Perhaps asking "What is your primary reason for callbacks?" is a bit like asking, "When did you stop beating your wife?" Following up with the question, "What measures are you taking to reduce these callbacks?" only adds to the seeming admission of guilt, the idea that one is being called on the carpet.

Most contractors were willing to call a spade a spade, without feeling their manhood or their pickup truck was being insulted. The two contractors who responded as if they were already calling their lawyer on the other line either have real problems with callbacks, or have been accused unjustly of sloppy work. Whichever it is, hopefully they will manage to sort it out. Another contractor wanted to talk to the editor to make sure the interviewer wasn't with the National Enquirer. Perhaps he could already see the headlines: "Contractor from Outer Space Called Back over Nail Pops."

In actual fact, the results of the survey of 33 contractors are a good deal more down to earth. The main reason for contractor callbacks is all the other contractors (see the chart on page 52). Or, to be more specific, it's the rush to get work done and the lack of proper sequencing of trades that results in having to redo work that other trades have messed up accidentally while trying to do their jobs.

Putting the Cart Before the Horse

The main reason given for trade damage (eight out of 13) is an incorrect sequence on installation. As a contractor from Maryland puts it, "It's not fair to the subs, who have to go up into the ceilings, to have to pull ceiling panels out in order to do their work. Probably the classic stupidity is the general contractor who tells us to 'go ahead and put up your grid. We'll take it down and install our boxes later.' Inevitably, the mechanical guy just destroys the grid. This sort of asinine planning is what creates the callback work, and of course, nobody wants to pay for it."

"Usually it's because different trades have come in after us to complete a punchlist item," adds a South Carolina man. "They've torn up a tile or put a hole in the wall."

Another reason for trade damage is contractors being in such a hurry to meet schedules that not only does the quality of...
their work suffer, but they also damage the finishes completed other contractors. This reason was given by three contractors.

Then there’s the angle given by a Georgian: “When you have construction guys walking around swinging ladders, they’re not exactly ballerinas!” A Maryland contractor adds, “The number one reason for callbacks is construction damage by the telephone guy, the sprinkler guy, the electrician and so on.”

Not all the blame can be placed on contractors, though. There are moving companies that, in the words of a Wisconsin contractor, “are not the most careful people in the world, banging walls and everything else. Unfortunatel-ly, people jump the gun because they are under the gun: their lease is up, and they want to move in. We will give them a completion date and, all of a sudden, a truck shows up one week early. Some of the schedules we’re working with nowadays are so fast track that there is little time between completion and move-in dates. We go ahead and do the touch-up work anyway, even though we know the damage was caused by the people moving in.”

And “the customer often moves in right away and scuffs up surfaces or breaks things,” says a Kansas contractor. “We are very rarely paid for these callbacks on small items—it’s better to fur it and be done with it. On the larger items, we demand payment.”

As contractors often have to eat the costs of callbacks, even when they come from damage inflicted by others after the work is done, it is obviously worthwhile to find ways of reducing these callbacks and their associated costs. While some contractors feel there is nothing that can be done to prevent this kind of damage—“I don’t know what we could do,” says a Georgian, “other than putting up a wall around our product to keep people from knocking it off”—most contractors are taking some sort of action.

“As a company,” explains a Wisconsin contractor, “we try to do the final inspection before the people move in, so any touch-ups after that can be billed.”

A contractor from Minnesota tackles the
problem at the front end: “When we roll up on the job, we say to the foreman, ‘Hey, you better tell the general contractor about this and this.’ They then shoot off a fax to the contractor, saying, for instance, when we’ve noticed that the cement guys haven’t been through the site yet, ‘We are concerned the cement guys will get cement all over our stucco.’ Then if things get messed up, it’s a lot easier to send out a bill for the callback.”

Others try to adhere to the correct sequence: “We hold off on some of the high-traffic areas until the last thing,” explains an Iowan.

“We try to stall completion of our work.” agrees a Maryland contractor, “against the wishes of the contractor or the owner, so that we can do our work in sequence. That’s the number one battle plan.”

One South Carolina contractor obviously has enough employees to try this approach: “What we try to do is keep at least one man on the job all the way through closing. Sometimes that’s not feasible because the punchlist drags out much longer than we’re actually needed there. However, if we have a good rapport with the contractors, then they’ll let us know what dates they’re having walk-throughs with the owner and so on. We always try to have a man on the job on those days, so that they don’t have to call us, and we don’t have to pull someone in from a job to send him unexpectedly.”

To lower damage from carelessness, some general contractors warn the subs, especially since they are the ones who end up with the back charges, explains a Washington contractor.

A Californian agrees, “I tell the subs to be a little more careful. I always recoup the costs, because I hold all the money”

A Virginian claims “I let them know that I’ll walk through the building and punch out on a first time. Then if I have to come back and repair any damage, it’s on T&M (Time & Material). It works
sometimes, as it puts a light on in the sub’s head to be more careful, because they’ll be charged for any damage.”

**Making Quality #1**

Eleven contractors stated either bluntly or in a roundabout way that quality of workmanship was the main reason for callbacks.

One contractor from Maryland issued what sounded like a press release that, when the “public relations” is stripped away, basically shows that quality of workmanship is the main issue. His company tries to resolve it by making quality an important component in calculating the compensation packages for its field supervisors.

