Aim – The aim of this paper is to understand why the testing models and structures fail to satisfy the Customer over a period of time. This paper aims to bring out the simple and basic things that are sidelined or over looked over daily execution of projects and program, and also may explain why Customer tend to move from one testing vendor to another. This paper lays down a method called LIASE to keep the Customer satisfied throughout and act as Customer retention method.

Introduction - Test Factory, Testing Centers or Managed Testing Services, TCOE, Staff Augmented Testing Services, Testing as a Service (Taas), Independent IV&V etc are Software Testing models or structures used to deliver testing service to Customers. These terms are frequently used in proposals, presentations etc to prospective Customers to win business. All these models are proven and robust models and are designed to benefit the Customer. The problem is despite successfully implementing these models there are issues related to Customer satisfaction with many testing service providers. Why the Customer perceives that it's not getting back what was promised? Should we adopt a process based on customer needs rather than coming up with "big" ideas and then testing them out?

Problem Statement – CUSTOMER'S SATISFACTION FLUCTUATES WITH THE PROGRESS OF THE TESTING SERVICE ENAGEMENT

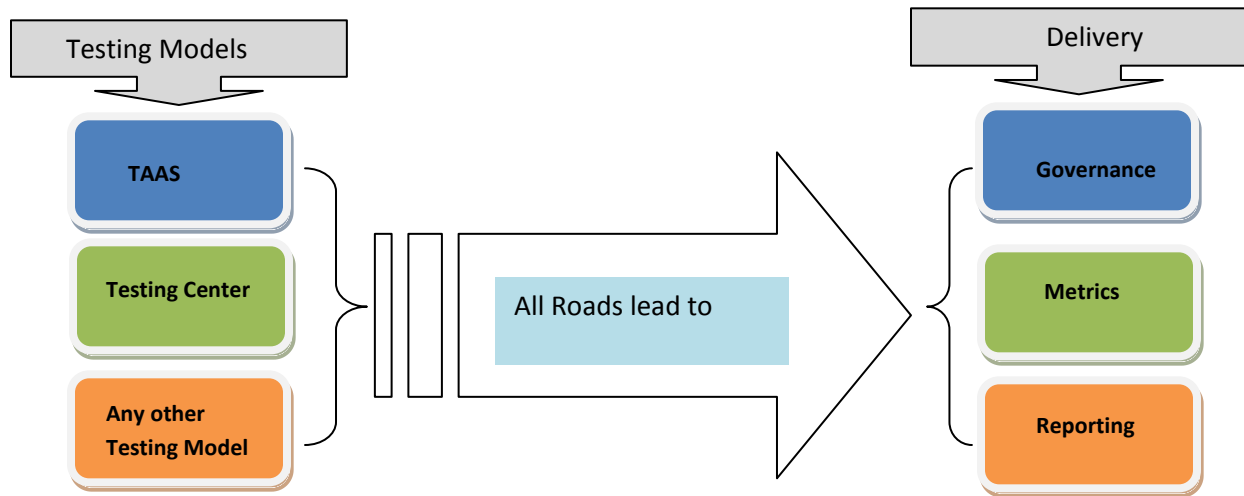**Inspection** – Why is the Customer not happy? Questions for the Vendor

1. Is the Customer too demanding and challenging
2. Over commitment or over demonstration during sales process
3. Unskilled Resources or staff augmentation issues
4. Cost implications
5. Internal management issues

Most of the times in most of the organizations that provide testing services, the above mentioned five problems are pertinent and persistent problems. However, all these problems are manageable and resolved over a period. So the question still remains unanswered why the Customer is not satisfied with delivery.

The major problem with Customer satisfaction is due the fact that Vendors either don't understand what exactly the Customer expects from delivery or misinterprets Customer expectations. Now client expectation could be a very subjective term and is vulnerable to misinterpretation. Before the solution to this problem is discussed it is very important to understand the Customers view points, what the Customer perceives and believes.

