

Turning out a quality product is the easy part.
The challenge is controlling the house full of people
living on the jobsite.

Managing TOUGH Customers

**BY
CLAYTON
DEKORNE**

It goes against everything we've always been taught: It's not about fine craftsmanship. For demanding clients, masterful design and brilliant execution are not enough to save a job from unraveling.

Call them discriminating or just plain fussy, demanding clients will challenge your pricing and exact meticulous detail on a punch list. They are quick to point out flaws and won't think twice about withholding money. Typically, they are professionals used to being in control and comfortable with painstaking negotiations.

But they are the clients with the means and vision to underwrite a major renovation. If you want plum work, this is the market you serve.

Remodelers who cater to demanding clients in high-end, competitive markets insist that the real art in remodeling is not so much in the product as in the process. "Every company in the area has good carpenters; everyone can turn out a good product," explains Mark Scott, owner of Mark IV Builders of Bethesda, Md. "The only edge I have over my competition is the experience I can offer the homeowner."



IT'S NOT JUST A HOUSE; IT'S A HOME

Scott has built his company to serve a high-end clientele of Washington professionals, 60% of whom are lawyers. He's not particularly worried about this demographic. He's never been sued. His contract is just as iron-clad as the next guy's. But he insists that's not the point. Scott achieves a 98% referral rate by actually telling customers there will be problems. "We tell them straight out, 'This job won't go perfectly,'" Scott says.

Andy Hannan, Mark IV's production manager elaborates: "The longer a job runs, the

**"The only edge I have
over my competition is the
experience I can offer the
homeowner."**

—Mark Scott

more likely problems will occur. They are very seldom about the product. They're the result of a breakdown in communication or some expectation that's not being met."

Hannan asserts that solving these problems starts with looking at the job from the clients' perspective. What most remodelers

take for granted is often completely unfamiliar to clients: They have never witnessed a demolition crew reducing the back of their house to rubble. They have never seen a back-hoe rip apart their back yard. They have never had a platoon of tradespeople march by their breakfast table every morning for weeks on end, never had to relinquish their garage to accommodate a staging area, never surrendered the driveway to truckloads of lumber. They may have a dim understanding of the order of construction, but no sense of the time intervals required on a job schedule. And regardless of what's written in the con-

Managing TOUGH Customers

tract boilerplate, they are always too expectant, too impatient, and too easily frustrated.

“They don’t know what they’re getting into, not really,” Hannan says. “A great deal of our work, not just at the initial meeting, but at every step in the process, is educating the homeowner.”

FEAR FACTOR

According to David Lupberger, author of *Managing the Emotional Homeowner*, many homeowners approach a project with a mix of emotions, but primarily fear. They are afraid they have hired an unscrupulous contractor; they are naturally apprehensive about the large amount of money they are spending and may be suspicious because they don’t understand the true costs involved; and they often don’t understand the plans until the walls are actually up.

Lupberger argues there is a psychological connection between home and self that accounts for the intense feelings many homeowners experience. A home, he says, is often a reflection, or an extension, of who the homeowners perceive themselves to be. Clare Cooper Marcus, author of *House as a Mirror of Self*, explains it this way: “A home fills many needs: a place of self-expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard.” Seen this way, it’s understandable why a remodeling project feels disruptive to clients. When clients have to move out of a kitchen, or shroud half their house in plastic, it creates not just a disruption to every daily routine but cuts deeply into their whole world outlook. “It feels like an invasion of their most personal space,” Lupberger says.

Demanding clients are not emotionally unstable people, or psychotic personalities, as some truly dangerous clients can be. Rather, they are people who are emotionally invested



“The longer a job runs, the more likely problems will occur. They are very seldom about the product. They’re the result of a breakdown in communication.”

