

The Foundation of a Successful Contractor

by Bobby Parks

It takes more than a spreadsheet and the best miter joint in town to run a deck business

All structures require a sound foundation. In the long run, it doesn't matter how well you frame or trim if your footings are flawed. That's as true for your business as it is for a deck. Ethical conduct and professionalism from you, your employees, and your subs are the bricks and mortar that support your deck business. Add quality workmanship and a thorough knowledge of current trends in outdoor living, and you'll establish a reputation that makes a positive impression on prospective clients and boosts your sales.

Professional Behavior

Potential customers often form opinions about your company even before any verbal communication has occurred: when they visit your website, for instance, or view marketing pieces. But they may also judge you based on other experiences, like how fast you or your crew drove through their neighborhood when you were working on a neighbor's project. How you comport yourself always matters (**Figure 1, next page**).

The first verbal communication usually takes place when the prospect calls your office. From the start, he or she must be handled in a respectful, courteous, and professional manner. The person answering your phone needs to understand proper business phone etiquette. "Yes, sir," and "Yes, ma'am," are standard for me, and it's always "Mr. Smith" and "Mrs. Jones" until otherwise requested. Do not allow co-workers to have loud discussions or make other disruptive noises when the business phone is answered. If you have a home office and a prospect hears a television, a stereo, or screaming kids while you're on the phone, he or she will not take you seriously as a business professional.

All the individual impressions you make add up to affect a prospect's ultimate decision to hire you (or not). The overall impression must be positive and professional if you're to have a reasonable chance of consistently gaining business (**Figure 2, next page**). Therefore, don't overlook the basics. When you schedule an appointment, arrive on time, prepared, and dressed appropriately. A jacket and tie is probably overkill, but khaki pants and a button-down or polo shirt are not. Follow up with any promises you make. Look and act like a pro.

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Importance of Trust

Gaining the prospective customer's trust is one of the keys to establishing the comfort level needed to close the sale. A prospect may get proposals from three contractors and have trouble distinguishing any real product difference among them — the nuts and bolts of deck building can seem like a foreign language — and in the end, many people simply choose the contractor they feel most comfortable with.

For example, as unfair as this may be to the automobile repair industry, I'm leery of trusting a mechanic to do only what's required when I bring my truck in to the shop. Have you ever wondered "Do I really need new brake rotors, or is the mechanic just trying to hit his sales quota at my expense?" I have. I feel like I'm at the mercy of the mechanic's honesty. However, if a friend refers me to a repair shop he or she trusts, I automatically feel better about taking my vehicle there. It works the same way for you as a contractor. A history of satisfied customers provides a base for positive publicity and referrals.

One of the components of establishing a good reputation is to be fair and reasonable with your prospects and customers. Adopt the old saying about putting yourself in someone else's shoes. Let's say when tearing off an old deck, you discover rot. Your customer is in the same position you were when the mechanic said you needed new rotors. You know that rot often looks worse than it is, and you could make out like it's a difficult fix and overcharge for it. Or you could make it as painless as possible and charge a fair price. You could even fix the rot for free if the project is a big one and the fix is quick and easy.

The goal isn't the necessarily the money you can make in the short term; you also need to consider how your actions today might affect your referrals tomorrow. By treating and charging customers fairly, you confirm in their mind that they've chosen the right contractor. Not only does that confidence make them more likely to send you referrals (and hire you back themselves), but it also reduces the potential for issues later in the project.

Competence

The level of expertise you project is another factor that has a direct bearing on a prospect's comfort level. When it comes to your self-confidence, educated customers will read you like a book.

During initial discussions, showing confidence and demonstrating you know your business is crucial. You must be able to field questions and understand product options. Your customers have access to the Internet and all the information that comes through it. Stay current



Figure 1. Prospective customers form impressions of you, often before they even call. Keep your truck looking good and drive courteously.



Figure 2. If you have an office, make it look professional. Be sure your staff knows how to interact with clients on the phone and in person.

so you'll be familiar with new products that customers suggest — and so you're ready to offer an explanation and an alternative if they ask for a product you don't want to use. Come to the table with ideas and suggestions that address your prospect's concerns. Have ideas other contractors don't. That scores points for you and dings the competition. And don't talk about what you don't know.

Quality Experience

Once you've landed a job, what is the deck-building experience like for your customer? Don't ever believe that just building a great deck will overcome any trauma that accompanied the experience. A problematic delivery may mean you'll never work for that customer again, and you won't receive any referrals, no matter how good the work was.

Insist on professional conduct from your subs, employees,

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Figure 3. Professionalism means keeping a neat job site and providing amenities such as a portable toilet for your crews.



Figure 4. Nothing else you do to build the image of your business will matter if you don't follow through with superior workmanship.

and suppliers. Train your people to show respect and courtesy to homeowners and their property. Control the language used by workers and teach them proper communication practices for interacting with customers.

Maintain a clean work area (**Figure 3**). Keep Dumpsters and portable toilets on site, and if you've got smokers, make sure they know where to smoke and where to dispose of cigarette butts. Don't leak oil on the customers' driveway, crush their landscaping, or track up their house.

Start on time and stay on the job. Schedule projects to maintain a good work flow. Don't allow the job to drag out because employees or subs aren't showing up on time or in the proper sequence. Don't start a project and then pull your people to do something else to the extent the project suffers.

Even a project that goes smoothly by our standards can be nerve-racking for homeowners. Manage expectations by communicating work schedules and giving customers progress reports. Keep in mind that some customers handle the construction or remodeling intrusion better than others.

Quality Workmanship

Being trustworthy and honest is important. But even if you're the nicest, most honest person in the world, if your work quality is average or worse, word will get around and your business success will be the same (**Figure 4**).

Performing to high standards regardless of grades of materials should be the core of any contracting business. Doing this requires the right mental attitude, good intentions, pride, and follow-through. If your work is noticeably better than that of others who compete in the same niche, you'll get more jobs. If you can't achieve this level of quality, at best your success will be limited, and probably your business will fail.

The Complete Foundation

What I've discussed here is the equivalent of Business 101. Establishing trust and credibility gives prospects confidence, which betters your chances of securing a contract. Running your projects professionally strengthens that good first impression and makes handling problems and changes that come up that much easier. And delivering a quality project and experience will get you the referrals and repeat customers that become the basis of a successful business. ♦

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