

# Quality counts

How to give your clients the best customer service experience.

BY JOHN HAYLOCK

Can you imagine having to pay your customers if you were late for an appointment or missed a deadline for delivering a job? You may be having heart palpitations at that prospect, but paying customers if they're late is exactly what American plumbing franchise Benjamin Franklin Plumbing does. If they don't turn up at the agreed time they pay the customer \$5 per minute late up to a maximum of \$300.

By guaranteeing to be on time they're directly addressing one of the major frustrations of the customers of plumbers. I've experienced it and you probably have too – the frustration of waiting for a tradesperson who doesn't turn up at the promised time.

Benjamin Franklin Plumbing's 'on time' guarantee is part of a four-step process where customer satisfaction "with both our service and plumbers is 100 per cent guaranteed". The other three components of their guarantee are:

- clean – if their plumber doesn't wear shoe covers inside your home, you don't pay a penny
- friendly and courteous – if their plumber smokes or swears in your home or on your property, you don't pay a penny
- repairs guaranteed – if a repair fails in the first two years, they will repair it again absolutely free.

Benjamin Franklin Plumbing also promise straightforward pricing and state they will "provide you with an



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exact price you approve of before any work begins".

## A template for service

This comprehensive system provides a template for any customer-focused service business. It is a commitment to high-quality customer service that the accountancy profession should take notice of.

I am sure you, as an accountant in public practice, take the quality of work you provide very seriously. You will have completed the required study. You have completed ongoing professional development. You seek specialist advice where necessary. You review the work your team provides. Your practice gets reviewed on a regular basis.

These are all steps designed to ensure your clients receive technically excellent work. Problem areas are addressed. You wouldn't think of keeping on making the same mistakes over and over. But do you take the quality of service you provide just as seriously? The evidence suggests many accountants do not.

## What clients dislike

Speak to business owners and it is common to hear complaints about the quality of service provided by their accountant. You commonly hear frustration over:

- the slowness with which their accountant delivers their annual financial statements and tax returns
- how difficult it is to get hold of their accountant or about how long their accountant takes to return their calls
- the lack of foresight and proactivity shown by their accountant
- the unexpected size of their fee.

Similar issues bedevil many other service-based businesses, particularly those that traditionally charge by the hour such as lawyers, electricians and ... plumbers.

## Too busy to do a good job?

It seems that charging by the hour encourages a culture of 'busy-ness'

where maximising chargeable hours is the most important thing to do. In that sort of environment the easiest way to keep busy is to start more and more jobs. But more jobs open slows down job completion and therefore cash flow, inflates work-in-progress, encourages interim billing and extends debtors, and means you never have enough time to do the important stuff because you are so busy doing the urgent. The focus on busy-ness has spiralled into a raft of other problems.

## Keys to better service

The solution is straightforward. Instead of busy-ness you should focus on certainty – certainty of price and certainty of quick delivery. Fixing prices is necessary because it is what your clients want and because it gives you an incentive to be efficient. Quick and certain delivery is important also because it is what your clients want and because it drives you to be better organised and more efficient. The keys to better delivery are managing capacity, scheduling work and minimising the number of jobs on the go at the same time.

Focusing on certainty of price and delivery aligns your interests with your clients' interests in a way that hourly billing never can. This is exactly the model that Benjamin Franklin Plumbing has adopted. Their guarantee drives them to run their business so well they rarely have to pay out on their seemingly outrageous guarantee. That guarantee also allows them to charge premium prices because they are delivering exactly what their clients want. Happy customers and more profit. They could never do this if they charged by the hour and ran their business like every other plumber. ▀



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