Introspection

 A thorough introspection any of the models and structures would reveal that these models are more Vendor specific and Jargon for the Customer. The models no doubt have benefits, but it's a method that the Vendor proposes to the Customer to deliver the service. The Customer is not always interested which Vendor is implementing which model, but the interest of the Customer is whether the Vendor can meet its expectation through the service.

Testing Models		Delivery	
TAAS		Governance	
Testing Center	All Roads lead to	Metrics	
Any other Testing Model		Reporting	

At the end of the day any model that is followed is to ensure good governance, accurate metrics and timely reporting.

Example – Let's assume a Customer X has floated a bid for Testing Service with three expectations

1) YOY ROI (Return on Investment) of 7% on total expenditure
2) An independent testing service provider
3) Standardized processes

Now assume that Test Factory Model best fits the service that the Customer is looking for and the ROI is 7% YOY through this model. Similarly in Testing Center model all criteria are met and the ROI is 7% YOY. Staff Augmentation model provides a ROI of 9 % YOY but doesn't meet all criteria

Three organizations bidding with an approach of Test Factory model, Testing Center model and Staff Augmentation model respectively stand a fair chance of winning the contract. Here the Customer may opt for any of the models based on its business value. The Customer may go for the Testing Centre model even if Testing experts believe that delivering the service through Test Factory model is the best option. The Customer is not bothered about testing models as what it understand its ROI and the criteria it has laid down, which is a fair enough proposition from Customer's view point.

So basically the Testing models and structures on their own cannot guarantee Customer satisfaction.

Million Dollar Question for the sales personnel –

1) Did they check with the Customer out of the three requirements which one the Customer is most concerned
2) What would the sales guys propose
   a. Test Factory + Standardized processes + 7% ROI
   b. Test Factory + Standardized processes +9% ROI
   c. Test Center + Standardized Processes + 7% ROI
   d. Test Centre+ Standardized processes + 9% ROI
   e. Staff Augmentation + 9%ROI
   f. Or all of the above

3) Did they check if the Customer has some nice to have criteria's not mentioned in the original proposal

No marks for guessing!

Solution – The solution is to LIASE with Customers as frequently as possible. Testing as a service comes right at the end of the project spectrum. What the Customers would like to see at the end of this spectrum is light, light in the form of quality of the product and ROI. Customers are more circumspect to Testing than to development, as testing is going to guarantee and is the final verification and validation that the product is built as the Customer expected. As software and application testing are vital for optimizing uptime of business processes and attaining better return on investment (ROI), Customer is that much more critical of testing service.

Since the Customer is more circumspect around Software testing a relationship needs to be built with the client based around

- Transparency – Transparent Process and procedures
- Trust – Trust that no stone is left unturned during testing
- Accuracy – Metrics should be accurate and project the correct picture of period for which it has been captured
- Innovation – Continuous endeavor to deliver more than the Customer had expected

Transparency, Trust, Accuracy and Innovation are excellent attributes and there are processes built in all testing models to ensure that these attributes are demonstrated. However the major question again goes unanswered, how to ensure that the client is satisfied continuously throughout the length of the testing engagement with the level of transparency, trust, accuracy and innovation exhibited by the vendor?

Project Color > Red to Green - Consider a simple scenario faced in a project lifecycle. A project with status red changes to amber and finally to green, sometimes with same resources or sometimes with changed guards. How does it happen?

Every time a Project goes Red there are escalations to the highest level with cost as well as overall service implications at engagement level and then

1. There is a concentrated effort on the part of Entire team to listen to the Customer
2. Foci shifts towards implementing the Customers suggestions, feedbacks and addressing of pain areas
3. Frequency of asking the Customer for feedbacks on the progress and result goes up dramatically
4. The processes are standardized and all projects are mandated to follow the successful pattern
5. The results of improvement and subsequent solutions are exhibited and sort of advertised

When a project has Red as status the delivery team focus is myopic. They are caught up with day to day delivery tasks and work hard towards short term objectives without understanding if it has any impact on the long term objectives expected by the Customer or value additions that can benefit the Customer.

Basically after the escalations the attitude of the entire team along with senior management changes. There is a marked and visible attitudinal difference in the same resources.

