

# Striving for Satisfied Clients

by Tim Faller

When speaking to groups about the Lead Carpenter system I have developed, I introduce a concept that makes a distinction between "happy" clients and "satisfied" clients. At first glance, there seems to be no distinction at all. But the way I look at it, there is a subtle difference in these words, which speaks to an enormous difference in action as well as profitability.

## Definitions

A "satisfied" client is one who receives everything he contracted for in the beginning and nothing less.

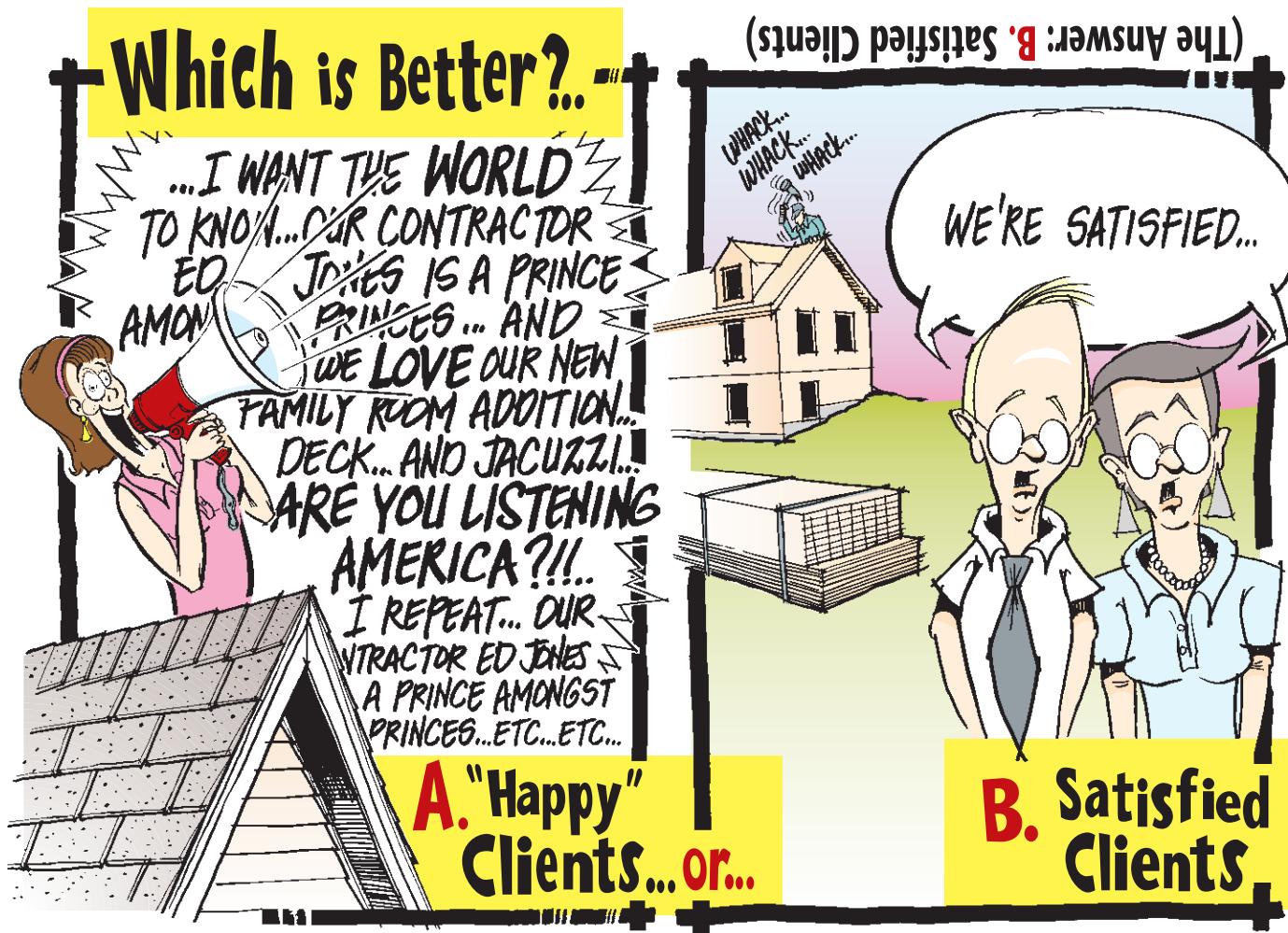
Typically, he has faced an array of budget driven choices while picking through material and component options. He may not be thrilled by some of those choices, but he understands them and the fact that he made them. In the end, he is satisfied with the work and is someone who is willing to refer you to a potential client in a positive manner.

