When you (the owner/contractor) consider marketing options for your company, the first things that generally springs to mind are the more conventional advertising and promotional vehicles such as advertising, direct mail, company brochures and trade shows, and these are all fine options. But perhaps, you are overlooking the most important method of marketing that any contractor (or any business for that matter) can possess: you and your employees.

continued on page 60
It’s true. In our haste to purchase the latest, greatest brochure-publishing software or build the biggest trade-show display, we often run around (over?) the very quarry we’re attempting to corner—the client. We miss out on the opportunity for social interaction—the necessary human networking—that has proven time and time again to be far superior to any newspaper ad. Remember, construction contracting is—and always has been—a service industry. Our customer is our product. Yes, we do create physical, touchable structures from sticks and stones, but it’s our client who remains the focus of our endeavors—and the one thing that we should always aim to please.

But there’s a side-benefit to customer attention: more work, work in the form of repeat business. As a matter of fact, it’s arguable that there is no industry that relies more on repeat customers than construction contracting. I know it’s true for me. I have single clients with whom I’ve performed dozens of separate construction projects (many of them major) over the years. These repeat customers are the heart and soul of the success we enjoy. You probably even know fellow contractors who have molded entire careers from only a handful of patrons. These firms got involved with giants like GM, AT&T or IBM early on in their business lives and never leave. They go for years in the same plant or facility. Instead of focusing their energies on going out to find new customers, they discovered that they already had all they needed.

The Forest for the Trees

Many times, your next sale is standing right in front of you in the form of existing clients. All you have to do is treat them right (again). But it shouldn’t just be the prospect of securing another job that propels your effort.
There’s also the matter of profit. How so? Well, it has to do with efficiency. There’s little argument that a lack of efficiency—in both the field and office—will almost always translate into lost profit for a contracting company. By eliminating new and unknown working environments, you avoid the need to start learning curves entirely anew . . . and the loss in production that often accompanies it.

It’s really very simple. You already know your customers. You know their needs, moods, patterns and idiosyncrasies (did I say eccentricities?). There are fewer surprises and — remember — surprises are a bad thing in construction. The more familiar the client and the scope of work, the better your chances will be to control both costs and operations, and the greater your prospect will be for controlled, sustained and solid profit.

Such is the case with a hospital client of mine. We’ve been with this customer continuously for more than three years now. Most of the work involves renovating patient rooms (which are quite similar in size and scope), doctor’s/staff offices, special areas (such as the pharmacy or chapel), and occasionally, they’ll throw an entire wing at us! We have an open-book policy with the hospital representatives and have grown quite familiar with what the hospital expects in construction and the ways of the hospital staff.

With this level of familiarity, we very seldom (actually never) take a hit on our profit line item. Granted, there are no major windfalls either (familiarity can work both ways), but it’s steady, predictable income for our company. And to think that what started out as a
simple handicap ramp (really) three
years ago has now turned into more
than $1 million per year in sales vol-
ume. Now that’s marketing!

Everybody’s in Sales

But it didn’t just happen by itself We
had to sell ourselves. I had to sell myself
(as an estimator and project manager)
to hospital administration, the workers
in the field had to sell themselves
through the quality of their work and
their professionalism, and our office
staff had to sell themselves by offering
prompt, courteous and efficient ac-
counting and administration. We were
all in marketing. Were there problems?
Of course. Nothing ever goes perfectly
all the time—especially in something as
technically and socially diverse as con-
struction. Rather, the positive promo-
tion for our company came in the way
we handled those unpleasant situations
when they did arise.

We took what could have been an
uncomfortable situation and used it to
increase customer loyalty As soon as a
problem was unearthed, we communi-
cated immediately with the client and
then followed through with a sincere
and genuine attempt to remedy the sit-
uation as professionally, promptly and
responsibly as possible.

Before long, our customer grew satis-
fied that we weren’t the kind of con-
tractor that would leave him in a lurch
during his time of need. He knew we
were there for him. We didn’t run away
or avoid contact with the client when
things didn’t go as planned. That’s all
most people want.

Now, certainly no one likes complaints,
but these situations gave us the opportu-
nity (in a left-handed kind of way) to
prove that we were genuine in our com-
mitment to our client. The way we han-
dled our customer’s problems and com-
plaints told more about us as a company
than any brochure ever could.

Take a look Around

Think about it for a moment. Think of
Animosity between parties arises when a business doesn’t offer a remedy to the customer’s problem.

a company or service with which you work of which you’re particularly fond. Chances are your reasons for liking or not liking that company have little to do with its product or price structure (even though that’s what you seem to hear the most about) and everything to do with the company’s attitude, abilities and service—especially in those situations where things don’t go quite as planned.

The truth is, most customers understand mistakes are going to happen. Besides, it never seems to be the mistake itself that causes hard feelings between a customer and a company. Rather, it’s when that business doesn’t offer (or even try to offer) a remedy to the customer’s problem that causes the animosity between the parties.

These types of experiences—both positive and negative—mold our feelings about a particular company. People simply want to conduct business where they know they will be treated well—and they will remember forever those places where they weren’t!

Lemons into Lemonade

So, your simplest-yet most effective-marketing tool may be found in 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 contractor offices where absolutely no one is around.

- 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
Companies that stoop to ridiculous diversions inevitably accomplish nothing other than becoming the next subject of a Dilbert® cartoon.

major part of quelling anger and resolving conflict is in simply letting the customer “get it off of his chest.”

If you have a voice-mail system—lose it! In my opinion, voice-mail is one of the most vile and ill-conceived inventions ever visited upon human society. It often only serves to infuriate existing (and potential) customers by wasting their time with endless directories and transfers that end up in hyper-space. A human-being should always answer your phone.

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 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 the customer know you’re on his side and that you appreciate that he brought the problem to your attention.

This next one is directed more at owners. Do not—under any circumstances—do that dopey, dopey thing (that, for some reason, many fast-track companies do) where you demand that 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 your employees... as if they’ve just blurted out a four-letter word.

I don’t know where this practice started (or what marketing seminar started it), but in short, companies that stoop to such ridiculous diversions inevitably accomplish nothing other than becoming the next subject of a Dilbert® cartoon. Remember, your customer isn’t stupid—and he or she will only find this type of childish diversion condescending and insulting.

As hard as it can sometimes be, 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, one I use myself all the time. After you’ve addressed the problem at hand to the customer’s satisfaction, ask him, “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 prob-
lem 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 a time that you’ll call the customer back, and then keep your promise.

■ Once the problem is fixed, follow 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 the project owner “just to see how things are holding together.” It’s almost always appreciated, and it often gives you a chance to discuss future work opportunities.

Most of what I’ve said here is common sense and nothing greater 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 always remember, we’re in a people business—the very same people that will spell the difference between our ultimate success or failure.  

About the Author
S.S. Saucerman is a full-time commercial estimator/project manager, professional woodturner and free-lance writer. He teaches Building Construction Technology and Construction Materials at Rock Valley College in Rockford, Ill.