

Service Manuals Make a Good Impression

by Kathy and Gary Wheatley

Like most remodelers, we're always looking for ways to improve service for our customers, especially after our work is completed. We want our customers to feel free to call us if they have any questions or problems with our work. We also want to maintain our reputation with them since they are a good source of referrals.

With annual sales of about \$600,000 and seven employees (including ourselves), our company is not large enough to have a customer service crew. Although we would like to personally call all our past clients to find out how our work is holding up, we don't have the time. Instead, about two years ago, we created a warranty and service manual that encourages customers to get back to us if they are having a problem.

We give out the manual for jobs totaling \$5,000 or more. We limit it to this size job since it coincides with the five-year Home Owners Warranty Corp. (HOW) remodeler warranty that we provide.

The manual consists of 14 pages bound in a standard folder we purchase from a business supply catalog. We use the folder pockets to supply brochures and an application for the HOW program, as well as pre-addressed envelopes for customers to return the forms.

The manual is divided into four parts: home maintenance tips, emergency procedures, 30-day, 6-month, and 12-month warranty lists, and a record of service calls.

Home maintenance tips: Few people bother to read through the owner manuals for all the products used on a particular job. Doing so would take hours. Yet without proper care, many of the items we have built or installed may not last as long as they should. Also, if problems develop, some customers might blame us. So our manual includes eight pages of maintenance tips to help our clients take better care of their homes, as well as the work we've done.

Our tips cover exterior work, roofing, plumbing, wells and septic systems, hvac, electrical, flooring, windows and doors, bathrooms, and basements. We cover general maintenance items, such as recommend-

ing that tree limbs growing on or over a roof be trimmed, or setting the water heater to the temperature recommended by the plumber or utility company.

But we've also included items that make our job easier, such as discouraging wallpapering until a year after the job is completed to minimize damage from normal settlement cracks and nail pops, or warning customers that abrasive cleaners will scratch and dull fiberglass and acrylic tubs and showers.

Emergency procedures: It seems emergencies always happen after business hours. So we've provided a list of emergency phone numbers where we can be reached, as well as numbers for the electrician, plumber, hvac contractor, and anyone else involved in the project. If the listed contractors are unavailable, our clients are instructed to call elsewhere for service. They should pay the bill and then submit it to our office. If we decide the problem is under our warranty, the client will be reimbursed.

Warranty lists: No matter how thorough we are, problems can still develop after we've left the job site. Bathroom fixtures may not function properly, for instance. Caulk and drywall repairs are inevitable with normal settlement and shrinkage caused by heating and cooling. Screws and knobs may come loose.

As a project nears completion, our superintendent and the clients develop a final quality-control punch list. It is stipulated that after the items on the list are completed, the client will make the final payment. Any other items found after the list is completed are included on the 30-day, 6-month, and 12-month warranty lists in the manual. The cost for repairing any items included on these lists is covered by our company's one-year warranty.

The warranty lists not only reassure our customers that problems will be solved, they also keep us from trotting back and forth to past jobs every time a nail pops. We are able to take care of many problems in a single visit. Also, we encourage customers to hold all caulk and drywall repairs until the 12-month list.

Record of service calls: This sheet is intended to help clients

track any work that remains. For instance, if something is broken during construction and must be reordered, the list serves as a record. It reaffirms to the client that we have not forgotten the item and will attend to it as soon as possible.

Other Benefits

Producing the manual is neither expensive nor time consuming. We use our word processor to customize each page with the homeowner's address and the date the project concluded. We also customize the emergency repair list since we may use different subcontractors depending on the job. We also write a cover letter thanking the customer for their business and encouraging them to contact us if they need assistance.

Ideally, every one of our customers will read the manual and follow all the tips offered. But, we've found that only about 10% of the warranty lists are returned on time. We'd like to believe this is because our work is so good that one year later there are no problems. In reality, it seems that most customers handle the little repairs, such as tightening screws or fixing the caulk, themselves.

The warranty and record of service calls provide another advantage: They create a paper trail that comes in handy in case there are any major problems down the line. We've never had this happen, but there are plenty of remodelers who have wound up in court after clients alleged that some of their work was never completed or that repeated complaints were never answered.

The manual also serves as a selling point. We keep a copy in our portfolio to show potential customers that if they work with us, we will take care of them.

We have learned that differentiating ourselves from the competition is one of the best ways to get more jobs. Our manual tells customers that we are both professional and committed. Many people don't expect remodelers to be either. ■

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