LIASE – The answer to this problem is to be proactive from the start of the testing engagement with the behaviors that project teams demonstrate when a project turns red and escalations are flying around. The approach that is suggested in this paper is to involve the Customer as much as and whenever possible. Involving a Customer doesn't mean that the Customer has to manage the service; it means that the Customer is given attention and is well informed throughout the length of the testing engagement. The behaviors that need to be integrated proactively at the start and throughout the life of the project are as follows

L - Listen to the Customer

I - Implement Customer's expectations, feedback, suggestion etc.

A- Ask the Customer for feedback and Challenge the impossible

S- Standardize the Processes

E-Exhibit the best practices and innovations

Listen to the Customer – The objective here is to listen closely and reply well. From the start of the testing engagement there should be a dedicated ear for the Customer. Someone from the testing delivery team who frequently, as frequently as every week listens carefully to what the Customer has to say and determines strength, weakness, threat and opportunity with respect to the delivery of the testing engagement. This is imperative for testing teams as testing comes right at the end of the spectrum and there is almost no time to turn around. So the escalations from Customers, rightly so are threatening and vigorous. Listening is quite important as the Customers expectation and demand may have deviated from the original proposal or solution. A frequent dialog with the Customer can ensure that Vendor and the Customer are on the same page always. Leaving this too late or waiting for Customer to communicate may lead to chaos in future.

There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves — Albert Guinon

Implement Customer expectation – The Customer's expectations, escalations, feedback, and suggestion needs to be managed on the lines of an incident management system. Where each item coming from the Customer is captured, evaluated, implemented and tracked to closure.

The expectations gathered through listening needs to be implemented successfully and at the right time. Timing of implementation is very important. Trust can be generated quickly if Customers suggestions feedbacks etc are implemented and Customer is appraised about the implementation. Proactive implementation makes a Customer realize that the Vendor is serious about delivering a better service than what was promised initially.

Give the Customer what it wants not what the Vendor wants

However not all Customer feedback, suggestions, expectation can be implemented due to various understandable constraints.

Ask the Customer – There are two parts to asking a Customer. One is to challenge the Customer on what cannot be implemented and secondly ask the Customer what it feels about the testing service at a micro and macro level.

1) Challenging a Customer – Challenging a Customer can be very tricky. One has to be diplomatic when challenging a Customer. While challenging the discussion should be backed by real data, facts and figures to ensure a healthy discussion and to come out with a meaningful, workable solution. This approach removes any ambiguity. Most of the time Customers do appreciate being challenged, as it them a feeling that the Vendor is deeply into the service and knows what is best for the Customer. Also this opens a window for the Vendor to know the Customers perspective and might turn out to be new opportunity or new business line.

2) Feedback – The Customer should be regularly asked for feedback on individual project level as well as service level. The feedback should also be sought at resource level as well. This allows the Vendor to identify what it is doing right and/or what it is doing wrong knowingly or unknowingly. This helps the Vendor to quickly and proactively take remedial measures or implement the correct practices across the testing service. CSAT or Customer satisfaction survey is a good method of collecting feedback but the frequency is quite high. Rightly so because most of the CSAT survey is done on the basis of a template which the Customer needs to fill in. This can be annoying for the Customer if it has to be filled regularly e.g. every week. Therefore apart from CSAT other communication methods need to be devised which could foster the collection of feedback.
For example – All meetings should be concluded after a feedback gathering session. Even informal should hold good, questions like how the team is performing. What are the things that impressed the Customer etc.

"He who is afraid of asking is ashamed of learning." One who asks is a fool for five minutes and one who doesn't is a fool forever – Proverb

Standardize the Processes – Standardizing the process anywhere would typically mean that same and correct set of process and procedures are followed across the Service.

Standardizing the process in the context of this paper has three parts.

