

Quality, Schedule, Price: Pick Two

by Walter Beebe-Center

All clients come to the table with a set of unspoken expectations, some of which they may not even be aware of. Because these assumptions will inform every decision they make, it's important to bring them into the open and prioritize them early on. This will help you decide whether you and the clients are a good fit — and it will make the job go more smoothly later on.

One of the most useful tools I have found for clarifying expectations is what I call the “priority triangle”: quality, schedule, and cost. I want to make sure the clients understand that every decision will require pri-

ority of the house. “Cost” is the simplest: It's relative to the affluence of the client, but doesn't need too much further explanation.

The trade-offs between these three concepts are obvious to us contractors but can be difficult for some clients to grasp. In fact, reactions vary quite a bit. Some clients give a knowing nod and — after thinking things over for a few minutes — quickly rate their priorities. One couple I met with had bought a new house that would need some work before they moved in. Since they were living in a low-cost rental, schedule wasn't an issue, and they were planning to live long-term in the new place. When I brought up the triangle, they understood immediately and told me their priorities were quality, cost, and schedule, in that order.

To other clients, though, the priority request comes as a surprise. One answer I get frequently is “All three are equally important to me.” That's a sign that they haven't remodeled before, and that if I don't educate them on the trade-offs they're likely to be disappointed. The good news is that if I do a good job presenting the triangle concept, they'll have a framework for decision-making that will carry on throughout the course of the job, and that will help them feel — and actually *be* — more in control of the process.

And then there are the clients who are absolutely dumbfounded; the concept is just too new to them. When I get this reaction I provide some examples to illustrate the principles. Often an outrageous example works best: A \$40,000 hammered-copper tub would provide great quality but would inflate the budget, while reusing the old tub sitting in the backyard would be cheap but wouldn't provide the best quality. The point is that they need to find someplace on the spectrum between those extremes that fits within their priorities.

Explaining Trade-offs

When explaining the triangle concept I usually start with the trade-off between quality and price, as people tend to get that one quickly. Then I bring in schedule.

Helping your clients understand that decision-making involves identifying priorities and accepting trade-offs can make the whole project go more smoothly.

oritizing these three elements, and that they'll usually be able to control only two of them. Do they really want custom cabinets delivered on a tight schedule? If so, that will make keeping the budget down more difficult. Are cost and schedule the priorities? Stock painted cabinets cost less and arrive faster, but quality will be sacrificed to some extent.

Be Clear

While the three terms may seem self-explanatory, I find it useful to define to the clients exactly what I mean by them. “Quality” refers to how well a product works, how beautiful the craftsmanship is, or how broad a project's scope is. “Schedule” usually means how quickly the project is over. At times clients will want a project done by a certain event (a family reunion, for example), or will want to schedule it to coincide with a summer vacation when they'll be out

If they still insist that all three are equally important, I have to decide whether to keep pushing the point or let it slide until the next meeting.

If I continue to have trouble getting through, I look for examples that I know will come up in their project. If it's a whole-house remodel, can they be out of the house for a year or do they need it done in six months? On a window-restoration job, if we can do it in our shop on bad-weather days over the course of a couple of months, they'll pay less than if they need it done in three weeks. If they want a bookcase, I can build and install it in one day, or I can build it in a week and take two days to install it. From a quality standpoint, the two bookcases would obviously be very different.

Prequalification

This conversation is also a big help when I'm trying to prequalify potential clients. The triangle concept helps me quickly determine whether I want to work with them. Some people are focused on price and schedule and are less concerned about quality. For instance, a house-flipper will be happy if the siding looks good for a year, as long as the work is done quickly and inexpensively. With folks like this, I thank them for their inquiry but tell them that another contractor would be a better match. I phrase this in a way that lets them know I'm

interested in their priorities.

No one likes to turn down work, but I know from experience that the people who will be happiest with me are those who want quality first and are flexible about the order of the other two. This was true of recent clients who inherited a family home and wanted it fixed up; their standards were high and they wanted a place that would require little maintenance. They were more concerned that the doors would be working smoothly in 10 to 20 years than they were with saving money or rushing through the job.

A Flexible Framework

Once I begin working with someone, the triangle concept tends to come up again and again, because every one of my jobs is custom and a lot of choices need to be made. When we get to specifying finishes and equipment, we can use it to help guide those decisions. Having this framework is particularly helpful to a client who hasn't remodeled before, as it serves as a map through unfamiliar territory. In the end they always say, "Now I see how it works!"

It's important to remember that new circumstances can alter the balance between quality, schedule, and price, and that you need to let the client continuously monitor priorities. This is especially true when you run into unexpected problems.

The best way I can illustrate this advice is by describing what happened the one time I ignored it. We had been asked to install a new wood floor and had ordered some beautiful salvaged yellow pine from out of state. The clients liked the flooring but repeatedly told me that their top priority was schedule. Since they didn't want to live in a construction site, we scheduled the job for when they would be away on vacation.

Then the vendor called to tell me that the flooring couldn't be delivered on the agreed-upon date. Rather than bother my clients on vacation, I went ahead and did what I assumed they'd want: I rented a truck and sent one of my guys to New York to pick up the flooring.

We got the job done on time, but there were additional charges. Even though it wasn't a lot of money, the clients were very upset that they hadn't been asked to make the decision themselves. In the end I had to eat the cost.

I do things differently now. When there's a problem, I talk with the clients and we revisit their priorities. After all, the triangle concept is all about giving them control. Forgetting that is asking for trouble.

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