Customers Ring Once

There Are Profits in the Telephone,
But Proper Use
Will Require Advance Planning

By Henry Holtzman

When a prospective customer phones, there’s a possible sale for someone. Will it be yours . . . or your competitor’s?

People in construction spend millions each year in every conceivable way telling prospective customers how and where to phone them. Then, when the buyers phone, most of that money often goes right out the window because not a nickel’s worth of time or effort has been spent teaching employees how to handle people on the telephone.

It’s then that “the boss” starts apportioning the blame. Usually there’s enough to go around among the receptionists, estimators, salesmen, supers, etc.

And when you’re handling such a product line as demountable/movable partitions, the art and care of handling customers over the telephone is mighty important. It’s too important in any aspect of contracting to leave to the hit-or-miss tactics of yesterday.

Face it. When a contractor has to spread the blame among his entire company for not doing a job correctly, it’s time the contractor took another look at the problem of mishandled inquiries (and lost sales). They’re more widespread than most business people are willing to admit.

For a contractor, hiring a receptionist or delegating telephone answering responsibilities to an employee and merely assuming that that individual has the skills to handle properly all of the intricacies of telephone manners is a large, and dangerous, assumption.

Take a Look
At the Problem

Whether a contractor operates strictly in the bid market or operates a sales effort, he receives calls daily from prospective buyers. In most cases the caller indicates that he or she wants to buy something and the lack of a telephone procedure presents no problem. Plain, old fashioned courtesy works.

Even when it’s catch as catch can, a sales crisis is avoided.

Under such simple circumstances, the contractor doesn’t suffer when there is no set procedure to refer calls to a specific estimator or service representative familiar with a particular kind of work.

But the absence of a procedure can hurt.

For example, in some situations, an operator may refer a caller to the contractor or some other individual in the company when all lines are tied up. The caller is then placed on hold and never hears from anyone again. Most people don’t hold for very long, especially on long distance calls.

In other cases the person who normally deals with a prospective buyer or old customer is out or away from the phone. All too frequently the caller is either asked to hold on (but never told for how long) or to call back.

Buyers have a habit of judging both answers as a form of discourtesy. And it can be left up to the contractor’s own judgment as to who gets nettled the most from a discourtesy . . . a good, old customer or a good, prospective new one.

In any event, the contractor may have lost a sale or found that his company is now in a position where it will take twice the effort to bring matters to a successful conclusion.

It all boils down to this: every wall and ceiling contractor should have an organized plan for handling calls from potential buyers.

This plan should be written and everyone who normally handles phone calls including the receptionist (if the contractor has one) and the estimators (sometimes they can be a little blunt) should be familiar with it. Most importantly, those people whose job it is to sell or support the sales effort (and this often involves everyone in the office) should be trained in handling “phone-ins.”

Establish a Plan
For “Phone-ins”

The first step is to determine who in the company answers calls regularly. They’re the ones with whom the contractor will be sharing the plan.

The next step is to designate specific individuals to ultimately handle certain categories such as a drywall expert, a plastering expert, an acoustical ceiling expert, etc. Depending on the size of the firm, a “back-up” team may be advisable, but the first person who picks up the telephone in the contractor’s office should be advised who these individuals are.

Because estimators, field people such as foremen or superintendents or the contractor-owner himself are often out of the office when a telephone inquiry comes in, it’s a good move to set up a convenient time to return “phone-ins.”

Incidentally, most of the standard office phone call notices of the

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“while you were out” variety are inadequate for contractor use. A contractor may want to develop one that more properly fits his specialized business needs—and the cost is minimal.

By establishing a time for key contractor people to phone in for their messages, personnel at the office can inform callers when their message will be delivered and about what time they may expect a direct contact from the individual sought. It is remarkable how happily this kind of information is accepted by a person who must talk to the contractor “right now and sooner if possible.”

Should a contractor have inside salespeople, a plan should also be set up so that their phones are covered not only when they are out ill but on vacation, or simply away from their desk. A minute hanging on hold can seem a discourteous eternity to a customer.

It’s worse yet when a caller is told . . . after waiting for a minute or more . . . that the person isn’t in. An estimator, say, may have stepped away for a valid reason, but the caller doesn’t want to hear that—and won’t believe it anyway. A caller wants attention, i.e., to be treated like a valued customer. It really isn’t too much to ask.

Finally; a few words about the company switchboard operator who is usually a secretary or a receptionist. Contractors may find this hard to believe but these employees don’t come automatically equipped in this world to handle telephone calls properly or even politely.

Many angry callers are created by a demand of “who is this?” or “who’s calling?” rather than a more polite “may I tell him who is calling?” Or the other enemy maker, “who are you with,” or “what company are you with?” rather than “may I tell him what company you are with or represent, please?”
In too many instances, a contractor hires a pretty, young thing as a secretary, clerk or whatever and then casually informs her that among her other duties she’ll be expected to answer the telephone or handle incoming calls. A few accidental words of instruction on who is whom and who handles what—and the new telephone greeter is left on her own.

For the most part they do a reasonably good job. And the contractor seldom knows or is made aware of the times when a better procedure could have saved hurt feelings. He knows only of the disasters—such as when a telephone call didn’t get through to him in the final 10 minutes of a bid situation.

During lunch hours, the principal telephone operator should have a replacement fully aware of the plan, too.

If a construction company is small enough, the plan really then should include virtually everyone in it. That’s not such a bad idea when consideration is given to the fact that perhaps everyone in the company regularly deals with the people who are keeping them employed . . . the customers.

Handling Complaints From Customers
There ought to be a piece of equipment on every person’s desk when phoning or receiving calls from customers—a mirror.

The odds are that if a person’s feeling glum or angry it will come across in their voices. Without intending’ to be discourteous, they’ll probably come across that way. The mirror can accomplish one thing: before a person lifts the phone from the receiver, there should be a smile on his or her face. That goes for incoming and outgoing calls.

Of course, there’s a lot more to handling telephone calls than smiling. It takes both business sense and an ability to tune into the inflections in people’s voices . . . the customers won’t be able to send visual signals that face-to-face encounters allow. This means that the one overriding skill in phone manners is the ability to listen.

To listen not only to what’s said, but to what is significantly unsaid.

And, finally, if the caller wishes to leave his telephone number or other pertinent information for heaven’s sake set up a procedure whereby the contractor representatives will eliminate from their vocabulary, “OK, but wait’ll I get a pencil and paper.”

Have a pad and pencil handy at all times . . . and this doesn’t mean the stock “while you were out pad.” It’s important to get as much information as possible if the person the caller wants is out or unavailable—and if the caller wishes to leave important information pending a return call.