THE GREATEST MARKETING TOOL OF ALL

When you (the owner/contractor) consider marketing options for your company, the first things that generally spring to mind are the more conventional advertising and promotional vehicles like direct mail, company brochures and trade shows. But though any of these can be effective options when implemented properly, they are almost always costly and time-consuming to create and deliver. “Well, yes,” you might say, “but what are you going to do?”

Well, I’d suggest that you may indeed be overlooking the most effective marketing tool that any contractor (or any business) possesses and it isn’t any of those above: it’s you and your employees. It’s true. In our harried rush to purchase the latest, greatest brochure-publishing software or build the biggest and best trade-show display, we often run around (over?) the very prize we’re attempting to win: our client. With noses buried deep in our work, we miss out on the social interaction—the critical human networking—that has proven time and again superior to any newspaper ad when attempting to acquire work.

The Repeat Customer

Construction contracting is and always has been a service industry. Our customer is our product. Though we spend our day creating physical, touchable structures out of sticks, stones, steel and mortar, our client remains the focus of—and the reason for—our endeavors. The client is who we please and who we will someday go back to for yet more work.

This is key, for there may very well be no industry that relies more heavily on
(LOOK IN THE MIRROR)

repeat customers than construction contracting. I know it’s certainly true for me.

I have single clients with whom I’ve performed dozens of separate construction projects (many of them major) over the years. This repeat business forms the heart and soul of our success, and there are many more like me. I’m sure you’ve heard of or may even know of fellow contractors who have molded entire careers from only’s handful of patrons. Often, these firms get involved with giants like GM, AT&T or IBM early on in their business lives and never do leave. Once in, they can go for years in the same plant or facility. Instead of focusing wasted administrative energy on soliciting new customers, they discovered that they already had what they needed.

**Seeing the Forest**

Many times, your next sale is standing right in front of you. It’s your existing client. All you need to do is treat him attentively and honestly (again). That’s all he wants. That’s all anyone wants.

But though this attention will almost certainly increase the odds for more work, it isn’t the sole reason for it. There’s also the mailer of profit. How so? Well, it goes like this: There’s a direct link between familiarity with your client and company profit. There is a fiscal efficiency in knowing your client. Enter the repeat customer.

By eliminating new and unexplored working environments, you avoid the almost certain possibility of beginning learning curves anew (and experiencing the loss in productivity that always seems to tag along). It’s simple: You already know the client. You know his needs, moods, patterns and idiosyncrasies (did I say eccentricities?). There are fewer surprises (and in case you didn’t know, surprises are a bad thing in construction) and less time establishing ground rules that often accompany new business relationships.

Familiarity with both the customer and the work will better your chances for
controlling and sustaining costs, maintaining schedules and operating more efficiently... enhancing the prospect of improved profit.

**A Case in Point**

Such is the case with a hospital client of mine. We have been with this customer almost continuously for about four years now. Most of the work involves the renovation of areas such as patient rooms (which are very similar in size and scope), doctors'/staff offices, utility areas, and more specialized areas such as pharmacies or chapels.

Yes, much of this is smaller work, but it keeps us in almost constant proximity with the owner. It also gives us a chance to show what we can do. Sure enough, every now and then, they’ll throw an entire wing at us, projects that may climb up to hundreds of thousands—even millions—of dollars. For most contractors, this is the fabled brass ring—and we don’t waste the opportunity. We also never stop trying to build stronger relations.

In, our negotiated projects, we maintain an open-book accounting policy with the hospital representatives (we often work on a set fee above actual cost) and never stop trying to learn more about (and adapt to) the varied and specialized methods and concerns of the hospital environment and its staff. With this growing level of familiarity, we seldom (actually never) have taken a major hit on our profit line. Granted, there are no major windfalls either (familiarity can work both ways), but it’s steady, predictable income for our company. Now, the job that began as a single, simple handicap ramp (really) four years ago has now generated over a million dollars per year in sales volume (and continues to grow).

That’s marketing.

**Everybody’s in Sales**

But it didn’t just happen on its own. We had to sell ourselves. I had to sell myself as estimator/project manager: the work-
ers in the field had to sell themselves through the quality of work, attentiveness, attitude and professionalism. Our administrative staff members had to sell themselves by offering prompt, courteous and efficient accounting and paperwork administration. We were all in marketing.

Were there problems? Of course. Nothing goes perfectly all the time, especially in a field so technically and socially complicated and diverse as construction. But even bad times offer promotional avenues.

Positive promotion often manifests itself in the way unpleasant situations are handled when they arise. You really can take an uncomfortable situation and use it to increase customer loyalty. Communication is pivotal, for it’s often not knowing
what’s being done—not the problem itself—that causes the most angst within a client.

Mistakes will occur. But all your client wants is reasonable assurance that a prompt and appropriate remedy is on the horizon. As a problem is unearthed, always stay in communication (even in tense times) with your client. Yes, sometimes this isn’t easy, but it is absolutely necessary. This will quell any of the unknown fear. Then of course, follow up with a sincere and genuine attempt to remedy the problem professionally, promptly and completely.

