

# Letters



## Acting Professional is the Best Defense

It seems we struck a nerve with our October editorial, "Why Can't I Find a Good Contractor?" In fact, the article generated more mail than anything we've ever published. Most of the letters acknowledge that problems do exist – and that these are problems of both image and reality. More important, most of the letters suggest positive steps that individuals and groups can take to both "professionalize" themselves and educate the public. We feel that these issues are critical to the survival and success of the small builder and remodeler. For that reason, you'll find the entire Letters column this month devoted to these concerns. Also note last month's letters on this topic and the articles this month on customer service, client management, and contractor licensing. To all of you who contributed ideas, keep the ideas flowing. We all benefit, and appreciate your efforts. – Editor.

To the Editor:

Your editorial in the October 1988 issue addresses a problem more serious than any of the problems discussed in the rest of the issue. Low bidders can cause good remodelers to go out of business or have them thought of as crooks; but there is much good work for those who do quality work and keep their customers very happy.

I use two items to help educate the public. I use *How to Choose a Remodeler Who's On the Level* as a handout for general use, such as at hardware stores. The card, "Check Before Hiring a Remodeler," is used both as an advertisement in our small local paper, and in the area around the job site. When it's used as an advertisement, we use just the checklist. On site, we fill out the back of the card, listing the customer's name, address, and type of work we are doing; then we distribute these cards and the general brochures to the houses in the immediate area (approximately 20). These people are then aware of us and can check on our work and reputation firsthand just by talking or visiting with their neighbor. We also have a professionally designed sign, identical to

the checklist, which we set out in front of the job site.

Even if I don't get a job, I am glad I had the opportunity to possibly help this person in the future through the use of the checklist provided.

I would like to close by letting you know that yours is the best journal for small companies like ours.

Don White  
Don White Remodeling  
Clarks Summit, Pa.

**Editor's Note:** How to Choose a Remodeler Who's On the Level is available to members of the Remodelers council of the National Association of Homebuilders (15th and M Streets, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005) for \$13/100. The checklist is free to members.

To the Editor:

After reading your editorial, I would like to offer a few comments. I have had some 25 years of experience in contracting with architects, engineers, and contractors. During these years, I have concluded that using the low bid method to award contracts generally results in a "no-win" situation for both the owner and the contractor.

A better procedure for obtaining construction services is to use a method called "competitive negotiations." The advantages of this method are twofold. First, the owner still obtains price competition; second, the owner receives information regarding previous contractor performance and thus can evaluate the contractor's qualifications. An award of a contract can then be made to the bidder who makes the best offer, price and other factors considered. The result usually ends in a "win-win" situation for the owner and contractor.

In the competitive negotiation process the owner first has to somehow define the requirements, preferably through the use of drawings and specifications. If the owner is not able to or does not want to assume this responsibility, then an individual with a technical background should be employed to do so. Many suggest that a lawyer should perform this task. I do not think that most lawyers have the

technical competence required. A lawyer should be retained, however, to review the package to determine if it is legally sufficient to protect the owner.

This package then is sent to a minimum of two, preferably more, contractors. The contractors are requested to furnish prices for the work required. Included also in the package is a questionnaire requesting the contractor to furnish a listing of projects completed during the last three years, with the final costs and the customers' phone numbers. It also asks how much work will be performed by the contractor's own crew, and requests a banking reference. With this information, the owner can do a background check on the low bidder. If this is satisfactory, the proposed contractor is invited to discuss individual work items and prices with the owner. During the discussion, the owner should encourage the contractor to offer suggestions that can improve the project and possibly reduce cost without sacrificing appearance and quality. Hopefully, at the end of this detailed discussion the contractor and owner are in agreement as to the project requirements. With a better understanding of the project, the contractor should be willing to reduce the allowances for contingencies.

Admittedly, this procedure will cost the owner more time and money up front, but this should be rewarded with a smooth-running project completed on time. My experience has shown that this method results in minimal contract administration, such as processing change orders and contractor claims.

Owners should be encouraged to retain control of their building programs rather than delegating these responsibilities to architects, designers, and contractors. I have yet to see an architect, designer, or contractor prepare a contract that truly protects the owner's interests. If an owner is unable or unqualified, he or she should employ someone with a technical background to assist in this.

Edgar K. Epp, P.E.  
Contract Services, Inc.  
Golden, Colo.

To the Editor:

As a bricklayer for the past 30 years, I have worked as a professor of building construction, contractor, professional estimator, project manager, and consultant across the United States. I am in contact as a construction educator with hundreds of professional builders and tradespeople who are trying to improve their knowledge and skill; their image and their professionalism.