1) Identify and consolidate deliverables from all processes. This list of deliverables should be made the base for delivery. The deliverable should be agreed with the Customer upfront. No matter what kind of project it is, these deliverables should be standard across service. There may be additions to these deliverables list depending on the nature of the project but for sign off the basic list of deliverables agreed with the Customer must be delivered. The deliverables could be metrics, documents, milestone planning, Reports etc. This will ensure that the Customer is

getting consistent list of deliverables at agreed frequencies. By isolating the deliverables from processes and delivering them at agreed frequencies it makes them objective in nature. Since these deliverables are now objective in nature they are easier to measure, monitor and control at predefined frequencies. This automatically exerts more control over the projects and service as a whole.

Ex: Let's assume that the deliverables for a project are Test Plan, Test Report, Test Metrics, and Schedule Variance etc

We take this deliverables out of the processes and consolidate them in one document define the frequency and agree with the Customer.

Deliverables	Start Date	End Date	Owner	Frequency	Phase	Signoff
Knowledge Acquisition Document			XXX	Once	Transition	Customer
Test plan			YYY	Once	Planning	
Test Report			XXX	Once	Closure	
Metrics			XXX	Per Phase	Lifecycle	
Schedule Variance			XXX	Weekly		

The above table is an example of what a document with list of deliverables would contain. This way the Customer as well as the management of Vendor can track the deliverables and detect any slippages. This document would also act as a high level plan.

2) Any changes made to meet Customer expectation, process or otherwise, should be implemented and practiced across projects and service as a whole. It should cover both green and red projects to ensure what the Customer is receiving are consistent. This has to be handled on the lines of change management. Like discussed above in the section –"Implement Customer expectations" changes have to be captured, implemented across projects and tracked to closure. This would automate the process of standardization of Processes.

3) Innovations – Innovations are a great way to attract Customers. It really doesn't matter whether they are small or large. Even if Customer thinks the suggested innovation would not fit them, but at least it send out a message to the Customer that the Vendor is aggressively and proactively thinking of improving the Customer's experience about the service. Thus a considerable focus should be on innovations by the Vendor. The existing processes should be challenged backed with ROI and presented to Customer as frequently as possible. This will keep the Customer interested and engaged. This will also showcase the capability of the Vendor and its preparedness for new opportunities.

If you think of standardization as the best that you know today, but which is to be improved tomorrow; you get somewhere." —Henry Ford

Exhibit the best practices and innovations – There is no value of a Service that cannot demonstrate the Achievements and Value Adds. This aspect is seldom followed in a pattern or in a planned manner. This achievements and Value adds are show cased to Customer's on a adhoc and as and when manner. This adhoc and as and when manner is like taking the foot of the gas paddle. There is no pressure to innovate to generate value adds and subsequently show case them to Customer.

The best practices, innovations, value adds should be put into a plan. A periodic plan which would outline when the best practices, innovations, value adds need to be shared with the Customer. This has a threefold impact. First it constantly reminds resource that they need to contribute something towards best practices, innovations and value adds by certain date. Secondly the management would have a consistent supply of these types of values to demonstrate to the Customer. Thirdly due to the constant addition of values to the service, the service would evolve into a mature service line.

Doing business without exhibiting is like winking at a girl in the dark. You know what you are doing, but nobody else does - Steuart Henderson Britt

Benefits – The benefits of LIASE method are manifolds. The overall benefit is Customer satisfaction and retention. Some of the major benefits are as follows: -

1) `Frequent communication with Customer on feedback, escalations etc
2) Customer expectation are managed in a planned manner
3) Customer gets a first row view of the service frequently
4) Customer concerns are detected early and measures to eradicate them can be taken proactively
5) Keeps resources on their toes to constantly better the service
6) Constant and consistent focus on the service delivery
7) Ensures a mature testing service
8) Processes are standardized
9) Planned windows to showcase the innovations, best practices and Value adds to Customer
10) Introduces objectivity to the delivery, helping in efficient tracking, monitoring and control by both Vendor and Customer

Conclusion – This focus of this paper is not on how to do but what to do. The concept will be same for all projects but the method may be different. The LIASE method may be very basic and elementary in nature but mostly forgotten during peak delivery. The purpose is to draw the attention of persons managing testing delivery to proactively consider these attributes.