vendor’s portfolio (and short-term roadmap) is therefore an important consideration.

Predict and Prioritize

If you intend to import your VoC data into a business intelligence (BI) or analytical tool, specify this as part of the evaluation. Or, if you expect the VoC platform to offer advanced analytics in order to predict future actions and prioritize insights, this should also be made clear. Some vendors are now able to use ingested data and past feedback to predict the Net Promoter Score (NPS) of individual customers and export that to a sales or customer service application. The associated depth of sophistication available to drive appropriate and intelligent actions varies by vendor. However, although employees at all levels are already inundated with operational and customer KPIs, what is often lacking is the guidance needed to help them take the most informed and appropriate actions. Adding a layer of high-level VoC metrics onto this already swollen dashboard might not help. It’s just more numbers to worry about. The key is to
ensure these employees can best utilize the new customer insight originating from VoC by providing prescriptive advice and effectively move from:

“Hey, this data point is below the preset threshold,” to

“Hey, this is the best thing you can do to address this data point that is beginning to trend downwards.”

To achieve this requires far deeper root cause analysis and predictive analytics capabilities to detect emerging trends and anomalies, and determine the best course of action. It requires moving from a backward view that articulates what has happened to one that looks forward, foreseeing potential upcoming challenges and how to address them. For example, a retail store manager whose customer satisfaction score (CSAT) has dropped for two months in a row could be given a list of prioritized actions to help redress that downward trend. Actions they could take may be anything from recommending staff product training to ensuring shelf stock levels are full at peak times, with each action prioritized based on its likely impact on the business goal — in this case, an increased CSAT.

This intelligent and prioritized approach to action management applies to all levels, from senior executives to regional and local managers and down to frontline employees. Each can receive a contextual set of prioritized actions linked to their role, as well as the metrics they are responsible for and can influence.

Vendors are beginning to embrace this more predictive, prescriptive and AI-driven approach to help organizations predict future behavior and prioritize across different improvement options. Supporting a more guided and role-based decision-making process for optimal action management is a hot topic, but it is early days for most vendors and a key source of differentiation.

Voice of the Employee

Many firms overlook the need for or value of a voice of the employee (VoE) program. The vendor evaluation process will be stronger if you specify whether you also intend to use the VoC platform to assist in understanding employee satisfaction and engagement.

Employee experience (EX) is not just a concern for the human resources department. Employee engagement is also a key aspect of a successful CX program. Understanding employees’ needs, aspirations, sentiment and perspectives is an important consideration. To do so optimally requires far more than the annual survey sent out by most HR departments; what is required is the more holistic approach of VoE (see Apply Voice-of-the-Customer Best Practices to Voice-of-the-Employee Initiatives).

VoC platforms are ideally suited to performing this “internal” role, but there are nuances that need to be factored in, and many VoC vendors are only just beginning to accommodate the associated functionality. Although your current VoC investment may have an exclusive external customer focus, expanding this remit to embrace VoE at a future time should not be overlooked — ideally, you would factor it into the initial selection criteria. Engage with HR to discuss this long-term possibility and ascertain specific requirements.
It has been proven in numerous studies that there is a clear correlation between EX and CX. Therefore, it makes sense to be able to centralize the two programs, linking employee feedback and customer feedback to reveal associated insights and help drive business improvements. This approach can provide a more logical and valuable configuration for numerous roles. For example, a sales manager from within one dashboard would then be able to see the feedback from both their team of sales reps (VoE) and from the customers their division is responsible for (VoC). Having this centralized view would allow deeper analysis — for example, is there a correlation between the engagement level of specific employees and the NPS of the customers they work with?

Another benefit of embracing VoE would be the ability to provide employees all over the organization with an outlet to share their ideas and observations. This could span from capturing the root cause as an employee closes the loop with a customer after a VoC-insight-recommended intervention, to employees submitting ideas directly for the company to consider as and when they arise.

Usability: Investigate Application Usability and Ability to Manage User Adoption

User Experience

One of the main go-to-market value propositions cited by VoC vendors is their application’s ease of use and appealing look and feel — in short, its user experience (UX). However, achieving a good experience for each user in spite of their varied requirements and all the complexities of deployment is easier said than done. Think about how different the UX would need to be for (a) a casual user in marketing who launches a light survey every six months to 100 customers, and (b) someone in the customer insights team of a large multinational with millions of consumers who is responsible for VoC governance and is constantly having to accommodate new feedback sources, deal with hundreds of concurrent survey activities and meet evolving business demands.

To understand and define usability needs within an RFI or RFP requires time to be set aside to recognize internally who will create things such as surveys, analyses, reports and dashboards. What skills do they have? If they are highly skilled and technically capable, you may require a different sort of usability than if they have fewer technical skills and are less adept at gathering, using and analyzing customer data. Pay particular attention to understanding your administrative user needs. The usability of master controls can be the difference in terms of spending thousands of hours of time deploying and managing the program over a number of years.

