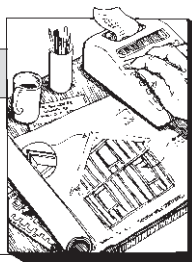


Using Previous Clients to Win New Ones

by Larry Hayden



How do you convince new clients that your company is the one to go with? One approach is a presentation book full of beautiful photographs detailing your handiwork. Such a book can be helpful; but more important, I've discovered, are the words of satisfied clients. Their descriptions of your company and your work carry a lot more weight with your prospective clients than any claims you can make about yourself.

Like many contractors, you probably give your prospective clients a list of names and phone numbers of people you've worked for in the past, but they don't often call more than one or two. And who knows what kind of mood your old customers will be in when they're called?

Enter the testimonial letter or, better yet, a batch of testimonial letters. As a design/build contractor, I hit on this idea while trying to develop a brochure to inform prospective clients about my company. I decided that a brochure becomes outdated quickly and has room for only a few excerpted testimonials, like the ones we've all seen in magazines. "This company did a great job for us! — J. L., Turlock, Calif." or "Couldn't have done without your fabulous advice! — L.P., Greenacre, Ontario." Convincing? Sure, about as believable as a left-handed spirit level.

Excerpts Are Limited

At first, I devised a testimonial summary — similar to excerpts, but with the full name, city, and state of each client. A client list with about 50 names and phone numbers, including those quoted, accompanied the summarized testimonials so that prospective clients could call for verification or clarification. I knew it would help to use real names of real clients to tell our story. But would the excerpts do a good enough job of communicating to prospective clients the capabilities of our company?

Even this type of testimonial excerpt, however, has a limited appeal, a sort of staged appearance. To the skeptic, it raises more questions than it answers. Prospects wonder what the rest of the letter said. What about the screw-ups? How were they handled?

I followed up with prospective clients to find out how reading the excerpts affected them. Let's just say I was underwhelmed by their responses. So, on impulse, I grabbed copies of the complete, original letters and gave these to the next five prospects along with the sheet of

of project), and a note confirming their appointment to visit our showroom.

When asked if they received the material we sent them, many of our prospects volunteer that they not only received it but read every letter. It makes me wonder if there isn't a *Dear Abby* syndrome, something in all of us that makes us enjoy reading other people's mail. In any event, the response continues to be very positive.

These letters are a natural way for your clients to say thank you for a job well done. But it isn't easy or cheap to produce and deliver them. Doris, our office manager, says

your clients. As designers/builders, we include a lot of detail on the plans so that misunderstandings are rare. It's easier to do the most pleasing work the first time. When problems do arise, we have what I call a "rubber spine" when it comes to client satisfaction. That is, we bend over backwards in our desire to please.

It's also important to tell your prospects how many testimonial letters you have received from your clients since you started collecting them as a marketing tool. Explain that you and your crew will be working very hard to please them, and will be checking with them during the course of construction to see how your company is doing.

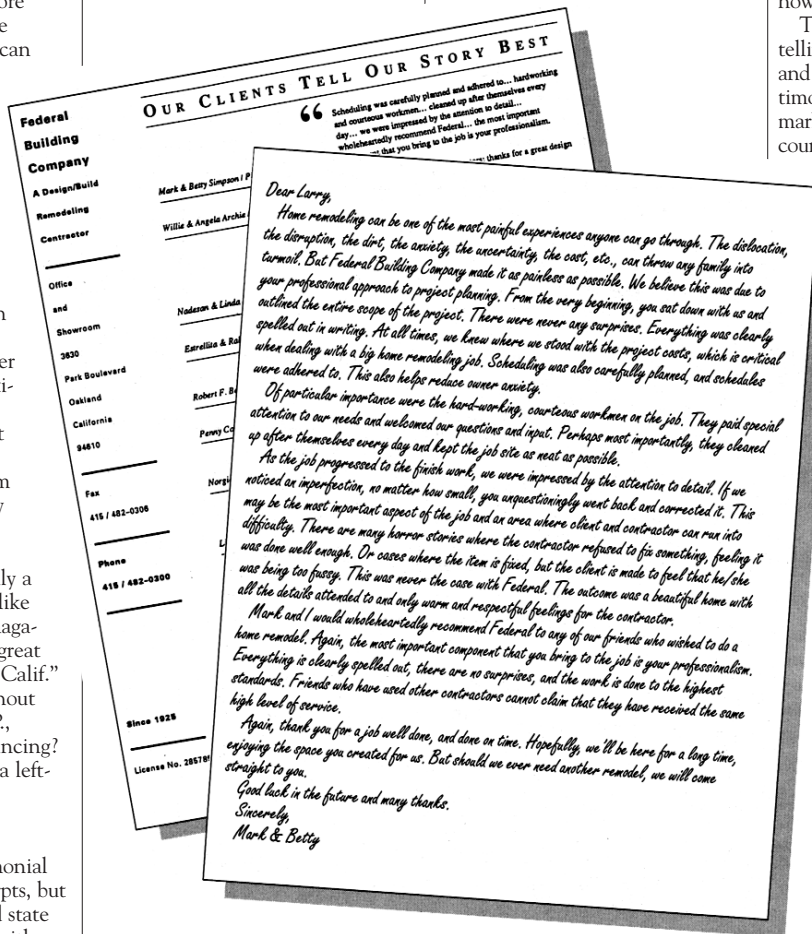
There is nothing wrong with telling your client before, during, and after construction that their testimonial letter will be an important marketing tool, and that you are counting on their help. Most people

will be delighted to assist you in this way. A contractor friend of mine even goes as far as to coach clients to use certain phrases that he wants to see in their letters. I think it's better to let people use their own words, and to encourage them to "let it all hang out."

Prospective clients want and deserve to hear the truth about you. If you make mistakes on the project, your clients might be afraid to write a letter for fear of expressing some negative information. Don't let this stop them. Encourage them to tell it like it is. Your prospects will appreciate reading the letters all the more and will really learn about your "rubber spine." It's better advertising than any words you could say.

Recently, we received two letters from the same client. One was nicely typewritten because she thought it would be used as a testimonial. The other was handwritten and, while it was complimentary overall, it covered the parts of the job that she thought could have been handled better. Even though we had gone over her constructive criticisms during and after the job, it was good for everyone in our company to reflect on her letters. We now include both letters in the packet we send to prospective clients. What an effect. Showing all the letters we get goes a lot further in establishing our credibility than the fanciest showroom, the most polished presentation, or a few handpicked or excerpted testimonials. ■

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excerpts. When I checked back with them, I was pleasantly surprised to find that all five preferred the original letters, and recommended that I abandon the excerpts. I took their advice.

Using the Original Letters

Here's how we currently use these letters in our company. We copy each one and staple together a packet of about 25. We arrange them in chronological order with the most recent on top. Then we send a packet to each prospective client, along with a business card, a list of about 50 client references (names, phone numbers, city, type

Even a lengthy letter is no substitute for a complete copy of the original testimonial letter.

postage to send the letters is now approaching \$1.44 per packet, and this doesn't include the cost of the manila envelope, copy paper, and her time. So much for this idea being less costly than a brochure. The results, however, are worth it. In Their Own Words

There is a distinct value in quantity here: Up to a point, the more testimonials the better. How do you amass enough testimonial letters to create the desired impression? The first step is to do a fabulous job for