

Repetitious Requests

Warranty Rep: Mrs. Jones, I'm here to inspect the three items you reported on your May 5 warranty list.

Mrs. Jones: Great. What about the two items on my May 7 list?

WR: Well, ma'am, I can't check those because today is May 8 and we don't have your May 7 list yet.

Mrs. J: But the work on my May 1 list isn't done and we'll need some of the same people. Why can't you just add the new items to the old work orders?

WR: I don't even know about the items yet.

Mrs. J: Never mind. What happened to my April 27 list? Those two items are not done yet either.

WR: I really regret hearing that, ma'am. We work hard to provide prompt repairs. What were the items?

Mrs. J: I don't know. I've lost my April file. But I'm sure nothing's been done. I'm here all the time, you know.

WR: Yes, ma'am, we suspected that.

Mrs. J: The plumber was here yesterday but he didn't do anything. He just stared at me, mumbled something about not knowing why he came, just out of habit, he supposed. I told him about the April 29 list, but he didn't have a work order yet so he couldn't fix anything.

WR: That would be Al Pipes of Pipes, Inc. He won't be back. Mr. Pipes has been put in a rest home. He has the room next to our warranty manager.

To the dismay of warranty managers everywhere, many homeowners submit list after list of warranty items, ignoring the builder's standard points of contact--typically 60 days and 11 months. Chaos and duplication of effort results. And yet, the opposite extreme--homeowners who hold serious items until year end and report them all at once can cause just as many concerns.

WR: Mrs. Brown, you have 30 minutes left on your warranty. It's time to do your year-end inspection. Where would you like to start?

Mrs. B: Well, the living room is the only room left. The bedrooms fell off in the second week and the kitchen disappeared in the sixth month. Of course, the stove is still here; that 220 cord is pretty strong. The bathroom was missing at our orientation. The superintendent told us there was no need to write it down; he already knew about it. He never did bring it like he promised.

WR: I'll be--Mrs. Brown, why didn't you call us?

Mrs. B: Well, that nice sales lady made such a point of explaining that your warranty service is more efficient if each homeowner just sends in one list at the end of the year. We didn't want to upset

anyone.

Causes

Chuckling aside, what causes homeowners to by-pass the normal structure for warranty contacts? Often by identifying the homeowner's motivation the builder finds a clue on how best to respond.

Quality

Perhaps the home has a lot of warranty items. This can occur if it was incomplete at delivery or was one of those rare homes that ended up with more than its fair share of problems. Living with a large number of items understandably gets on the homeowners' nerves. This always seems to happen with the toughest homeowners--or is it that they become the toughest homeowners when this happens?

Personality

Some homeowners are meticulous individuals who are uncomfortable when any detail is out of order. Others may have little else in their lives and dwell on their homes continually. Since builders are still pursuing perfection in this handcrafted product, such homeowners can usually find something to report.

"If you need anything, just let us know . . ."

An often overlooked cause of repetitious requests are the friendly remarks an orientation rep makes at the end of the orientation. Some customers take these statement literally. The result is list after list--they're doing just what they were told to do. While the orientation rep means well and builders should be accessible, service is actually more impressive when it is orderly instead of chaotic.

Lack of Trust

If a homeowner feels uncertain about the reliability of the builder, impatience over warranty repairs can result. It is as though the homeowner wants to ask for everything he or she needs before the builder disappears or goes out of business.

Desire for Revenge

Customers generally fall into three categories. Those in the first group notice an item and decide to live with it--they recognize homes are imperfect and they have other interests. Those in the second group are essentially satisfied homeowners who need some repairs. They report their items, receive the appropriate repairs, and continue to be satisfied homeowners.

The goal of customers in the third category, however, is to demonstrate their dissatisfaction, punish the builder, and strain company resources. These homeowners submit list after list, often overlapping requests and spicing them with editorial comment. Their communications have a "so there" tone and are usually sarcastic or threatening. Providing the repairs will not satisfy them. These homeowners want revenge.

