

HOW TO BEST HANDLE AND AVOID COMPLAINTS¹

by Robert Felix

Mr. Fink, your men just dropped a limb on my flower garden. Smashed all my flowers.

Mr. Fink, your men just destroyed an azalea.

Mr. Fink, your men just sprayed my windows.

Most of you have heard all of these complaints but I'm sure that you handled them better than Frank Fink did. Being in a service industry, it is inevitable that we will get complaints. Even though you may have the best trained, most well equipped crews in the business, some day, some client will complain. And it may have nothing to do with the production crews. The person who answers the phone may have been abrupt with the client. The company representative who estimated the job may have forgotten to write something down or promised too much. How many times have you heard, "Your man said that while the crew was here they would shape my azalea and trim my pyracantha."

How about the scheduling? How often do we get so overloaded that we don't get the work done when we promised we would. A storm that comes through really puts your schedule out of order. Every time your spray crew gets blown out or rained out, the insects don't stop feeding. The weather destroys spray schedules. How do you explain these to a client?

Then there's the operations man. What happens when the foreman you wanted to send to a particular job doesn't show up and you promised the client you would have a crew there.

The other side of the coin is the client. Some you will never satisfy and others are just out to take advantage. In our industry the "I'm going to sue" syndrome is just as evident as in any other industry. Most clients are reasonable, fair, understanding people. A little common courtesy can go a very long way. Let's examine some typical dialogue.

Hello, Mrs. Smith? This is Professional Tree Service calling. You called earlier for our Mr. Jones and he is still in the field. May he call you this

evening or is there something that I can help you with?

Thank you for calling back. I'd like to have Mr. Jones look at the elm tree in my front yard.

I'm sure we can arrange that, Mrs. Smith. Rather than tie you up with a specific appointment, suppose we have Mr. Jones look at the elm in the next day or two. He can analyze the situation and then call you in a few days with his suggestions. Will that be O.K.?

That's fine. Thank you very much. Goodbye.

Here we have used a supervisor or a secretary, to find out what the problem is and to offer a time frame in which a diagnosis can be made. The client is happy because she is getting the action she wants and the man in the field isn't bogged down with an unnecessary phone call.

Hello. Professional Tree Service. Tom Jones speaking. May I help you?

This is Mrs. Murphy. Your men just dropped a limb on my flower garden, smashed all my flowers, destroyed an azalea, cracked a bird bath, and have made an awful mess. I want it all replaced immediately.

I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Murphy. We'll take care of everything right away. Don't worry about a thing. Let me have one of my people come out to your home either later today or first thing tomorrow morning. We can fix up the flowers and the azalea easily and the bird bath can be either repaired or replaced. I hope my crew was courteous to you.

Yes, Mr. Jones, they rang the doorbell and told me as soon as it happened. Apparently somebody made a mistake and I guess accidents do happen. Your suggestions sound fine and I'm sure you will take care of everything. The flowers were just petunias. They should have been pinched back anyway, and the azalea could probably stand a little pruning anyway. The birdbath was pretty old and we really didn't like it, so I guess I was a little excited when I called. If you make things neat and

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clean, I'm sure that will be satisfactory. Thank you, Mr. Jones. I'll leave everything up to you. By the way, the trees look beautiful. Goodbye.

That's a bit of an exaggeration but prompt attention, an immediate remedy, assuming full responsibility and a few pleasantries make the customer realize, immediately, that it was an accident and that the company stands behind their operations. In the final analysis, the customer actually reduced the severity of the claim.

I know of one tree man that handled every complaint with a personal call and a bouquet of flowers for the lady of the house. How could anybody be angry with him? Very often, an irate customer can be readily calmed down if you let them do all the talking and agree with them.

Mr. Jones, this is Mrs. Smith. I'm going to sue you. My trees are dying. My place looks terrible. There are insects all over the place. You promised to prune my trees. The spray you put on two months ago didn't do anything. I trusted you to take care of my trees and my neighbors who do absolutely nothing have a better looking place than I do.

What am I spending all of this money for? I'm going to sue you for fraud. My husband's sister's brother-in-law is a lawyer and he says you must be a fake. I read somewhere that you can't prune now.

I'll have to look at this mess all summer. I could have had that kid with the pick-up truck prune those trees six weeks ago for one half the price. What are you going to do about it?

Mrs. Smith, you are right. We should have been to your place before this, but I didn't want to send just anybody there to take care of your trees. You're an important client and I want to send our very best crews. Now, as for that newspaper article, I'm sorry, but it is inaccurate. This is an excellent time to prune your shade trees and I have an excellent crew available the day after tomorrow. By the weekend your trees will look magnificent. Tell me about those insects.

Well, we were out in the garden just now and I saw a mosquito. Did you say that you would control mosquitos?