The only "sleazy" people that we run into are people such as the "young lady" who spoke to you on the phone regarding her dilemma! You should have advised her that there is no such

thing as a free lunch. You get what you pay for.

If the contractor in question was overzealous and ambitious, I hope he learned a valuable lesson.

I question the reporter's ethical behavior and her "professionalism." I also question her professional friends (builder and architect) who concurred that bad experiences with tradespeople are the norm.

In answer to your questions, "Are most contractors bums?" and "Can't they be trusted to show up?" the mere existence of your magazine answers these questions! The Journal of Light Construction is a highly professional publication geared to a professional group of craftsmen and women. Do you honestly feel that the 30,000 contractors who subscribe to your magazine are all "bums?"

Construction organizations such as the AGC, ABC, NAWIC, and many private companies encourage professionalism through education.

Travelling extensively in the United States on both major and small construction jobs, I have firsthand knowledge of the high regard in which the New England tradesmen are held.

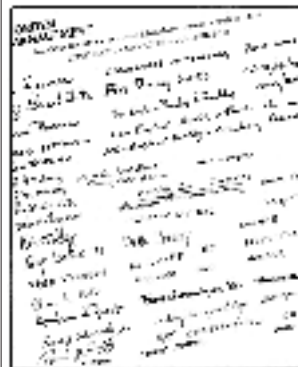
I recommend that a national publication, such as The Journal, conduct a forum with a select group of builders and address the subject of apprenticeships.

I also recommend that the young lady in question use the power of the press to show some of the fine work that the tradespeople have done in the past 200 years instead of crying about the fact that she was "ripped off," when, in essence, she was the "ripper!"

To the disgruntled reporter, I have a piece of advice: A contract is only as good as the people who sign it!

John X. Elliot  
Borden Management  
Worcester, Mass.

**Editor's Note:** John Elliot's letter was accompanied by over 40 endorsements (a few are shown below) from contractors in the Massachusetts area.



To the Editor:

In response to your editorial "Why Can't I Find a Good Contractor?" I would like to suggest one source of the problem, and also one solution.

A source: You mention the "loss of both skills and values – the pride in one's work – that we associate with old-fashioned craftsmanship," and that the trades "let go of the apprenticeship system." Years ago the trades were assured of a supply of industrious and capable people, for such individuals among the "working class" had few options besides entering the trades. With higher education more available to everyone, many such people can now choose more lucrative respected careers. You say "only by acting like a profession will remodelers and builders be perceived as one." It is important not only for clients to perceive us so, but for prospective employees as well, because we must now compete with more prestigious professions for workers with talent and integrity.

A solution: I give each prospective client a four-page "Client Policy," which describes what they can expect of me. This paper outlines my purpose, my experience, my manner or working, my scheduling considerations, my fees, billing practices, estimating concerns, and my interest in their satisfaction. It includes such details as cleaning the job site, conversations, timekeeping, materials procurement and billing, explanation of my business costs, whose job I do first, my integrity, when I expect payment, and why I am not likely to work weekends and holidays.

I supply clients with this information because of the "horror stories" I have heard (and participated in). I believe most of these stories result from "good" contractors disappointing some customer – as we all have done. I have seen good jobs go sour over trivial details because small misunderstandings

can begin to undermine the essential trusting relationship between builder and client. What one party takes for granted the other may not be familiar with: What one assumes, may come as a surprise to the other.

Imagine (or remember) such a scene: A worker arrives fifteen minutes late on a time/materials job, or takes some scrap materials home. The client starts to wonder if he is paying for those minutes, or had a use for the material. He begins to watch more closely and mentions a few such incidents to the contractor. The contractor starts to feel the client is "picky" or "on his back" and begins to resent the client's otherwise normal input. The situation can snowball until trust and respect are lost. Even if completed properly, the job becomes a "horror story," which the client tells about the contractor and the contractor will tell about the client. (You've heard – and maybe told – plenty of those!)

My clients often express appreciation for my information paper, and for the effort it represents. They perceive me more as a professional and are more confident in me and my work. With misunderstandings minimized, my workday is less hassle and much more enjoyable.

Roger Niesen  
Ellsworth, Maine



**Keep 'em coming...**We welcome letters, but they must be signed and include the writer's address. *The Journal of Light Construction* reserves the right to edit for grammar, length, and clarity. Mail letters to The Journal, P.O. Box 5059, Burlington, Vt. 05402