

IS YOUR COMPANY CUSTOMER SERVICE SENSITIVE:

In a quest to increase your sales you begin a campaign to market your company to as many potential clients as possible. You change into your sales role and peruse new clients with vengeance. You are not satisfied until you are awarded as many bids as possible.

You call or send promotional pieces to a number of potential clients. When possible you call their offices and set up an appointment. You arrive there twenty minutes ahead of schedule. You walk the site and present the client with a dazzling professional proposal, which places you in the running for the contract.

Up to this point, most contractors respond to their clients, in a very timely manner. They want to convince them that they are different from their competition; they are concerned about customer service. However, once that bid is awarded to your company, you put a check mark in the "W" column and you are off to the next client.

The crews arrive out at the site to start the work as specified in your proposal. However, many of the promises that you made are beginning to fall by the wayside. The foreman that you dedicated to this job has not been seen on site. The monthly site reports have not been submitted, you have not conducted any of the monthly site inspections, it takes you two days to return a telephone call, and you are twenty minutes late for your scheduled meeting.

This by no means is being "Customer Service Sensitive". And if the scenario that I just outlined reminds you of your company, you need to grab hold of the controls and start turning your organization around. Whether you work on commercial or residential properties, your clients are looking for a contractor that will respond to all of their needs.

As a contractor you need to take a proactive approach with your clients. You need to anticipate their needs before they do. This is not as hard as you may think if you follow what I refer to as QSRC&V.

QSRC&V stands for Quality, Service, Responsiveness, Communication and Value. QSRC&V needs to be implemented at all levels of your organization from sales, estimating, office staff, production, to the shop personnel. It is a culture that will elevate your organization to a new level.

Before I discuss each element of QSRC&V, I feel that it is important to explain why I feel that you must train and educate all levels of your company on its importance. Just as your vehicles will not travel with three tires, or your lawn mower will not cut grass with one blade missing, your company will not operate productive and effectively without being able to carry through with all of the promises that were made at the time you presented the bid to your client.

Your entire staff needs to be on the same page so that your clients are receiving consistent information from whom ever they talk to in your organization. I am not

purporting that we all walk around like robots. However, there is a need to show your clients that there is consistent flow of communication within your company.

QUALITY:

As I stated above, I would like to go through each element of QSRC&V so that you have a thorough understanding of what I am trying to convey. When I ask people within different companies what I am referring to when I speak of quality, most of them equate it with the completion of a job according to the specifications. Though that is true, there are other key elements that go along with this concept.

You will achieve the highest level of quality in your organization, at all levels, if your company adheres to the concept of "C.A.R.A.". C.A.R.A. stands for Consistency, Authority, Responsibility, and Accountability. How many times have you heard how important it is to be consistent.

Your clients and employees will all benefit from consistent policies, procedures, and systems. It is essential that you develop and implement standard operating procedures at all levels of your company. By doing this you will ensure that consistent best practices are being followed. It is this consistency that will help insure that Quality is one of the main focuses of your organization.

Once you give your staff consistent policies and procedures you must also give them the appropriate amount of AUTHORITY to carry out their job. At this time I am not going to get into specifics as to what constitutes the right amount of authority, we will save that for another discussion.

You now have the ability to hold your staff RESPONSIBLE to carry out the policies and procedures within your company. This parity of authority and responsibility is very important if you want to hold your employees ACCOUNTABLE to achieve consistent practices within your organization. It is this consistency that will bring a standard degree of quality to your clients.

SERVICE:

Most Contractors spend a considerable amount of time and money soliciting new clients. However, once they sign their contract they forget about many if not all of the promises that were made during the negotiation process. You can have best marketing programs and sales people in the industry. If you don't follow through and service your clients you will be hurting the reputation of your company.

Every company should have a client assurance policy that clearly states their objective to customer service. This policy needs to be clear and concise and must be understood by all levels of your organization. The following are a sampling of items that could be part of such a policy. They are as follows:

- Dedicated On Site Management Personnel
- Annual Client Survey
- Client Seminars
- Returning of Telephone Calls on the Day Received
- Assign a Specific Contact Person in the Office to Handle Clients

Too many contractors look at customer service as the way in which the crews perform in the field. Though that is an integral part of the equation, the manner in which a receptionist answers the phone, the style that the accounting department uses when making a collection call, checking in to see how things are going, or just showing up for an appointment when you said you would, all give your client a perception of your commitment to service.

All companies, large or small, have to realize how important it is to provide your clients with the level of service that meets the expectations that you committed to. If you do not focus your attention on this you will be setting yourself up for problems. Not only will you have wasted precious dollars on marketing, your company will endlessly be searching for new clients.

