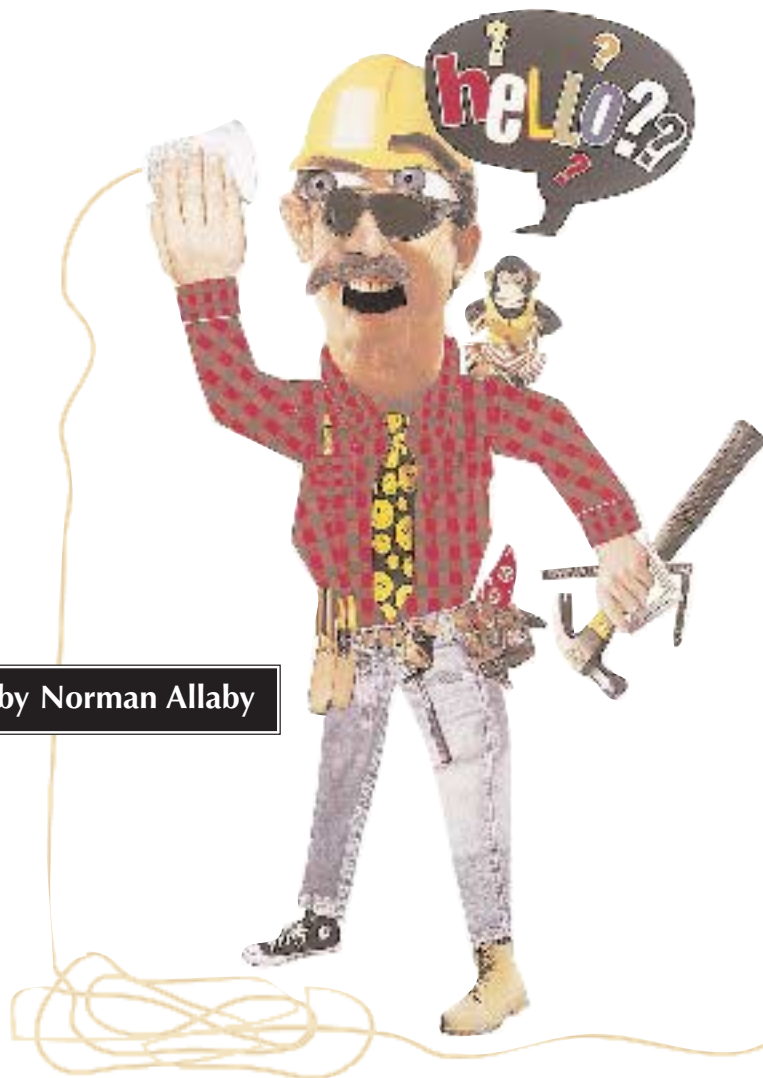


# Communicating with Clients

Effective communication pleases customers,  
wins referrals, and boosts profit



by Norman Allaby

**T**he friend who gave me my start in construction once told me that if he had to, he could build a house using only a hammer. But there's an even more remarkable construction tool available to builders, and it's one you can't get from Stanley or Bostich. It's called "effective communication."

My investment in acquiring good communication skills has returned impressive dividends. Because I communicate well, I can usually catch problems while they are small and manageable, and my customers tend to develop fewer unrealistic expectations. Surprises occur less often and jobs run more smoothly, making my life as a contractor easier.

In my experience, opportunities to establish and maintain effective communication with clients occur at seven critical points:

- early contacts
- contract signing
- preconstruction conference
- weekly site meetings
- payment collections
- punchlist procedures
- post-job relations

## Early Contacts

My first contact with a client is usually over the phone, but I'm rarely able to evaluate any proposed work without visiting the site. Site visits take time, however, so when a prospect first calls my office, I collect as much information as I can about both the job and the clients. I follow a preset list of questions on a standard form, which I use to "qualify" the caller and to help me decide whether I want to pursue the lead further (see "Selecting Quality Customers: The Art of Prequalification," 2/95). If the job sounds promising, I arrange to meet with the prospect.

During this initial face-to-face meeting (we usually meet at the prospect's home, because most of my work is remodeling), I have four major goals:

- to find out exactly what the customer wants and what he or she can afford
- to set myself apart from other contractors bidding the job
- to begin building trust
- to identify and avoid problem customers

At this stage, I use my professionalism to set myself apart from other contractors who may be bidding the job. I wear work clothes, for example, to convey the image of a "hands-on contractor," but they're clean and neat. I also watch my body language, and I try not to talk too much.

