



The Imperfect World of Foodservice Equipment, Part II

By Foster Frable,
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The job is drawing to a close. Your project manager and installer want to move on to other projects that are now in their most active stages. It's easy to forget the project that is 95 percent completed. Yet that last 5 percent is often the most important one—the one your customer will remember more than the other 95 percent. Prior to this time the customer was an observer, they were busy doing other things. Now as the project is drawing to a close, they are busy training staff, ordering supplies, dealing with the myriad of details just before an opening. They need closure on the project and they need it NOW. Small details can become problems for someone stressed out over a long or difficult project.

Pre-punch List Inspection

The best suppliers we know punch their own jobs well in advance of the final inspection by the owner or their designer. The final punch list should confirm that you delivered what you promised—not list all the items left uncompleted. Empower your people to take care of the little things as early as possible. One of the things that really separate the pros from the ama-

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teurs in the mind of a consultant is their ability to take care of the details before they become big issues. An example: the trim plate hanging from one screw finally falls off and is thrown away in the trash, now you have to buy a new one. Your installer fails to caulk the obvious areas before a health department inspection, so instead of caulking a few sinks and prep tables you now need to caulk every creak and crevice in the kitchen.

It has been my experience that half of the items on some punch list could be handled by someone with a screwdriver, pliers, a box of stainless screws, a tube of caulk. Anyone on your staff should be able to accomplish these minor tasks. This way if your installers are committed to another project the client won't need to wait or the problem won't become more serious.

Remember while you may look at a punch list as a to-do list, your client looks at it as a list of deficiencies and the designer or consultant sees it as one big pain in the butt. The length of that list and how you react to it can do more to create the final impression the owner and

designer have of your work than any other factor. Customer satisfaction is directly proportional to how well you close out a job—Don't EVER doubt it.

The Punch List from Hell

Most of you have been involved in projects that produce a punch list from hell—the one that repeatedly grows just as you think you are nearing the end. The main tool for preventing this is to obsessively back up your verbal agreements with written confirmation. Your completion walk-through, when you generate the punch list should include the owner/chef and the designer. Make sure everyone involved signs your handwritten list and gets a copy. It

brings a sense of closure, which helps to reduce the punch list that never seems to end.

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bringing the list to a close you need to reassure them that you will be

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available if they need you. Communicate your commitment to finishing the punch list by a specified date and schedule a follow-up inspection a week or so after opening.

The Follow-up

A follow-up or post operational inspection provides you with an excellent opportunity to smooth ruffled feathers. The people now using the kitchen may never have met with you or had any involvement in the project. But their comments and grips will surely reach your client's ear. Often their concerns are based on miscommunications or circumstances beyond your control, but if you aren't there to defend your work you will be wrong—even if you are right!

If the senior people in your organization attend along with your project manager, this is an excellent opportunity to show your concern for the customer's satisfaction. Knowing that you will see the final product may also challenge your installers to do a better job and it shows you care. Often the problems that come up during this meeting are not the fault of our organization. They may be the result of design errors, equipment performance or last-minute format or menu changes by the client. Instead of being blamed for the problems, you can become the solution or at least get the "monkey off your back."

Skipping a follow-up inspection can be very expensive. You lose the opportunity for one final chance to show you are trying to satisfy your customer and that you care about them. You may very well lose profitable add-on sales for additional equipment, accessories, smallwares. On numerous occasions we have seen clients buy over \$100,000 worth of additional equipment based on a single quote from a competing dealer because of a few unresolved issues that weren't even the installing deal-

ers fault. The customer just assumed they didn't care or want their business.

The follow-up inspection also provides you with some frank feedback that will allow you to either praise or raise concerns about your own suppliers or installers. The information gained should also be shared with your staff, so everyone can learn from the ups and downs of the project, and problems don't get repeated.

The Referral

Assuming you've taken the ideas of this message to heart and your customer is satisfied, the follow-up inspection is a great time to ask for a written referral. In addition to providing a valuable sales tool, writing a referral will strengthen the client's

commitment to your organization. If you have a customer who doesn't like to write or is too busy, draft a letter of the project's specific accomplish-

ments and send it to them to revise. Most customers will react positively and reply.

Once you have a written referral, it's a lot harder for a new chef or manager to come on board and badmouth you or your company when you are going after other projects. If another customer hears a secondhand story from a competitor's salesman about problems on a prior project, faxing a copy of the referral should end the issue and diminish the competitor's credibility at the same time. □

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About The Author

Since 1983, Foster Frable, Jr., has been a principal with the White Plains, N.Y., foodservice consulting firm Clevenger Frable LaVallee, one of the nation's 10 largest foodservice consulting firms.