

Delivering Exceptional Service

Win good clients with great service — before, during, and after the project

by Candi Hilton



A reputation for delivering exceptional service can make or break a construction business. I've found that we can set our remodeling company apart from the competition by delivering a high level of service that other contractors in our area don't think is worth the cost or the effort. In fact, the reverse is true: Our service efforts build good client relationships that bring us a steady stream of repeat and referral business.

We concentrate our efforts in five areas:

1 Technical knowledge: fully understanding the products and processes involved in the project so we can demonstrate our professionalism to the client

2 Organization: staying on top of the myriad of details that are involved in every project

3 Listening: the ability to hear what our client and staff need to make the project go smoothly

4 Communication: making sure that we offer our client a clear line of communication and that we respond to every question and problem that may arise

5 Follow-through: making sure that our commitments are completed on the promised dates

These may seem like basic objectives, but when added together, they have a big impact on our clients' satisfaction. Here's a summary of what we do at each stage of the process.

Service Before the Sale

I always return phone calls from new clients within 24 hours to let them know that their project is as important to us as it is to them. I make only those promises that I can keep. If I tell the client that I am going to do something or get something for them by a certain date, I make absolutely sure it's done on time. I'm

careful to set realistic deadlines for myself, though, and if I have to I'll add extra time to make sure they can be met.

I have learned that it is effective to send a package containing company information and a list of references to prospective clients before my first meeting with them. This gives the clients an opportunity to see how great we are before we even get there.

I'm always careful to confirm my scheduled meeting with the client the day before. This has saved me on those occasions when there was a difference in understanding; mistakes happen on

both sides. Before leaving for the appointment, I check my overall appearance and that of anyone going with me. Clean shirts, clean pants, and clean trucks are a must. This is the first impression the client will have of me and my company, and I want to convey that we care about their home and their project. I'm always on time for scheduled appointments. If I find that I'm delayed, even a few minutes, I call in advance to explain or reschedule.

While I'm with the client, I turn off my cell phone so the customer gets my full attention. I always listen carefully to the client and talk the least.

After the appointment, I send a thank-you note to the client for allowing me to review the project with them, as well as a thank-you to the person that gave me the referral.

Service Before Contract Signing

To make design and specification work as easy as possible for the client, I maintain a supply of samples to hand out. These include countertop materials, paint, wallpaper, and other portable items. If needed, I'll take the client to contractor showrooms to make selections, or even use a professional interior designer to assist them in pulling it all together.

I make a special effort to keep in contact with clients on the progress of their plans and specifications, politely reminding them of the product selection information I may still be missing. Before signing, I present them with a clearly written contract with all known specifications and a complete payment schedule, and I explain what I may still need from them to ensure on-time completion of their project.

Service Before Construction

Here's my biggest and best chance to impress the clients. Construction is a stressful time for clients. We remodelers do it everyday and take for granted the little idiosyncrasies that go along with starting and completing a project. We know it's normal for glitches to happen, but our clients don't. In today's world of instant gratification,

Preconstruction Meeting Checklist

Hilton Enterprises, Inc.

Job Name: _____ Project # _____ Date: _____

People Present: _____

Client Phone Numbers

Home: _____	Her Work: _____
Fax: _____	Her Cell: _____
His Work: _____	Emergency Contact: _____
His Cell: _____	Authorized Agent: _____

