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Customer Surveys: Vital Feedback

By Deborah L. O'Mara

You can have it all in the palms of your hands: the information you need to find out how well you are doing with your customers and how to sell more effectively. That's exactly what you get when you do customer surveys, job-process evaluations and follow up. If you're not doing regular surveys and evaluations of your customers, you are missing one of the best resources available for improving your business.

Begin with personal conversations with clients before, during and after the project. Note and log each client contact. Also track any problems and how they are resolved. After the job, send the customer a "How did we do?" survey.

Such measurements are a vital key to success, according to Jerome Quinn, president and chief executive officer of SawHorse Inc., an Atlanta-based design-build remodeling firm.

Jerome believes that a successful renovation project is the result of a partnership based on mutual trust and respect between the contractor and the client. His company begins every project by analyzing the client's needs, then designs and builds a product that uniquely fulfills those needs. And yes, customer evaluations are integral to the entire process.

A critical part of the company's success, says Jerome, comes from regular communication and assessing the opinions of current and past clients, as well as those who didn't select the company as its contractor. "We get a ton of positive feedback from our surveys," says Jerome.

While SawHorse already has a communication process in place, Jerome is always looking for ways to expand it. This year, for example, the firm will conduct 'exit' interviews with customers. They will hire an independent contractor, a freelance journalist on an as-needed basis, to interview customers and ask a dozen open-ended questions. Homeowners are encouraged to talk about their experience and what they liked and didn't like. Because the questions are open-ended, the interviews provide SawHorse with a wealth of knowledge.

In addition, SawHorse annually mails 200 to 300 past clients and asks: "Why don't we reconnect?" The mailing serves as a reminder of their previous relationship, Jerome says, and if the timing is right, they might be ready to proceed with another project.

Prospects who didn't buy are another vital source of information. "We go back six months or so and survey customers who had visited or contacted us and had not used us," says Jerome. "We ask them the current state of their project and why we didn't get the job. What we've found is that some half to two-thirds have not gone forward with the job, which means that no one else got it."

Customer surveys and evaluations are critical, but that's after the fact, says Jerome. What's most important, he says, is the contact with the customer throughout the process—asking them how things are going. "A lot of clients recommend SawHorse to others during their construction," he notes. "That says so much about how we're doing."

Concerns or problems cited from customer surveys are acted upon. For example, if customers said they didn't get enough assistance throughout the job process, SawHorse responds by giving more individual attention. If the job site was messy and the customer brings it to their attention in the survey, SawHorse works with personnel to keep a neater space during construction.

Customer surveys and evaluations are a good snapshot of your business. They can provide a roadmap for continued success. All you have to do is ask.