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S E L L I N G



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N O T P A I N T

by Pamela Mills-Senn

If you've been in this business any length of time, you're undoubtedly painfully aware of the negative image many people have of painters and painting contractors.

They don't return calls.

They don't show up.

They're sloppy and unprofessional.

These perceptions-unfortunately not unfounded-place even the best contractors at a disadvantage when dealing with prospects, homeowners in particular. But perhaps even more challenging for painters is the attitude that anyone can paint and that little skill is required.

"You hear a lot of this," said Zebby

v i c e

Sulecki, president and CEO of Zebby Sulecki Painting & Wallcovering, located in Newton Square, PA. "When you tell them your fees, everyone says, 'why should a contractor make this kind of money?'"

This attitude puts the focus entirely on price-ok if you're a contractor that markets his business primarily on this attribute (and there are good ones that do, and prefer to sell to a price-driven market). But if this isn't your preference, if your fees are in the upper regions, or if you want to move them in this direction, you're going to have to turn the prospect's attention away from price. You're going to have to sell service, not paint. Otherwise, you'll be forever fighting price objections and losing too many of the battles/bids.

Selling service is more than just saying you're better than the other guy

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and touting the quality of your workmanship, said Tom Woodcock, president of Seal The Deal, a St. Louis-based sales consulting and training company.

"The dominant perception is that all painters are basically the same," he explained. "By not effectively separating themselves from competitors, painting contractors are forced to compete on a price-first basis. [Consequently] contractors need to determine real points of separation and tie both their marketing campaign and sales strategy to them. Just to say, 'we have great customer service', isn't enough. No one says they have lousy customer service."

Selling service is more than just saying you're better than the other guy and touting the quality of your workmanship, said Tom Woodcock, president of Seal The Deal, a St. Louis-based sales consulting and training company.

A major stumbling block for painting contractors is their failure to realize they're a sales organization first and a painter second, Woodcock continued.

"Most don't even develop a sales strategy," he said. "Seat-of-the-pants selling is pretty common."

Sell the experience

But this is starting to change, said Carl Utter, president of The Training Group, Inc., a training, consulting and coaching company based in Philadelphia.

"I'm seeing this taking place in higher-end companies," Utter said. "There's a transition from becoming a contractor to becoming a contracting *business*. It's the mentality of being a business owner versus that of being a painter."

The other thing Utter has noticed is that companies who suc-

cessfully overcoming price objections are selling the *experience* to their customers.

And this takes you back to the heart of customer service-finding out what is truly meaningful to the customer and explaining how you go a step above and beyond the other guys to deliver this, said Woodcock.

Let's give you some examples from contractors to illustrate:

"We work hard to change people's perceptions," said Sulecki. He explains his hiring process (criminal background checks, references) to prospects. Employees wear company-supplied uniforms and undergo regular training (they have a safety committee to ensure safety regulations are met). A

handbook spells out expectations and requirements.

Sulecki has developed a welcome/introduction package with literature specific to the market (they have residential, commercial and industrial divisions) and personally delivers this to prospects. Included is information about the company, its association memberships/community involvement and job photos.

"After we educate clients about who we are, 90 percent of the time, they're very excited," he said. "Many customers just want price, we want them to understand the value we bring before we provide them with the price."

Mario Guertin, owner and president of Painting In Partnership, a primarily residential repainting company in Palatine, IL, finds in most cases two visits are required to educate the customer about why

they should hire his company over another—even if his prices are higher.

During the first visit, Guertin discusses the project and requirements, but most importantly, the needs of the customer, how he/she wants things done and the expectations.

"I gather up all the elements of the estimate and then I set up a second appointment to come back with the proposal," he said. "This is where the selling begins."

At this second visit he gives the prospect a folder containing information about the company. On the front is a photo of him and his wife, his crew, and even his dog, he joked.

"What I emphasize is the people and the fact that our company is built around craftsmanship," Guertin explained. "I also direct people to our website where they can check out individual backgrounds. What I'm doing is describing an experience they will get with this team of people, and I describe this experience in detail."

"There is always an anxiety factor," he continued. "People wonder what they are getting and so I address this through my credentials and memberships in associations, including the Better Business Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Painting & Decorating Contractors Association. I talk about our safety and training programs, and what we do to address the environmental concerns of the job, like dust and odor control, and about our warranty-things that speak to stability, trustworthiness and predictability."

