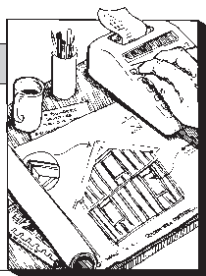


Pre-Construction Conferences

by Walter Stoeppelwerth and Linda Case



A pre-construction conference with the customer has become an absolute necessity in the remodeling and renovation business. It is held on site, immediately following the initial site walk-through, and includes the homeowners, salesperson, production manager, superintendent, and lead carpenter.

The contract is reviewed once more to ensure that the customer understands just what is and is not included. Most customers have discussed options on a project and reached compromises to bring the job in at budget. Therefore it is easy for them to forget just exactly what the final specifications will be. Going through the contract point by point is extremely important.

It is essential that customers make every selection for the job during the pre-construction conference. Many companies insist that all job materials be in local stock before work begins.

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What must be made clear to the customer is that this meeting marks the passing of the chain of command from sales to production. They will now work with the production staff rather than the salesperson. If during construction a customer continues to call the salesperson or company owner, the production manager will lose control of the job and the customer's respect. The production manager often has to play the "bad guy" at this meeting, explaining in lay terms what the specifications mean more thoroughly than most salespersons have done. He often must unveil the reality of what the customer has already bought—minus the "decoration and advantages" described by the salesperson.

The lead carpenter should also be introduced to customers as the person responsible for running the job, and he should attend the pre-construction conference. Calls to the production manager for insignificant items can be eliminated when a customer knows the lead carpenter has responsibility and authority.

Topics for Pre-Construction Conferences

Storage of materials must be addressed: An area the size of one bay of a two-car garage is needed for storage of finishing materials.

Finishing the affected area should be discussed: rough grading, finish grading, sodding, re-landscaping, etc. If the customer is a gardener or landscape enthusiast, the backhoe to dig a basement or footers will affect, more than the actual dimensions of an addition.

If a bathroom is being remodeled, there will be three or four days during which it will be unusable. Assure the customer of adequate notice and minimal down time, while making it clear that after three or four days the bathroom will be usable but not finished.

If there will be interior work, temporary rearranging or storage of the homeowner's furniture, rugs, curtains, piano, etc., must be arranged. Dust protection of adjoining rooms and disruption of the rest of the house should be realistically discussed. If a household member has an allergy to dust, other living arrangements might be made, or the allergic person might move to a room on a floor unaffected by construction.

If the kitchen is being gutted and remodeled, there will be no working sink, appliances, or space for a period of time. Where should the refrigerator be temporarily relocated? Will the owner keep the removed cabinets or dispose of them? If the cabinets are of the built-in type that cannot be removed in one piece, their dismantling should be explained.

Opening up a house is just a construction problem to a remodeler, but it is a heating, air conditioning, privacy, housekeeping, and security problem to the customer. If a wall is to be removed between the existing house and a new addition, the timing is of utmost importance. Most companies enclose the new addition before tearing out, but the customer must be considered and kept informed.

Routine interruptions in electric power that characterize construction jobs can be a real problem if the customer has a computer. Also dust is a computer's enemy: Customers should be warned to move a computer out of the range of remodeling's inevitable dust.

New plumbing often requires opening and patching walls. If the wall is then painted, it may not match the existing paint in the room. If this possibility is not made clear, the remodeler may end up in an argument at the end of the job and have to repaint an entire room in order to satisfy the customer.

If a dormer is being erected, requiring doubling the 2x6 floor joists on the second floor, nail pops or plaster damage are likely. The customer should be warned to expect this repainting at the completion of the project and its inherent cost (if not in the contract).

If any matching is being done, whether it be on mortaring, roof shingles, floor tiles, special molding, windows, doors, etc., customers should be informed of any major differences and encouraged to visit the supplier or view available samples. The contract language should be pointed out. It might read: "match as closely as possible from stock materials at existing local sources of supply."

If staining a pine door is specified, the production manager should describe the different degrees of hardness of wood used for doors and that staining a pine door may produce a splotched effect. Because they have had so much trouble in the past, one company in California brings customers into their showroom so that they will know what a pine door looks like before it is included in the contract.

If a home has galvanized water pipes and a new bathroom is being installed, the salesperson should suggest changing all accessible piping to copper during construction. Galvanized pipes rust from the inside out and ultimately clog and rust out. Due to the rusty pipes' reduction in aperture, when the new bathroom is installed and additional demand for water begins, there will be a noticeable drop in pressure. The customer will accuse the contractor of ruining the water pressure and expect it to be corrected.

Framing lumber today does not always look strong and the customer may need to be assured that structurally the material is sound. Many customers are unaware that pressure-treated lumber is a rough, construction-grade material. Much grief can be avoided if this is explained and possibly demonstrated at the pre-construction conference. If the customer has any problem with the rough finish, or cracking and warping of the material, it can be exchanged for redwood with an increase in price.

If the contract calls for copper-baseboard heating to be put in an addition where there are cast-iron radiators in the existing house, the production manager should explain that radiators work best at 140 to 150° temperature while baseboard heating works best at 170 to 180°. There will need to be a compromise when setting the aqua-stat for the temperature in the boiler.

When a heat pump is to be installed as part of the contract, the production manager should explain that the temperature of the air at the registers will feel "cold" but that this is to be expected.

Customers have strong feelings about certain things, and they tend to assume everyone shares their feelings. They also assume the remodeler will ask the right questions and make the right judgements. A customer may picture stain on all trim and be astonished that fingerjoint trim has been used.

One person might have an absolute fetish about no hammer marks on the trim, but be completely oblivious to whether or not the insulation is installed properly. On the other hand, another person might be extremely concerned about air leakage and energy conservation. This does not mean that the customer should set the standard of quality for a remodeler, but it is advantageous to know what areas should receive extra care and attention if this customer is to be satisfied. ■

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