**Careful listening.** To find out what the prospect wants, I ask open-ended questions about the proposed work. If they want a family room addition, for example, I'll ask them how they plan to use the room and where those activities currently take place. If it's a bedroom remodel, I'll ask them what kind of furniture they plan to use or whether a proposed closet will be large enough. I want them to talk about the features and benefits they're most interested in, and if they have magazine clippings or photos to illustrate their ideas, I want to see them. Anyone can ask for a "kitchen" or a "family room," but those are imprecise descriptions that don't really help me to build what my clients want.

By allowing the homeowners to talk about their plans, I not only get a good feel for how well we will be able to work together, but I can often discover a hidden agenda that could lead to problems down the road. A proposed kitchen remodel, for instance, may be moti-

vated by a real need for a more efficient space, but it may also spring from boredom or from a long-standing desire to build the "dream kitchen." In the first case, my work will usually meet the homeowner's needs; in either of the other situations, however, I may never be able to satisfy them and may be better off declining the work.

**Budget.** To evaluate the job fully and to gauge expectations, I need to ask the home-



owners how much money they plan to spend. Some people will tell me; others will talk about a "range" rather than a specific number.

For those customers who refuse to budge, I won't waste my time pricing their job. If the projected budget is too low, I can begin to educate them about the real costs of construction and explore their willingness to change the scope of the project. I also like to spend some time educating the prospects on how they can get what they want. At this point, it's a matter of briefly explaining product options and design features and drawbacks. If the client already has blueprints, we may go over them

**Figure 1.** To keep work from grinding to a halt while homeowners decide on colors or other options, the author provides his clients with a list of tasks tied to deadlines.

## Client Deadlines & Tasks

ABC Contracting  
RR2, Box 146  
Richmond, VT 05477  
Phone 802/434-4747  
Fax 802/434-4467

Date: JAN 1 1998  
 Owner: JOHN & JANE DOE  
 Revision number: 2 Date: JAN 5 1998  
 Sheet number: 1 of 1  
 Project name: FAMILY ROOM BATH ADDITION  
 Project number: 3

decision	#	Flooring	Paint/color	closets/furn	elec/fixtures	plumb/fixtures	other	Notes
DATE		FAMILY ROOM BATH	FAMILY BATH * OWNER TO PURCHASE PAINT & SUPPLY MATERIALS	FAMILY RM (CLEANOUT)	BATH FAMILY	BATH	MOVE SHARPS CLEAN BAY IN GARAGE (FOR STORAGE)	
JAN 15		X X			X X	X		CHOOSE & ORDER
JAN 19							X X	
PROJECT STARTS								
JAN 20								
JAN 30				X				MOVE EVERYTHING TO PREP FOR DEMO.
FEB 20			X X					CHOOSE COLOR
FEB 25			X X					PICK UP PAINT & PAINT ROOMS TO PREPARE FOR TRIM

and make minor modifications, discussing the advantages of tile instead of laminate, or why a light fixture should be moved. But at this first meeting, I'm careful not to overwhelm the client with details.

**Building trust.** Everything I do during the initial meeting, from arriving on time to listening attentively to what the homeowners have to say, contributes to building trust and confidence. I'm careful to treat their ideas with respect, and I try to defuse any awkwardness with a little humor. I've found that evening or weekend meetings are less successful, because everyone is either tired from the day's work or anxious to get to other planned activities, so I try to schedule all of my appointments for regular working hours. Early morning works best, because everyone is fresher and clients can't drag the meeting out if they're on the way to work.

**Red flags.** The final goal of this first meeting is to make sure that I am not selling myself to a potential problem customer. Obvious red flags are indecisiveness, fighting between spouses, and fixation on insignificant details. When I think I'm dealing with a problem customer, I politely excuse myself and recommend a competitor as I move towards the door.

I follow up all meetings or discussions with a memo to the client recapping our discussion, carefully noting any changes, conflicts, decisions, and future actions. This verifies a "meet-

ing of the minds" and it confirms that we were communicating and not merely talking at each other.

### The Contract

The contract-signing phase is what really sets the stage for the entire job. The contract must be clear on the scope of work, all specifications, and the payment schedule. Along with photos and references from past jobs, I keep standard contracts and change orders in my portfolio. I don't read every word of every document with my clients, but I will point out the most important sections to help eliminate any gray areas.

The clients will never be more flexible than at the contract signing, and your credibility will never be as high. After all, the client picked you to build their dreams, but the stress of surprises and unexpected costs during the project will eventually take its toll. Warn them now about possible extra expenses, and your honesty will pay off later as the inevitable changes arrive.

