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How to Handle Disagreements With Homeowners on Projects

Communication is the key to avoiding problems and to smoothing them over if they occur



Erin Carlyle August 3, 2020

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In an ideal world, every remodeling and outdoor project would run smoothly with no surprise issues, and clients would be full of patience throughout the process. But the reality is that homeowners often find remodeling and outdoor projects stressful, especially when unforeseen problems arise. This can lead to conflict with you, their remodeling or landscaping pro.

We recently spoke with experienced remodeling pros to get their wisdom on handling client disagreements. Their biggest collective takeaway: Do everything you can to avoid discord in the first place. Here's how to do that.



Communicate on Price, Schedule and Look

This may sound basic, but it's true: A good way to avoid conflicts with clients regarding a project is to communicate about everything.

"There's three things clients want communicated: price, schedule, and finish

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There's three things clients want communicated: price, schedule and finish, meaning how it's going to look," says B.J. Barone, a general contractor at 41 West in Naples, Florida. "Most builders fail because they don't communicate in all three of those. They'll send a bill out too late in the game, and the customer will say, 'Oh I thought that was included.' "

Homeowners don't naturally know how unexpected issues or changes they'd like to make midproject will affect the timeline or the bottom line, especially if they haven't remodeled before. So when a client brings up a possible change to the project, Barone or his employees immediately address the three key points: price, schedule and finish (or look).

His company also quickly sends out change orders that detail how the change will affect price, timeline and look. The client must sign off before workers proceed.

Another good communication practice is to document everything that's discussed. "I preach to my guys that every conversation should be followed up with an email recap" that summarizes the conversation, Barone says.

Project management software like Houzz Pro can help you track communication with clients so that you both have a record of what's been agreed to. With Houzz Pro, builders and remodelers can manage their emails, direct messages and phone calls with clients. They can also share estimates and change orders, project timelines and updated daily logs as a project progresses.

How Houzz Pro Software Helps Pros Communicate Better With Clients



Communicate About Your Process

Communication with clients about a remodeling or landscaping project begins well ahead of demolition or groundbreaking. It's critical that you outline from the get-go what clients should expect during each project phase.

"We don't have a lot of disagreements with clients, we really don't," says Cheryl Kees Clendenon of In Detail Interiors in Pensacola, Florida. "The reason is we do such a good job of preparing the client for how we work."

Clendenon lays out her firm's process five times for a would-be client before she ever creates a design proposal. The process is outlined in materials she refers to as "the Client Introduction," which explains to homeowners the benefits of working with her design firm. Clendenon emails these materials ahead of the initial

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discovery call. And then she continues to repeat the information.

“We go over it on the phone in the initial discovery call,” she says. Clients hear about the process again in a follow-up email Clendenon sends after the call. She reviews the process once more during the initial consultation, which is when she visits the home to diagnose the problems leading the homeowners to want to remodel or decorate. Finally, information about her firm’s process is also on the company website as an FAQ.

Repetition is a great way to make the design or remodeling process clear to homeowners. Remember, the way you do things may be a well-oiled machine. But many homeowners may be embarking upon a remodel for the first time.

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Be Upfront About Your Project Backlog

Another key thing to communicate is the lead time before you can take on a new project, or get started in the design phase for a client who knows they want to work with you. That includes sharing with potential clients how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected your backlog of work.

For instance, landscape designer Jim Drzewiecki of Ginkgo Leaf Studio in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, found that while project inquiries slowed for only a couple of weeks, his typical work process was thrown off for much longer. Normally, Drzewiecki works in an office with fellow designer Hannah Paulson, and they are quite collaborative.

When the pandemic hit, the designers worked from their respective homes, texting and touching base daily. This continued for three months. In May, Drzewiecki’s father died. All of this lowered productivity for their two-person team.

Now the designers are back in the office and project inquiries are higher than ever, but Drzewiecki and Paulson are still digging themselves out of the hole that the shift in their work process — plus the general stress of the pandemic and the loss of a loved one for Drzewiecki — caused. As a result, their turnaround times to produce a new design are longer.

“We tell people six, eight, 10 or 12 weeks” before a project can start, “depending how busy we are. And some people are contacting us when it’s only been four weeks,” Drzewiecki says. “We live in a world with an Amazon mentality.”

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weeks, Drzewiecki says. We live in [a world with] an Amazon mentality.

Drzewiecki is telling clients about the lengthier turnaround times when they call, so that if they want to work with him, a conflict doesn't arise over the length of time they'll need to wait for his services.

Confidence in the Home Remodeling Market Returns



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Handling a Conflict With a Client When It Does Occur

If you've communicated throughout the project and documented all the client's decisions, there should be little opportunity for conflict. But occasionally disagreements can't be avoided. And in those cases, you have to keep in mind what matters most to you: being right or keeping your client happy.

"There is a cost of doing business," Clendenon says. "If you know that they signed off on the yellow knob and all of a sudden they want the red knob, you just get the red knob."

While that's a minor example, differences of opinion about a project's direction might occur with a client you've already agreed to work with. "I come back to 'the client is always right,'" says Jimmy Crisp of Crisp Architects in Millbrook, New York. "Unless it's something that is going against code or could be dangerous, I tell clients ... 'If you want a purple tower connected to your house, I will do the best purple tower that can be done.'"

"I will say, 'I don't think it goes with the architecture' or 'It's not a good color for the neighborhood,' but it is their house."

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