On the surface level, the usability of most vendor applications will look perfectly adequate, but when delving deeper into the administrative aspects of running the program, it will begin to vary greatly. The degree to which a user can configure surveys, dashboards, reports, analysis functions and action workflows without support from their software vendor varies. Forced vendor participation adds cost but is sometimes unavoidable within the most complex of configurations.

There are also many other considerations linked to the criterion of usability, for example:

- The aesthetics of the dashboards.
These are the things buyers tend to see in demos, and they are usually impressive. Going beyond this to the heart of the offering is where usability nuances will be made more apparent.

Program Health
The “health” of a VoC program is often overlooked, but is an important consideration. Your chosen VoC vendor's solution and associated services have an important role to play. In order for the VoC program to be healthy, the data needs to be valid and processes executable. However, what is often overlooked is the fact that employees also need to be engaged and logging in regularly.

As such, administrators need good visibility into which employees are logging in and using the platform, and how often. Are they logging in once a month or daily? Daily access implies a good level of “addiction,” with the solution likely to be a core asset in supporting their role.

By monitoring actual user activity within the system, administrators can also identify users who may need further communication or training to really get the most out of the solution. One dimension of this would be observing if proposed actions are being followed through on or not. When an employee ignores a prompt to do something, it implies they either don't believe the findings or have some other issue with the application. Being aware of this and having a process in place to investigate such situations can help ensure the long-term health of the program. The ability for vendors to provide this “health check” capability as part of their software offering cannot always be guaranteed.

Interestingly, some vendors monitor usage independently so they can advise a customer on potential issues and work with the program's leaders to help put corrective measures in place (e.g., if the percentage of users logging in daily is low or dropping). Some organizations appreciate this external assistance in helping maximize the value from their investment, but not all vendors support this in a cost-effective way.

Technology: Ensure the Appropriateness of the Architecture for Operationalizing a VoC Program

Scalability
There is a big difference between a lightweight tool that can launch a simple web survey and a strategic enterprisewide VoC platform. Determining whether the application has been designed from the bottom up to work in a complex, multidepartment environment with thousands of potential users is a key requirement.
At the heart of this enterprise-scale capability is the robustness of the central administrative function, where VoC governance requirements can be managed. For example, a new survey would need rules on:

- Who can create it
- Who should test and approve it (i.e., a sandboxing phase)
- Which customers can receive it (by applying associated filters and sampling rules, including dynamic sampling to manage quota requirements)
- Which employees can ultimately see the resultant report (or subsets of the report)

The report itself, if new, may also need to be tested and approved before being distributed. For an organization with hundreds or even thousands of surveys running globally each year, and tens of thousands of employees potentially being able to see the gathered information, managing this is no small undertaking. Add to this the data collected from other indirect channels and the situation can become extremely complex very quickly.

Delving deep into this below-the-surface consideration can be an important differentiating factor. Determining if this can all be done via the software in a self-service capacity by the business user or IT, or with assistance from the vendor, is also important to know before starting the project.

**Technical Underpinnings**

Several key architectural conservations should be explored beyond subcriteria, such as the availability of on-premises versus cloud deployment options, support for multitenancy and country-specific data center availability.

Investigating the platform’s in-built redundancy, overall reliability and scalability is important, as these vary between vendors. The increasingly diverse and sensitive nature of the data being stored within these solutions merits a thorough investigation into this topic. For example, checking that the provision of relevant security certifications, such as ISO 27001 or FedRAMP, applies to the entire solution and not just the data center, and how GDPR compliance is achieved — these aspects can separate the vendors. Not all vendors can easily support a customer’s “right to be forgotten” without compromising long-term reporting (e.g., anonymizing responses rather than deleting them completely).

Integration is another key subcriterion. The ease and flexibility with which a vendor can cope with the import and export of multiple file formats varies and demands deeper investigation. Seek assurances that the solution can work seamlessly within your organization’s unique set of business system data feeds and associated quirks in real time; do not assume this will be the case. This may place an increasing burden on the organization’s own IT resources.

Increasingly, vendors have out-of-the-box connectors to mainstream business systems, spanning domains such as customer service, sales, marketing and HR. These are replacing the passive API-
connector-based approach, where custom-written scripts are used to support the import and export of data with the third-party database. These can help simplify integration, but the depth and sophistication of the connectors vary. The portfolio of supporting vendors is usually limited to one or two market leaders within each domain.

**Security Access Rights**

Another aspect that needs particular attention is the ability of the solution to engage the whole organization. Key to this subcriterion is understanding your organization’s reporting hierarchy (or perhaps multiple reporting hierarchies). Each employee should be able to log in and access the relevant authorized data for their role from the most relevant device (desktop or mobile device), with that data presented in a way that provides a positive UX and drives engagement. This may mean integrating with other platforms such as CRM to display the information there.

A considerable challenge here is dealing with the ongoing changes organizations make to their hierarchies and the roles employees undertake. For example, if an employee switches departments, then their entitlement to specific datasets could change. If departments merge, split or introduce new reporting structures, entitlements might need to change. Managing what data each employee is entitled to, both historically and moving forward after a change, in an auditable way, is difficult to manage.

