

Using Feedback to Boost Your Bottom Line

In a previous article, “Becoming the Company Your Clients Want,” (Jun/23), I discussed reasons that client feedback should be one of the most valuable resources for your company. That article outlined the urgency to build great value, especially during the sales process. We are constantly challenged to close the gap between the number that we must sell a project for and the number our clients want to pay—particularly now as costs continue to rise, and it becomes more and more expensive to be in the remodeling business.

Over the years, my company has managed to close that “price gap” through obtaining client feedback, taking the resulting data, and integrating it into every facet of our business operations. Simply put, properly incorporating feedback from our clients has led to improvements in our customer service. Better customer service has led to greater value, and greater value has increased our bottom line. In this article, I’ll explain in more detail how to obtain feedback, how to process it, and how to use it to boost your bottom line.

Rules for obtaining feedback. I’ve been in the remodeling business for 37 years. I own and operate a design-build company with 23 full-time employees, running seven to 10 jobs at one time. We mostly do kitchen and bathroom remodels, finished basements, and additions. Our work volume affords us an ample database of client responses to draw from (particularly over the past 10 to 15 years as we have increasingly incorporated client feedback into our operations).

We have a few basic rules we follow when soliciting feedback from clients: Share why you want their feedback; be sincere when asking for it; write all their comments down; ask follow-up questions for clarity; and don’t “yeah, but” the clients when they are giving their responses. We’ve trained ourselves to remember that the quality and accuracy of feedback from a client is only as good as the delivery of the question.

If you want clients to be honest with you, then you have to share why you want their feedback. You have to tell them what you’re going to do with the information because that’ll influence what they tell you. For instance, I’d ask, “I’d love to get some feedback from you because I’m trying to build a better company. I’ve been doing this for 37 years, but I don’t have all the answers and I’m trying to get better.” So, who better to ask than those we serve, right?

Then I’d say, “I just want to thank you again for allowing us to work with you. Are you willing to share with us three or four things that you would change if you were running this job? Are you willing to be my coach right now? I’d appreciate that. And,

I promise you that I’m going to bring your comments up in our team meetings so we can learn from them.” If you ask your clients like that, you’ll likely get the truth from them. Also, by doing this, you’re setting the table for repeat customers. Repeat work is 46% of our work, which roughly translates to \$3 million dollars per year coming in from doing a great job for past clients. People like to work with people who care, who are truthful. Having soft skills and exhibiting emotional intelligence when dealing with clients matters.

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Be sincere when asking clients for their feedback. You have to know from your heart what you’re looking for and not be perceived as just going through the motions. Be thoughtful, take notes, and thank them for their responses. Don’t be afraid to ask follow-up questions for clarity. “You said the site wasn’t neat and clean. Can I ask you, did you mean the whole job or was it just the subs? Was there dust in some other rooms? Could you elaborate? I just want to know a little bit more.” And again, no yeah, but! “Yeah, I remember the ‘Fluffy’ incident, but do you see those cabinets, they’re dead-level, right?” Are you willing to go to the mat for the quality of your workmanship, while you let their declawed house cat out that one time, and you frequently parked your truck on their lawn? Some homeowners care way more about their pets and lawn than dead-level cabinets.

OPPORTUNITIES TO OBTAIN FEEDBACK

We try to attain feedback from our clients at every stage of a project—during lead qualifying, intro appointments, contract signing, weekly visits and calls, exit interviews, online reviews, and paper surveys (though I prefer attaining feedback via face-to-face meetings with clients rather than with mail-in surveys).

Intro appointments. When visiting somebody’s home for the first time, we can get a lot of information. For example, when

visiting a homeowner who wants a kitchen remodel, we don't necessarily care about what kind of kitchen they want; first, we want to see if they're a good fit for our company, and second, we want to know what qualities they're looking for in a remodeler.

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Instead of asking, “Hey, what do you want, maple cabinets? Do you want crown molding?,” we say, “You're planning to invest a hundred thousand dollars in your kitchen; let's talk about this whole project. What kind of qualities are you looking for in a contractor?” More likely than not, they're going to think, “That's a weird question. Why would a contractor ask me that? That's not typical language from a contractor.” But, it's going to be impressive, and they may think, “Maybe there is something here? They asked some pretty thoughtful questions. I could see them working on our home.” This would be a great start for us.

