

covering **installation**

Cooperation brings mutual benefits

Can't we all be friends?

By Christopher Capobianco

Tension between floor covering installers and salespeople is nothing new. Salespeople blame problems on installers or installers say salespeople make promises the installer

can't fulfill. Miscommunication can make the installer's job more difficult or embarrass the salesperson when the installer and the salespeople aren't saying the same thing to the customer.

"I didn't know I had to move furniture," or "have the heat on," or "empty the closets," are statements every installer dreads. These customer statements on installation day put the installer in a tough spot. Customers don't mind doing their part to prepare for the installation, but they need to know in advance.

More serious problems occur when expectations about the installation itself are unrealistic. Seams come to mind right away. The presence of seams, seam location and visibility of seams are common customer concerns. I learned early in my career not to promise "invisible seams" unless you are selling invisible floor coverings. A few extra minutes to go over installation specifics with the customer will go a long way toward eliminating these situations.

Customer perception equals quality

On the other side, customers look at installers as experts, so it pays to know the answers to product and maintenance questions. Avoid answering questions about what you think of the floor covering. A customer call to the salesperson saying the installer didn't think the product was right for the area (even if it is true) can be a disaster.

Diplomacy can go a long way. When it comes to maintenance questions, the wrong answer can affect the performance of the floor, or it could become a warranty issue. To help the installer address these questions, the dealer should supply maintenance and warranty information to the customer, or the installer should refer questions back to the dealer.

Installation for salespeople

I was a retail salesperson for the first half of my career, after having grown up in the business, working as a "helper" throughout my teenage years. This gave me a great installation background for selling and a great deal of sympathy for how tough a trade floor covering installation is. Not many salespeople have this experience, so it's good for salespeople to go out on the job and observe or work with the installers as part of their training.

I know this is not as easy as it sounds, but if a way can be found to make it happen, it's a great exercise in better communication and understanding. Also, I have given or attended many installation seminars where salespeople came to learn more about the installation process. This knowledge helped them answer customer questions, explain the process and create realistic customer expectations. It made them better salespeople and someone is more likely to buy from someone who knows what they are talking about. Installation seminars are not just for installers.

Sales for installation people

Another way to make the entire team better is that all parties understand any new product that arrives on the showroom floor or shows up on a set of plans. Is there a different installation technique required? Where should the product be used or not used? The installers and the salespeople need to know this, so some training may be necessary. Insist that the manufacturer spend a little time with everyone, so all parties can touch and feel the product, and have a better idea of what is involved with a successful installation.

Schedule a session first thing in the morning when everyone is there, have the manufacturer bring breakfast and take some time to go through the product characteristics and installation techniques.

I have done this many times with such unique products as cork floors. It has been a key to my success, ever since I have been a manufacturer's representative. Everyone learns how the product is installed, they know what to expect, a fair labor cost is established, the product is sold

at the right price for the right type of installation, everyone makes money and the customer is happy.

The bosses, too

At the center of this entire conversation should be the owner of the company and the installation manager, who can set a tone of communication and teamwork. Encourage the sales team and the installers to communicate with each other directly about specifics on a particular job. Specific concerns can be communicated directly from the salespeople to the installer, instead of just writing it on the work order. The installer can help the salesperson if there is something the salesperson missed, a different way of laying out the job, or feedback about a specific product. Face-to-face conversations in the spirit of working together for a better finished product establishes a positive environment for everyone, as do meetings of the sales team and the installers. A quick breakfast or an evening meeting over pizza to go over new products, address concerns that come up or just share war stories goes a long way.

Make money

Historically, new dealers pop up and raise a ruckus in the local market by having the lowest prices on the block. Dig a little further, and you'll find they often don't treat their installers well and pressure their salespeople for more sales. The salespeople will say anything to make a sale and the installers feel no loyalty to the company. All of this leads to unhappy

customers. Statistics show that the average happy customer tells one to three people about his or her experience, while the average unhappy customer will tell nine to 12 people.

These "low-price" dealers usually don't make it but dealers that have survived and thrived — even in the shadow of "big-box" competitors — do it by reducing or eliminating unhappy customers. They retain good-quality installers and honest, knowledgeable salespeople, pay them well and take good care of them. Their prices may not be the lowest, but quality products and service will win every time, especially in a business like ours where the product is useless until it gets installed.

Too often, the relationship between salespeople and installers is "us and them". When the two sides work together with a goal of making more money by providing better service to the customer, this inevitably builds repeat business and everyone wins. ●

*A fourth-generation floor-covering specialist, with experience in retail, architectural sales, technical support, consultant, writer, educator and activist, **Christopher Capobianco** is owner of Christopher Collaborative Inc. Capobianco volunteers with FCICA, ASTM Committee F.06 on Resilient Flooring and II CRC (Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration Certification).*



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