Things to take to meeting:	<input type="checkbox"/> List of salvage items
<input type="checkbox"/> Plans	<input type="checkbox"/> Emergency numbers
<input type="checkbox"/> Business Cards	<input type="checkbox"/> Smoking policy
<input type="checkbox"/> Specs and Contract	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs from homeowner
	<input type="checkbox"/> Access to property: keys, alarm codes, etc.
1. Purpose of Meeting:	<input type="checkbox"/> Owner responsibilities
<input type="checkbox"/> Introduce entire team	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Lead carpenter and Sales review project with client	
<input type="checkbox"/> Answer questions	5. Selections that still need to be made:
2. What to Expect:	6. Start date:
3. Any special considerations for the client?	7. What needs to happen between now and then?
<input type="checkbox"/> Children	8. Discuss importance of communication.
<input type="checkbox"/> Pets	9. Tour project area.
<input type="checkbox"/> Everyday issues	10. Subs' needs and schedule adjustment if needed:
<input type="checkbox"/> Job hours	11. Owner questions:
<input type="checkbox"/> Material deliveries and location	
<input type="checkbox"/> Shop set-up (if needed)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Bathroom	
<input type="checkbox"/> Telephone	
<input type="checkbox"/> Trash/Dumpster location	
<input type="checkbox"/> Job sign	
<input type="checkbox"/> Clear location of utilities	
<input type="checkbox"/> Change orders	

Figure 1. This checklist helps the author to remember to address numerous important details with the clients during the preconstruction meeting.

many clients think that remodeling their home is as easy as picking up paper towels at the grocery store. I feel that it is my responsibility to educate them on what will happen and how it will affect them.

Before we begin, I always send the client a Certificate of Insurance for liability coverage from our insurance company. The goodwill this creates is terrific. I strive to communicate what is happening in the preparation stage. For example, I keep the clients apprised of when their plans are approved and their permit issued. This gives me an excellent opportunity to talk to them and ease any fears about the pending construction.

I also send the client a responsibility checklist, which is helpful in making sure that their portion of the work is completed before the start date. This reminds them that their kitchen cabinets need to be emptied, that landscape plantings must be moved, and that the basement or garage storage area should be ready for our materials.

We also schedule a preconstruction meeting to ensure that all aspects of the project are covered with the owner. This is the meeting that transfers the project from the sales staff to the production people. I introduce members of the team, including the lead carpenter who will be in charge of the project. I let the client know how the project will flow and make sure that everyone involved is clear about where materials and tools will be stored. Before this meeting takes place, I fill out a "pre-construction checklist" (see Figure 1). I bring the checklist with me to the meeting and it helps remind me of all the details I want to be sure to cover.

At this meeting we also find out what our clients' pet peeves are and what is important to them. Maybe there are special flowers or shrubs that need to be protected during the project, or maybe the safety of the kids or the dog is the most important thing. I look for ways to show them that I am interested in them, not just in the checks they will be writing.

Depending on client preferences, we schedule our communication meetings

either daily or weekly to review the job's progress. Setting a specific day and time makes it easy for all of us to make these meetings happen and minimizes the interruption in my workday.

Service During Construction

When I set our schedule, my main concern is to be able to start and complete the project when I said I would. We post a project schedule at an accessible place to show the client what is to happen and when things are to be completed. It's up to my lead to keep it

updated as the project progresses. The schedule also shows the payment due dates (Figure 2).

We leave a notebook near the schedule where the client can write down the non-urgent questions that always arise after the crew has gone home for the day. Our out-of-town clients get e-mail or fax updates to which they can respond.

Even the most careful planning will not eliminate all of the glitches, and I insist on any schedule changes being communicated to my client as soon as possible. I want the owner to know

