

# Secondary Attention

## *Achieving Closure on Warranty Items*

*Secondary attention means simply that an item was not completed smoothly the first time it went through your system. Further discussion, research, and sometimes paperwork were needed.*

In the interest of mental health, expect that some warranty items will need secondary attention to be completed. While not all secondary attention can be eliminated, it can be greatly reduced. Monitor the number of items that fall into that category. The number may be lower than you believed. Fed on frustration, these items grow to unnatural proportions and overshadow successes. Describing them as a percentage of overall work provides perspective and a way to track improvement.

Once you know the size of the challenge, analyze the nature of it. If a high volume of service work is involved, a breakdown by trade may be useful. Ask the question, item by item, "Why was this item not closed?" Categorize the underlying causes and begin taking steps to reduce or eliminate as many of them as possible.

Look in three areas for the causes of delays: your office (yes, *your* office), your trades, and your homeowners. Examples illustrating each category follow.

### Warranty Office

Before accusing others of poor performance, make it a habit to check your own accomplishments.

#### ***Administrative Time***

Working with trades and in-house technicians to achieve fast response times will fail to satisfy homeowners if their requests linger on a desk for a week before work orders are issued. A sense of urgency is reinforced when the warranty office reacts immediately to requests and inspection reports. Issuing work orders within one day of the inspection should be your goal. This will reduce calls from homeowners asking when the repair will be done.

#### ***Complete, Correct Work Orders***

The work order that contains complete details about needed repair work is the work order most likely to get done. Well-trained warranty reps recognize who needs to be sent to the home and the sequence of repair steps; they anticipate informational details needed to get the work done—color, size, style, and so on. When resulting work orders contain all of these details technicians do not need to call your office and you have removed another cause for delays in service to homeowners.

#### ***Access Policy***

The reality is that warranty work will take longer if you do not accept keys.

#### ***Trade Support***

From time to time a service technician will have a question or may need help arranging access to a home or preventing homeowner interference with work. Enthusiastic support at such times keeps repair work flowing.

#### ***"Who's Going to Pay for This?"***

Builders sometimes pay for work performed during the warranty period. This occurs because companies provide courtesy repairs such as attention to dry wall shrinkage damage. Another time a builder might pay for work is when a trade is replaced. Enforcing the former trade's repair responsibility can be tough and time consuming—all the while the homeowner is waiting. The new

trade contractor will likely expect to be paid for correcting someone else's mistake.

Understanding how payments are structured in the trades= contracts and what is included in their scopes of work is vital to appropriate decisions in this area. Ask the purchasing agent for copies and review them. If you expect to pay for work, obtain a cost estimate and issue a purchase order or other authorization along with the work order. .

### ***Legitimate Double Visits and Multi-Trade Repairs***

Some repairs require more than one visit by a trade or more than one trade, each working in a set order. For instance, repair of a plumbing leak is followed by drywall repairs and then by painting. The first repair usually occurs promptly. Steps two and three often drag on. The best approach is to discuss the steps and set all appointments in one conversation with the homeowner. Then follow up at each step to stay on track and prevent unnecessary excitement.

### ***Was the Answer No or Maybe?***

Failure to follow through in writing when you deny warranty items can leave the matter unresolved in the homeowner's mind. Today's homeowners are unlikely to forget any of the items they reported. Often the issue that comes across your desk a second time is the one you failed to respond to clearly or failed to document.

Minor items can be documented quickly by marking it Ahomeowner maintenance@ on the warranty service request form provided you give the homeowner a copy. For more significant items, a conversation followed by a letter is best. "This is to confirm our conversation regarding . . ." is useful as an opening for such letters.

Documenting your answer can forestall the homeowner=s reporting the item again three months later in hopes of getting a different response. Put a copy in the warranty file and forward a copy to any trade contractor affected. If you are promoted the person who takes your place will appreciate the thorough documentation.

### ***Wrong Trade***

Disorganized records or careless research often results in a work order going to the wrong trade. Unfortunately, such work orders tend to sit on a trade=s desk for days or even weeks before you learn about the mistake. Train your trades to get in touch with your office immediately if they receive a work order that should have gone elsewhere.

## **Trades**

Trade contractors are likely to live up to your expectations. Make warranty service important in conversation and documents from the beginning, perform consistent follow up, and enlist the support of upper management and other departments when problems occur.

### ***Diluted Urgency***

Homeowners care more about their warranty items than anyone else. Their home is the most important home; their list is the most important list. The warranty office handles warranty items all day, every day. It is impossible for every item to be the most important item.

Now this slightly diluted enthusiasm is passed along to a trade's service technician, usually on a work order. The urgency of that item diminishes dramatically because the technician has not heard the homeowner's voice, seen the homeowner's face, or observed the actual complaint. What is a heartbreaking flaw to a homeowner becomes routine work to the warranty office, just another naggy detail to the trade, or merely job security to the service technician.

When you routinely enforce time frames "If they really wanted it done, someone would have called us"

is replaced with "Let's get this scheduled. You know we'll hear from [Builder] if we don=t." The shift in attitude improves service by restoring some of the original urgency.

