



By Jerry Horner, CWS-VI

Providing quality  
customer service for  
long-term success

# Right From the Start

If you do not have the time or dedication to do it right the first time, what makes you think you will have the time or opportunity to do it twice? In the water treatment industry, there are many shortcuts available. They may look appealing at first; however, the long-term result could be the erosion of your reputation and customer base.

We are all familiar with low-quality products and undersized systems advertised at prices so low it is hard to understand how a legitimate business could keep its doors open selling them. The truth is, the end users who purchase these water conditioning products often find themselves searching for an alternate system when the product fails prematurely and the selling company is unable to provide service.

## Establishing a Reputation

Key factors when buying or selling include finding a trusted name, a reputation for quality and evidence of an established, legitimate business operation with a long-term focus. People flock to big-box stores like Home Depot for flooring, roofing and other similar services, because Home Depot, like many large retailers, has a trusted name, a solid reputation and is well established.

Sylvia's Flooring and Wallpaper may provide superior service at lower prices, but Sylvia's is at a disadvantage. It can improve its position by maintaining a professional showroom, being licensed, bonded and certified, and providing a readily available list of referrals.

Like most people, I am willing to pay higher prices for items I perceive to be from a legitimate seller or an established merchant. I do not buy tamales from the back of someone's car or stereo systems from a sidewalk vendor.

Do not battle over offering the lowest price or matching another supplier's ambiguous offers. Instead, sell by doing it right the first time and providing a sense of quality, value and security. Stand behind

the design, installation and ongoing maintenance of the product. Do not be afraid to lose a job if the only way to salvage it is by cutting corners—do it right or pass it up. Losing a job occasionally may have a perceived immediate negative impact, but the long term will be filled with business generated by a stellar reputation for providing consistent value and fantastic customer service.

## Listening to Your Customers

You can use your professional experience to provide recommendations, but in the end, be sure to have a thorough understanding of what customers need, want and expect. If they have lived with a water softener and enjoy its benefits, be careful about selling them an alternative. Many softener alternatives are effective and offer desirable benefits, but they do not currently provide all the features of a traditional softener.

If the customers are looking to eliminate spotting on shower doors and other surfaces, offer clear information prior to the sale. While softeners and some alternate systems will make spotting less obtrusive, they will not prevent it completely. Spotting is the result of minerals left behind after evaporation. Softened water may not contain “hardness” minerals, but the overall quantity of minerals is essentially the same as in hard water. The spots will be easier to clean, but they will not magically fail to appear. Spot-free water is typically accomplished using reverse osmosis (RO) and/or demineralization.

A customer might desire “pure” drinking water with no waste to the drain. You could offer a three-stage filter culminating in an ultrafiltration (UF) membrane. This is an excellent point-of-use filtration system, but it will not provide bottled-quality water. UF removes most suspended matter, and when combined with carbon filtration makes a superb drinking water system, but the customer expects significant reduction of total dissolved solids. This is typically accomplished

using an under-sink RO system.

Unfortunately, most residential RO systems waste 3 to 12 gal for every gallon produced, so this would not meet the customer's parameter of no wastewater. There are zero-waste RO systems that run the concentrate back into the hot water side of the home, so this may be an option. Other systems are highly efficient and may be an acceptable compromise. It is important to listen to the customer's desires and provide guidance based on your professional experience.

## Knowing Water Quality

Whether you rely on a lab or onsite testing, it is critical to know the influent water conditions you are battling. It is a waste to install a filter to remove a specific contaminant, only to have the filter completely fail due to interfering contaminants. Know what you are dealing with before going all in. Accurately sizing and configuring systems is a significant advantage you can offer.

It is fortunate that water treatment is complex, as it creates a separation between the professionals and the pretenders. Improperly sizing a point-of-entry carbon filter will result in diminished removal performance and compromise the long-term capacity of the media. With 13-grains-per-gal influent, you could easily install a single 0.5-cu-ft-capacity softener and it would work. However, there are other factors to consider, such as system longevity, efficiency and the reserve capacity required for most single-meter-initiated systems.

Understanding this provides you with the opportunity to offer the correct system for the application. It may be a single system sized large enough to mitigate the capacity loss due to the reserve capacity setting. Or, it could be a single system incorporating proportional brining that calculates the percentage of capacity remaining and adjusts the salt use based on the capacity actually depleted. Then there is the twin alternating softener that in theory

uses almost all of the available capacity before switching to the alternate tank. These advanced systems are only as good as the setup and initial configuration.

#### Introducing New Products

Be careful when taking on new products. Make sure they are properly tested under various conditions and that they come from reputable companies with track records for quality. Understand that even small components like carbon filter cartridges can vary vastly in quality. In some areas you can be open to fines and litigation simply by using carbon or other components that are "non-compliant." It is critical to source items from trusted distributors performing due diligence to ensure their products perform consistently and comply with basic legislative requirements.

Follow plumbing codes and proper installation procedures to impress the customer, encourage future referrals and provide a sense of security. The last things you want are second thoughts or anxiety about whether a job was done incorrectly and may result in a leak or other failure. Leak detection devices will automatically shut off the water supply when a leak is detected and are available in a wide range of sizes. Any failure that does occur should be a rare, unexpected anomaly.

A properly configured and sized system with a professional installation will go a long way toward making your water improvement business a success. The way you operate your business is both a conscious decision and a decision of conscience. *wqp*

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