

BY ROB CORBO

The 80/20 Rule of Client Communications

The economist Vilfredo Pareto is credited with the Pareto Principle, also known as the “80/20 rule.” The story is he discovered that 20% of the pea pods in his garden produced 80% of the peas, and then applied that ratio to economics. In essence, it means that 80% of what is achieved comes from 20% of the effort made. The principle has been applied to finance, education, marriage, and fitness. For those of us running businesses in the construction trades, the 80/20 rule works with a variety of tools.

The tool I want to focus on here is communication. Communication is the 20% of effort that produces 80% of the desired results. It's a simple concept, but not always pleasant, so not always easy. It means returning a prospect's call, even in a heated market; returning a client's call, even when you have to discuss a problem; identifying a client's preferred method of communicating—email, text, or phone—and being accessible to answer the phone or return calls promptly.

I've separated myself from at least 80% of my competitors by returning calls within 24 hours. Many people have genuinely thanked me for returning their call; my reply is, “It's my job.” I'm grateful to my competition for failing at such a simple, but important business practice—returning calls promptly—allowing me to score points in the homeowner's decision-making process.

I return calls about projects even if I can't pursue a job due to scheduling issues. I inform the homeowner we are not available; to create good will, or if a homeowner asks, I walk them through the remodeling or construction process: Select an architect, have zoning approved, have plans approved, conduct walk-throughs, gather quotes, and select a contractor. I've recommended architects (later letting the architect know I recommended them) and provided competitors' contact information. Such calls provide dividends down the road—future projects or referrals to family, friends, or neighbors.

We sell remodeling service as a partnership emphasizing communication and accessibility, and we take it seriously. I'm on the job every day banging nails; I'm not sitting in an office. My partner and I decided long ago that if a client calls, I answer—unless, of course, I am lifting a beam into place. When necessary, I stop construction work at 11:30 a.m. and switch to administrative tasks—returning client calls, emails, or text messages being our priority. Being responsive and communicative makes dealing with clients and construction problems easier. Clients know there's a problem, they know you're working on it, they are getting updates, and they know when the issue has been resolved. This allows the client to direct their time towards work and family instead of spending time trying to contact you. The approach builds confidence in you; clients know you represent their interests.

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No doubt, clients can be difficult, occasionally exhibiting unpleasant personality traits. However, they are easier to deal with when they know you're on the job every day and accessible. Most, I find, respect your evening and weekend time. If they don't, you can inform them that calls after 5 p.m. will be returned the next day, and weekend calls on Monday. Outline your policy regarding personal time in a clause in your contract.

So, return calls promptly, and enter into a partnership with your client by being accessible and communicative and become a member of the 20% that gets 80% of the work.

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