

## SIX THINGS I LEARNED BUILDING A HOUSE



by Laurence Claus, NNi Training and Consulting, Inc.

In 2005, my bride of several years and I entered into an adventure and decided that rather than buying an existing home, we would build our first new home together. For many, entering into such a project is likely to test the mettle of their relationship, but my love for building projects made this an easy decision, and thus, I was not intimidated to act as my own General Contractor. So, we hunkered down, began working with an architect friend, and soon had a plan ready to go. Next came the arduous process of finding and hiring subcontractors.

At this point some of you may be wondering how this subject can be relevant for a fastener magazine. The answer is simple: Sometimes life lessons transcend in a meaningful way to other areas in our lives. This just happened to be one of those cases. Although we are all regular consumers of products and services, this experience truly provided a perspective like none I had experienced before, or since, about what our customers sometimes experience in choosing us as suppliers. The following short article shares six things that I learned in the process that make a difference in the way that customers view and measure their suppliers.

Suppliers that practice these things are likely to impress and delight their customers, which is a winning equation for landing, retaining, and growing business.

### #1: Trust

Business icon Warren Buffett once said, "I learned to go into business only with people whom I like, trust, and admire." I believe this is an astute observation and nicely sums up the truth that people will not want to do business with you or your company if they cannot trust you or the organization.

As General Contractor, one of my jobs was to find, interview, and hire my subcontractors. In several instances this was quite easy and required me to look no further than my circle of friends. For example, I engaged my best friend, a licensed electrical

contractor, to do all of the electrical work. However, these few instances were more the exception than the rule, and most of the trades were individuals or companies that I had to seek out and hire with little or no previous knowledge of who they were.

One such trade was the foundation and concrete work. I approached about a half dozen different prospects regarding interest in my project. As I recall, all expressed an interest and committed to quoting the project if I sent them a set of plans. Although representatives of several of the prospective companies contacted me with follow-up questions, only one asked to meet me on-site. We arranged to meet about 7:00 a.m.

on a Saturday at the building site. I arrived shortly before the appointed time to find that the two partners had already arrived and were waiting for me. If first impressions were the only gauge we used in making decisions, these guys would have been immediately excluded. For some misguided reason on my part, I was expecting someone in "business" attire to meet me. These guys, however, were two salt-of-the-earth working men, dressed in jeans, Carhartt jackets, and wool stocking caps on their heads. They were meeting with me on their way to the job they were currently working.

After introductions were made, we walked around the site. I quickly warmed to these guys as they asked me questions, made observations, and introduced ideas and suggestions that they felt might improve the project. In doing so, they showed that they had knowledge and competency, and that they had taken the time to prepare for our meeting by closely studying the plans and thinking about their approach to the project. After that initial meeting,

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they solidified their interest in the project and inquired whether I would be willing to meet with their excavator. I agreed, and a few days later had a similar on-site meeting with their excavation subcontractor, who also represented himself and his company extremely well.

When all the bids were finally in, I ended up choosing this duo (concrete guys and excavators) not because they had the lowest price or best timing (they didn't) but because their efforts had resulted in gaining my trust. Although I was pleased with all of my choices, these guys were probably the best hire I made, and I would end up using the excavator for multiple projects on this house construction and a couple of projects that would come later.

### #2: Honesty and Integrity

In many ways this practice complements the previous one. One of the fastest ways to submarine trust is to be dishonest or act in a manner that exhibits questionable integrity. Although there are certainly cases where individuals are downright deceptive, most of the time individuals get hung-up in a more subtle manner. Take, for example, the land surveyor that was providing all of the site plans. This firm was very busy when I hired them, and they had a significant workload ahead of mine. I was trying very hard to obtain permits so I could get started by a certain date. I could not do so without the site plans that these guys would create. When I hired them they told me that they could meet my requested timeline. Unfortunately, because of their workload, they got behind on my job, and it would be several additional weeks before I received the needed site plans. This is not uncommon in the building trades, as weather and other unknown factors often conspire to slow projects down. My problem was that when asked about meeting the timeline and on subsequent follow-up communications, the answer was always that it could and would be done. When it wasn't, I was let down and had to scramble to reorganize my plan. If they had only been honest from the very beginning and informed me that they had a very heavy workload and if events like bad weather occurred they could get behind pushing my job out, I would have been armed with honest information that would allow me to plan and make the best decision on how to proceed forward. Being dishonest, even if it isn't intended as outwardly

deceptive, is one of the fastest ways to lose trust and business.

### #3: Responsiveness

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect I experienced as a General Contractor was when prospective individuals or firms were unresponsive. Like any project, my building project had many moving pieces, some which could be accomplished in parallel, but most being completed in succession. Therefore, if one item got delayed, it had the potential of setting back future project components. Therefore, responsiveness to quotes, questions, and action items was critically important.

