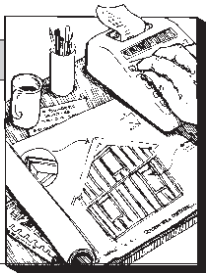


The Keys to Customer Satisfaction

by Shawn McGlynn



I've seen a customer scream so hard that the saliva flew from his lips. I've seen a one-week-old foundation torn to the ground because the client withheld money. I lost a couple of good friends through a misunderstanding about the cost of renovating their log cabin. Not all these misfortunes have happened to me, but regardless, the lessons are hard-learned for anybody. Now that I have my own company, I've come to rely on certain guidelines for operating my business as smoothly, as efficiently, and with as much customer satisfaction as possible. These guidelines may seem obvious and simplistic, but they are difficult to follow in the chaotic, workaday world of a small contractor.

Commit to Quality. Believe me when I say that quality *must* be the foremost concern of any construction firm. You *absolutely, positively* have to care about the work you're doing for your client. If you don't, get out of the business and go far, far away. You won't have to wait long for someone to tell you to do just that. Clients have an uncanny ability to perceive the level of commitment to their job. If you don't care, they know it.

Good work is essential, but there's a lot that can be done to ensure customer satisfaction long before the toolbelt goes on.

Communicate. It's the key to a smooth job. You need to explain in detail what your company policies are, and what your client can expect for his money. There's nothing worse than leaving your client in the dark because that's where he feels most vulnerable to being duped or cheated. You have to establish a trust between you by communicating honestly.

Part of communicating honestly is insisting on specifics. Make sure you know what your client wants in the way of wood types, materials, colors, etc., and be sure to write those specifics down in your proposal. Include dimensions, structures involved, and amounts, and by all means, include clauses for any unknowns. I know that in restoration work a bid can be totally inaccurate if you don't know what lies under the flooring, or if the joist you partially revealed happens to be the only sound one in the bunch. Sit down with your client and discuss every aspect of the job, and always go over your proposal word for word. You'll be laying down a solid foundation for your job before you've even touched your hammer.

One note of caution...if you're dealing with a group of individuals or husband and wife, *never* talk to people separately. Decide upon a spokesperson at the beginning, or always make sure the husband and wife are present together when decisions are made. I know a woman who went \$6,000 over the lighting budget her husband had dictated, and he didn't know about it until the contractor handed him the bill,

(which he didn't pay, and that case is in the courts now.)

Try to stay away from time-and-materials jobs. The risk of messing up on a bid is far less – if you do your homework – than the problems inherent in a time-and-materials contract. Here's my reasoning. With a bid, the price is clear-cut and you've spelled out a specific payment plan in your contract. Basically, you're your own man, doing the job according to your calculated hours. In a time-and-materials situation, the client becomes your boss, and you have to justify time spent and materials bought. I think contractors and clients alike feel more secure within the context of a bid.

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Make the money situation perfectly clear. So many problems can be avoided if your client knows exactly what has to be paid and when. My company policy requires a ten-percent down-payment of the total job price upon signing of the proposal, then the rest of the total is divided into three payments, the last of which is contingent on customer satisfaction. It's sometimes a good idea in restoration work to submit a demolition bid first before trying to come up with an overall job price. This can save you from some devastating unknowns in old structures.

Be on Your Best Behavior

The rest of my guidelines are small but important aspects of maintaining customer satisfaction.

Keep a business-like stance from your client. In general, you're going to like many of the people who contract your services, but be careful to separate business from friendship. If your client is already a friend or family member, make it clear right away that your work is on a purely business level. Submit bids, contracts, and payment plans exactly as with any other client. If you want to give them a break on the price of your labor, fine, but don't make an issue of it.

If your client is not a friend, but you're hitting it off very well, save the

afternoon beers or invitations to dinner until everything has been finished and paid for. Personal experience has shown me that cutting costs and corners for "friends" only leads to trouble. You can lose your profit and gain some underlying resentment. Your business needs to make money, and you shouldn't feel guilty about that.



Keep your appointments. Now does that sound easy enough? I am still, to this day, astonished at how many contractors and subs miss appointments and never think to make a phone call. Believe me, it makes a difference to treat your clients with respect. There's nothing wrong with being unable to keep an appointment, it happens all the time. *But phone your client and let him know.*

Guide your clients, but respect their individuality. As a contractor you are bound by law to uphold all state and local building code requirements. That's a given. But if all the codes are fulfilled and you just *don't like* your client's ideas, it's best to keep your mouth shut. Sometimes you'll get a surprise. I contracted to build a deck for a woman who wanted white, Grecian columns and fancy white railings to surround a pink fiberglass deck. I wasn't sure I wanted to park the company truck out front each day, but the finished product was quite unusual and beautiful.

Guarantee all your work. After all payments have been made, assure your client that if anything goes awry, with the exception of normal wear and tear, you'll be happy to return and fix it. Make call-backs a priority, no matter how small.

Word of mouth is so important to a company's future. It just doesn't make sense to alienate clients for the sake of a fast buck, when to take some time and extra effort will bring you more of everything...money, jobs, and respect. Their satisfaction will ultimately be yours. ■

Shawn McGlynn is the principal of Renaissance Restoration, Inc., in Treichlers, Pa.