



Taking Care of Customers

by Paul Turpin

Remodeling is always stressful for homeowners, even if you're just putting in a new front door or replacing some old windows. Few jobs, however, are more anxiety-provoking than kitchen or bath remodels. Remodeling one of these rooms not only presents the usual problems of dust, dirt, and noise, it also means putting the room out of commission for awhile. So unless your customers can take a trip to the Caribbean for the duration of the project, or at least stay at a nearby hotel for awhile, they must sweat it out at home, cooking rudimentary meals over a hot plate or taking sponge baths in the powder room downstairs.

As a contractor, it's up to me to not only do a good job remodeling the kitchen or bath, but also to take good care of my customers before, during, and after the job. In other words, good craftsmanship is a must, but it is my attention to customer service that gives me a good reputation and plenty of referrals.

Service From the Start

Often homeowners will call me after having their plans drafted by an architect or a designer. If that process was not a pleasant one, I have to work with customers who are soured on the project before construction even begins. However, if the customers first come to me, I have the opportunity to treat them well right from the start.

When I'm doing the design work, my first step is to help my customers set a budget for the project, even if it's only a ballpark figure. If they want custom cabinets, granite countertops, and gold-plated faucets on a \$10,000 budget, it's up to me to educate them about the costs of kitchen remodels. Once we settle on a

budget, it's my job to give them the most for their money. Doing so is my first opportunity to show that customer service is a priority at my company.

Listen, Listen, Listen

Customer service at its most basic level means showing respect for your customers and their needs. The most important thing you can do is to listen and respond to what your customers say. This is one of those things they always tell you at sales seminars and in those glossy magazines, but I know from experience that *really* listening is easier said than done!

Sometimes customers don't communicate their needs, so it's up to you to pull the information from them. For instance, on a kitchen remodel I always ask things like: Are there things about the kitchen that are uncomfortable? Are there certain tasks you hate doing? What do you wish your kitchen had? What would make cooking and cleanup easier?

After this, I come up with a list of things that will make working in the kitchen simpler. Often these are not extravagant items, but matters of convenience, like having a good, sturdy shelf for canned goods, drawers that don't fall out, and countertops at the correct height.

I also try to learn as much as possible about the way customers use their kitchen or bath. One client wanted to remove the dining room wall and put a kitchen island in its place. She does a lot of entertaining and makes a show of preparing Chinese food. While discussing the island, she mentioned that she has arthritis, so lifting the vegetables above the wok often bothers her arms. I thought the height of the cooktop might be responsible, so I took a piece of plywood and set her wok on top of it. Then I held the wood in front of her and asked her to pretend she was cooking. We lowered the wood little by little until we reached a height that felt comfortable. I measured that height and built the cooktop accordingly.

Similarly, I determine the optimum height for the bathroom vanity by building a cardboard mockup and asking clients to "wash up" at it. The standard 32-inch vanity is too low for most adults and not appropriate for the master bath.

When the Sawdust Flies

During the job, it's essential to keep your customers informed. I try to catch them at least once a day, in the morning as they're leaving for work or in the evening when they return. If that's not possible, I call them daily to give a progress report. Other remodelers leave a clipboard on site that's filled with notes, schedules, reminders, and so on.



While the kitchen is out of commission during a remodel, the author provides this simple cabinet to store food and set up a microwave or hot plate.

I used to take personally the inevitable complaints that come during the course of any job. I've since realized that customers have a perfect right to be ornery. Part of my job is to put up with that grouchiness, sort of a professional courtesy. If you make arrangements ahead of time to provide the items your customers need to survive the job, it may alleviate some of their stress.

For a kitchen remodel, this means setting up an area where they can boil water and perform other basic kitchen chores. I make available a very simple cabinet I built (see photo below) that has a single drawer, room for a microwave oven, and several open shelves for storing coffee, tea, cereal, and so on, as well as some dishes and silverware. I also have a hot plate and an electric kettle. Some of my customers use these items, others make their own arrangements. But all of them appreciate the offer.

Doing without a bath, particularly if it's the only one in the house, is a logistical nightmare. You can't leave your customers without a toilet, although sometimes you have no choice. If there are no extremely friendly and accommodating neighbors, it may be necessary to reset the toilet every evening and plan your work schedule around the family's at-home schedule.

I've learned that some people need to go through their morning routine in peace — without the screech of the circular saw. Other customers think the project is not proceeding unless they hear the sounds of construction before they leave for work. Adjusting your hours to suit your clients may not be practical for large remodeling firms. But for small companies, making even minor adjustments can have an enormously good effect on customer relations.

All customers appreciate it if the work area is swept and neatened at the end of the day and if the rubble piles are somehow contained. Doing so also promotes safer footing and helps keep tools organized.

Unfortunately, no matter how thorough and well-intentioned you are, problems will arise. If the problem is your fault, take it on the chin, apologize at once, and set about remedying the situation. If a sub is at fault, straighten it out yourself and avoid involving the customer. In all cases, keep your cool, stay professional, and don't tangle with angry customers.

After the Job

Once the job is completed, I check back with the owners (on the phone or in person) every three months for the first year or so to see how everything is working. This is a good way to stay on top of the little warranty problems, like a loose drawer pull or a leaky faucet. Unattended, these kinds of things become major problems. Keeping in touch with your customers is also a good way to identify yourself with the finished product, which your customers are enjoying, instead of with the mess and upset that's part of the job. That way, customers will think of you positively when it comes time for a referral. ■

Paul Turpin is a Los Angeles-based contractor who specializes in kitchen and bath design and remodeling.



To help his clients stay on budget, the author makes sure their cabinet, appliance, and fixture choices are realistic.