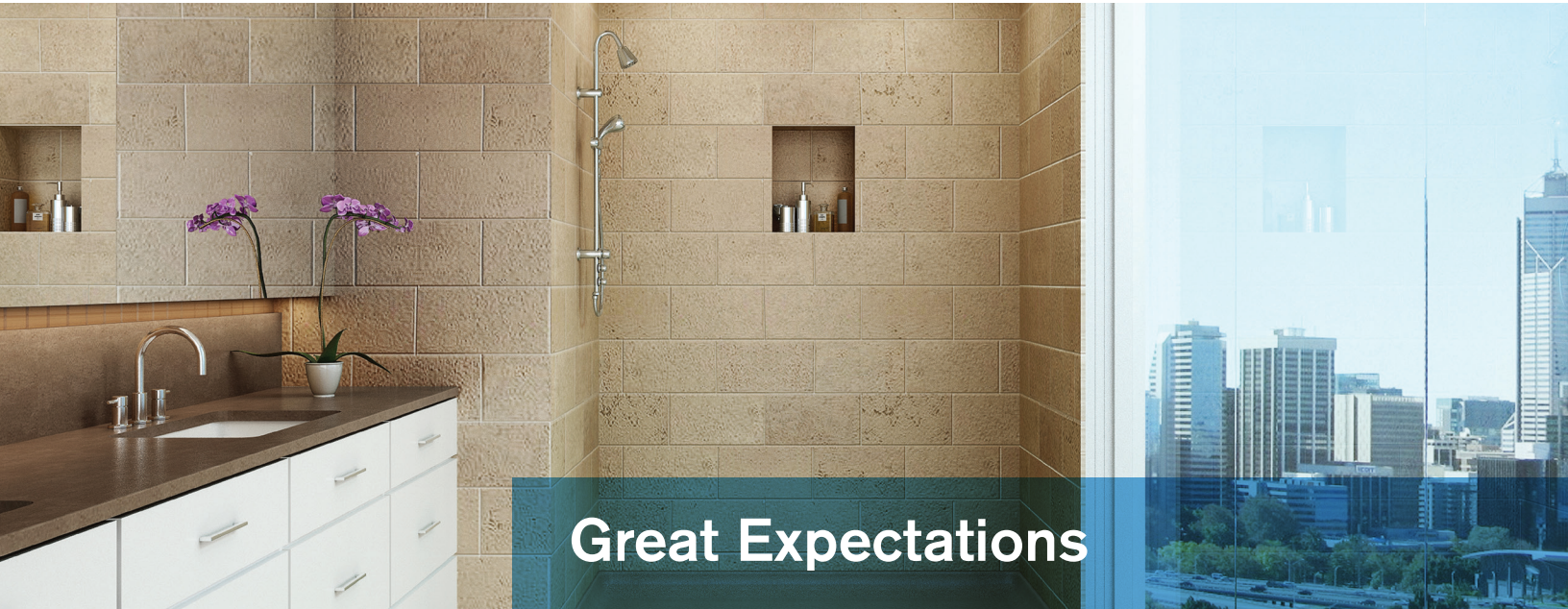




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Great Expectations

Remodelers Adjust To Meet Demands of a Younger, More Connected Clientele

Today's homeowners are better informed about remodeling than ever before, thanks to the relentless march of TV remodeling shows and 24/7 internet access that provides them an endless array of product information. Remodeling sites like Houzz and Remodelista stoke their dream home fantasies and ambitions.

While all that information has created a more informed customer, it has also made for some unrealistic expectations on the part of homeowners, whose demands have forced remodelers to rethink their client communication skills.

Traditionally, homeowners relied on their remodelers' expertise, and simply left them to get the job done, more often than not accepting their recommendations and product choices. Now companies have to figure out how to provide service to customers who come into the process armed with a lot of information on product and definite demands, but often lack the technical knowledge to fully understand how the process comes together.

Remodelers who don't may well find themselves pushed aside in favor of those who have better responded to a changing market. Or even end up being called out on social media, where an unhappy client can lay out their experience chapter and verse.

"We talk about this quite a lot around here," says Bryce Jacob, vice president at Dave Fox Design Build Remodelers in Columbus, Ohio. "The romance of



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remodeling has taken people by storm and they think they can do that.”

Jacobs says that many homeowners believe they are as educated about the remodeling business as the builder. But the technicality of the installation process and experience makes the builders the true experts.

