

What Building a Home Can Teach About

CUSTOMER SERVICE

by Laurence Claus, NNi Training and Consulting, Inc.



About 12 years ago, my wife and I built the house we currently live in. I acted as the General Contractor. Although for many, this choice turns out to be a disaster, it went reasonably well for me, and in fact, I enjoyed doing it. So it is no surprise that I should find myself once again playing General Contractor in a major construction project.

Like no other recent activity, this has provided me an opportunity to learn some things about customer service. We are all consumers and constantly shaping opinions of customer service through personal experiences. The general contracting process, however, seems to have a way of consolidating many learning opportunities into a short time frame.

I have written about this before, but this new general contracting experience has allowed me to take away a couple of new lessons on customer service. The beauty of these lessons is that they are applicable to just about any customer and vendor relationship, regardless of the market served, or the product or service being provided. Following are five “new” lessons I’ve learned being my own General Contractor.

Communication

I was very naïve when I got married. While my wife and I were dating, we took extra care to listen to one another and make sure we were understood. Therefore, it came sort of as a shock in those early days of marriage when my wife would say something that I completely misunderstood. When I did not then perform to my wife’s expectations, invariably letting her down, I would end up on the receiving end of either an angry rebuke or an emotionally distraught exchange. In either case, I was left puzzled as to what had just occurred. As we have now been married many years, these exchanges are few and far between, as we have learned how to better communicate with one another.

In the same way, when beginning a new relationship with a customer, it is important

to establish good lines of communication from the very beginning. Communication should be clear and easy to understand. It is important that communication not be vague or leave the recipient with more questions than answers. It is also important that you listen and not be too anxious or quick to dive in. Recently, I hired an insulation contractor. When I first met him at the job site, I discovered he had an accent and was not always easy to understand. However, he carefully listened to what I wanted, asked questions, took notes, and provided some advice and ideas on the project. I wasn’t too surprised that when I received his proposal it was excellently done; he clearly expressed each aspect of the job and denoted, in detail, everything I had asked him to include. Even though he had a slight accent, he demonstrated other attributes of being

an excellent communicator, which played a strong role in my decision to hire him. In other words, he communicated better about what he intended to do and made better recommendations than any of his competitors.

Quotes/Proposals

The previous example also illustrates another important piece to winning new business: the proposal. Although I imagine since we are all “wired” differently, the amount of information needed in a proposal might vary. An engineer, like me, likely prefers more detail than someone serving in a non-technical role might. Regardless of the personal preferences of the proposal receivers, however, proposal providers only have a limited amount of “space” to get their proposal across. Therefore, successful proposals must be well thought-out and executed.

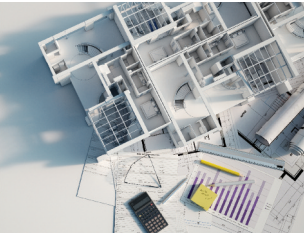
One of the easiest ways to leave a good impression on a customer is to provide a well-explained and thorough proposal of potential services. It is frustrating to receive a quotation for services that is vague and

continued on page 16

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leaves you guessing about the services or item that will be provided. I have received a wide range of proposals, but the ones that clearly stand out are the ones that provide a thorough description of the services to be provided, including a description or list of the materials that would be furnished for the job and the terms under which they were made.

As an example, I sought out several rough carpenters for the project and received back proposals from all of them. One proposal was about three lines on a full page, while the others went into a fair amount of detail regarding exactly what they intended to do, who would supply the material, and in one case, when they would start, expected project duration, and the size of their crew. A well prepared proposal is not likely to be the decisive tipping point for a decision to hire a supplier or not, but a poorly prepared proposal is sure to end up ignored or discounted.

Personal Touch

We are all exceptionally busy, and investing too much time in the early responsibilities of a project may simply not be prudent, wise, or possible. On the flip side, however, attempting to land the business with little first-hand knowledge of the job will likely be a red flag. I think, without exception, every contractor I hired made a personal site visit to review the job I was seeking them for.

As an example, I have a small set of stairs and about 10 feet of railing that must be fabricated and installed. I reached out to two local stair builders and requested quotes. In fact, both companies are headquartered less than two miles from my project. One contractor chose to come out and review the job with me in person before quoting, while the other simply quoted from the plans I emailed. Interestingly, after receiving the two quotes, the quoted dollar amount was only about \$40 apart. The quote by the contractor that just used the print, however, clearly noted that the proposal was “preliminary” and subject to change in price when actual site conditions were eventually reviewed. With all else being equal, with one definitive proposal and one tentative, it was an easy decision to award the business to the one that had extended the personal touch.

Easy to Work With/Goes the “Extra Mile”

Although this point was not something that could be conclusively ferreted out in the earliest stages of receiving quotes, it is something that has emerged during the course of the project and has seen me time and again exclaim to myself or others my gladness at having chosen a particular contractor. My carpenter is perhaps the best example of what I am trying to convey here. He is extremely easy to work with and goes out of his way to make sure that he and his crew are being helpful, doing things as I need them done, and providing me with good value.

Keep Your Word

Contractors are notorious for not doing what they promise, particularly showing up when they promise. Now in their defense, many contractors are limited by forces outside of their control, particularly by the weather, so that it is often difficult to keep a rigid timetable. However, this sort of thing only goes so far—with a couple-of-day delay being understandable—but a month delay, not so much.

In any event, it is clear that when we are consumers of a product or service we have expectations that the supplier will keep their word and supply the expected product within an allotted time frame at an estab-

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In just one example, I had to replace some floor drains in the basement floor. This involved breaking up some concrete and replacing it with new concrete. The job was too small to warrant hiring a cement truck, so I decided that I would simply hand mix bags of premixed concrete. I, therefore, calculated the amount of concrete needed and concluded that I would need about 40, 60-lb. bags. I asked if he would include this in his next material order from the lumberyard and have them deliver it with the other items he needed. He agreed. When he ordered for me, he discovered that the lumberyard did not carry 60-lb. bags, so he made a calculation and had them deliver about 60, 40-lb. bags. I was away when these were delivered and not looking forward to spending a good part of my Saturday schlepping 40-lb. concrete bags into the basement. When I got home, however, much to my delight, I found all 60 bags of concrete neatly stacked in the basement. He and his crew had taken it on themselves to carry all of these down into the basement for me. That is going the extra mile and is the kind of action that will quickly seal the relationship and convince you that you have found a great partner to do business with.

lished price. Failing to meet these promises will quickly tarnish one's reputation. Therefore, the best and most successful vendors are those that keep their word and stick to their promises, even if it means some hardship on their behalf.

Summary

Obviously the stories shared in this article are not about fasteners. They are, however, general observations of good customer service principles that are applicable to anyone in any market segment. Since we are all consumers and know what we like and don't like in our interactions with stores and vendors, it surprises me that we often fail to apply our life lessons to our own business activities. I mean, do we really believe that our customers are not frustrated by the same things we are? The five observations and principles shared in this article are a few of the many things that can make a winning equation in business. The bottom line, I guess, is that we realize exceptional customer service is exceptionally good for business and that mediocre or poor customer service is exceptionally bad! ■