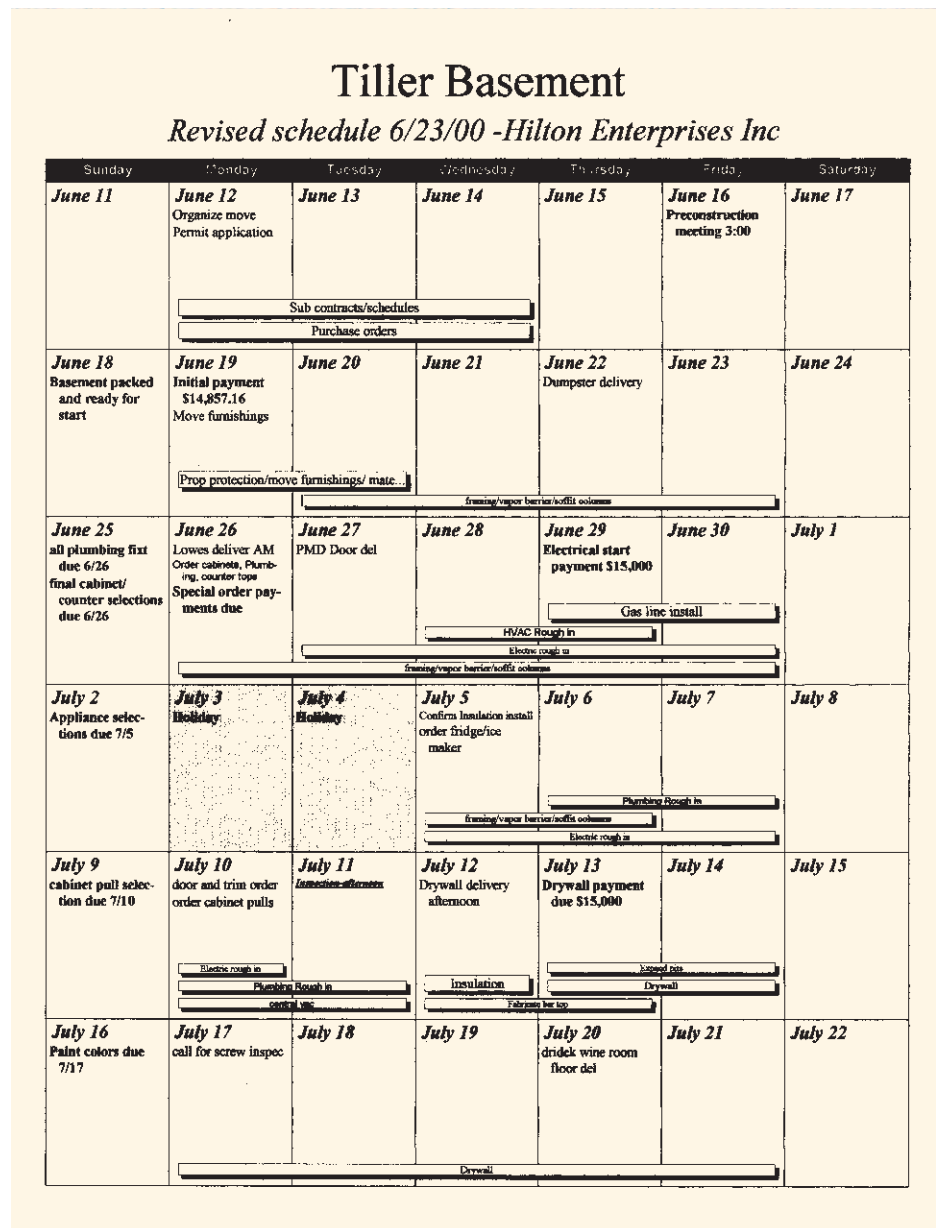


Figure 2. This schedule gets posted in a convenient location on the job site. The author includes progress payment due dates, as well as other client-related items.



Figure 3. Simple measures, such as using plastic dust protection (left) and carpet protection (right), provide commonsense courtesy and and promote future referrals from your client.

HILTON

Enterprises Inc., "Remodeling Enthusiasts"
P.O. Box 308 Stilwell, KS 66085 Phone: 913-685-9775 Fax: 913-851-8491
www.hiltonremodeling.com

date _____

Dear _____!

Thank you for the opportunity to complete your project! It was our pleasure! Enclosed are the lien waivers and warranty for your project. We are glad you called on us and hope that if future needs arise you will call us again. We look forward to having you as a long time client for all your remodeling/repair needs. We provide a full compliment of services to make your home more enjoyable.

We hope our service and the quality of our work pleased you. Any input you have regarding our performance would be greatly appreciated. Your comments are an important part of our quality assurance program. We would appreciate the favor of you taking the time to fill out our survey form so that future clients will gain from your and our experience. We have included a pre-addressed stamped envelope for your convenience.

Thanks Again from all of us at Hilton Enterprises Inc!