To make things worse, overlapping lists often cause confusion and errors in the repair process. This often draws more criticism from the homeowner--this time of the competence of the staff and trades. The harder the builder tries, the less satisfied the homeowner becomes as event after event reinforces a bad impression and fuels negativity.

Prevention

Complete control of customers is elusive, but builders can influence the conditions that produce repetitious requests. As with most customer relations challenges, preventing repetitious requests is

the first choice. Review your current practices looking for opportunities to improve and thereby minimize repetitions requests.

- < Communicate clearly and completely to align your buyers expectations with your product and process. Then fulfill each commitment. Honesty and reliability create trust and a high comfort level. In this frame of mind, homeowners are more likely to follow your system.
- < Monitor quality throughout construction, correcting errors and addressing buyer concerns as soon as they arise. Deliver the home complete and clean. The tone of the orientation sets the tone of the warranty period.
- < Deliver information about how your service system works to your customers no later than when they sign their contract--make it part of your homeowner guide. Describe your procedures in a friendly tone, focusing on what you provide, what you offer, and what you will do. Detail both emergency and non-emergency procedures. Keep this information clear and simple. Customers resent complex confusing systems. If you need more than a couple of pages to describe your procedures, work on streamlining them.

In delivering the homeowner guide, the sales person can point out "Our warranty reporting procedures are described on these two pages for your review." Whoever conducts the pre-closing orientation should review these pages in detail, emphasizing the differences between emergency and non-emergency procedures.

- < If you're not already doing them, consider implementing builder-initiated visits for your standard checkpoints. This means you contact the homeowner and set the appointment without waiting for them to send in a list. These can include a builder list of points to check on the home--sort of a tune up--along with an inspection of items the homeowner has noticed. Most homeowners are more comfortable knowing the builder has a service system of some kind in place and one that includes builder-initiated contacts fosters an even higher comfort level.
- < Make sure your warranty system works. If it produces results, homeowners are more likely to use it. When the system fails to provide prompt and effective repairs homeowners resort to other tactics to obtain what they need. Ineffective warranty systems cause homeowners to move up to category 3 and seek revenge. As one homeowner revealed at the friendly end of what had started as a difficult warranty inspection "I really didn't care that much about all 80 of these items. It was just that you ignored my first letter and I was angry."

Response

In spite of your best efforts some homeowners will still submit repetitious requests. When this occurs you have several responses to choose from.

- 1) Process the list in the routine way, remembering to review the file or existing work orders for duplications. As necessary, inspect the items and issue appropriate work orders. Follow through to ensure their timely completion. If you demonstrate to homeowners that your system works, they may be content to wait for the next routine checkpoint.
- 2) Contact the homeowners and suggest that, if it is acceptable to the homeowner, you wait until the next routine contact to process these items. This is the preferred course of action when the list includes typical "one time" repair items such as drywall shrinkage cracks. Explain your reasons in a friendly tone. If the homeowner objects ("We have relatives coming from out of state, they've never seen our home before...") agree to process the items.

One caution, watch for urgent items--anything that endangers the occupants or the home. For example, loose carpet on a stair or excessive shrinkage of caulking in a wet area. Postponing this type of repair could result in serious injury or more serious damage to the home. Under either circumstance, it is in your best interests to proceed immediately with a repair order.

Remember that the home is under warranty for every one of the 365 days (or in some cases, longer). Planned contacts are designed to increase builder efficiency and minimize inconvenience for the homeowner, but forcing homeowners to follow that structure can damage goodwill.

3) In extreme cases (when the third extra list arrives) set up a friendly meeting with the homeowner and review the normal procedures. Ask if there is some reason they are uncomfortable using the standard contact times. Assure them you intend to meet all obligations and that your concerns are for overall efficiency. Remind them that you will respond immediately to emergencies.

In all of these contacts, be aware of the attitude you convey--in words, tone, and body language. Thresholds vary, but everyone stops enjoying even the most constructive criticism at some point. Once that point is reached, we become a bit grouchy. Remind yourself that some homeowners ask for nothing while others expect a lot. Overall, it evens out. Maintaining the needed detachment and objectivity is a challenge best met with humor and maturity.