We ask, “Have you remodeled before? If so, please describe that experience for us.” If they have, the answer may unfortunately be something along the lines of, “Thank you for asking; our last remodeler made a mess and didn't show up on site consistently. We felt abandoned.” A pithy response like this is loaded with good intel. It tells us how to take care of them if we get the privilege to work in their home, as well as coaches us on how to build a better business—cleanliness and fear of abandonment are top concerns with homeowners. So, when we're writing our job scope, we'll insert a pamphlet on the air scrubber-HEPA filter we use to point out that we care about cleanliness. Regarding abandonment, we tell them that we have a process, a lead carpenter system, which will ensure that won't happen. The lead carpenter is dedicated to their project and will provide great communication, oversee all trade partners, and keep the schedule on track. And be someone they can contact at any time if they have any questions or problems.

We also ask, “What's giving you the most anxiety while looking for a remodeler? You said you talked to five or six remodelers and you haven't pulled the trigger yet. What's holding you back? I know we have some scars in our industry, but don't lose faith, there are some great companies out there.” And we tell them, “It's tough to buy a remodel. You can't see it. You can't test drive it. It's a leap of faith. It's probably the most money you're going to spend in your entire life, besides the purchase of your home. It's going to give you anxiety.” If

you could learn from everybody in your area what gives them anxiety about having you as a guest in their home and develop protocols to avoid these pitfalls, would that not make you a premiere remodeler?

“What criteria will you be using to make your decision on a remodeler?” Imagine if you asked that, and you already knew the criteria that are most important to people. They're giving you the keys to success. For some people it may be price, but we've always found there are few things above price. Cleanliness, fear of abandonment, and communication to name a few. If they select us, that's going to be the value they'll be getting; we have a reputation of keeping our jobsites impeccably clean and sticking with a project from start to finish ... we've been taught well!

Contract signing. The contract signing is an excellent time to attain feedback. When a homeowner signs a contract, we say, “Mr. and Mrs. Jones, I want to thank you so much for taking this leap of faith with our company. You chose to have our company come and be a guest in your home, and thank you so much again for that trust. I know you talked to five other companies, and we were a little bit more expensive. Would you be willing to share with me maybe three reasons why we're being awarded the privilege to remodel your home? What was the motivating factor? Why DBS Remodel? They may say, “I've heard great things from my neighbor who said you guys were so clean, so friendly, so trustworthy.”

You need to know what attracts people to your company; you can't assume it. You need the truth—why do clients hire you? I have at least three responses from everybody who has ever signed a contract with us over the last 15 years. I know why they hired us. I'm not guessing. As I stated in my previous article, we've used this feedback to morph into the company my clients wanted it to be rather than the company that I initially thought it would be.

So, at contract signings, don't lose out on the opportunity to learn what clients think about your company. Imagine how that would make them feel at that moment, being asked why they chose your company; wouldn't that make them feel good about you? And about their choice? Somebody who is being sincere and just wants to learn and make their company better.

Weekly visits. During weekly site visits, the first thing we're going to do is thank homeowners for giving us their business and allowing us to be a guest in their home. We ask, “How is the remodeling going at your residence so far? Are we meeting your expectations? Is there anything that you feel needs attention? Are you finding our team friendly?” We want to get a gauge on how things are going and right the ship, if necessary. We don't assume everything is going great; that's why we're asking the questions. It's not going to help us at all if they say, “Yeah, everything's good.” We're not looking for praise, we're looking for their disappointment because that's where the money is—small incremental changes for the good.

Is the cleanliness up to par? Is there any area that needs improvement? Are you happy with the workmanship? You'd think that your workmanship is the most important thing, but I know from looking at 15 years of surveys that it is not. It's important and it can get you in trouble if it's not good, but it's not the most important thing to them. So, don't sell that you're the best kitchen

installer and that your workmanship is better than everyone else's. Homeowners care about friendliness. They care about trust. So, if you want to build value, and you want to get them coming your way in terms of closing the "price gap," emphasize other company traits and learn what those are by asking great questions.

