

Some aspects of jobs are beyond your control.

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# Engineering the Client Experience

**S**elf-described remodeling neophytes Susan Parker and Ed Hynes “lived to rue the day” they almost hired another contractor instead of Greg Antonioli. The Boston-area couple, a college professor and a library director, had a substantial project in mind when they interviewed a remodeler we’ll call Roger, as well as Antonioli, president of Out of the Woods Construction and Woodworking, a \$1.5 million design/build firm in Arlington, Mass.

Roger and Antonioli were a study in contrasts. Roger didn’t volunteer much detail about how he worked, but he was willing to meet with the couple several times in their house at no charge. Antonioli, though personable, had a “fairly rigid structure” by comparison, says Parker. In that initial meeting, he asked lots of questions, outlined his typical project’s phases, agree-

ments, and procedures, and explained their responsibilities as clients, including meetings to attend, decisions to make, and checks to write. He then came to their house for a site visit and suggested they enter into a design agreement, for which he would require a deposit.

Parker and Hynes selected Roger. Then they never heard from him again, despite repeated phone calls and e-mails. “He bought our bad will for no good reason,” observes Parker. So they reconsidered Antonioli, newly appreciative of his forms and procedures. Some time after the Roger debacle, Parker turned to Hynes and said, “You know, Greg is great.”

And he was. The project — a kitchen remodel, porch conversion, and entryway addition — took four months and went almost precisely as Antonioli had said it would. When REMODELING spoke with the couple three months after the job’s con-

clusion, they had recommended Out of the Woods to two friends and begun sketching out their next project with the company. “We’re somewhat hooked on remodeling,” Parker says.

Voila. Greg Antonioli had engineered another client experience.

## ANTIDOTE TO ANXIETY

Engineering the client experience means preparing clients for the warts-and-all realities of remodeling, explaining your process for running the job smoothly, and then following through on your promises. In this time of HGTV-style makeovers and starry-eyed homeowners, it’s a strategy that can be invaluable for minimizing the surprises and setbacks that can eat time, burn money, and turn relationships toxic.

“What remodelers need to understand is that these people are scared; they’re taking a huge financial and emotional risk,”

## The clients' expectations are not.

Greg Antonioli's project for Susan Parker and Ed Hynes had 13 change orders but no surprises. Weekly meetings and detailed reports meant "we knew right away what was happening," says Parker.



says Nina Winans, co-owner of Winans Construction. Oakland, Calif. "So whatever you can do to reassure them they've made the right decision, the better the process will go." Problems are inevitable, she notes, but "we try to prepare them for that. We concentrate on making the experience as predictable as it can be, even though 99.9% of the time something unpredictable comes up."

Antonioli concurs. Referrals and repeats account for nearly 90% of his business, so his prospects typically are pre-sold on the quality of his company's craftsmanship. "What I need to convince them of is the predictability of hiring us." But not by raising their expectations unrealistically. His mantra, in fact, is "no surprises," so he bluntly promises that "we're going to screw something up" and then follows that up by illustrating how he remedied such a screw-

up on a recent project. "They don't expect brutal honesty, and they're just blown away," he says. In the same vein, he spells out his company's policy of "naked apologies. Don't make excuses, or you lose credibility," he says. "Even if it's a good excuse, it still sounds like BS, and, frankly, they don't care. They just want to know does this mean my job is going to go on a month longer or two days longer."

Antonioli's process for engineering the experience begins with bonding and building rapport. A trainee of the Sandler Sales

System, he gets prospects talking about themselves, their house, their interests, and their remodeling fears and hopes. By showing an interest and "feeding their egos," he says, "I'm helping them develop that comfort level, gaining their trust." He also asks questions to reveal prospects' apprehensions: why they want to remodel, and, if possible, what their previous remodeling experiences have been. "Once I get someone to mention that other, bad contractor, I start drilling: 'Was it a painful experience? How did you get out of it? How did that

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make you feel?” Confronting prospects’ “emotions and fears and stuff in the beginning immediately differentiates you from every other kind of contractor they’ve talked to,” he says. It also helps him anticipate and plan around their concerns.

To that end, Antonioli then pulls out a binder full of the documents he uses to keep projects on track, such as a design/preconstruction services agreement, minutes from a weekly meeting, a sample invoice, and a change order form. The latter explicitly spells out the “nonrefundable \$75 administrative fee” each change will incur. Again, the goal is no surprises. The simple matter of having a structure gives “this perception that we’ve got our stuff together,” Antonioli says. Clients “walk away breathing a sigh of relief.”

### SOUND BEGINNINGS

Another remodeler who begins the engineering process with the initial visit is Kacey Fitzpatrick, president of Avalon Enterprises, Mountain View, Calif. She says the benefits inherent in this process include building “trust in me and the process we are all undergoing. Customers who trust me don’t question everything I do or say, but instead partner with Avalon to participate in the process productively.”

This partnership takes root with an upfront interview lasting two to four hours. Fitzpatrick “asks in-depth questions about who they are, how they like to live, what they like and don’t like, what they do every day, how they grew up, etc. I work hard to understand the client and to design a home that really supports them in their family life and feeds the essence of their lifestyle.”

What she does with that information is essential. Besides informing her design work, Fitzpatrick’s investigative legwork helps her accommodate clients’ preferences and lifestyles during the actual remodeling process. “They may

**“Whatever you can do to reassure them they’ve made the right decision, the better the process will go.”—Nina Winans**



Antonioli hires employees with a “sixth sense” for people. Parker and Hynes said the crew “took great care” to keep them informed and happy.

be going on a weeklong vacation and want a messy phase of work to be scheduled for that week,” she says. They could have a big deadline, “and I will fast-track the subs and ensure timely completion.”

