



An Industry Upgrade

By Daniel H. Chinitz

“Should I take a vacation or remodel my bathroom?” “Would I rather have that new car or a new kitchen?” People contemplate their options when thinking about spending money. Especially when it is a lot of money.

As we all search for ways to increase business, we tend to focus on the local competition we face every day within our trading areas. But the reality is that we are first competing with other industries for the consumer’s discretionary dollars. So it is important to make doing business with your business a positive experience for your customer.

I was at a gathering of working professionals from other industries recently that made me think about the consumer’s perception of our industry. After they discovered what I did for a living (and we got all the requests for free advice out of the way), I heard the following statements:

“It’s impossible to find a good plumber.” They told me horror stories of taking days off from work so they could be home waiting for the plumber to show up. Sometimes he never did. And he never called. Or he finally shows but doesn’t have the proper tools or parts, despite knowing the complaint in advance. This is not helpful for our industry’s reputation. We need to continue to advance business education for contractors that excel with the tools but not much else.

“They wrecked my house.” Apparently the contractors working for the kitchen outfit tracked mud all over the house. There was a distinct path from the truck to the kitchen. Would it have been a big deal to lay down some carpet protection or put on some clean carpet safeguards over their work boots?

“After they had all my money, they wouldn’t come back to fix the problems.” Shouldn’t the “punch list” cost of doing business be figured into the job? Why are there still outfits out there that don’t realize the benefits of turning negatives into positives? Don’t they like getting work from word of mouth referrals? This one really hurts.

“My bathroom took twice as long to finish as they said it would.” Some industries can market themselves by offering extra days at no extra cost. Not us. Customers want us in and out of their houses fast. Did you ever blame a delay on backorders? Then don’t start a job until all the items are in, inspected and ready to be installed. “Under-promise and over-deliver” should be our industry motto.

A few years back, the huge road construction project at the busy intersection of Routes 4 and 17 in New Jersey was actually finished *ahead of schedule* due to incentives offered to the firm doing the work. Encourage your Contractors to run your jobs like you have incentives too, which you do have, if you consider how your customers will talk to their friends and relatives after the job is done. People love to recommend their contractors

because it makes them look smart. Care to speculate on what they tell everyone when the job didn't turn out the way they expected?

So what else can be done about improving our image? After all, we are an industry of mostly small, separate businesses with different standards, from the very sloppy to the very professional. How do we get the slobs to bring up their level of service? One bad outfit can do damage to more than just *their* reputation.

Perhaps some of our industry's associations could do more to educate the public on the benefits of doing business with the professionals that make up their membership. They could publicize a free list of "What You Should Expect" from your kitchen or bath company. Let potential customers know that there are outfits out there that run jobs professionally and with respect for their client's time and money. Good work should become the norm rather than a pleasant surprise.

Let's also consider discussing the price issue up front and in the open with all new clients. "Price, quality and service...pick two out of three." You can never get the best quality products and a high level of service if your goal is to find the lowest price. If an outfit is charging less, you will get less. Unless it is hassles you are looking for, in which case you will get more. It isn't any different from the warm weather island vacation you have been contemplating. You can spend five thousand or two thousand dollars for the same week. Do you want to stay at the Ritz or the Pits?

We all must do a better job of raising consumer awareness of the importance of value versus the lowest price. Consumers need to finally understand that when it comes to permanently installed items in your home, price is just one of many factors to consider.

As an industry, let's learn to respect the outfits that deliver this value with top-notch service. Can you imagine a group of attorneys getting together and knocking a rival law firm that they think is charging *too much*? Some lawyers earn hundreds of dollars more per hour than other lawyers. Their competition doesn't knock it; they set their sights on achieving the same thing! This is in sharp contrast to our industry when professionally run companies are often labeled "rip offs" by their competition. We need to learn to go for the golden goose rather than trying to kill it.

Look at the copier repair industry. Their average technician undoubtedly gets less time in the training room than your average plumber, who works years as an apprentice before he can even sit for his license exam in most states. But the copier repair guy shows up in a tie with a black briefcase and often commands a higher hourly rate than our contractors with years of service. Does that make sense?

Part of the answer is that we need to work on *our image* as an industry. Individually, we can begin by upgrading our advertising, cleaning up our showrooms (replace those missing items!) and trying to look more like a well-run store. (When was the last time you went to Nordstrom and one of the mannequins was missing an arm?). Encourage the rest of your industry friends to do the same. I navigated a very informative plumbing

website recently that still *had to have* caricatures of plumbers with exposed butt cracks. Some might find this humorous but does our industry image really need this?

I often discuss the value of the “30 second sales pitch” in our showroom selling seminars. This should occur toward the end of the first meeting with the client when you look them in the eye and ask, “I realize you can find lower pricing out there. Would you like to hear my 30 second sales pitch on why we are worth every penny we charge?” This prepares your client to hear your well-prepared list of important reasons to do business with you. Not the least of which is the fact that your showroom is well staffed and maintained, your installers are professional and you will care for their job like it was your own home.

And their remodeled bathroom will last a lot longer than that fancy car they are contemplating.

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