Exit interviews. For us, the exit interview is the most important stage of the project to attain feedback. We get together with the homeowners one last time on site and bring them a gift. (We would never show up empty-handed; we consider gifts part of our marketing.) We thank them and lay it out to them again, why we want their feedback, why we want them to be our business coach. We ask them, "Can you please share three things you appreciated most regarding your remodeling experience? What was it that you enjoyed most about DBS Remodel? I promise you, I will share this with everyone involved with our team. We're going to try to make our company better using your remarks." They reply, "Honey, do you want to go first? OK, um, you guys were so clean and you didn't leave us hanging. We felt like we were in good hands." We just let them go through their experience and draw out more detail for clarity as needed, "When you said 'you guys were so clean', what do you mean? Do you have specifics?"

Then the hard part, we ask, "Can you please share three things that you appreciated least about this remodeling experience? What are some things that we could've done better? If you were running this company, what's the first thing you would change?" That's the way we ask, and the clients may be reticent at first, "I don't know. Honey, do you have anything?" You may have to work hard to get their feedback: "Please, we won't be offended, we know we're not perfect." We make it comfortable for them because we want to learn. "OK. You know one thing. We didn't know when your guys were coming one day, and the doors were locked, and it was a pain because my cousin had to leave work to let somebody in." We write it down and bring their responses, positive and negative, back to the office and evaluate them in our lead meetings. We then develop procedures to safeguard against these "least appreciated" items from recurring.

Last, we want to know how they feel about the money they've just spent. We ask, "Could you please share how you feel about the value you received for your investment in this project? I know on the front end, you thought this was a lot. Our budget was \$85,000 and you were getting bids for \$60,000. You took that leap of faith with us, but now that the project's done, and you've been living in it for a couple of weeks, how do you feel?" I want to always gauge this, learn how they feel about the project cost, and why they feel that way, so I can continue learning. I can't think of a finer response at the end of the job than for them to say it was worth investing more money because of our cleanliness, our politeness, and their trust in us.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS FEEDBACK?

OK, so we've collected all this feedback from clients, what do we do with it? We compile a feedback data sheet in Excel that lists all of our clients; the job type (kitchen, bath, deck, etc.); the lead carpenter in charge of the job; the sales consultant; the contract date; the exit interview date; the "why hired" responses by client;

the "most appreciated" responses; and the "least appreciated" responses. We've accumulated all this intel on how to build a better company over the past 10 to 15 years. It's living proof, and it's a front-and-center topic in our meetings. We've made (and continue to make) changes to every facet of our business operations based on everything we learned. So, if you're asking the right questions, your clients should be telling you how you're different. For us, this was pivotal; it taught us to "name our difference."

Finding your brand. "When cleanliness, politeness & trust matter" is our brand. It's on all of our trucks, on our website, our conference room wall, everywhere. Where did we come up with this? We looked at more than 2,000 surveys and said, "What's the common theme? How are we different?" We didn't come up with it as a slogan because we thought it would be cool. We looked at all these surveys and said, "Look, everybody cares about these qualities. That's who we are. That's our brand." We coined the phrase from client feedback; you can as well from your clients.

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Other uses. We share positive feedback with our team to inspire them. For example, if we learn great things about a carpenter on a client's project, we immediately share the news about what a wonderful job they did. If you want to keep your employees, that's what you have to do. We celebrate all of these victories. But, sometimes it's the other way around—when an employee dropped the ball and we have to have a difficult conversation to teach them the error of their ways. Again, we develop procedures to safeguard against these "least appreciated" items from recurring. We don't let the negatives fester; we quickly address them and move on.

We use the feedback (both positive and negative) in our in-house training sessions and to strengthen our culture and reinforce our company's core values. It has allowed us to build tremendous value in our company. So, the gold-nugget takeaway here is that feedback leads to changes in customer service, improved customer service leads to greater value, and greater value is where you boost your bottom line. It's worked for us.

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