This is also the time to present the clients with a list of any product selections and other obligations they have to take care of before work can begin. I use a simple form that lists all of the decisions they need to make tied to a specific deadline (see Figure 1). The list not only ensures that I will be able to order every-

thing needed for the job in plenty of time, but it also makes the clients feel that they are a part of the process.

### The Preconstruction Conference

I like to schedule a meeting for about a week before beginning work. This is the last chance I'll have to prepare customers for what is coming and to eliminate potential misunderstandings. Most homeowners have difficulty visualizing the construction process, and they need to have everything explained to them. During this preconstruction conference, I go over the contract once again, but this time I have the benefit of being able to describe the work while walking through the job site. Answering questions about the project now may prevent conflicts later. I can explain, for example, that the entire living room won't be getting new drywall just because a new doorway is being created to the family room.

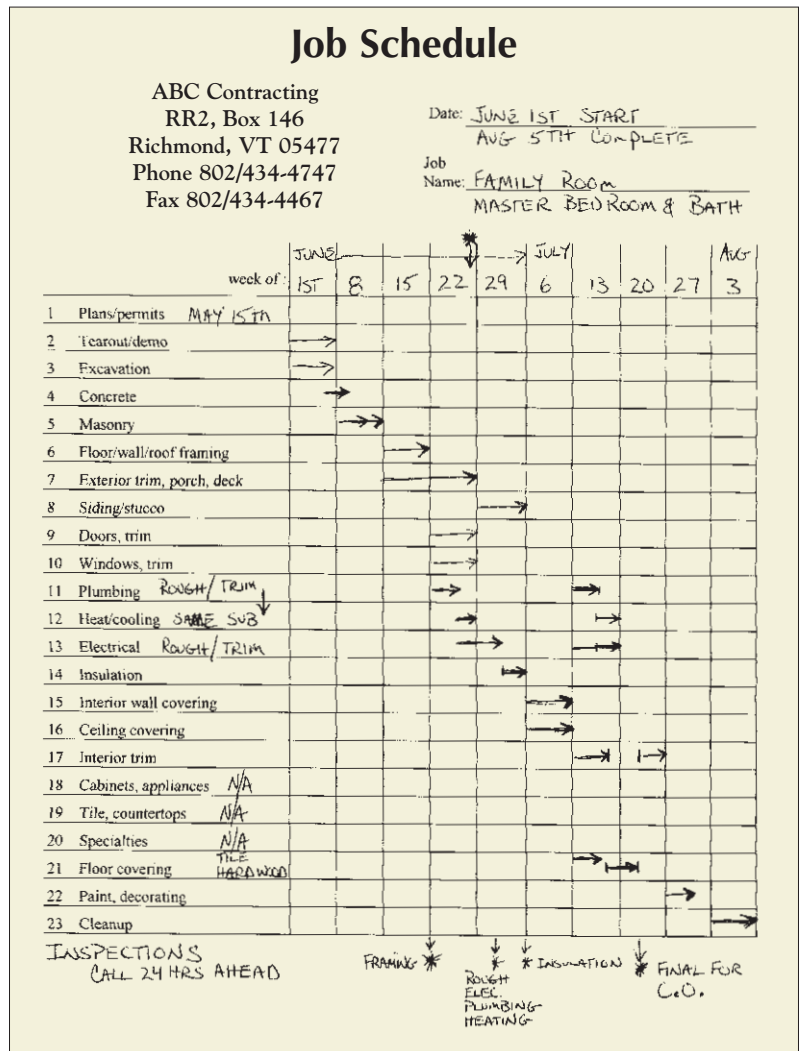
I also go over the schedule during this conference (Figure 2), explaining the importance of cooperative weather and the role of subs. I also explain the delays that change orders can cause, since most customers simply don't realize the way change orders can mess up the schedule. I also emphasize that any change orders must go through me, not my help or my subs.

Work can slow down or stop when customers freely roam the site during the workday, so I take a few moments to establish times when the owners can meet me at the site. I do mostly remodeling, so the people I work for are usually living at the job site. Even so, I ask them to limit visits to the regularly scheduled site meeting or to check in before or after working hours. A friendly but firm explanation will usually get the point across, but I've had to board up a new addition on occasion to isolate it from the rest of the house.

This preconstruction meeting is also the best time to designate a message center for written communication, and to go over any other rules for the project, such as the protocols for paging, phone calls, or change orders.

