

Well Begun Is Half Done

by Nina Winans and Robyn Muscardini



The successful completion of a project depends on what happens before construction starts. By following a few simple procedures up front, you can leave the job with a satisfied customer who will provide repeat business and plenty of referrals.

Avoid Problem Clients

The very first step is to avoid problem clients. Pay attention to a few warning signs and find a graceful way to decline working for a person who looks like trouble.

Control freak. A person who needs to control the process is bad news. If, for example, your business hours are 8 to 5 weekdays, but the customer can only meet with you evenings or on the weekend, you may be looking at more than a scheduling problem.

Penny pincher. A customer who questions why every item in your estimate costs so much is likely to carry this attitude into the project. You may end up renegotiating price at the end of the job.

Legal eagle. If most of your clients accept your standard contract, a person who wants to change it may continue to argue about its provisions later. If your contract is legal and fair and has worked well on other projects, it's unreasonable to overhaul it significantly for one picky customer.

Trust. Rely on a gut feeling that tells you not to trust a particular customer. You'll be surprised at how often your intuition is correct.

A Good Contract

Besides the usual boilerplate legalese covering things like reasonable delays and insurance, your contract should clearly address several critical topics.

Scope of work. Describe the work you will perform in as much detail as possible. Specifically call out the customer's responsibility for purchasing or selecting materials or for work they are having done by others under separate agreements. Be sure to clearly state that anything not specifically included in the scope of work is excluded.

Cost. Make sure the total cost of the project is accounted for. If some items are still up in the air, such as selecting ceramic tile, use an allowance price that can be adjusted up or down depending on the customer's eventual choice.

Schedule. In California, the contract must state approximate

commencement and completion dates. Make sure the time line you provide is realistic, and be sure you can adjust the schedule for change orders if they require more time than you've allotted.

Change orders. Never proceed with change-order work until it is fully scoped, priced, and authorized by the client's signature. Also provide for a way to include payment for change-order work in your regular schedule of payments. This will keep you from having to wait until the entire project is complete before you can collect. You can use handwritten change orders to keep the work moving, but always follow up with a more formal document later.

Preconstruction Meeting

Assuming you have a qualified client who has accepted your bid and signed your contract, you're still not ready to start the job until you've had a preconstruction meeting. This is a good opportunity for your clients to air out last-minute concerns, and for you to discuss the schedule and introduce your job foreman.

Communication. Clients are often out of the house before your crew arrives to work, and they sometimes don't return home until after you've left. Designate a spot where you can leave messages for each other and agree on the best time to reach each other by phone.

Make sure your clients understand they should communicate only with you or your foreman about the job. It's nearly impossible to run a job smoothly when the client directs the subs without your knowledge.

Cleanup. Inform your client of the measures you'll take to control dust and keep the site free of debris. Agree on a place to store materials and salvaged items.

Utilities. Make arrangements for use of the bathroom and, if there's more than one, decide on which would be most convenient. Designate a route to the bath and other undisturbed rooms of the house that you may need to get to. (On larger jobs, we find it's best to rent a portable toilet.)

Also make arrangements for use of the client's phone. Try to limit your calling to local calls and long distance calls that are directly related to the job. Otherwise, set up a separate phone line and include the cost in the price of the job.

Personnel. Agree on the ground rules for employee behavior. If your clients are non-smokers, for

example, designate an area outdoors where smoking is allowed and clean up your own butts.

If there are young children in the family who are sometimes at home without supervision, your employees may easily find themselves taking on childcare duties unless you explain your concerns to your clients in advance and agree on the ground rules. You should still take extra safety precautions, like putting up barricades and unplugging power equipment each night.

If there are pets, find out when and where in the house they are permitted. Ask about house plants and other things around the house, like pianos or works of art, which require special protection.

Walk-through. To make sure your clients understand the work you'll be doing, walk through the job together. Explain specifically what will happen where, and establish an order of events. Listen carefully to your clients' concerns and make sure they understand your answers to their questions.

Finishing Touches

When a problem occurs after construction has begun, don't be defensive and don't make excuses. Instead, listen to what your clients have to say, and let them know what you plan to do to take care of it. Then act to correct the problem as soon as possible. If you can't resolve things immediately, say so and give a realistic estimate of when you will be able to handle it. Above all, keep your clients informed every step of the way. Most people can understand plans gone awry, but they don't have much tolerance for being kept in the dark.

As the job winds down, there are a number of things you can do to cement the good relationship you've established:

- Clear all debris and equipment from the site as soon as possible;
- Hire a cleaning service to thoroughly clean the work area, including windows and cabinet interiors;
- Present your clients with warranties, operating instructions, and maintenance manuals in one, neat package;
- Leave material samples, such as carpet and tile, together in one place.

Once you're off the job, be sure to make follow-up calls periodically to see if your clients are satisfied with the work. Making a few minor repairs is the most inexpensive marketing you can buy. ■

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