No, Mrs. Smith. We sprayed to control the gypsy moth caterpillars. Did you see any of those?

No. I guess the mosquitos fly in from the swamp

across the road. You say that your crew will be here on Wednesday? That's fine. We are having a lawn party this weekend and I want everything to look nice.

Thanks, Mr. Jones. Goodbye.

This is a typical example of applying a little grease to the squeaking wheel. Perhaps this complaint could have been avoided if Mr. Jones had done something about his backlog.

Most complaints can be avoided if they are anticipated. Scheduling complaints are easily handled before they happen by logging sales, estimating production capacity, and converting both to man days available. If you oversell, you have to get more men and equipment to fulfill your obligations on a timely basis or don't sell the work, or tell your clients that it will be some time before their job is done. In most instances if your clients want the highly skilled professional work that you can provide, they will wait for it, as long as they know when it will be done. Clients are reasonable people.

Mr. Jones, I would like to be able to grow some grass under these trees. Can you help me?

Yes, Mrs. Godfrey, but I want you to understand what we are going to do and what your trees will look like when we finish and thereafter.

If the customer understands what you're going to do, what the immediate results are going to be and the long-term results as well, you can avoid the phone call after the job and expect a prompt payment. The same is true of the client who calls about a charge on a time and materials job. If the client understands at the onset that the invoice will include such things as travel time, dump time, and anything else that you might charge, you can avoid problems later.

The worst type of complaints to deal with are the ones you don't hear about. These are the people who don't pay their bill and don't tell you why until you call three months later to find out why you haven't been paid, or they pay the bill and then not only discontinue using your services but they spread the word about their unhappiness with your company without giving you any opportunity to correct the problem.

Complaints are an unnecessary cost of doing business. They take management time, sales time, and staff time. They change production time

to nonincome-producing time. They create hard feelings and sometimes cost clients. Complaints may also increase your cost of insurance and slow up your cash flow. No matter how good you think your operation is, you will always have some complaints. That is human nature. The object is to minimize the number of complaints, their individual magnitude, and their cost.

It would be a contradiction of terms to say that you should plan for complaints and how to handle them. You should provide a first class professional service, which in theory, would preclude any complaints. Since this utopia can never be reached, it is best to view each complaint as a learning experience, taking whatever steps are necessary to prevent a repetition of the same complaint.

Keep in mind the fact that courtesy, patience, prompt attention, fairness, and integrity will turn most complaints into incidental occurrences. Remember that most complaints are the result of your own mistakes.

To avoid complains, you should start with that initial phone call. It often sets the stage for an entire relationship. Don't assume anything. Be sure that every person who handles phone calls in your office treats every caller courteously and efficiently. No matter how busy or hectic things are, each caller is entitled to think that their call is the most important call of the day.

Establish standard responses for dealing with typical questions. For example:

I'm sorry but we can't diagnose over the phone. Unless we see your trees we really don't know the full extent of the problem.

We can have someone look at your trees in the next few days. If you're not home our representative will call you by phone.

We can't quote prices over the phone. Each job is different and we have to see it to determine the cost.

I'm sorry, I don't know the answer to your question but I will have someone call you back in the next day or so with an answer.

Responses such as these are simple, but they establish a pattern and become part of the routine way of handling clients. The follow-up phone call or visit then becomes the key to maintaining the relationship. When the job is sold, a clear understanding of what is to be done, when, and

how, avoids questions later. If you fulfill the terms of your contract and the client understood all of the details at the time that you made the agreement, you should have no problem.

I have always believed that every job should be on a contract basis with a written order for the work, signed by the client. Many of you, I'm sure, have been very successful doing work on a time and materials basis and/or with no written agreement. Since the key is simply good communications, maybe you are all better communicators than I am.

There is another link in this communications chain that has to be considered and that is the production crew. The details of the work agreed upon by the client and the company representative must be implemented by the production crew. It is here that communication can be lost and result in a customer complaint. If there is one elm on the property and it is to be removed, that's simple. Is all the resulting debris to be removed? Is the stump to be ground below grade? If so, are the stump shavings to be removed? Topsoil added? Suppose the stump is not going to be ground below grade. How low is it to be cut? Will the customer expect to be able to run a lawnmower over it? These are the details that cause complaints.

Pruning jobs can be difficult and difficult to write down, and nonetheless, the scope of the work to be done must be outlined. Sometimes the trees to be pruned on must be located so that the wrong trees aren't treated. Use of the pruning standards of the National Arborist Association can clearly identify to a client exactly what type of pruning is to be done. This saves much talking and writing.

The production crew should know what they are supposed to do and do it. Part of their responsibility is the satisfactory completion of every job. Adequate supervision must be provided to insure that this occurs.

Complaints can be avoided if there is good communication and everybody in the chain of events fulfills their responsibility. Complaints can be handled with courtesy, patience, and fairness.

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