

## Once-and-Future Customers

**T**he biggest asset any remodeling business has is its company database. If the projects went well, you have a proven relationship with past clients that's enjoyed by few other service professionals.

The mistake that I see most remodelers make comes at the end of the project. They shake the homeowner's hand, say thank you, and then start the sales process all over again with a new client. Here is the smart remodeler's mantra: When any project ends, our relationship is just beginning. Unless you completed a whole-house remodel, there are certain to be other parts of the home that need upgrades.

Knowing this, you must engage your past clients to identify future projects. And by "engage," I don't mean sending promotional emails, holiday cards, or company newsletters; I mean sitting down with the homeowners at their kitchen table and talking with them about their home.

I was surprised when I recently talked with some salespeople about doing this. The market was booming and they were busy pursuing new leads. They didn't see any immediate need to follow up with past customers. Worse, they were afraid that contacting past customers could generate service requests that would divert company resources away from new customers.

Isn't it ironic that responding to past clients was considered an inconvenience? That's certainly not the way to build a strong relationship.

### NEEDS LEAD TO WANTS

The simple truth is that every past client you've worked for has additional work that they need or want done. The value of sitting down with past clients to talk about their home is not to promote new products and services, it's being in the right place at the right time. You're not selling, you're listening.

Set a time once a year to meet to talk about their home. At first, you may mainly uncover repair needs, such as faulty electrical outlets and

switches, hard-to-operate sliding doors and screens, misaligned cabinet doors and drawers, and so on. If you can't take care of these repairs internally, refer the work to trusted trade contractors you already know. Your clients don't know who to call when these kinds of problems arise. You do, and the homeowners know you far better than some random person who's written a review for an online referral website.

But there are also plenty of larger projects to be discovered. Here is another simple truth: Homeowners are always thinking about additional improvements that they would love to make to their home. For those past clients who are planning to stay in their home for the next eight to 10 years, many of those improvements make financial sense.



### KEEP IT OPEN-ENDED

When I want to find out what those projects are, I ask open-ended questions like these:

- How long do you plan to stay in your home?
- During that time, will there be any "lifestyle" changes (children moving out, an elderly parent moving in, children moving back in, etc.)?
- How do you currently handle repair and maintenance of your home?
- How do you choose the people or companies you work with?
- When choosing people to work on your home, what is most important to you: quality, price, or convenience?
- Which improvements, repairs, or maintenance

do you make yourself? Why have you chosen to do this work yourself?

- If your health permits it, would you still like to be living here in 15 years?
- Cost notwithstanding, what changes would you love to make to your home?

Done correctly, you will begin to understand their thinking about future improvements. That opens the door to your providing the help and

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direction they need to get started on the path to design and project development.

### LISTENING, NOT SELLING

I haven't found anything that replaces this kitchen table conversation. Even though you're not actively selling, future sales will come from the dreams and concerns that are shared in these meetings.

You are a sympathetic ear with knowledge of construction and a good understanding of the client's home—who better to help them develop their ideas?

This is the most effective low-cost marketing you will ever do. For most remodeling contractors, three-quarters of their business comes from referrals, and there's no better referral than one that comes from a satisfied past customer.

Your clients will be receptive to this idea. They want and need your help. Manage these relationships, and the work will follow. **PR**

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*David Lupberger has been in the remodeling industry for more than 20 years and is author of Managing the Emotional Homeowner, and creator of the Remodeler's Turnkey Program, and the Home Asset Management Plan. You can reach him at david@davidlupberger.com or 303.442.3702.*