In addition, a single data point (e.g., a customer complaint) might be relevant to multiple departments, such as the account team and customer service. Each would need access to the feedback, but the potential action would need to be managed in such a way that only one department takes responsibility for it.

**Services: Assess Availability of Services From Initial Configuration to Ongoing Value Measurement**

**Service Portfolio**

One of the reasons that VoC software vendors’ responses can vary so widely in terms of price is that vendors are often forced to make assumptions as to the level of support you will need. Some vendors assume you have all the skills and resources you need, so they quote to provide a turnkey self-service solution. Others may assume you need professional or managed services to deploy your program, so they add considerable costs for these to their quote.

To avoid confusion, take time to understand the skills, capabilities and resources you have available. Be specific in your RFI or RFP as to the services you expect the vendor to provide.

Running a successful VoC program requires significant organizational input, and most organizations lack the associated expertise. From the initial setup to the day-to-day governance and driving measurable business change, managing a successful VoC program requires lots of practical experience. Most organizations require some form of assistance, either just to help set them on the right path initially, or at the other end of the spectrum as an ongoing, fully managed service commitment.
A wide variety of services might be needed to deliver a successful VoC program. You should assess what your organization's current in-house CX competency is, and what its future aspirations are. You should identify where the organization would need to seek assistance with its program based on its current maturity, and for how long.

The list of potential VoC services is long. A small selection of the most commonly purchased examples include:

- Survey design and sample management
- Role and hierarchical entitlement design
- Analysis/modeling and action planning
- Journey mapping and customer touchpoint optimization
- Employee CX certification, KPIs/metrics and ROI modelling
- Change management
- Governance framework creation

View these services as discrete investments that can be ramped up and down in line with evolving relevance and your organization's associated increase in CX maturity and in-house competency. It is worth noting that some services are not needed to begin with, as they require a body of feedback data before they can be used effectively.

Most VoC vendors offer some degree of service support. Some offer a full service and view their professional service competency as a differentiation. Others offer basic implementation capabilities, focusing more on the initial deployment of the software only and deferring to someone else (usually a partner they can recommend) for more advanced requirements.

The average VoC software vendor generates 80% of revenue from software subscriptions and licences and 20% from services. But some only generate 10% of revenue from services, and others 50%. The difference can usually be accounted for by either how much of their business is self-service or how much they rely on partnerships with consultancies, agencies and implementation partners to fill the gap.

As such, we suggest you conduct a granular assessment of specific service needs and how they will evolve over time, and map these to each vendor's capabilities (both direct and indirect). When doing so, industry experience is a key dimension to consider, as best-practice nuances vary enormously. In addition, industry-specific experience can help determine more logical business decisions based on the feedback data collected, and sometimes facilitates an ability to benchmark against others.

Value Measurement
Defining how you will measure success and specifying this in your RFI or RFP can help yield better responses. For example, if you’re going to measure success only by the number of detractors or complaints identified, that is a different need from wanting to measure the financial value delivered by more satisfied customers.

VoC programs cannot succeed with a leap-of-faith approach, whereby you hope that the value of customer feedback will become evident to leaders once the insights start flowing. But determining the financial ROI of VoC is extremely difficult. Many of the benefits of VoC are qualitative — for example, better informed projects, better priorities set for CX initiatives, more empathy with customer problems and greater insight into customer needs. VoC data is used to understand a problem — but then, if someone creates a strategy based on that data and a group executes a plan to resolve the problem, how much credit can be attributed to the VoC investment?

Some VoC application vendors have begun to align their output to quantifiable actions and measurable goals. It is not enough to know what the priorities (i.e., problem areas) are; organizations also need an understanding of the business benefits of investing in making those changes.

Some VoC vendors can help support a VoC program by aligning to a set of key, customer-oriented VoC metrics, or proposing and setting some up if they do not already exist. These metrics should dovetail with the high-level business aspirations for CX, growth, retention and operational efficiency. These VoC metrics can align with existing business systems and their associated operational metrics, as well as with other external data sources where relevant. Such alignment ensures that the right business decisions are made and that the value of VoC is both trackable and optimized.

A basic example of this could be when the VoC solution determines that a customer is unhappy (e.g., low NPS), but the proposed action varies based on how long it is before that customer's renewal is due. If it's imminent, then an immediate outbound call could be triggered; if it's months away, perhaps just a courtesy notification to the account manager would suffice. There is no need to incur the cost of the outbound customer care call if it's unnecessary — but at the same time, triggering an action that could result in that customer renewing their contract would be of high value.

As one vendor succinctly puts it, the key is to “monetize NPS,” which means being able to justify the potentially millions of dollars spent on a VoC program. Most vendors are evolving their go-to-market positioning to be more action- and value-oriented, but their maturity varies. This is, therefore, a topic worthy of exploration.

**Evidence**

Interviews with several leading vendors to determine what they felt differentiated their application and go to market.

**Document Revision History**

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How to Develop a Hierarchy of Criteria for VoC Vendor Selection

Apply Voice-of-the-Customer Best Practices to Voice-of-the-Employee Initiatives

Market Guide for Customer Journey Analytics

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