Customer Satisfaction Survey

<p>Were your needs met promptly?</p> <p>Before the job <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>During the job <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>After the job <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Did the project . . .</p> <p>Start on time? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Complete on time? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Finish cleanly? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Were our staff/subs courteous and helpful?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>	<p>Did we fulfill our agreements?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Did you receive the service you expected?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Was the quality of the work as expected?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Will you consider us for future projects?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p> <p>Are there other projects we can assist you with?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No</p>
---	--

Please write in any additional comments . . . (continue on back if needed)

May we use your comments in our promotional material? ☐ Yes ☐ No

May we use your name as a reference on future jobs? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signature _____ Date _____

Figure 4. The author developed this follow-up survey to generate useful client feedback, as well as good will.

what we are doing to correct any delays, as well as any additional costs that may be involved.

Job-site protection. The first thing we do on the job site is protect all areas that will be affected by construction traffic. We place plastic runners over carpet and flooring and wrap any door jambs that we will be passing through. We set up dust curtains to contain as much dust as possible (Figure 3). And we lay drop cloths in the bathroom if the owner's facilities will be used during the project. We also place plywood under the dumpster to protect the driveway.

I require that every job site be picked up daily and left broom clean. We don't want the kids or the dog coming through after everyone is gone and stepping on a nail or tripping on a board. At project completion we have the space professionally cleaned so it's ready to be lived in again.

At the end of the project I personally deliver a thank-you gift. It lets the client know that I appreciate their business — and if we have done our job right, we should be a welcome part of the family by now.

Service After Project Completion

As soon as a job is finished, I deliver a project-completion package that

includes the following:

- All warranty information and a description of the procedure we use for handling warranty issues
- A list of all subcontractors used on the project
- Lien waivers from all substantial material suppliers and subcontractors

We also include a “Client Satisfaction Survey” (Figure 4) with a stamped, addressed return envelope and encourage clients to give us feedback, so we can improve our service in the future.


Finally, we set up a reminder schedule in our office for follow-up calls, which we do at 30 days, 90 days, 180 days, and 1 year after project completion to make sure the client is happy. This follow-up is the most important step.

Service Makes Sense

As you consider all that is involved in exceptional customer service, you may think, “I don’t have that kind of time” and “Those things cost too much money.”

But viewing service as an integral part of the business, instead of an intrusion into it, makes good business sense. Service is a marketing tool that generates the referrals we build our business on. The money we spend on these services goes much farther and is much more effective than the kind of marketing we used to do.

Our system also ensures that we are consistent in our efforts to provide excellent customer service, and it has become a routine part of our company culture.

On the other hand, we are not in the habit of giving anything away. The cost of everything I have discussed here is factored into either the design or the construction contracts. When you are compensated for this level of service, it makes it easy to deliver it. And clients will pay for service when they know they’ll get what they are promised. 

Candi Hilton and her husband, Todd, are partners in Hilton Enterprises, a full-service design/build remodeling firm in Stilwell, Kan.

Exceptional Service, Step by Step

Before the Sale

- \$. Return all phone calls promptly
- \$. Send company information before your first appointment
- \$. Confirm appointments and show up on time
- \$. Listen to your clients
- \$. Set realistic deadlines and always meet them
- \$. Send a thank-you note to the client and the past customer who referred you

Before the Contract Signing

- \$. Keep in contact with your client; communicate what is happening at all times
- \$. Take your client to showrooms and provide product samples
- \$. Deliver a clearly written contract

Before Construction

- \$. Communicate what is happening during the preparation stages
- \$. Send a Certificate of Insurance for liability coverage from your insurance company
- \$. Assemble a client responsibility checklist and send it to them
- \$. Schedule a preconstruction meeting to ensure that you deliver what you promised
- \$. Establish a schedule for progress meetings

During Construction

- \$. Start the project on time
- \$. Protect anything and everything that may be damaged during construction
- \$. Post a schedule and communicate any changes to it immediately
- \$. Clean up the job site every day

After Project Completion

- \$. Send a project-completion package, including all warranty information
- \$. Include a client satisfaction survey
- \$. Follow up at predetermined intervals to make sure the client is happy with the project