

Running a Business from the Customer's Point of View

by Jon Hardie



"How do I get to Chicago?" said the customer. "Well," replied the agent, "it all depends on where you're starting from, when you want to go, and how much you have to spend."

Customers sound a lot like that, don't they? They've turned the idea or project around in their minds for some time and weighed all the alternatives they can see—then they want you to make it happen. And they usually get frustrated when they can't get a "straight" answer (or an answer to the question they *think* they have asked).

How do you get a house built, an addition completed or a kitchen remodeled? It all depends on how you—the seller, builder and/or remodeler—interpret the customer's questions.

When you look at jobs from the customer's point of view—and few sellers of any product take the time to do it—you will find yourself looking at your business and the customer from a very different perspective.

Operating your business from the customer's point of view often requires a 180-degree shift in attitude—from "How cheaply can I do this job?" to "How can I meet the customer's needs given the budget, features and quality criteria that the customer and I have agreed on?"

I'm not suggesting that you give evasive or indirect answers to straight questions. On the contrary, you should pay close attention to the customer's concerns and address the underlying needs of the customer that he or she may be unable to express.

These concerns often have more to do with intangible issues like confidence, peace of mind, anxiety, satisfaction or uncertainty than with hardware or specifications like R-values, nailing schedules, joist dimensions or Btu's.

For example, the question "How much does it cost?" often means "What am I getting for my money?" When a customer remarks that he or she would "like to think about it," the customer often means, "You haven't sold me yet—I'm not convinced!"

Let's face it: The customer is your source of food on the table, gas in the truck, tools in the shop and money for the mortgage. If the customer doesn't buy the goods and services you sell, you're out of business.

Take the time to explain what you plan to do and how you intend to go about it beforehand—in plain English without a lot of technical jargon.... If you take a little time in the beginning, you'll save hours answering questions and interrupting the job later on.

Customers want you to buy into their dream project with the same amount of enthusiasm they've had for months—to reassure them, to give them peace of mind, to ask the kinds of questions based upon your experience that will make the space more useful, more responsive, more practical, more cost effective and more enjoyable.

They are looking for a partner in whom they can confide their dreams, hopes and ideas. It's your job to incorporate those often-intuitive feelings into a tangible product—within budget.

That means, quite literally, that you have to stop thinking about what you do and how you do it, and instead think about what the customer needs and how to achieve it within the clearly defined constraints of the project. One of your main responsibilities will be to help define and develop the specific objectives and the actual project specifications with the customer—not *for* the customer, but *with* the customer.

The value of this partnership cannot be underestimated. After all, you can reasonably assume that every customer knows at least 30 families well enough to refer them to you if you do the job right—and the closure rate on referred jobs is more than 80 percent.

If you become invaluable to your customers, they will market you more effectively than you ever could. In other words, if you market your goods and services from the customer's point of view, your business will actually take care of itself. And as you become more customer-oriented and your customers begin to see you as a person they can depend upon, they actually will begin to understand how and why you do what you do.

Problems actually become opportunities to work out alternatives with the customer. Instead of banging heads, you will end up working out practical solutions that satisfy both you and the customer. In short, your job will actually become easier.

For many builders and remodelers, however, this shift from "Here's what I do" to "Here's what you need" or "Here are some suggestions that may help you balance your dreams with your budget" is a hard pill to swallow. They feel uncomfortable, unsure and uncertain, as if they were staking out new ground.

Here, then, are a few suggestions on handling some common customer concerns to help you get started:

1. *The customer is always right.* The customer may have it backward or not understand things clearly, or maybe even assume things that simply aren't true. But if that's where the customer is, that's where you have to begin. You have to begin where the customer is—not where you want him or her to be.

2. *I can get the same job done cheaper by someone else.*

Response: "That may be true, but you get what you pay for. Our costs are pretty much the same, so to get the job done cheaper must mean that you are getting lower quality materials. I thought that good quality and workmanship was important to you. Let's see if we can take another look at the project and see where we can save on some of the extras and still keep the quality."

3. *Why does it cost so much?*

Response: "Well, briefly, here's what we have to do to if we want to be sure that you won't have any problems with this new roof in the future." Take the time to explain what you plan to do and how you intend to go about it beforehand—in plain English without a lot of technical jargon. "Do you have any questions? Is there something I can go over again before we start work?" If you take a little time in the beginning, you'll save hours answering questions and interrupting the job later on.

4. *I'm not very good at visualizing construction. What happens if I feel we should make changes as we get into the job?*

Response: "Well, there are changes on every job. The important point is to address those changes early—to keep in touch and discuss job progress. If we keep the door open, we may be able to make changes with little disruption of the overall schedule. What we want to do is avoid undoing or redoing work. If there are changes, we need to sit down together and look at the pluses and minuses, including any additional costs and their impact on the project

budget and schedule. If we do that together, we may be able to avoid costly mistakes or corrections."

5. *I don't understand this bill.*

Never submit a bill without going over it item by item—unless you want surprises like not being paid. The customer doesn't want surprises either. So take the time to bring the customer up to speed. What the customer doesn't understand, appreciate or agree to won't be paid—period.

6. *My neighbor says I can do it this way....*

Response: "Well, you may be able to do the job using those materials. Let's sit down together and look at the consequences and the impact on the budget, time, labor and how that solution will stand up over time....I assume you want the job done right."

Most customers really want to be helpful. They will discuss their project with everyone they know. It's important to recognize their desire to reduce costs and cut corners because it's coming out of their pocket. How you handle occasional off-the-wall suggestions can have a big impact on customer cooperation. If you show a willingness to listen, so will they. If you react negatively or out of hand, you will get back what you send.

7. *When in doubt, ask.* If you feel uncertain, you can be sure that the customer does, too. If you sense confusion, you're probably right. Proceeding without the customer's full knowledge and support is to risk getting paid—or simply getting any referrals.

When you do a job from the customer's point of view, you'll have a job the customers will talk about and show off to their friends. The most costly job is one that just sits there without bringing in any referrals. So ask the right questions, and keep the door open. •

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