

HOW-TO

Avoid customer service problems



BY KEN THOMAS

In 2006, I learned a valuable lesson about customer service. My company had recently completed a beautiful project for a wonderful client who happened to be a 9/11 widow. She was quite pleased with her new backyard patio and waterfall until she was hit with a flood that washed through her yard, overwhelmed the development's storm drains and flooded her finished basement. She called us in a panic, and we responded by helping her stop the water and clean the basement.

But I was surprised when the client blamed our company for the flooding, even though we had nothing to do with the storm drains or epic storm. As a seasoned businessman, I pushed back when challenged and explained, in my most gracious southern manner, this wasn't a problem caused by our company. I felt confident that my logical and accurate explanation of why her basement flooded would sink in and she'd appreciate all we'd done to help her.

The next day I received a phone call from her lawyer, who started the call by asking me, "Do you want to become famous on the news?" He said my client would be contacting a local news station's consumer advocacy reporter to tell him her story about how a big landscape company took advantage of a poor, helpless widow. So, at a considerable expense to our company, we did whatever it took to make sure that didn't happen. But did we do the right thing?

While not all customer-service problems are this severe, they all have the ability to cost you money and hurt your reputation if not handled properly. Behind every client problem, I try to remember one thing: This is a relationship business. Most of our business comes from referrals. Every year we're in business, our base of satisfied clients grows, creating a larger circle of positive influence for additional business. There's a huge advantage to making sure every client we deal with has a positive experience.

Many times our clients have legitimate issues with the way we conduct business or the product or services we provide. It's important to deal with those issues quickly and efficiently. The best response is to apologize, listen and empathize; fix the problem quickly and fairly; keep your promises and follow up. Every now and then we get that client from hell who just doesn't get it, and it's our natural response to draw a line to protect our margin or be right.

Customer service breakdowns often involve customer expectations and our processes. Here's what I've learned:

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY. Don't over promise to close a sale. Slow down and get everything in writing. Many uncomfortable client experiences can be avoided by being thorough about your scope of work and payment terms upfront.

GET A SIGNATURE ON EVERY CONTRACT AND CHANGE ORDER. It's good business, and

most reasonable clients understand. If someone won't sign a contract or change order, it should be a red flag. Email approvals are OK as long as the paper trail is clear about what they're approving.

ADMIT MISTAKES. When you or your team make a mistake, don't cover it up. Own up to it and make it right quickly.

DON'T BE PENNY-WISE AND POUND-FOOLISH. You did everything right, and the client expects additional work or plants. Don't nickel and dime him. Weigh the cost against the future damage to the relationship and make a value-based decision. If this is a reoccurring problem, get to the root of it.

FIX THE PERSON, THEN THE PROBLEM. Address the emotional state of the client first. Once they believe you care, they're more interested in solutions.

DROP ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS. Sometimes it's best to move on when you're dealing with an unreasonable client. At some point, you have to determine what's good for the client and your company.

Effective service recovery doesn't happen accidentally. It's a well-thought out and executed process with the objective of delivering a positive experience to every client. Hopefully, these tips will help you avoid some client-related problems, build your base of referrals and keep you from becoming "famous on the news." **LM**

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