Before long, your customer will grow satisfied that you’re not the kind of contractor that would leave him in a lurch in his time of need. They’ll know you’re there for them. That’s all most people
want. No one likes complaints, but these situations give us all the opportunity to prove that we’re genuine in our commitment. Let’s see a brochure do that.

**Making Lemonade**

So, since your simplest—yet most effective—marketing tool may indeed dwell within you and your employees’ ability to handle and resolve problems and conflicts in an expedient manner that won’t offend, it pays to take a closer look Here are a few tips for turning customer complaints into positive promotion for your company:

*Always be sure someone from your company is accessible to the customer.* Yes, this sounds elementary, but I still walk into offices where absolutely no one is around or the office is so under-
staffed that long waits are common. Most business people—contractors included—simply don’t have time to waste. One more employee or a simple re-assigning of duties may-be all you need. Yes, overhead is sometimes increased, but so too will profits rise. It’s the classic risk of cost vs. revenue, but may indeed be worth the plunge.

This next one will raise some eyebrows, but I’m quite serious: If you have a voice-mail system—lose it! In my lifetime, I don’t believe I’ve witnessed a more vile and ill-conceived invention. The day voice-mail arrived, people went away and personal—human—interaction was immeasurably and immediately detoured. This was a very bad day As is the case with so many techno-based products, I think we were so deeply wrapped up in how to build the system that we never for a moment stopped to ask, “Should we build it?” I can’t tell you how many times I ended up frustrated and infuriated from voice-mail systems that wasted my time via endless directories and instructions, abrupt transfers into hyper-space (to never return), and just overall bulk. What use to be a 30-second phone call is now three minutes. Multiply that over the hundred or so calls you make in a day, and it
doesn’t take long for the stress to mount. A human being should always answer your phone and, if the person you are asking for is gone, a human being should take the message.

When faced with a customer complaint, **always show genuine interest** and offer a sincere and responsive demeanor. Cavalier and casual attitudes will always further inflame the situation.

**Listen completely and calmly before offering any help.** Many times, a major part of quelling anger and resolving conflict is in simply letting the customer “get it off of his chest.”

**Never make excuses for a problem.** Don’t blame the workers in the field or the woman in accounting. The customer sees you as a company, not as a group of individual personalities. Passing blame only serves to make the problem more diffused than it really is. Besides, most customers don’t care nearly as much about “why” as they do “when” (it will be fixed!)

**Repeat your understanding of the customer’s problem back to the customer.** This shows the customer that you not only understand the problem, but that you understand how important the situation is to him, and that you’re sincere
in providing a remedy. Let him know you’re on his side and that you appreciate his bringing the problem to your attention.

**Don’t become defensive with a complainer.** Yes, there are some nasty chaps out there, and sometimes they can talk pretty rough (especially in our industry). Keep cool and maintain your interest in their problem. Most callers will calm down after the first burst.

Here’s a good trick, and one I use myself all the time: *After you’ve addressed the problem at hand to the customer’s satisfaction, ask them, “Is there anything else I can do to help you?”* This simple exercise of adding one more concerned sentence (as opposed to getting off the phone as fast as you can) gives the customer the chance to pour forth any remaining frustration . . . and is often the point in the conversation where “the walls come down.”

**Always try to agree on some mutual solution to the customer’s problem at the time of the complaint.** If a complete solution just isn’t possible right then and there, arrange for a defined and specific “next step.” If you need to check with a superior or another party, set up a time that you’ll call the customer back—and then keep your promise.

Once the problem is fixed, follow up with a call to the customer just to make sure everything is fine. Most of the time
it will be. But if not, treat it as a brand new situation and start the whole process over. Of course, you don’t need a complaint to follow up with a customer. Always make a point to call or stop in to visit a recent project’s owner just to see how things are holding together. They’ll almost always appreciate it, and it often gives you a chance to discuss future work opportunities.

This next one is directed more at owners. Do not under any circumstances do that dopey, dopey thing wherein you demand your employees not use the word “problem” in conversation with customers or with each other. “We call them ‘opportunities’ (or some other mindless, first-grade euphemism) here,” you sternly tell them... as if they’ve just blurted out a four-letter word. I’m not sure where this idiotic practice started (or what skewed marketing seminar started it), but in short, companies that stoop to such ridiculous and childish diversions to achieve their goals inevitably accomplish nothing more than starring in the next Dilbert® cartoon. Remember, your client isn’t stupid, and he will only find this exercise condescending and insulting.

Most of what we’ve discussed is common sense and nothing more novel than practicing the golden rule. It’s just that in the heat of our everyday business battle—swamped in technical details and deadlines—we often forget the very basics of simple socialization. We forget to be human. But we are in a people business, and these are the very same people that will spell the difference between our ultimate success or future.

About the Author
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