Guertin has also developed a risk assessment tool he goes over with the prospect to help them in their decision-making when it comes to what contractor to hire. He does this only for folks who have gotten several estimates or who plan to collect more. The two visits, the information folder and the risk assessment tool have allowed him to successfully address pricing "head on," he said.

Make it as painless as possible

Josh Abramson, president of A Allbright Painting, Inc., a residen-

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tial painting company in Valencia, CA, relies in part on a tool (dubbed 'One Step Estimating') he developed to help close the deal. In his case, it's a software program that, used with a tablet PC, allows him to hand the prospect a typed estimate on the spot.

"It reduces the customer's frustration in terms of waiting for the estimate and sometimes not even *getting* the estimate," he said. "It also allows you to discuss the proposal right there with the customer, giving you the ability to manipulate the bid, adding to or reducing the scope of the job—all in front of the customer."

"We don't sell the paint," Abramson concluded. "That's what the paint store does. And when you change your mindset to sell the service, that's when you'll find areas of improvement in your company."

Abramson's said their focus with customers is on the process and experience and how they want to make the owner comfortable before, during, and after the job.

"We know there's a lot of stress that happens at the beginning of the project so we send our project manager to the customer's house a week prior to the job start," he said. "They discuss the job with the homeowner, confirm the scope of work and go over all the details."

While the project is running, they communicate daily with the customer about what was done that day and what is scheduled for the next. When the job is finished, customers receive a closing packet—containing a thank you letter, client satisfaction survey, the warranty and a touch up request form—and walk through the completed project with the job supervisor. (Abramson credits Nolan Consulting, Inc., located in Havertown, Pa., for coming up with the closing

packet).

"The touch up request form is good for two years," said Abramson. "All they have to do is fill out the form, contact us and we'll get back to them within 48 hours. We also send them a one-year anniversary letter asking if they want us to do a one-year inspection free of charge to look for expansion or contraction areas."

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Woodcock believes it's important for contractors to not only develop more than one point that de-

when we say we'll get them a proposal tomorrow, we get it to them first thing in the morning, because whether they say it or not, that's what they expect," he said.

They also work hard to provide additional assistance to general contractors.

"We try to service them in the bidding stage of the contract," Bazan explained. "Basically, we give out free estimates. We also try to help facility owners in solving problems that fall into our [area of expertise]. We'll consult with them on what kinds of surface prep, coatings, paint, etc., the job requires. We'll go over their specs and see if these are aligned with what the job entails. [Essentially], we provide them with valued-engineering alternatives, putting the right processes and materials on the job so there's no over or under-kill."

"I think a lot of contractors will do this to some extent, but not as fully," he continued. "They don't put in the extra effort to offer a different solution."

What contractors must realize is that for consumers, it's about building relationships, said Barry Himmel, senior vice president of Signature Worldwide, a Dublin, OH-based consulting company that specializes in helping businesses with customer service.

"Choosing a contractor is not only a logical purchase, it's an emotional one," he explained. "You have to really connect with that person, gain their confidence and trust. I've noticed more and more clients are recognizing that focusing on providing meaningful service to the customer is not only a good way to differentiate their business, it's a way to make this connection."

Utter agreed.

"Hiring a contractor you've never worked with is a leap of faith. I think this is one of the most overlooked aspects of selling," he said. "Some contractors forget you have to build a relationship first and then you'll get the project, and this isn't accomplished by talking about semi-gloss or flat paint. At the end of the day, people don't buy paint, they buy *you*."

finer their business but to cultivate several niche markets as well. This is one of the tactics St. Louis-based Bazan Painting Company has employed, said Walter Bazan Jr., vice president. Bazan Painting Company focuses on three markets: commercial, industrial, and high-end residential.

"We're known for our diversity. I would challenge that in our region there is no one that works in as varied of materials that we do. We cover so many bases; we're like a one-stop shop," said Bazan, ticking off a list that includes (among other services) specialized flooring, wallcovering, faux finishing, wood finish, specialty roof coatings, waterblasting and sandblasting ("We even have robotic sandblasting units," he said).

The low opinion many folks hold of contractors in general make the one-time/first-time buyer a "hard nut to crack," said Bazan.

"One of the things we do is