

The Nice-Customer Niche

by Paul Eldrenkamp

What's your niche? Decks? Kitchens and baths? Apartment remodels? That's how we tend to think about what business we're in. However, the success of the custom builder or remodeler depends more on the quality of his or her personal relationship with the client than great skill with cabinets or plumbing fixtures. Yes, it will probably help you get along with someone whose kitchen you've just dismantled if you can demonstrate a clear idea of how to put everything back together. But given a choice between doing your hundredth kitchen for a jerk or your first deck for a saint, who wouldn't pick the deck?

After 18 years of trying to figure it out, I've concluded that my niche is, simply put, nice people. Working for nice people virtually eliminates bad debt, boosts crew morale, reduces callbacks, and improves referrals. You sleep better at night and have an easier time coming to work Monday mornings, and so do the people you work with. I'm blessed with a well-rounded crew that has broad-ranging experience and expertise. We can do a master suite renovation or a multilevel deck with equal facility. What we can't do is make a chronically angry, resentful person happy with our work no matter how hard we try. We can't make an irrevocably untrusting soul feel comfortable letting us in his house. We can't (and shouldn't) adjust our prices sufficiently to satisfy a stubborn tightwad.

There are two equally essential parts to working for nice people. The first is to learn to identify them. The second is to handle their projects in such a way that they *stay* nice for the duration of the project.

Identifying Nice Clients

The initial screening can be difficult to master. It's a blend of intuition and hard facts. It's part understanding other

people, part understanding yourself.

The first pitfall is believing you have to have the job. Maybe it's a celebrity client; maybe the job was designed by a well-known architect whose bid list you want to be on; maybe you're feeling the crunch of the recession and think you have no options. If you sense yourself believing you have to have the job, step back immediately. You're no longer in control. And it's your job to be in control — after all, you're the professional, the expert.

Stay in control. You should be the one who decides whether you do the job, and on what terms. Look for signs of how easy the clients will be to work for. How did they get your name? Referrals from past clients tend to be better than leads from the Internet or the Yellow Pages. Past clients tend to look out for us. More than once, a past client has called and said, in essence, "I just gave your name to this person. I had to; he put me on the spot. Run from this guy as fast as you can. He will be nothing but trouble." Focus your marketing (and all your business practices, for that matter) to maximize referral leads; the leads will be of a much higher quality, on average.

Jerks can still slip through. Look for other indicators. How hard is it to schedule the initial meeting at a time convenient not just for the client, but for you, too? Can both partners (if there are two) make the meeting, or is one too busy and too important? How many times do they call to reschedule? Do they remember the meeting, or are you reduced to sliding a card through the mail slot with some humiliating message like, "I must have got the time wrong; give me a call"? I once went to a house that a prospective client was considering buying. When I arrived, the real estate agent informed me that the prospect had decided to stay at work but

wanted me to call him from my cell phone and walk through the house, describing what I thought needed to be done. Needless to say, I didn't call, and mercifully never heard from him again.

Once you do meet, what happens? Do they offer something to eat or drink, or hurriedly escort you up to look at the bathroom because they have a meeting to get to? Do they let you control the pace, or do they insist on running the show? Do the partners treat each other like human beings, or is the tension between them palpable? Do they refuse to talk money, no matter what, even if you bring it up first? Ask them about past remodeling experiences: Do they recite a tale of woe about their never-ending bad luck with contractors?

Observe how they treat their children, and how their children treat them. Is there respect and love, or nagging and ill will? Ask how they'll choose their contractor, what the selection criteria will be. Ideally, it will be clear from their answers what sort of relationship they're after — one of mutual respect and benefit, or one of subservience and mistrust.

Finally, do they have a sense of humor? *Can you relax with these people?* Because if you can't relax at this meeting, do you think you'll be able to relax when you're negotiating a change order? But temper your judgment on this aspect of the meeting with an understanding that they're probably scared to death at the whole idea of hiring a contractor. Our industry's failure to understand or appreciate that fear gets us into some avoidable trouble.

A word of warning: If you go to a sales meeting determined to impress the homeowner with your skill and expertise, you will handicap your ability to look for and think about these warning signs. I've taken to going to first meetings with only a 3x5 spiral notebook and a pen

tucked in my pants pocket. I generally wait at least 30 minutes before bringing out even that minimal paraphernalia. I want to ask questions and listen to the answers, and look at the speakers as they respond. This is a job interview, after all, and I'm the one conducting the interview. Unexpectedly, this tells the prospective client a lot about me. Control freaks will perceive that I'm not their path of least resistance. Those who want to squeeze all the blood out of their contractor will understand that I'm not a good donor — not their type, so to speak.

To Thine Own Self Be True

I don't intend all this to sound cocky and arrogant. In residential construction, as in all endeavors, pride goeth before a fall. And in construction, the falls tend to be higher and harder. My approach to these meetings is solely aimed at answering two humble questions: How hard will it be for me to

make these people happy? Based on that, should I take this job?

Whatever the answers, make sure they're honest. This is where self-understanding becomes so crucial. Know your weaknesses — give yourself time to think about your failures and their causes. Pride has been the cause of almost all my failures: Thinking I could make someone happy despite all the warning signs.

Keeping Nice Clients Nice

Pride also plays a role in turning nice clients into monsters. Admit it or not, some "clients from hell" are of our own making. We take their good nature for granted, we bite off more than we can chew, we don't keep our promises, and all their worst fears are realized. In general, if you're looking for people who are on their best behavior, don't look for fearful, uncertain people whose trust has recently been betrayed. Vengeance shall be theirs.

To keep clients happy, meet with them once a week when their job is in progress; it forces communication and prevents you from hiding (or appearing to hide). Don't lie to them. Admit your mistakes and fix them. When confronted by a client with a problem, defend your crew but not yourself. Return calls within 24 hours. Make the unpleasant calls before you make the pleasant ones. Call them before they have to call you.

In short, remember the Scout Law and the Golden Rule. And above all, charge enough to do a good job. Unfortunately for our industry's reputation, this seems often to be more than most contractors feel comfortable charging.

Bottom line: Find the nice clients, and keep them nice. Let your competition handle everybody else. 

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