### ***Production Pressures***

In most companies, the superintendents have more influence over the rehiring of the trades than warranty staff. Thus, faced with a choice of satisfying a superintendent or the warranty department, most trades respond to the superintendent. However, when management makes it clear that feedback from both production and warranty influence hiring decisions, priorities become more balanced.

### ***Missed Appointments***

Whether due to memory lapse, an emergency, or heavy traffic, any trade can miss an appointment occasionally. However, when the behavior is chronic you might get improvement from being more involved in setting and confirming appointments until better habits take hold (21-30 days), or in extreme cases by sending another trade and back charging the original company. (This should be provided for in your company's trade agreement.)

## **Homeowners**

Many scheduling challenges stem from the fact that most homeowners are extremely busy and a few turn appointment setting into a power struggle. Your goal is the same regardless: respond to reported items.

Most of the time, homeowners welcome service technicians and are cordial to them. From time to time, however, a belligerent homeowner refuses to set an appointment during established hours or sets an appointment and then stands up the technician.

Occasionally, a homeowner harasses the service technician about repair method or quality, or can have a personality clash with a repair person. Warranty service will proceed in a more orderly manner if you are ready for such events.

### ***Temporarily Unavailable***

If your homeowner is about to go on vacation, have relatives visit for a month, just started a demanding new job, or for any other reason prefers not to have warranty repairs performed right now, put the work orders on hold. This is the traditionally accepted step under such circumstances.

The traditional mistake that follows is relying on homeowners to reactivate these work orders. The result is usually an angry call from the homeowners six weeks later, asking when this work will be completed. Avoid this by noting when the hold should end on your calendar. Check with your homeowners at that time to see if they are ready to set repair appointments. If the warranty period is nearing its expiration, limit the hold to between 10 and 14 days. Document all efforts to arrange a repair appointment. What you can prove counts more than what you remember.

### ***Homeowner Missed Appointments***

Missed appointments are an acknowledged and annoying part of warranty work. While technicians attempt to keep appointments with homeowners who somehow cannot remember to be home when they said they would, other homeowners who would keep their appointments are waiting for service.

If three or more appointments have been scheduled and the homeowner consistently stands up the service technician, you might consider sending a check for the cost of the work. This is an undesirable solution to be used as a last resort.

To review an example of the warranty document wording that includes your having this option, refer to paragraph 3 of the [Sample Limited Warranty](#) which you will find in the FORMS section of our service library.]

The defect may remain in the home for others to see; or a second owner may re-submit the complaint. However, those concerns may be easier to tolerate than delaying service to other waiting homeowners.

### ***Method of Repair***

Homeowners may demand that you use their repair methods or that you replace an item when a repair is the normal approach. While you should certainly listen carefully to the homeowner's opinions, be cautious about using unfamiliar repair procedures or those you know have not worked well in the past. Following the dictates of the homeowner may seem on the surface to be service oriented, but when problems develop as a result, any benefits are lost.

### ***Quality of Repair***

If a homeowner says that repair work is unacceptable, the best response is usually "What is a convenient time for me to look at this with you?" Trying to resolve such issues over the phone is a waste of time. The homeowner interprets long-winded discussions as defensive and becomes more upset. Volunteering to re-examine the item shows interest without committing to any action. If all service technicians know that homeowner complaints result in an inspection of the work, they are more likely to pay strict attention to details and do a sound repair in the first place.

### ***"That Person Will Never Set Foot in My House Again!"***

Sooner or later in the lives of all warranty managers a homeowner-service tech meeting produces a chemistry so negative that it does more harm than good. While you could take the position that the assigned technician will do the work or the work will not be done at all, this is not conducive to high levels of customer satisfaction, especially if the tech earned the homeowner's low opinion.

Exactly what went wrong? If the homeowner is displeased with one individual and someone else from the company can perform subsequent repairs, the problem is relatively easy to solve. If the complaint is more general and the homeowner refuses all contact with a trade contractor's organization, stronger measures may be called for. One option might be to have a warranty rep in the home when that trade works on items.

Consider what work is left to be done or how much time remains on the warranty. If the homeowner has three days of warranty coverage remaining, you face a different situation than if the disagreement occurs immediately after move in. You may decide that the best choice is to make arrangements with an alternate trade contractor. A letter can establish the details of this and provide the homeowner with peace of mind. A copy to the offending trade establishes the dates for which the alternate trade will fill in at the original trade's expense.

Careful trade contractor hiring practices combined with clear communication of warranty service policies can prevent many of these occurrences.

The Secondary Attention Scorecard (see next page) can help you track and identify the most common reasons extra effort goes into bringing items to closure. Use it for a week or two and see what turns up. Effective after move-in service is a vital component of your reputation. With well-organized systems and good habits, what seems like chaos can be brought under your control.

<i>Secondary Attention Scorecard</i>	
<b>WARRANTY OFFICE</b>	
Administrative tasks	
Work order omission/error	
Access	
Support (access, questions)	
Payment	
Double visit or multi-trade repair	
Wrong trade	
Other	
<b>TRADES</b>	
Diluted urgency	
Production pressures	
Trade missed appointment	
Other	
<b>HOMEOWNERS</b>	
Temporarily unavailable	
Homeowner missed appointment	
Method of repair	
Complaint about quality of repair	
Personality issue	
Other	