



Job Quality Standards for Remodelers

by Ray Sandbek

Quality is one of those words that is often used but seldom defined. Too often, the way a remodeler defines a quality job and the way a customer defines it are two different things. Until recently, there was no such thing as industry quality standards.

Consequently, each contractor defined his or her own set of standards, which varied from remodeler to remodeler and, often, from client to client. Few of these standards, if any, were incorporated into contracts, leaving the remodeler wide open for disputes.

For example, a contractor might know that a large, exposed wood beam that develops some small splits is not a problem. But to a customer who's envisioned furniture-quality woodwork, the splits mean the remodeler is incompetent or has used substandard materials. Faced with dissatisfied clients, most remodelers either redo the work (with no change order or extra pay), or refuse, running the risk of a lawsuit and a bad reputation.

In 1987, the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) Remodelers Council, along with the NAHB's National Research Center, began work on a set of quality standards for the remodeling industry. They set out to develop a credible and uniform body of written specifications to cover all the major areas of residential construction, from site work to roofs. The first edition of *Quality Standards for the Professional Remodeler* was published that year, while a second, and somewhat refined edition, came out last year.

The book's goals are to

enhance the remodeling industry's image and to give a concrete set of standards that can be used for resolving complaints. It is written in layman's terms so that even the customers can understand what to expect from their remodeler.

For example, in a section entitled "Beams," it says, "Beams and posts, especially those 3 1/2 inches or greater in thickness (which normally are not kiln dried), will sometimes split as they dry. Such splitting is usually not a structural concern if posts and beams have been sized according to the

National Forest Products Association span tables." Being able to show something like this to the customer in the example cited earlier might save a lot of ill will and heartache.

How We Use the Standards

After 13 years in this business, and many more years as a salesman, I've learned that printed material has more impact than anything you say to a customer. I take along a copy of the book on my first sales call and let the customers flip through it during my sales presentation. I tell them that the standards lay the ground rules for my work. I also state in my contract that I will abide by the standards, with any unresolvable disputes to be decided by binding arbitration.

Some customers will go so far as to ask how they can get a copy of the book, but most are satisfied to hear that standards exist and that I follow them. In this business, where you don't have to look hard to find a horror story, having these standards reassures my customers and tells them I'm professional.

I also use the standards as an educational tool for my employees. My superintendent and lead carpenter carry the books with them each day to help them know what work is acceptable and what isn't. I let them know that the standards are minimums: Our work should be consistently better than the recommendations in the book. The standards are intended to be used as a guide, and are to be interpreted with common sense.

For the greater good of the industry, I've also spent the extra money and purchased copies for our local Better Business Bureau, the local television station's consumer advocate, and the Kentucky Attorney General's Office of Consumer Affairs. I've also given a copy to my attorney in case of a legal dispute.

Giving It Away

I'd like to say that anytime our work meets the guidelines contained in the quality standards, we will stand our ground and refuse to do a job over. But the truth of it is, like most remodelers, we're willing to lose some time and money if it means hanging onto a good client and a clean reputation.

The standards are most useful when you run into those occasional problem clients, the ones that seem to pick at every bit of work you do. Sticking to the standards when you're dealing with this kind of customer is a good way to draw the line in the sand. The quality standards give us a way to measure our work. Then we can say to our clients, "We have complied." ■

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