A Nebraska contractor says that “Ninety-nine percent of the time it has to do with the quality of the work, and that’s usually related to expansion and cracking of walls, especially above door frames.”

“We have occasional quality issues with ceiling tile cuts not being up to par because we have a poor ceiling crew,” states a Maryland contractor, whose main callback problem is actually trade damage. ‘Sometimes, when we have a job that’s rushed and not properly coordinated, we have comebacks because ceiling panel cuts aren’t true. Another problem has been shadow molding that isn’t flush against the wall and needs to be caulked, or the wall has to be refinished. We are sometimes called back to do some refinishing, particularly where there is critical lighting on a Level 5 coat on the wall.”

An Arizona contractor has trouble with “cracking, which is reduced by instructing the foreman and improving workmanship.”

“Before the job starts,” adds a contractor from Nebraska, who prefers the front-end approach to solving cracking problems, “we find out what the contractor has planned for expansion joints. Where these are inadequate, we give him the ASTM standards for our trade and try to push him into putting in enough expansion joints to avoid callbacks. This approach works most of the time.”

“On the few occasions where we are
called back for our own work,” says an Idaho contractor, “it’s because there’s an imperfect taping somewhere. We try to address that with quality control experts who check the work when it’s done.”

In Florida, a contractor has something to say about the reason for workmanship being under par: “Ninety-nine percent of the time, callbacks are because something wasn’t done right. That’s usually because the contractor wants the job done cheaply and fast so he can make some money on the deal. You can’t babysit employees, who often don’t know what they are doing, so you get mess-ups. I’ve seen million-dollar homes with walls that look like the subcontractor was drunk when he put them up. You get what you pay for.”

In addition to pegging supervisors’ compensation to quality workmanship, there are other ways contractors are handling the quality issue. As states an Oregon contractor: “The way we improve quality is by being on site more and consistently managing and overseeing the folks who are doing the work. It’s the day we don’t go out to the jobsite and
something slides by that we experience callbacks.”

“My solution is to downsize the company so I have more control over the quality of the workmanship,” says a Pennsylvanian. “The more you push production, the more punchlists you receive.”

Then there’s the quality of the site management itself, as covered by a North Carolina contractor. “What reduces callbacks is doing it right the first time. If you are involved in your job and make sure that you are in the job meetings that pertain to your product and what has to be done, you will reduce the number of problems. You can make sure the other people have their product ready before you accept it.”

“That Wasn’t What I Had in Mind”

The last major reason for callbacks is changing specs, either because the architects are unclear, or because the customer changes his mind. The second reason is not a cost the contractor eats generally and is hard to avoid, although a New Jersey contractor considers it a cost of doing business and keeping the client happy.

A Minnesotan tries “to stress that it’s cheaper for the customer to change his mind while we’re still on the job. Otherwise we have to set up everything again completely, which is more expensive for him.”

A contractor from Nevada had something to offer on the subject of architectural specs being inadequate: “The real reason for any callbacks we have is a change in the scope—meaning that what was ordered wasn’t what the architect or owner had in mind. It wasn’t necessarily built wrong. We are seeing a lot of this with the casinos in Nevada. I’ve observed an increasing lack of architectural planning over the years. We used to receive a very thorough set of plans from architects whom we considered gods. Now architects are taking more of a design approach to construction, leaving the contractor to translate their designs into reality or practice.

“We try to avoid this problem by paying attention to detail up front, being proactive rather than reactive. This may sound like company jargon, but it’s
actually the truth. We try to clarify what the architect’s intentions are and so make ours align with his.

“I don’t know why contractors will not bring up an issue or think about it before they start work. They just go ahead and build and then find they are being called back to fix it. We’re very thorough on the upfront planning here. When there are any potential problems with a gray area, it’s brought to the forefront right now, and we talk about it. Otherwise we get into the problem of who is going to pay for it. When there’s a gray area, it’s hard to prove we built it according to the intention of the designer, as opposed to building it incorrectly.”

In the same vein of doing it right the first time, eight contractors specified they had very few callbacks, and four said they had none. While some protested too much and left some measure of doubt as to whether they were being completely up front about having no callbacks, the worldly view of a Louisiana contractor isn’t necessarily correct, either. His opinion is that “I’d like to talk to anyone who says they don’t have any callbacks, because that just doesn’t happen in the construction world. I’m still looking for that perfect installer.”

The fact is that proper training and supervision can result in consistently good work, as one Florida contractor points out: “My work is all on the road around the country, and it would be very costly if I were to be called back. The secret is close supervision and correcting employees on the spot.”

“We haven’t had any callbacks,” says a New Yorker, “none at all, because we have good, well-trained guys working for us.”

“I really can’t think of a time we have had a callback,” agrees a Colorado man, “because of our quality control.”

“Our biggest reason for callbacks is fixing the other trades’ damage to our work. We ourselves are so thorough,” agrees a Minnesotan, “that when we’re done, we’re done. We have well-trained guys and good quality control.”

As much as we prefer to not receive callbacks, they are not terminal and they are certainly not a dirty word when contractors take measures to reduce them.

About the Author
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