About the House

Making the Sale—Not the Pitch

by Henri de Marne

You undoubtedly have read articles in various trade publications written by remodeling-management specialists who religiously advocate certain procedures to follow when dealing with prospective clients.

(Note that I used the word "specialists" rather than "experts," because most people interpret the latter to mean someone who allegedly "knows it all." One need only hear "expert" witnesses contradicting each other in court to realize that something is amiss here. But I digress....)

Having attended some of the seminars and read some of the writings of these authorities, I recall these recommendations essentially as follows:

• Meet husband and wife together; that means during the evening or on weekends.

• Follow the rather strict sales-pitch procedures dictated by sales managers, with the goal of getting a signed contract at the end of this first meeting. Among other things, this means compiling information about the appropriate appliances and other items in a ring binder that you take with you so you can price the job right then and there.

• If you have a showroom, get prospects to come in so you can dazzle them with the array of stuff your company exhibits.

I recall one recommendation in particular, made by a man from the mighty state of Texas, who was paid by a regional organization (and undoubtedly took a hefty travel tax deduction to boot) to tell attendees how to succeed in remodeling without even trying. (Fortunately, I have long since forgotten the speaker's name.)

His line throughout the evening was, "Stick it to them so you can afford to be a gentleman later'—presumably when things go wrong. I translated that in East Coast American lingo to mean: "Gouge the suckers in the beginning so you won't lose your shirt if they have the gall to insist that you correct your mistakes!"

I left with the feeling that this man, who sported a white 10-gallon hat, should have been wearing a black one like the villians in old western flicks, and that Matt Dillon was probably hot on his trail.

Worse, though, I came out thinking that if many remodelers took him seriously, the field would be full of sleazy characters like him.

I do not mean to imply that speakers or writers who follow the dictates mentioned above are all bad guys who advocate sleazy practices. Far from it. Nevertheless, I tend to disagree with a lot of them, perhaps because of my constitutional makeup and an accident of geography that placed me in a market that never would tolerate such practices.

I suspect that many *NEB* readers would be more comfortable following the procedures I developed (which my partners still adhere to while running a million-dollar-a-year remodeling business), because I suspect they operate a more personally oriented business—one that relies primarily on word-of-mouth referrals, rather than volume sales generated by newspaper or television ads (which in my mind is the market to which these management specialists address themselves).

The Personal Approach

When a potential customer calls your office to discuss a proposed project or you hear about someone who is planning some remodeling work, it is essential that the lead be followed up promptly.

Try to respond the same day, if only to say that you can't set up an appointment until the next week. This is your first opportunity to establish a pleasant, personal relationship between your firm and your prospective customer—and first impressions count for a lot.

Consider the following scenario: Remodeling contractor Joe Smith receives a call taken by his answering service—or worse, one of his children, while a loud fight between the others is heard in the background. He's so busy lining

up subcontractors and ordering materials for the next day that he doesn't take the time to respond. The message is set aside and gets lost under a mound of papers. (Everything in its own time, right?)

But consider the plight of the other protagonists—the homeowners—as well. After struggling with the decision for months, John and Sally Doe finally have decided to forego buying a larger house, opting instead to build an addition with two bedrooms and a bath.

They have every right to be a little apprehensive; after all, remodeling is disruptive to the family's routine. Workers will be in every day tearing things down, creating dust and tracking in mud. It means strangers using the facilities and poking their noses everywhere. Gone are privacy and an orderly life for perhaps a month or more.

But while discussing their concerns at a friend's house the night before, Joe Smith's name was mentioned. They were told his crew is considerate and does fine work. Remodeling isn't so bad, their friends advised. Just try it.

So with pounding heart and racing pulse, they phoned Joe Smith and now are eagerly awaiting his return call. They think of him as a friend—a source of salvation—and they can't wait to hear from him. But wait they do—and wait, and wait, and wait.

Maybe he's not as reliable as their friends made him out to be, they think. Suspicion sets in, and they're now reluctant to call again.

Meanwhile, another friend in whom they confide their disappointment suggests that they call Keith Dunn.

Though submerged in work, Dunn picks up the phone immediately upon arriving home and calls the Does before starting to line up the next day's schedule. He knows from experience that public relations—particularly the kind he is about to tackle with the Does—is essential to his success (and, moreover, costs him nothing).

