

Win Referrals With Parting Gifts

by Diana Hanson

Whether the deck costs \$5,000 or \$50,000, it's a luxury for your customers. And it's important to recognize that not only did they decide to build a deck, they also decided not to take a long-overdue vacation, buy a snowmobile, replace their old carpet, or pay off their mortgage. So, help the homeowners celebrate when the job is finished — sharing that excitement with them can get you some really good referrals at the same time.

Parting gifts are standard in many industries. Real estate agents, for example, are famous for them: When new home buyers use that shiny new key to unlock their beautiful new door for the very first time, they will likely find a gift basket

on their spotlessly clean kitchen counter, as a “thank you” for their business. It's a nice touch, but that's not why real estate agents do it. They do it because at the very moment the new homeowners see the gift basket, they will think warm and fuzzy thoughts about their real estate agent (who also happened to leave a small supply of business cards in the basket).

Just as in real estate, giving parting gifts to deck customers is a strategy to generate business referrals. The gift could be something as simple as a bucket filled with ice and adult beverages (or not-so-adult — you've got to know your audience here). If there's a spa involved, you could give your customers a redwood or composite towel rack — and throw in a towel with your company name and Web site embroidered into it. If the deck includes a fire pit or fireplace, consider a present of kindling (nicely wrapped, and no, I don't mean your job scraps; I mean actual kindling like you can get at L.L.Bean or Plow & Hearth).

Chances are that your customers will be talking with their friends and neighbors during the week or so that you are installing their deck. When it's done, they will likely want to show it off.

GIFT SUGGESTIONS

Smaller Decks:

- Decking-manufacturer-approved cleaning materials and care instructions
- Bottle of wine or sparkling cider
- Bird or squirrel feeder (if you choose one of these, you'd better also provide the cleaning materials)
- Outdoor potted plant
- Small cooler for use on the deck
- Flavored wood chips for the barbecue (like apple wood or mesquite)
- Star chart showing the visible night sky
- Citronella lantern
- Wasp trap (especially if you got stung on the job)
- Hummingbird feeder
- Can crusher (and find out if your customer would like you to mount it, too)

Larger or More Extravagant Decks:

- Grill pad (to help keep the deck clean)
- Bocce or croquet set
- Back-door welcome mat (find out your customers' favorite sports team and get one with a logo)
- Chimney or other small portable fire pit
- Storage unit
- Planter box
- Bench
- Towel rack (if there is a spa or swimming pool)



Giving your customer a little something extra gives them additional bragging material. “And look at what the builder left for us — this great towel rack! And he even installed it on the side of the house by the hot tub!”

The impression of a parting gift can last a long time. My husband, Jack Hanson of Woodpile Construction in Idaho, tells of a time he was placing a gift grease mat on a new deck

DECK LEDGER

where the customers were going to put their barbecue. The folks had just gotten back from buying patio furniture and the husband said, "This is really outstanding because I was worried about my grill — it's a leaker and we were going to start cooking tonight." You can bet that every time the customer looks at that mat, he will remember the timing of the gift.

"Leaving a gift is also a great way to step off your final inspection of the deck," Hanson adds. "Everybody is in a good mood. In my area, I know of no other deck builder that follows this practice. I believe it puts me a definite step ahead of my competition for a good, lasting impression."

Always tuck a few business cards into your gift.

Keep It Reasonable

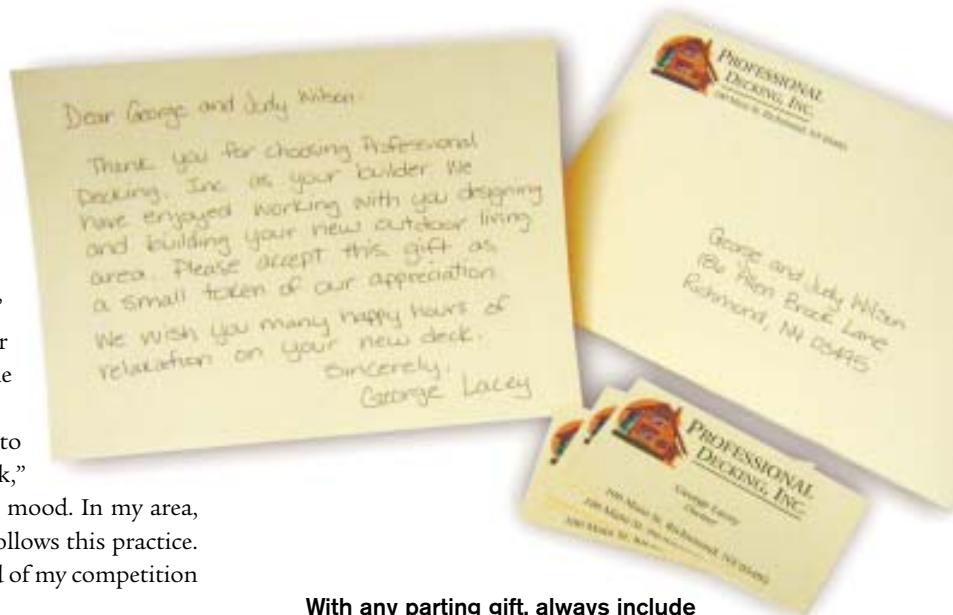
You don't want to spend too much money on a parting gift, or your customers will start thinking about how much it cost you, which means they will start thinking about how much it cost them.... Keep it in perspective: For a small deck, a small gift is appropriate (\$10 to \$35). A really large deck might warrant something a little more (\$35 to \$50). You are simply thanking them for choosing you.

Mike Ebner, owner of Back to Nature Decks in Pennsylvania, says, "We recognize the value of our customers. Therefore, we present them with gift cards to local restaurants as a thank you for their deck once it's done. We also offer additional gift cards for referrals that turn into customers. This program has worked very well for us."

Party Anyone?

You are at the customers' home for at least a few days, so be friendly — you might get yourself invited to the "let's break the deck in" party that they will probably have.

If no invitation is forthcoming, invite yourself! What I mean is offer to be the chef for a barbecue they host — all



With any parting gift, always include a short, handwritten note of thanks. If your penmanship is hideous, ask someone who has decent handwriting to do the writing for you. And don't forget the business cards.

you ask is that they let you have a little low-profile conversation with anyone who asks (and leave a few business cards around). If you are barbecue-challenged — know your limitations — you could buy precooked country pork ribs, and just reheat them on the "barbie" (any rib joint will be happy to set you up).

And remember to bring a disposable camera to take pictures of your customers and their friends enjoying the deck for the first time. You can simply hand it to them on your way out and say something like, "You guys sure had a good time."

In the end, you step off the deck that you built, looking professional and leaving the customer happy. Now, just who do you think they will refer their friends to? YOU! ❖

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