—Andy Hannan

in their homes. Remodelers who understand this, and can manage a client’s emotions as well as they manage tasks, will be able to avoid the explosive outbursts that sap a homeowner’s enthusiasm and put the contractor on the defensive. “When a homeowner gets so frustrated, and they feel like they have lost control over their homes, they will try to take control of the job,” Lupberger says. “This can lead to the loss of a lot of time and money for the remodeler. It also takes all the fun out of what we’re doing.”

BEYOND BUSINESS BASICS

At the very least, contractors must be savvy business leaders, insists Dennis Rourke, of

Van Metre Homes, Burke, Va. In his book *Managing Your Most Difficult Customers*, Rourke outlines the basic business procedures required to institute a system of “proactive customer care.” These include tactics many remodeling contractors employ to ensure quality and efficiency: writing uniform contracts, specifications, and scope-of-work documents to establish a baseline for job expectations; maintaining clear communication with clients in regularly scheduled meetings; and forming partnerships with core subs and suppliers to ensure the delivery of quality materials and maintain high standards of workmanship.

Such strategies are only the starting point, however. “The devil’s certainly in the details,” laughs Rourke, acknowledging a particular class of customers who demand the utmost care. “You never want to grovel, or otherwise appear to have surrendered control of the process to the customer. But you do have to constantly demonstrate an interest in the customer’s well-being. I call it overservicing the job.”

According to Rourke, a system of proactive customer care requires anticipation of future problems, needs, or changes. For remodeling, David Lupberger recommends addressing the problems up front with a prejob questionnaire (see “20 Questions for Laying the Ground Rules,” page 80). The questionnaire serves as a checklist of the potential pitfalls that should be reviewed with a client. The answers serve as the basis for establishing clear ground rules defining how the process will run.

Mark Scott emphasizes the need for setting clear boundaries in advance. Timing and communications, Scott explains, are key control issues that the contractor — not the homeowner — must define. For example, Scott’s company schedules weekly meetings with the client to review what Mark IV has done and

Managing TOUGH Customers

inform the homeowners of what they'll do next. Scott sets the time and expects the customer to be there. "We drive the schedule, not the homeowner. We never ask in this meeting 'How are we doing?' We say 'This is where we're at, and this is where we're going.' We keep it focused and don't expose ourselves to open-ended critique." Before the company held these pointed progress meetings, customers would inevitably lose it, usually around drywall time. "By that time, all the uncertainty and the lack of understanding about what was going on in the process would build up, then someone would go ballistic. It never failed. Now, that hardly ever happens," Scott says.

In a similar refinement of the basic business procedure, Scott holds a "trade day" to introduce the clients to his subcontractor partners. "It's both a time to introduce all the strangers who will be marching through the clients' house over the course of the job and an important time for us to emphasize that these are the experts we've hired to do the job right." As with weekly meetings, Scott schedules this time during the day, usually late in the morning. "It's important that the customer have to take time off work and give us their full attention," Scott says. "If they don't, we see this as an immediate red flag. If they can't, this is an indication they probably aren't willing to pay our price."

Scott highlights the job closeout as one of the most critical moments in the process. Near the end, when homeowners are tired of the process and simply want a state of normalcy to return, is when a lot of jobs unravel. Scott takes steps to avert disaster at the stage of substantial completion by reintroducing himself into the job as the company owner, along with the architect who may have been involved. Together they walk the job with the customer and create a punch list. This



"You do have to constantly demonstrate interest in the customer's well-being. I call it overservicing the job"

— Dennis Rourke

punch list is then printed out on three-part carbonless paper. Each item recorded has two blanks — one for the field supervisor to initial when it's done, the other for the customer. "When this list is complete, that's it," Scott says. After that, Scott will only send someone back to the job at specific intervals as part of the warranty process. "It's useless to come back before the house has passed through at least one heating season anyway," he says. Then he goes back to address drywall issues such as nail pops and cracks in cathedral ceilings.