Sally Doe remains calm and collected on the surface, but she's literally bursting with excitement as she discusses the project with Dunn. Dunn, of course, knows how she feels. He recognizes the restrained enthusiasm and knows how to nurture it.

He listens carefully to the flood of reasons why they have to raise a dormer and why they called him after trying someone else, who didn't even bother to return their call. All the while, Dunn is squelching his joy that his competition is handing him work on a silver platter.

While the torrent of details and explanations runs its course, Dunn is careful to ask pertinent questions designed to pre-qualify his potential customer and determine whether they are serious or simply shopping around. Do they have a budget in mind or any idea what they want to do will cost? He gently gives Sally a price range of past jobs similar to hers, leaving himself plenty of leeway to avoid scaring her off.

He has other questions. Has she talked to a bank about financing, or is this a project they will finance themselves? Have they drawn their own plans or selected them from a magazine? Or would they like him to handle that aspect after they've sat down and firmed up the details?

Her dream taking shape at last, Sally now thinks of Keith Dunn as a friend, and she wants to know how soon he can come over and talk to them. That's where Dunn clinches the job.

"You know I want very much to work with you on this, or I wouldn't have taken so much of your time talking about it," Dunn says. "But I have to ask that you give me until late next week before I can come to see you. I'm pretty tied up on a couple of jobs that are requiring a lot of attention right now in order to avoid any delays. You can appreciate the fact that these matters deserve top priority—just as your job will once we get under way."

The appointment is set up with the understanding that it might have to be postponed if something comes up on these two jobs requiring immediate attention. Dunn promises to bring catalogs of plumbing and light fixtures, samples of ceramic tile and plastic laminate, and product literature on fixtures, medicine cabinets, vanities and the like to leave with them.

He suggests that they'll have to make these preliminary choices reasonably soon so he can include them in his proposal, unless they prefer that he include an allowance. In this way, he puts them to work while buying a little time.

Moreover, he tells Sally that hell bring along his plumber so she can get a firm price from him on extending the hydronic heating system and connecting the new plumbing to the old.

This half hour has been worth hundreds—even thousands—in advertising. Keith Dunn can now proceed with his other trade calls while Sally Doe, adrenalin pumping, awaits her husband's return from work so she can tell him all about it.

You can bet that when Joe Smith gets around to calling (assuming he does), the reception will not be as warm or productive as he expected, even if he's invited to present a bid.

Even if his price turns out to be lower, Joe Smith may not get the job. My firm often was awarded contracts that were bid more than 10 percent higher than the competition. To many customers, the combination of prior performance, recommendations from customers, quality of workmanship, organization and timely follow-through on past jobs—added to the prompt return of their initial call and the way in which it is handled—is worth the difference. Aggravation, after all, has its price—in dollars as well as in its toll on the psyche.

Communication is thus the first link in a chain that the contractor builds with the prospect. It's crucial not only at the beginning, but throughout the entire business relationship. If the prospect is to become a customer who sings your praises around town after the job is done, you need to communicate *all the time.*

I cannot emphasize this enough. Many happy beginnings sour because contractors fail to call to say why they can't start when they said they would, why the workers have been called away from the job, or why the plumber or the electrician didn't show up after the client stayed home from work to let them in.

So take the time to call, even if you think it's not important—even if only to say that you're behind schedule and will be a few minutes late for your appointment, or that workers were delayed by bad weather.

And once you've established a policy of communication between you and your clients, it's not that difficult to extend it to your subs and suppliers. It becomes a habit, and you must insist on it.

You can't expect to look good if one of your employees, subs or suppliers doesn't show up—especially if you can't tell your inconvenienced and impatient customers why. After all, who's running the show?

Make a point of knowing. Insist that those you work with let you know of any changes in their plans—or deal with others who are more cooperative, and they'll soon get the message. Nothing straightens out a smug, prima donna subcontractor faster than awarding the next job to a competitor and making sure he finds out about it.

But let's back up a bit: You have an appointment with a prospective client. Keep it and arrive on time and prepared—and presentable.

