HAIL THE RECEPTIONIST

Want More Profit? Value? Jobs?
She's Sitting Out in Front

At a very real risk of sounding stereotypical and sexist, the job of receptionist for most typical construction offices is a woman. I come to this conclusion only because I have yet to see a man occupy this position (perhaps because we men couldn't handle it?). So admittedly and up front, I'm being chauvinistic as I write this piece, but my intentions are good. I write regarding something that has fascinated (bugged?) me over these many years and felt the subject needed addressing. The premise of this piece: The office receptionist is a far more valuable tool to
the construction office then she’s been historically given credit. Let me explain.

THE RECEPTIONIST — THE FIRST VOICE

The construction office receptionist, who commonly owns a wide array of duties, labors through a challenging, fast-paced and harried workday. She’s also the first voice that virtually all of your customers hear and can be vital in making a sale—but more on that a little later.

The receptionist’s foremost duty (and arguably the most important) is to answer all incoming telephone calls and route them to the proper parties. Or of course, the call may be regarding one of her responsibilities, in which case another item has been added to her to-do list. Now to many, the task of answering phones may seem mundane and menial, but I assure you, it possibly may be one of the best sales tools you own, for the person who is able to maintain a helpful, friendly and cheerful phone demeanor—even when under fire from the day’s rigors—is a truly skilled individual.

Unfortunately, friendliness and helpfulness fall into the category of “attributes that can’t be quantified,” so it’s difficult to assess its tangible value, unlike—for example—the percentage of profit on a particular construction job. But I can firmly attest—and I’ve worked for many years as both a residential and commercial construction estimator/project manager for general contractors—that as someone whose duties included making LOTS of phone calls to subcontractors and suppliers, there were many times
when the attitude of the receptionist set the tone that would eventually mold my opinion of that particular company. Indeed, in some cases, it made or broke the sale for that business right on the spot. I have absolutely chosen not to call (or to discontinue discussions with) on companies whose office people had been rude, apathetic or seemingly uncaring over the phone. Cooperation between the players was a key to our company’s success, something we’d learned through bitter experience. It also bolsters the cannon that low price is not all that GC’s look for in seeking out vendors and subcontractors.

YOU’RE NOT ALONE

Another important thing to note is that no matter what trade you’re in or how competitive you may think you are within your market, you do indeed have competition. Given this, it’s often the little things that help you to stand out from the pack. So knowing that the playing field is relatively even (a fair and real assumption) and that the quality of work between your people and your competitor’s people is on par, a helpful and gracious attitude by the first person the GC’s estimator or project manager hears becomes all that more important.

I don’t know about you, but I would want my company to take full and complete advantage of every opportunity I get to make a sale! And one thing’s for sure: You’re not going to get opportunities if the first voice your customer hears is negative and uncaring. And it’s not the personality alone itself that turns off the GC. It’s the fact that as construction estimators/project managers, we simply don’t have time to deal with apathetic and unconstructive attitudes that often lead to slower job processes. Schedule

and cooperation are simply too important in what we do to allow any more negativity than necessary to creep into the mix. We simply don’t need it. And we’ve learned through experience that when schedules are delayed due to attitude and/or negativity melds into the construction process, our profits suffer.

OTHER COMMON DUTIES, OFFICE ADMINISTRATION

In average size construction offices (where there isn’t an intricate hierarchy of responsibilities filled by separate individuals) the receptionist is often saddled with far more responsibility than just answering phones. Other receptionist duties include the tracking of blueprints and specifications required for bidding (which can be a daunting task if you’ve ever tried it) and the handling/distribu-
tion of mail and parcels for the day—no simple task itself.

In construction, we mail a lot of documents, typically large (plans, etc.) in size, and of which are often shipped overnight (“It’s gotta be there by 4!”). I’ve also worked in construction offices where the receptionist, who really takes on more of an “office administrator” role rather than “receptionist,” does daily entries into accounting ledgers for payable/receivables and organizes bills and incoming payments. In these cases, the more intricate accounting is then completed by the staff accountant/bookkeeper or may even be subcontracted to an outside firm.

But there’s more. The receptionist/OA may also assist the estimator or project manager with submittal/shop drawing collection and submission, contracts, bid proposals and closeout documents for individual jobs. And that, of course, is when she’s not ordering office supplies, calling the copy machine repairman, scheduling the phone service to come install the new line, arranging social functions for the company and/or principals . . . and the list goes on and on. It’s safe to say that she’s never wanting for something to do.

REDEFINING “VALUE”

OK, so she has a lot of responsibility and can be an excellent sale tool for your company, so for her labors she’s paid accordingly. Right? Wrong! Unfortunately, our receptionist/AO most often makes the lowest wage in the office. But as an employer, think quite seriously before falling into this historic (and dangerous) pay pattern. Paying your receptionist (or anyone) less than their true worth will always eventually and ultimately come back to damage your own interests. The financially slighted person (some with a family to support) will gain experience, have that special day when she realizes her true worth, grows bitter over the wage she’s making and the treatment she’s receiving, and go on to find an employer somewhere who is willing to pay her and treat her accordingly for what she brings to the table. You, in the meantime, have lost a valuable company asset.

But there’s more. That loss of experience
and skill doesn’t often just disappear from the market. It’s entirely likely (and common) that a competitor has picked up your “instant expertise.” They’re tick-led pink to have her. They gain an already-trained employee while you’re stuck back at the office, scrambling around trying to find documents and files as you attempt to set up interviews for that new special person. Oh, and did I mention that you now have some training to do for the next three or four months? You can see that this is hardly an efficient and economical way to run your business!

I believe my message is clear. And in truth, this isn’t a new idea or even a guarded secret: If you want the best people—or you currently have the best people and want to keep them—pay them what they’re worth, and not what the market has historically dictated. The profit and value you will receive back through this ultimate investment in another human being will be returned to you tenfold.

I’ve worked (sadly, these are true) for employers who have spent $10,000 for sports tickets in a year and then balked at a 50-cent raise for the receptionist. I’ve seen employers pay $950 for one potted plant, $2,000 for a painting, $900 per office chair—and not offer Christmas bonuses. It was simply amazing to observe. And this was all because their concept of what’s truly “valuable” was tainted. They simply didn’t possess the ability to see where their company’s value truly lay.

So in closing, take time out to examine what your receptionist/OA is truly worth to your company, treat her with respect, and pay her accordingly (assuming she’s good of course). And yes, you may consider this your wake-up call.

About the Author
S.S. Saucerman retired last year after 26 years in the construction industry. He also taught part-time in the Building Construction Technology program at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Ill., for 11 years. Today he is writing, speaking and consulting on a full-time basis.