

Fifteen Rules of Remodeling

**Tried and true lessons from
a remodeling contractor's
school of hard knocks**

by Rick Stacy

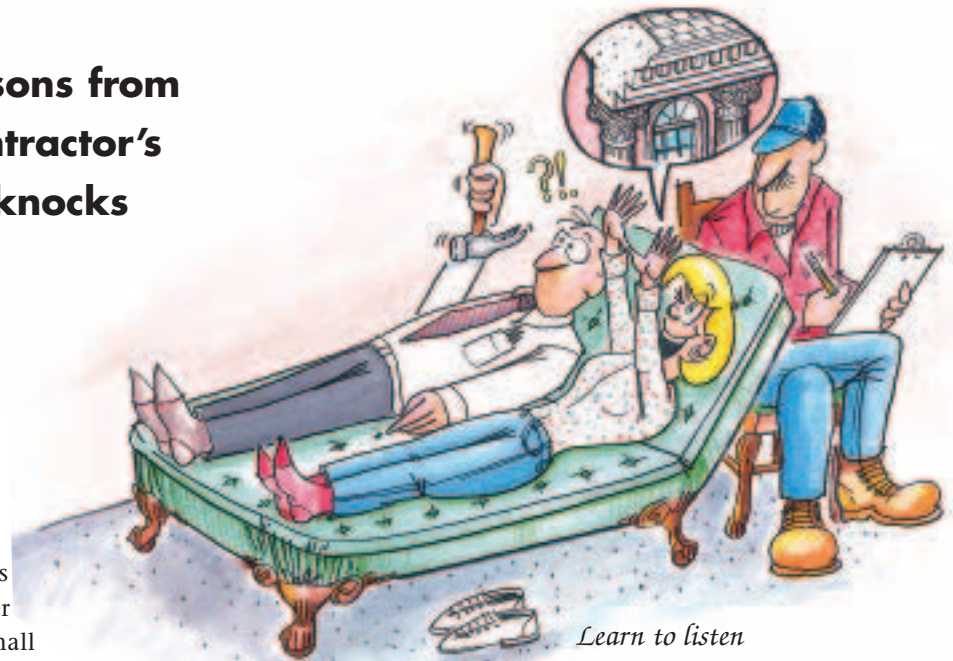
Experience has a way of teaching us lessons that college or trade school never could. Fifteen years of running a small remodeling business have given me more humbling experiences than I care to admit. But through all the ups and downs, I have discovered a number of commonsense principles that work. Businesses that follow them have a better chance for success; those that neglect them usually fail.

1. Make a Good First Impression

Be on time for the site visit, and if you are delayed, call ahead. Give customers a specific period of time within which you will get back to them with a price — one week, if possible. If you don't want the job, say so and recommend another contractor. It's not good for business to have someone going around saying, "Don't call R.A. Stacy Construction: They never got back to me."

2. Learn to Listen

Use the first half of the site visit to get a handle on the customers' wants and needs, and to size up their construction savvy. Are they familiar with the remodeling process or would they have trouble recognizing the working end of a hammer? Use this information to discuss the project at their level of understanding without degrading them. Avoid discounting their



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ideas with comments like "No, Mrs. Jones, you don't want to do it that way." Instead, try "I see what you're trying to do here, Mrs. Jones. Another way we could accomplish that is by" Don't force your ideas on customers; instead, allow them to settle on the solution they like. This will assure them that they have a contractor who will work with them, and if in the end they are unhappy, it is unlikely they will give you grief about it.

3. Sell Quality, Not Cost

In the long run, charging adequately for a quality job will bring more satisfaction and repeat business than low-balling a price and cutting corners. Rather than get defensive when customers balk at a price, sympathize with them: "Yes, I know it's expensive these days to have work done, and done right. I can't believe the way lumber and material prices have been going up." This approach is disarming, and it puts you on their side. Spell out in detail the quality of the work you are planning to do, and note everything you plan to do that a cheaper competitor may not bother with.

4. Be Versatile

The more kinds of work you are willing to do, the busier you'll be, no matter the season or the building climate. Stay current with new products and construction processes, and glean as much knowledge as you can from others who are expert in a particular aspect of remodeling. You may never be as quick or as efficient as your drywall sub, for instance, but if you are willing to hang and tape a few sheets now and again, it will help you to become a one-stop service for customers. You'll also be able to keep the job going when your subs' schedules fall apart.

5. Start on Time

Provide a start date that you are reasonably sure you can meet and keep the customer apprised of changes as the date approaches. Most customers will understand a short delay if they are notified in advance. If you wait until the day you are supposed to be there to tell them, they'll never forgive you, and it will taint the relationship throughout the job.

