



Setting Your Customer's Expectations

Each of us spends a relatively large effort to impress our customers; always hopeful that they will call us back the next time there is work to do. Just as important, we want our customers to be so impressed that they recommend us to others - again and again. This makes good business sense, as is the BEST (and least expensive) way to grow any business.

Sometimes this happens, and sometimes it doesn't. Why? In my experience, the simple answer is "customer perception".

It's hard to believe that the great efforts we make for our customer might not be appreciated. After all, we did everything we believed the customer wanted, right? Is it possible to do everything right, on time, and at a fair price and still not meet the expectations of our customers? It absolutely is, particularly if you don't fully understand what the customer wants. Examples are everywhere.

A restaurant manager may hire you to clean the hoods, explaining that the work must be done after close on Saturday so the work doesn't interfere with operating hours. That same manager did not say anything about noise from your crew at 4:00AM. You could do a great job of cleaning the hoods, but if that Manager got a nasty phone call the next day from a neighbor you probably won't be invited back or recommended to others.

A homeowner may ask you to clean and seal his deck, telling you that it had to be done by Saturday if possible. You agree, and schedule the work to be done on Friday. On Thursday evening, you call and tell the homeowner that the work will be done the next day. On Friday morning, however, there is a change in the weather forecast. You realize sealing the deck right before a sudden rainstorm would be a disaster. You call the customer Friday evening and explain the situation, but the customer is angry and tells you he will hire someone else.

How do these situations happen? Who told the restaurant manager that you would be quiet while cleaning his hoods? Who told the homeowner the deck would be sealed rain or shine? Who set the customer's expectations?

The answer is: If you didn't, then they set their own!

Experienced contractors, who have lost their share of customers due to misunderstandings like this, seem to know instinctively what the customer expects. How do less-experienced contractors avoid these mistakes? If you carefully explain what you do and how you do it, you have the opportunity to set the customer's expectations. You tell the customer what to expect of your company. Once you are done with the job, you can follow up by asking the customer if everything you did met those expectations in his eyes. One way to do this is to survey every customer after the work is completed and the bill is paid.

In the area of customer service, advice like "Keep your head down, and don't ask questions" is not going to help you keep customers. Remember, though, that you are asking for complaints. Try to be objective in evaluating all of the information you get back. If a serious problem is revealed, though, at least you get a chance to correct it and save the customer.

A well-structured customer survey will reveal what the customer liked and didn't like about the job you did and the way you do business. It doesn't have to be long or complex - in fact, the shorter the survey is the more likely the customer is to fill it out and get it back to you. Don't be surprised if you get a number of good testimonials, too. After all, you are working hard and trying to do a great job!

Why would a customer take the time to fill out a survey? Customers want to be heard. Tell them that you value their opinion and they will respond. Let them sound off - and they will.

Surveys can tell you which of your employees is doing a great job. They also reveal training issues or attitude problems among other employees. Sometimes employees will act more professionally if they know that you will ask the customer about them.

A survey usually creates a positive customer response because it tells the customer that you care. If you follow up on any complaints discovered through your survey, you are assured that customers will recommend your service to others. You can enhance your image of professionalism and learn more about your customers at the same time.

The knowledge gained through a simple survey program will help you design or modify your services so that they match your customers' needs - and their expectations!