### Weekly Meetings

I like to hold weekly meetings, and I impose an agenda to keep things organized and moving. The agenda should include project status (ahead of or behind schedule, and why), goals for the coming week, and a list of the questions that have arisen since the last meeting



**Figure 2.** The author gives all of his clients a copy of the same schedule he uses to track job progress. Extra time for possible construction delays is built in to the schedule dates, and notations serve as reminders for required inspections.

(Figure 3, next page). I'm careful not to bog the customers down with unnecessary details, since that's the burden I was hired to bear.

Be sure to include a short question-and-answer time to clear up uncertainties. It's best to do this at the end of the meeting, since many questions get answered during the discussion of agenda items. Ask your customers to save all of their questions during the week for this time, unless something urgent comes up. Explain that unnecessary questions and interruptions during work time slow down progress and may affect the schedule and budget.

Weekly meetings also keep me in tune with the homeowners' state of mind, teaching me how to give them what they want and improve on what they don't like. Do the daily cleanups

# Weekly Meeting

ABC Contracting  
 RR2, Box 146  
 Richmond, VT 05477  
 Phone 802/434-4747  
 Fax 802/434-4467

Date: JAN 10th  
 To: JOHN & JANE DOE  
 From: NORM  
 Subject: UPDATE & CHANGES  
 Project name: FAM ROOM / BATH  
 Project number: \_\_\_\_\_

	COMMENTS:
1) Update summary	
2) Last week's accomplishments	
3) Do you still want to change Jacuzzi size?	
It will delay project 1 week because we would have to move framing, outlet, and rough plumbing.	YES JD
4) Have paint colors for rooms been chosen?	YES BENJAMIN MOORE
5) Clean out closet this weekend.	JD WALL FAM RM FEAT #1AB TRIM FRAMING #1TG BATH TRIM GLOS #7G BATH WALLS - WALL PAPER
We are tearing out walls on Monday	
6) Plumber would like to work Saturday a.m.	
Is that okay?	YES JD
7) Dumpster is going Monday. If you have anything to get rid of, you may toss it in dumpster this weekend.	
(Nothing should be above top of container.)	
Signature or initials: <u>NPA</u> <u>JD</u>	

**Figure 3.** An agenda keeps weekly meetings on track and provides a written record of job progress, changes to the scope of work, and homeowner decisions.

look okay? Are my guys trampling on border plants? I can't keep every client happy all of the time, but these meetings improve the odds.

## Payment Collections

The way a customer pays is another form of communication that tells me a lot about the kind of job I'm doing. Cheerful payment probably means they're happy with the job, but if they write out the check grudgingly, then I suspect there's a problem.

I find that the best approach is to simply ask what's bugging them. The customer may be having a bad day that's unrelated to the job, or they might be bummed just because it's tough to let go of \$10,000, no matter how good my work is. In some cases, however, there is a prob-

lem, and this becomes my opportunity to fix it. It might be something small, like the way a stack of materials blocks part of the driveway or the fact that the trim we're about to install isn't quite what they thought it would be. By tending to these concerns early, I can usually keep minor irritants from becoming major problems.

## The Punch List

When the job is closing, I use a punch list to wrap things up and get the final payment. About a week before completion, I ask the clients for their list, and then add some items of my own. The punch-list process both reminds the clients of my high standards and reassures them that I will complete the job properly. I explain that I expect final payment when I've finished everything on the list; anything after that will be handled, but it will be considered warranty work.

## Post-Job Relations

Finally, maintaining contact after the job is done is an effective way to get new work and good referrals. I conduct a satisfaction survey anywhere from a month to three months after the job, and do checkups at six months and twelve months. Mostly I make little repairs, like fixing nail pops or recaulking, but the cost is minimal and the payback is great.

I stay in touch with customers via phone, cards, and drop-in visits. Occasionally, I'll drive a bucket of balls or have a beer with a past client, or my wife and I will have dinner out with a husband-and-wife client, but this kind of entertaining is reserved for clients with whom I've worked well and for whom I'd enjoy working again. I typically get more than one call from clients with whom I've stayed in touch, but I get far fewer from those with whom I haven't. As a rule, I make contact at least twice a year, even if I know my customer has no future plans for remodeling. Why? Because my work will be seen by their friends and family, and I love referrals.

Communicating well makes my business run better. I get more work, make better profits, and enjoy a good reputation with satisfied clients. Like that buddy of mine, I could build a house with just one tool, but the tool I'd pick is "communication."



*Norman Allaby has been a remodeling contractor in Connecticut since 1986.*