Using my hiring of a concrete foundation contractor again as an example, I reached out to about a half dozen different companies for quotes. All replied that they were interested and to send them prints for review. Two of these contractors promised quotes by my initial deadline but failed to execute. As they had seemed to be promising prospects, I followed up with both companies. I was assured that they were both interested and that a quote would be shortly forthcoming. I waited a week or two more and finally had to make a decision that did not include them. To this day, I am still waiting for their quotes.

The waiting and constant follow-up were very frustrating. I learned that one of the easiest ways to delight a customer is by being responsive. It is easy, and for all practical purposes, free.

### #4: Special Requests

Listening and acting on special requests are important skills to learn in the pursuit of delighting your customer. During this project, I encountered two types of tradesmen: those that wanted to do it their way and those that would listen to your needs and requests and act accordingly. I learned that I appreciated those that practiced the latter and avoided those that acted in the former manner. There is little room, particularly in a new business relationship, for the supplier to not listen to the needs of their customer or prospective customer.

One example where this was done well in this building project occurred while we were framing the roof of the garage. We had designed the garage roof to be steep enough to accommodate some bonus space. We had planned on putting a couple of skylights in to provide some natural light.

The framers were about halfway through setting the rafters when I arrived on the job site, surveyed the work, and realized the original design was not going to provide what I wanted. I reached out to the company owner, expressed my concerns, and we ended up redesigning the configuration on-the-spot. Instead of skylights, we added two large dormers with large window units. This change not only added a great deal of light to this area but also addressed my request to make the space larger and more functional. Today, this space acts as my office, and I couldn't be happier with it. If my framing contractor had not, however, been willing to listen to my special request because the job was already underway, it would have been framed in the original manner and not as nice and functional a space as I have today.

### #5: Communicate Clearly

Clear communication is important. Without good, clear communication, misunderstanding, mistakes, and hard feelings are bound to happen. It is important when communicating with both current and prospective customers that communication is not cloaked in vagaries. Expectations on both sides should be clearly understood. If either side is not clear on something, it behooves that party to bring it to the attention of the other party and resolve it with a clear understanding.

Our home is designed with a partial wrap-around porch. Originally my plan had been to use either Cypress or Douglas Fir tongue and groove floorboards. My framing contractor, though, approached me and suggested that I substitute wood for composite flooring. Although I am positive his heart was in the right place, I was told it was going to be a small upcharge, when in fact it became a significant one. I have never cared for the end results, and if I could rewind, this is one of the few decisions I made that I would do differently. Assuredly, if the price and installation procedure had been clearly communicated with me at the beginning, I would not have proceeded as I did.

### #6: Go the Extra Mile

The fastest way to really delight the customer is to go above and beyond what is expected. It is like going out to eat for your anniversary and receiving a free appetizer or dessert "on the house." Individuals who have received such special treatment almost

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always go back. Actions that are taken that go above and beyond, and are unexpected, normally build loyalty to that supplier. This is one of those actions that does not have to represent a big investment but almost always pays itself back in multiples.

As an example, I recently had a small landscaping project completed. In our neck of the woods, Buckthorn is a particular problem. Buckthorn is an extremely aggressive, invasive species of tree that is easily spread by birds and other means. I had our landscaper remove a small area of Buckthorn in the front corner of our property that up until recently I had been prevented from doing. After it was removed, I needed the stumps removed and the area graded. My contract with the landscaper only included removal and grading. On his own, he sowed grass seed to restore this graded area. Although a small gesture, I was delighted, as I would have had to do this myself, and his initiative not only won me over for the next job but also saved me time and expense in sowing the grass seed myself.

**PERHAPS THE MOST FRUSTRATING ASPECT I EXPERIENCED AS A GENERAL CONTRACTOR WAS WHEN PROSPECTIVE INDIVIDUALS OR FIRMS WERE UNRESPONSIVE. LIKE ANY PROJECT, MY BUILDING PROJECT HAD MANY MOVING PIECES, SOME WHICH COULD BE ACCOMPLISHED IN PARALLEL, BUT MOST BEING COMPLETED IN SUCCESSION. THEREFORE, IF ONE ITEM GOT DELAYED, IT HAD THE POTENTIAL OF SETTING BACK FUTURE PROJECT COMPONENTS. THEREFORE, RESPONSIVENESS TO QUOTES, QUESTIONS, AND ACTION ITEMS WAS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT.**

### Summary

I learned a lot from being the General Contractor when building my home. Having to hire individuals and companies to provide services was both eye opening and enlightening. By projecting my experiences to a business situation, I realized how

important certain customer service activities were and that you did not have to be the lowest cost provider to “win.” Being a supplier that customers want to do business with is intrinsically valuable and a lesson that good organizations are extending throughout all of their ranks. ■