It is much easier to service an existing client than it is to spend large amounts of money, on marketing and sales personnel, looking for new prospects in the market place. You need to remember that commercial property managers as well as residential clients talk among themselves about the contractors that they use. If you are not providing them with good service, it will spread like the “plague” throughout your market area. Keep an eye on your renewal ratios to be certain that you have a handle on the service aspect of your business.

RESPONSIVENESS:

Many contractors believe that if they are servicing their clients they are being responsive to their needs. And in a majority of the cases that is usually true. However, I look at responsiveness a little different than most contractors.

From my prospective a contractor is being responsive to their clients if they have policies and procedures in place to operate their business in a very proactive mode. And for different business, construction, maintenance, or irrigation, the degree of proactive ness will vary.

In most situations there is some common ground and basic rules that can be followed. When you are hired to work on a property your main objective is to keep your management and labor team focused on the task at hand. I can appreciate that since you bid the job to perform a specific scope of work.

However, you need to have the ability to point out to your clients the good, the bad, and the ugly. The “ugly” is usually something that was over looked in the bidding or estimating process. Whether this is the fault of the owner, architect, or the contractor is

not important. As a professional you have the responsibility to come forward and point out the issues.

The “bad” usually results from an unforeseen series of events that most parties could not of anticipated. A lot of time the contractor will not let the proper people know about it thinking that it will end up costing him money. That cannot be further from the truth. Informing the appropriate party as to what is going on usually makes the contractor look like a hero. In fact, it will help build goodwill between all parties involved.

The “good” is what we all contractors strive for. On a construction or irrigation job it usually comes in the form of a change order that carries a much higher profit margin. And in most cases an owner, architect, or general suggested it because you were to timid to be proactive and make the suggestions based on your professional opinion.

On a maintenance project, where you visit the site on a weekly basis, the degree of your proactive ness can be a determining factor as to how long you hold a contract. If your company has a policy of reviewing properties on a monthly basis you are off to a good start. In most cases you will root out many of the problems before they become “bad and ugly”. What many contractors overlook is how much “good” in the form of extra work they can generate for their company. While at the same time being perceived as a professional by your clients because you brought various issues to their attention. Remember, that is why they hired you.

COMMUNICATION:

In this day and age I do not know how any contractor could have a problem communicating with their clients. Yet, I am shocked when I talk to homeowners and property managers that are frustrated over their inability to get in touch with their contractor. Yes this is the same person who assured their client, during contract negotiations, that they were accessible 24/7.

I do not want this to sound repetitive but this is an area that your company must also have standard consistent policies and procedures. Whether you are a one-man show or you have several employees, how you communicate with your clients will have a profound impact on the bottom line of your company.

Every company needs to have a set policy as to when a call must be returned. I have always felt that a call should be returned on the same day that it was received. That is not to say that you will be able to answer a specific question or make any type of commitment when returning the call. I am advocating that an immediate response gives the client the perception and confidence that you are addressing their needs.

Ignoring a telephone call or waiting several days to contact the client will most likely lead to further problems up the road. Your client will begin to lose trust in you and your company, which in most cases will force him to search for a new contractor on existing or future projects.

I have talked to numerous clients that were calling the office of a contractor to get some additional work completed on their property. They were amazed that their calls were not being returned. No matter how much work you have, even if you are backlogged for six months, you should always return your telephone calls.

Most of us utilize some form of voice mail in our office or on our cell phone. In many instances we have abandoned the formal receptionist for this new technological answering device. I am all for technology but one must not lose sight of common sense.

Not only was your client talking to a “real person”, you were getting a written log of all of your messages. With voice mail you have eliminated a step in this process, which in many cases has led to problems in both large and small companies - the failure to check your messages on a regular basis.

You need to have a set policy as to how many times your voice mail is checked during the day. If you do not get into the habit of checking your voice mail on a regular basis you will have a backlog of messages. That only leaves selective call returns, which inevitably will annoy many of your clients. Voice mail is as a very useful and efficient tool if it is used properly.

VALUE:

The final segment of the QSRC&V equation covers value. The word value has a different meaning depending on whom you talk to. From your clients point of view value is getting what was paid for and most of the time a little more. That little more that I am referring to does not necessarily mean planting an extra tree or cutting the lawn three additional times.

What it does refer to are the intangibles that we previously discussed quality, service, responsiveness, and communication. Though these items were not given a specific dollar value on the bid sheet, they do carry some very heavy weight with your client.

Being customer service sensitive is not something that happens overnight. This is a culture that is built from the top of your organization all the way down. Companies that adopt this concept not only achieve greater profits through client retention, they also have a much more dedicated and committed work force.

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