



Customers from Heaven

Carol Smith

Two home builders die instantly in a head-on collision with a concrete truck. At the Pearly Gates, the Angel on Duty (AOD) frowns at the computer printout. “This is a mistake. Neither of you are due yet; you’re both going back. You have a lot of homes to build before your work is done.”

The builders look at each other in stunned silence, sharing the same thought. First Builder admits, “Actually we’d rather not. We’ve had enough of those demanding customers. Can’t we stay?”

Checking the procedures manual, the AOD explains unscheduled entries are prohibited by space allocations. These are set by OSHA, the *Organization for Safe Heaven Arrivals*. But as a retired new home warranty manager herself, the AOD understood the builders’ reluctance. To make returning to Earth more appealing, she granted each builder three wishes for improving customer relations.

First Builder quickly responded. “Wish number one, they live out of state until I call and tell them their house is done. Two, they have no relatives in the construction business. And three, they neither have nor want an attorney.”

Poof! First Builder was back at the construction office with no memory of the side trip and his original customer problems reshaped, but not resolved.

Second Builder thinks before responding. “The buyers I’ve enjoyed working with are those who take responsibility for their decisions, communicate effectively, and understand that a home is a hand-built product. Can you make them all like that?”

“Probably, but that is a big order. You’ll need to help. How are you at following instructions?”

“Have you ever applied for a building permit? By the way, while we’re at it, can you do anything about low flush toilets?”

“Do not push your luck. Let’s get to work.” Poof! Second Builder vanished.

Second Builder awoke in front of the computer. “What a strange dream!” Looking at the screen, Second Builder wondered where the following memo had come from.

Memo to All Staff

Over the last several years we’ve experienced increased demand from customers for better quality in products and services. In response, some of us have become resentful and defensive. This negative focus escalates hostilities and solves nothing. A different approach is called for. Therefore...

- (1) To show buyers the boundaries between their responsibilities and ours, we will thoroughly, accurately, and forthrightly explain both our product and the process of building. Sometimes, we will explain things more than once. We will be patient and cheerful when this is necessary.*

This includes explaining procedures for change requests, site visits, the delivery process, and warranty. Rather than glossing over the tough truths with hollow marketing slogans, we will build mutual trust with solid information. We will describe our responsibilities and theirs. When buyers decide to do business with this company, they will understand what we expect of them and what they can expect of us.

- (2) To establish effective communication, we will go first by listening actively, with sincere interest in the customer finding the right home and the right builder. We will respond promptly to customer concerns. When one of us does not know the answer, we will acknowledge that and commit to finding the answer.*

By working from the belief that our customers are our partners in this transaction, not our adversaries, we create the context for mutual respect. The extra effort required to maintain customer trust these days will be our daily routine.

- 3) Customers' active involvement in the care of their homes is vital to their satisfaction and our survival as a viable business. To foster that involvement, we will educate our buyers about the materials and products they purchase. We will use every available tool and medium: conversation, the written word, photos, diagrams, displays, samples, and demonstrations.*

Many misunderstandings arise because we assume that customers understand the natural properties of materials we use and the requirements we must satisfy. Meanwhile, they assume we did a poor job or do not care. Where we have an obligation, we will meet it promptly and cheerfully. Where we do not, we will explain, teach, or guide.

We know success is not guaranteed. From time to time a devil of a buyer may sneak into our system. We will resist the temptation to become cynical, learn everything we can from these experiences, and move forward. We take our task seriously and strive for excellence, not just because customers demand it, but because to do so provides us with the dual rewards of a prosperous business and personal joy in our work.

Second Builder hit the print key and noticed that peace had replaced aggravation in his heart. Being at work felt good again. Nodding and smiling, he picked up the phone and dialed the number of his most difficult customer.