“Remodeling is an industry where we are working in homes with pre-existing conditions, and people don’t understand that,” he says.

Jacob believes the bottom line is about developing trust with the homeowner, many of whom in today’s market do a lot of research, don’t feel like they can trust anyone, and want to do it themselves.

“We have a lot of clients that kind of babysit the job, and ask, ‘Why are you doing it that way?’ and we have to say, ‘it’s not going to stay that way; this is just one of the steps along the way.’”

Jacob’s crews have even run into homeowners who have undone their work, thinking it was wrong.

During the kitchen cabinet installation on one job, the workers found that the ceiling was not level and realized that the crown molding they were going to use to finish off the cabinets would have gaps where the ceiling was uneven.

“We knew we had to float the ceiling to make it level,” Jacob says. However, when the homeowner came in that evening and saw all the drywall mud on the ceiling, he ran his hands through it, not understanding its purpose. In the morning, still full of indignation, he was waiting for the crew when they arrived, and greeted them with some choice words, including, ‘Did you think you could get away with this?’ Jacob relates.

What the homeowner didn’t realize was that the remodeling crew was doing the right thing, when it would have been much easier and quicker for them to slap up the molding and throw in a little caulk or wood filler to disguise the gaps.

In an information age, many remodelers are supplying more information to their customers than ever before to satisfy their appetite for knowing exactly what’s happening, and why, and to build the trust that Jacob talks about.

Remodeler Bob Ligmanowski, owner of Norway Built in Downers Grove, Ill., has seen the changes in his 30 years in business, and says the internet has made a difference.

“Fifty percent of my customers use the internet, and even the ones in their 70s are shocking me by corresponding with texts and email, and doing internet shopping,” he says.

Ligmanowski’s response to changes in expectations is to provide lots of infor-



mation up front about his process, and remain flexible. He also stresses his company's attention to detail and how he plans to protect a customer's home during the remodel, manage security, and provide clean-up at the end, even ensuring that his crew uses the customer's preferred cleaning products.

While Ligmanowski has products that he likes and recommends, if his customers want something else, he is happy to use it. And if his customers want to go out and look at products, he will go out with them, or have his designer accompany them.

"Customers do have higher expectations these days," he says. "The older ones are not as nit picky—they've been around the block—and demanding as the younger ones."

"You need to be flexible to survive. Younger customers will go somewhere else in a heartbeat. When they ask for a bid, you'd better have it in a couple of days, or they are on to the next one. There is no loyalty. We run into a lot of that."

"I definitely think the Millennials are different," says Sarah Henry, owner of Gaspar's Construction in Seattle. "They are more educated, which is good, but they aren't doing remodeling for a living."

Henry has developed a good process for communication that meets the needs of her clientele, whether Boomer or the more exacting Millennials and Gen-Xers. During the remodel, Henry sends clients a daily email with pictures. But she sets the stage for the remodel at the preconstruction meeting.

"We tell them, 'You're going to come home at seven in the evening, and you're going to see stuff [that may concern you], so feel free to email us, and know that we will respond the next day, if not earlier.' We set expectations from that meeting, and let them know that we finish strong. Then we do a weekly meet-

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ing on site; that's mandatory."

Henry uses her company's showroom to display tried and true products that have been proven their mettle in the field and with clients, and to evaluate new products along with her clients.

At Dave Fox, the company has responded to a changing remodeler-client dynamic with regular training for employees, as well as goal-setting for clients.

For his employees, Jacob says, "I just tell everyone, 'Assume you are on film.' People today have cameras in their homes. We tell our people, 'If you scratch your butt, someone will see it.'"

While Ligmanowski hasn't run into cameras on the job yet, he says it wouldn't surprise him.

"We do so much training on this every year to set realistic expectations for clients," Jacob says. "They'll tell us, 'We know if we go with you we won't have any problems.' I stop them and tell them that there will be a problem; I just don't know what it will be, but we will work through it with you. We want them to understand that problems will arise."

For remodelers, small steps can make a big difference when it comes to managing customers' expectations.

Says Jacob: "If you are going to work with us, we get it. I'm not one of the youth, but I can play in their sandbox."

Realize you'll need to proffer more information than you have in the past. Acknowledge customers' references to HGTV shows, internet gleanings and Pinterest boards, and really listen to them. And when complaints arise, address them promptly.



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