If you come off a job with muddy clothes and shoes, have a change in the truck or car. You may think it makes you look like a "doer," but to the client you're a slob—particularly if they're like most people and feel that they already spend too much time cleaning house. People won't pay much attention to you and your ideas if they're worried about the mud you've tracked in on their carpet. If necessary, bring a pair of indoor shoes, or walk around in stocking feet.

Don't feel that you must make an appointment when both husband and wife (or cohabitants, as is often the case today) are present so you can close the deal on the spot. Not only is it hard for many people to arrange this scheduling, but they can feel cornered if they're pressed into a decision.

Don't come on strong like a salesman. Present yourself as a competent, confident contractor eager to help them get what they want. They know you want the job; there's no need to beat them over the head with the fact.

An appointment during the day, when one of the owners can take time off to accommodate you, is always preferable. Evening appointments can be hard on all concerned—

there are dinner dishes to wash, favorite TV shows to watch, children to spend time with, and people tired from the day's work. (This applies particularly to you, since the job being proposed is not likely to raise your adrenalin to the same level as that of your prospect.)

An appointment in the middle of the day is often best for the contractor, who by that time presumably has checked other jobs and found them to be running smoothly, and who should have an open schedule toward the end of the day in case any problems come up.

Some prospects are so well organized that they'll have typewritten sheets detailing their requirements; most are not. Generally, you will be asked, "Where do we start? Do you want to see the whole house first?"

Don't take over. Just suggest that he or she tell you want they want, giving a few more details than what were provided during the initial phone conversation. Be a good listener, and interrupt only to ask questions that bear on your understanding of the project.

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At all costs, avoid appearing superior, know-it-all or condescending. All of us appreciate some modesty in others.

(The rare times I purposely vary from this course is when I'm confronted by some smart aleck who doesn't know his you-know-what from a hole in the ground. It can be fun playing games with people like these at times, as long as you're prepared to lose the job—which in this case might be the best thing that can happen.)

Once you understand what the project involves, suggest a procedure—such as, "Why don't we first go outside so I can picture how it's going to tie in and check for potential obstacles?" or "Let's go to the basement first."

By all means, make intelligent, constructive suggestions, and avoid remarks that belittle the client's ideas, however impractical they may be. Suggest possible alternatives, and let *them* realize how much better the alternatives are than their own ideas. This is one of the ways to develop a remodeling partnership built on the solid ground of mutual respect and need. (They have the bucks, remember!)

If you aren't proficient at it already, train yourself to draw freehand sketches of existing components relevant to the new job, as well as sketches of the new job itself. Keep all elements as much in scale as possible, and make brief notes of everything you need, such as vertical and horizontal measurements between each point and break. If you're good at it, let your prospect see what you are doing.

Don't hesitate to ask for or accept your prospect's offer to help you hold your tape. Let potential clients physically become part of the preliminaries so that they feel involved.

If you need to have a subcontractor look at some complicated installation or firm up a price after this initial visit, set up a convenient time for the subcontractor's visit and arrange to be there yourself. A sub who shows up alone and asks the homeowner to explain what he or she is supposed to do doesn't reflect positively on your control of the situation.

Once again, if you find that you can't have your proposal ready at the stipulated time, call to explain why and give an alternative date you can stick with. Keep foremost in mind that these people are very anxious to get going—and that the most important job in the world to them is their own.

In a forthcoming issue of *New England Builder*, I'll outline what form I think that proposal should take. For now, though, I offer this advice: Don't phone in your proposal and leave it at that. People want the proposal in writing, detailing what you have included—and, more importantly, what you have *not* included.

Failing to cover what's not included in the price can cause more arguments and ill will than you ever bargained for. At worst, it can end your relationship abruptly, assure you of very bad press and prevent you from collecting all your money. At best, it can cost you a bundle doing something you hadn't included in your price, or, assuming you can get away without providing the service in question, foster discontent and mistrust that will last long after the job is completed.

As soon as possible, mail the proposal and call your prospects to tell them it's on the way. Mention that you'll call in a few days, after they've had a chance to look it over, to go over any questions they may have. Then be sure to call back when you say you will.

Don't push too hard—it makes many people wary and uncomfortable. But *do* express an interest in helping them with their exciting project. •

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