Equally important, investing so much time up front lets Fitzpatrick defuse bombs that could otherwise prolong projects and breed ill will. For instance, she outlines change order procedures and assures clients they’ll have “time to plan in advance when inconveniences are on the horizon that will affect their daily life” — inconveniences such as turning off the water or power or scheduling a delivery that needs to be stored at their home. As an advocate of green building, she also emphasizes indoor air quality, particularly when the home is occupied during construction and/or the homeowners have allergies or small children. And again she follows through. For example, she might build full walls to separate the work area from the living area. use

a clean air scrubber during especially dirty phases, and use low VOC (volatile organic compounds) paints and finishes to minimize airborne toxicity.

Before the remodeling work begins is also the time

to layout the ground rules. David Heaney, president, of Rockland Architects and Builders, Newport, Del., explains his company’s design/build approach and fee schedule at the initial client meeting. But he emphasizes that his company “focuses on the intangibles. It’s all about expectations.” He views his clients as his boss. he says, “but we don’t know what they want until we ask questions,” which he does later, at a preconstruction meeting (see “Do Ask, Do Tell,” page 89).

Like Fitzpatrick, Heaney follows through by ensuring that homeowners’ wishes are respected throughout the remodeling process. A project clipboard is posted so they can jot down questions for the lead carpenter to address the next day. They can call staff at any time — Rockland employees carry pagers 24 hours a day and are backed up by an answering service. Besides holding weekly meetings, Heaney also asks clients to complete a mid-project questionnaire. Major complaints are rare at this point, he says, because he nailed their expectations by asking so many questions in advance. He also posts a document called “Commitment to Excellence” at each jobsite to remind workers and subcontractors of Rockland’s many “intangibles,” such as its commitment to customer service.

Follow-through is equally important to



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**“From first call to final walk, we have a system that makes the client feel they are in good hands.”—Matt Plaskoff**

Matt Plaskoff, owner of Plaskoff Construction, Tarzana, Calif. “From first call to final walk, we have a system that makes the client feel they are in good hands,” he says. Called “client delight,” this system of “touch points” is designed to help clients “remember us and know that we are thinking about them” throughout the process, he explains. Heavy project management and supervision are integral to client delight, but so are thoughtful touches such as a preconstruction “golden hammer” ceremony, gift baskets, regularly scheduled follow-up calls, and a “homeowner’s manual” (with general home-care information and subcontractor names) presented at the project’s conclusion.

### PULLING THE STRINGS

Antonioli also continues to engineer the client experience as the job progresses, in ways that are both visible and invisible. Like Heaney, he works with clients at the preconstruction meeting to identify, among other things, precautions involving pets and children, storage of tools and materials, moving of furniture and other items, and procedures for protecting the clients’ home. “On every job, we probably budget a minimum of \$250” on protective materials for walls, floors, carpets, etc., he says. “Being clean is one of the bigger things we do” to keep clients on their side.

At weekly meetings, Antonioli recaps clients’ concerns from the last meeting and forewarns them of upcoming responsibilities on their end — be prepared to talk budget next week, for instance, or remember to select cabinet knobs by Thursday. At the same time, he discreetly pulls their strings from behind the scenes, by ensuring, for example, that his product person “is on them like a hawk.”

While Antonioli engineers and sells the client experience, “it’s my staff that executes it,” he says. To that end, he employs only crew who “have that sixth sense about

taking the clients’ temperature on a daily basis and knowing when they need to push a little more” or, conversely, knowing “they need to tiptoe around, give them a little more room.” Similarly, he sends a “dear neighbor” letter announcing his company’s presence in the neighborhood and pledging to avoid disturbing or inconveniencing anyone. “People are concerned about how their project affects neighbors,” says Antonioli. “That may be one of their biggest fears — looking like an idiot, like they hired a bad contractor. We do every little thing we can to make them look good.”

And make them feel good. Antonioli uses weekly meetings not just to discuss project status but also to let clients blow off steam — something most remodelers reserve for the exit interview. Each meeting triggers an itemized “project status report”

concluding with the question, “What could we have done better this past week?” The simple act of asking this question “releases the pressure building and heads off the issue before it explodes in the client’s head,” says Antonioli.

Which takes us back to Susan Parker and Ed Hynes. True to Antonioli’s word, Out of the Woods Construction and Woodworking had a snafu in the client’s house: While working on the plumbing, a worker inadvertently overfilled the boiler, knocking out the heat to the home. Yet when Hynes walked in an hour later, the worker “immediately told me what had happened and apologized,” promising that a plumber was en route to remedy the problem. Hynes was pleased. “He was absolutely up front with me,” he remembers, just as Antonioli had been from the beginning. **R**

## Do Ask, Do Tell

Avoid remodeling pitfalls by scheduling a preconstruction meeting to determine how clients live and what precautions you should take in and around their home. Here are some questions to ask.

- What hours can we work?
- What days can we work?
- Where is your security system?
- Where can we drop deliveries?
- Where can we place the Dumpster?
- Where can we place the port-o-let? (Or, which of your bathrooms can we use?)
- Where can we park our vehicles?
- What hours can we call you, and what numbers should we use (home, work, cell, other)?
- Where are your utilities (gas, electric, septic, communications)?
- What furniture or shrubbery needs to be moved?
- Can we use a lockbox system during your project?
- Can we install a phone/fax line for the duration of the project?
- Where can we post company signs?
- Are there any pet considerations?
- Are there any neighbor concerns?
- What do you want to salvage from demolition, and where do you want it stored?
- How often do you want us to meet with/contact you?
- What can we do to make the project more enjoyable for you?