The "happy" client, on the other hand, is really just an ideal that we contractors are striving for. It's the client who is so deliriously delighted with you and her house at the end of the project

that she is willing to shout it from the rooftops to anyone willing to hear. This ideal is no more than a longstanding myth and has no basis in fact.

## The Need To Be Liked

As lead carpenters and contractors, we are seeking approval from our clients for a job well done. We want them to like us and to like their project, and we want their referrals. In our desire to make a client happy, we try to win brownie points to offset problems or setbacks that may have occurred or may still occur. "The client really wants



this, and it doesn't cost that much more, so I'll throw it in." But there is no guarantee that this approach will work as planned. In fact, the only guarantee is that the project has just exceeded the budget.

It's easy to try to justify these give-away items with the following kinds of thoughts: "This will make up for the time I left the tarp off the roof," or maybe, "They seem to be upset with me all the time, this will get them on my good side." Or how about, "We seem to be way ahead on the budget, they deserve a little break"? All of these reasons ignore the simple fact that you are giving away something for nothing, and may also give your clients the impression that you are making so much money on their project that you can easily afford to do this. So the more you do, the harder you will be pressed to do more, and the harder it will be to get them to agree to pay for legitimate items, such as hidden conditions, even though the contract says they must.

This desire to please and the give-them-something-and-they-will-be-happy trap is really a misinterpretation of the choices the client makes during the selection process. Very few clients have unlimited funds to work with, and inevitably they prioritize their selections in order to meet their budget. They have established this budget based on criteria that the contractor is not privy to, so it is almost impossible to gauge their true desires or their ability to pay for what they want. Frequently, money not spent on a custom run of trim to match the existing will probably wind up being spent on countertops or some other desired option. Or they may simply want to hold onto their money more than they want the custom tile floor.

## Converting to the Satisfied Client Approach

If you're still not convinced that it's better business to strive for the satisfied

client versus the happy client, or if your convictions start to slip, keep the following tips in mind:

**Beware the poverty plea.** An acquaintance of mine once had some clients who absolutely could not spend another dime on their \$40,000 project. He had compromised with them on several items, and threw in a few extras that they really, really wanted — a couple thousand dollars worth, if memory serves me well.

Shortly after he was finished, he returned to take care of a few warranty items. When he arrived at the house, he couldn't park in the driveway because there were two vehicles already there. One belonged to a window covering company that was installing \$30,000 worth of wooden blinds in the house. The other belonged to the clients — a brand new \$45,000 European sedan, one they apparently paid cash for. Imagine how he felt then about giving freebies to these "poor" people. Lesson learned.

**Set expectations at the sale.** Clients need to be made fully aware of what they are getting and what they are not getting. When a client calls on a professional remodeler, their expectations are very high, sometimes so high we cannot ever hope to meet them. If they are left at that level they will never be happy with the work or the service.

The clients will reset their own expectations while walking through the selection process. But they must also see it all in writing, in the specs and in the contract. Only then will you set the stage for a satisfied client.

**Follow through.** Always follow through on everything you contracted to do. The contract you have agreed to obligates you to complete everything you have promised. It may be tempting at times to let a few things slide, especially if the project falls behind in profitability. But it is totally unacceptable, both from a legal and moral viewpoint. Even if something was left out of your

estimate but is in the contractual obligations, it absolutely needs to be completed. If a client ever discovers that you failed to do something you were supposed to do, it will become just the thing they need to control the project in its entirety. You need to remember that the client does not care about your pain or loss, but only about what they are paying you to do.

All changes need to be written and signed. Changes become part of the client's expectations as well as part of the legal documents. Any changes, clarifications, substitutions, or adjustments need to be written out in a change order, no matter how trivial they may seem.

**Train your staff.** Your field staff is in a very difficult position. They encounter the clients on a daily basis, and they are people who want to be appreciated and liked, both by you and the clients. They are investing themselves in each project, and need to understand what you expect of them, as well as how to handle client issues. Training is critical.

Instead of giving in to the happy client temptations, work hard at performing your work to the letter of the contract. Don't give your clients any more than they have contracted for, but make absolutely certain to give them no less. Fulfill the obligation you have undertaken, and you will win those satisfied clients. They may not shout your company name from the rooftops, but I'll bet they actively offer your business cards to friends and relatives with confidence in your ability to make them look good, too.



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