6. Stay On the Job

Once you start the job, stay on it till it's done. If you have to pull off, tell the customer when and why in advance, and let them know when you'll be back.

7. Keep the Site Clean

Tidy up the work site at the end of each day, especially for the weekend when the customer may tour



Respect the customers' routines

interested friends and neighbors through the project. Take pains to keep dust and debris out of living areas, and keep pathways and walkways to the house clear of materials and equipment.

8. Rein In Your Subs

Most of my major problems on jobs have stemmed from a customer-sub relationship gone awry. This was usually due to my failure to show my face on the job often enough to head off problems. Communicate with the customer daily about the who, when, why, and how of what your subs will be doing. Better yet, do the work yourself with your own crew.

9. Keep Your "Boss" Happy

As independent contractors, we pride ourselves on being our own bosses. In reality, we take on a new boss — our customer — every time we sign a job proposal. We need to provide the kind of service that will make them want to keep us in their employ. Remember: There is no better marketing tool than a satisfied customer.

10. Respect the Customers' Daily Routines

It may be your work site, but it's their home. Make the construction process as painless as you can. Don't block them in or out of the driveway. Adjust your start

The Top Five Customer Gripes

Many people are naturally wary and distrustful of contractors. Unfortunately, many contractors seem to have worked hard to reinforce this attitude. Over the years, I've taken a personal tally of the gripes that my customers have had with previous contractors; here are the top five. You can bet I work hard to avoid these same mistakes. In fact, I usually address these gripes in my sales pitch.

1. Never got back to them with an estimate, not even to say "Thanks, but I'm not interested."
2. Did not take care of problems and callbacks.
3. Did not clean up after themselves.
4. Did not respect customers' needs and schedules.
5. Started a job and then pulled off with no explanation.

—R.S.

and finish times so that you don't interfere with their daily routine. Simply acknowledging your customers' grievances can go a long way to easing tension and maintaining a healthy working relationship. Ask — before piling lumber on the lawn, moving the kid's swing set, or shortening the chain on the family's Doberman pinscher.

11. Blow Your Own Horn

During the job, there are many tactful ways to make the customer aware of the quality of the work you are doing. As they drive in and see you rolling out that ice and water membrane on the roof, tell them: "This is something a lot of contractors don't bother with, Mr. Smith, but I've found the extra protection so beneficial that it comes standard on every job I do." Don't assume that your customers will see the difference between what you are giving them and what the next guy would have done. These reminders bolster their satisfaction and confidence in you, and make it easier to collect that final check.

12. Get Back to Callbacks

If a customer calls with a complaint, set an appointment on the spot and be there to take care of it. Fix the problem if you can, even if it wasn't your fault. These are golden opportunities to gain a faithful repeat customer; don't let them slip by. Once, after completing a siding job, I received a call from the customer, who complained that I had ruined her kitchen light switch with all the pounding. I threw a spare switch into my truck and headed to the job. The switch was gone all right, but it was located nowhere near the work I had done. I replaced the switch (all of five minutes work), explained to the customer that its time had just come, and gained a great reference.

13. Do the Little Jobs

Those pesky little handyman jobs keep your customers accustomed to seeing your face around. Chances are, the customer won't want to trust a stranger when the big project comes up, even when the other guy's bid is lower.

14. Keep in Touch

Send a Christmas card or an occasional flier, if only to let your customers know you are still out there. It may even jog their memory about a project they have had on the back burner. Fliers should not be pushy, but rather should be written like a note to an old friend. These mailings are also a great opportunity to introduce other services that your customers may not be aware of.



15. Be Honest

Be aboveboard with your customers, your subs, and Uncle Sam. Don't feign expertise in an area that you really aren't sure about. Instead, tell your customers, "I'll have to do some digging and get back to you on that." Turn down offers to get cash under the table in exchange for a break in the price. Not only is it unethical and illegal (if you don't report the income), but it's unprofessional and it will eat away at the integrity of your business and hurt your long-term success.

In the long run, working to build a faithful, steady clientele is more beneficial than chasing after a glamorous high-profit-margin remodeling project. I've seen many remodelers abandon their regular customers for the gold and glitter of a larger project, then find themselves with nowhere to go when the job was over. Don't let go of your regular customers. They're the ones who will keep you busy when other contractors are scratching for work. They may also surprise you every now and then. More than once I've received a bonus along with my final payment for a job. And just the other day, a regular customer sent me a gift certificate to a local restaurant as a way of saying "Thanks for being there." It's those kinds of gestures that make running a service-oriented business worthwhile. ■

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