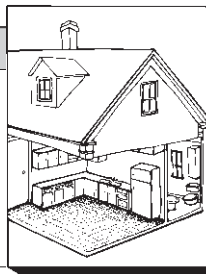


Getting Choosy About Your Customers

by Lynn Comeskey



One of the truer cliches in the kitchen and bath business is that the customers you don't sign are as important to your success as the ones you do. You know the kind of clients I'm talking about.

An example from our business a few years ago was the couple we referred to as our "clients from Hell." We had a contract to add on to their house. They seemed very nice until construction began, at which point doors were always locked and we had to obtain permission to enter each time we walked back inside from the truck. The woman spent her days either eavesdropping on our tradesmen, or watching them through the window. One of our subs working outside finally placed plywood over windows to end her "peeping" act. The problems didn't end there.

Being Selective

This is a customer we could have done without, and its one of the reasons we actively select our clients these days. For many contractors, this runs against the grain. Starting a small service business means taking on all

programs developed to help describe personality types. A kitchen and bath dealer I know uses the DISC system by John Mathis in evaluating his potential clients, and he tells me it's been quite successful for him. The acronym, DISC, stands for dominance, influencing, steadiness, and compliance. A further matrix of open/self-contained, and indirect/direct is superimposed over the primary categories.

I personally find it is more difficult to know what to look for than to know what to avoid—one of our standing jokes around our office is that there is somehow a customer profile that would actually describe our diverse clients.

So I tend to do a kind of "negative" sort. It relies on intuition—my gut-level reaction to people—and that's really the most effective tool. Your gut isn't going by the facts, it's just predicting that you and that potential customer are going to end up at odds. Although I often get so excited about the design or the job that I forget to look, listen, or feel the clues that I'm getting, there are some areas that are

remember it in a year or so. But if we rush through and don't give them a good job, they'll see the results everyday. Obviously, if there is something beyond their control, such as the impending birth of a child, and the time constraint is reasonable, we work with them very closely.

How precise? Living in Silicon Valley, a significant number of our clients are engineers. We have to educate them that construction is not like engineering: We deal in eighths and sixteenths, not thousandths of an inch.

But just pointing out the differences in professions doesn't take care of the problem if the client is obsessive by nature. Recently I had a designer recommend me to a client, who in showing the house had stopped at several switch plates and straightened the screwheads with a breastpocket screwdriver. We decided not to follow up this lead.

Who's in charge? Having control of a job is of utmost importance. If the homeowner shows signs of insisting on control, this is another red flag. For example, when a customer wants to modify your standard procedures for payment or scheduling for no apparent reason, there's a reason. What else are they going to want to change (read control) later? I usually have a lot of trouble with this kind of overbearing personality, and tend to avoid them as clients altogether. Constant cost worries? When an owner frequently expresses concern about costs, their anxiety is probably appropriate, and they will ultimately determine you are too expensive. Don't waste your time with a bid.

When an owner insists on itemized costs, I also back off. It is the total price which is important. Although you can argue that an itemized estimate helps the customer find items that are out of line when there are multiple bids, these kind of comparisons invite wrong conclusions and miss the subtle (and often not so subtle) differences between the bidder. One-line indicators. Last, but certainly not least, are a few pat phrases I hear often. I think of them on a par with "The check's in the mail." They include:

- If the price is right, we won't get any other bids.
- We already know what we want; we don't need an architect—you just have to do a sketch.
- Give me a good price and I'll give you more business.
- We're not hard people to get along with. ■

Lynn Comeskey is a remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchens and baths. He is from Mountain View, California.

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comers and using your personal skills to keep 'em grinning. Right? Well, that would be fine if we weren't in a profession that requires us to essentially move in with the homeowner, and then deny them access to the important rooms in their house. This puts even stable folks on edge.

Sure, there are some obvious and time-tested ways to keep most customers from acting out: Communicate well with them, keep the job site neat and clean, hold the delays down to a minimum, and do good work. But there are some customers that still don't respond positively—ones that have their own agendas. And the troubles they can cause affect not only you, but your employees, your subs, and quite dramatically, your bottom line.

Ironically, the way to avoid these problems is to keep your clients happy so that your referrals grow to the point that you can pick your customers rather than having them pick you.

Client Screening

There have been a number of

consisting red flags for me.

Everything okay at home? When appraising the homeowners, I look for secure individuals and solid relationships. If either member of the couple is shaky about themselves or their relationship, remodeling can easily cause them to come unglued. And that is going to affect the job in more ways than you can count. If the couple does not get along well or doesn't agree on anything, it's also difficult. I look for enthusiasm from both people before I continue. Quite often, we end up with a "can't wait to get started" wife and a "I don't really care what you do as long as it doesn't cost too much" husband. That's a hard one to sell, and if you sell it too hard, you pay down the line with constant resistance from the husband when it comes to interim decision-making and paying up.

Do it right or just fast? What are the homeowners' expectations in terms of timing and quality? I tell customers that quality is more important than timeliness. If we take a little longer than anticipated, they won't