

Quality Corner: What is Quality, Anyway?

By [Tracy Barnhart](#), Quality Manager

Posted: April 2010

J.M. Juran, affectionately known as the Father of Quality, probably said it best- quality is fitness for use. Quality is defined in many other ways, such as conformance to requirements, a measure of excellence, and meeting customer expectations. No matter how you slice it, quality is always defined by the customer.

The term "quality" can be applied to many products and services. However, quality means different things to different people. Your expectations of quality may be very different from someone else's. For example, when purchasing a new vehicle, what are your requirements? You might desire high gas mileage and reliability. Your spouse, however, may be looking for leather upholstery and lots of cup holders.

In the construction materials testing industry, meeting customer expectations should be a high priority. As a testing laboratory, you are not the customer. You are now providing a service to your customers. Your expectations are not the definition of quality. The customer has expectations and wants those expectations to be met. If that doesn't happen, their perception is that you are not providing a quality service to them.

AASHTO re:source customers have certain expectations for the products and services we provide- on-site assessments, accreditation, proficiency samples and, perhaps most importantly, customer service. Our customers have told us that they appreciate the friendly, prompt, and professional customer service that we have provided to them. Because these things are important to our customers, we have rolled them into our quality policy statement and we are constantly mindful of fulfilling these expectations.

If you want your company to be perceived as a quality organization, you must always be in tune with your customers' expectations. You know the old saying- "The customer is always right" (even when they're wrong). Are you unclear about your customers' expectations? Talk to them! Keep the lines of communication open and actively solicit their feedback.

The key to quality is continual improvement. In fact, the most effective way for a company to improve efficiency and quality is to focus on continual improvement. Don't take the "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" stance. Be open-minded. Implement suggestions from customers and employees and incorporate new ideas.

Commitment to customer satisfaction and continual improvement can almost guarantee a "quality" organization. In the immortal words of The Ford Motor Company, "Quality is Job 1". Make it #1 for you, too!