Scott paints a painful picture of what can

happen without a clear closeout procedure. Typically, the homeowners start looking around after the walk-through and see where a mover dinged the wall or begin to question color and fixture choices. When the lead carpenter shows up to finish the items on the list, the homeowners hand him a few new ones, and in an effort to please, the carpenter chases those new items, easily forgetting the original list. Then the homeowners call back and want to know why some items didn't get done. Or they will call up a few weeks after the job is over and want this or that changed. This is the period before they've settled in and are feeling uncomfortable about the amount of money they've spent. "That's when they're working your schedule," Scott says. "You can't allow that."

PARENTAL INSTINCTS

Managing clients through the remodeling process requires a delicate balance of being both forthright and considerate — blunt, straightforward, even a little hard-nosed, while at the same time being understanding, considerate, even compassionate. Lupberger suggests the best way to steer clients through a major remodel is by adopting a parental role. When clients are facing a lot of unknowns and grappling with hidden fears, they want someone to tell them what to do and need to be constantly reassured that they are doing the right thing.

"At the beginning of any job, there is a subtle transfer of authority that takes place," Lupberger explains. "Psychiatrists call this 'parental transference.' Whether you are geared up for it or not, when you're invited into a person's home, and they say they want you to do a project, you are taking on a role as parent."

Just as any parent would do to make a child's life less stressful, a contractor builds trust gradually. He deliberately makes little promises and keeps them, sets a routine and

Managing TOUGH Customers

sticks to it, and reassures the client that no matter how rough things look, he'll get them through it.

But also like a parent, a remodeler must know that at some point, the homeowner is going to have a temper tantrum. When it happens with a toddler, you know not to take it personally. With a homeowner, it's just as understandable, and you have to let it wash off you without it getting under your skin. "If a remodeler understands this at the beginning, it's a lot less traumatic for everyone," Lupberger says.

"When a homeowner gets so frustrated, and they feel like they have lost control over their homes, they will try to take control of the job."

— David Lupberger

"The people in the field are often the ones who have to take the tongue lashing from clients," Hannan points out. "We spend a lot of time working with the entire crew on communication issues. We teach them to stand back and listen to a complaint and not argue back. That only makes it worse. Often if you retreat, a homeowner will cool down and even come back and apologize. But that never happens if you go on the defensive. That only confirms their fears that you did something wrong, when the real issue might just be that they had a bad day and needed to vent their frustrations." —Clayton DeKorne writes from headquarters in Burlington, Vt. and Brooklyn, N. Y.

20 Questions for Laying the Ground Rules

A prejob questionnaire recommended by David Lupberger serves as a checklist for reviewing potential pitfalls with the homeowner and provides a basis on which a contractor must establish clear ground rules for every step in the process. Answer all these questions for your clients, and you'll reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and miscommunications.

1. What time will daily work begin and end?
2. Can work be scheduled on weekends?
3. If weekend work is an option, are there any special restrictions?
4. If there is an after-hours emergency, who will clients call?
5. Who will clients talk to about change orders?
6. To whom will clients take day-to-day comments and suggestions?
7. When do you want the weekly homeowner meeting to occur?
8. Will any work areas need to be completely cleared of furniture? Please specify. (Note: In addition, most contractors will state in their contracts that they shall not be responsible for any valuables left in any area under construction.)
9. Where will workers store tools and building materials?
10. Which outside area(s) will bear the brunt of construction activities and what protective measures must be taken?
11. Does any landscaping need to be moved or protected?
12. If there are pets, where will they be kept during construction?
13. If there are children, what rules apply to them around the work site during working hours?
14. What dust containment procedures will the contractor employ?
15. What kind of cleanup will take place at the end of each day?
16. What restrictions, if any, are there on use of the telephone? Bathroom?
17. Will there be a designated eating or smoking area for workers?
18. Are there any parking restrictions that the contractor should be aware of?
19. What times, outside of the weekly homeowner meeting, is the lead carpenter available for questions?
20. What other ways can the impact of construction be reduced?