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Date: 2008-10-01

How to cut back on 'go-backs'

By Gero Sassenberg



Learn to avoid costly return trips to the job site

"Go-backs" are always a topic when I visit cabinetmakers. By definition it simply means how many times we have to go back to an install before the job is completed. Multiple trips to an install site clearly have a negative impact in terms of cost overruns as well as delays, and possible customer dissatisfaction. But when I question a cabinetmaker as to what the go-back rate is, I often receive a blank stare. The topic needs to be seriously addressed.

What causes go-backs?

Go-backs result from many factors, such as customer expectation not matching what is being delivered, changes in job details not communicated and systemic errors everywhere. To be sure, they are also because of poor material quality and perhaps bad workmanship. But most of all they are because of human frailty. When a combination of these elements functions perfectly, life is beautiful.

Another factor is installing into structures that are built to tolerances of plus-or-minus 1/2 inch with a product that is made to 1/64 of an inch, and with the dictum that things should look right. That really raises the bar.

Always be clear

Because the customer is king and always "right," the overcoming of this first hurdle has to be about absolute clarity at the outset. As cabinetmakers, we can visualize what a thing will look like. Most customers cannot.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Two-dimensional drawings are lines on paper and do not necessarily activate the 3-D simulation capability we have in our heads. A 3-D graphic presentation and a written contract are a must for reasons of clarity nowadays when we are daily presented with streaming images everywhere.

Accuracy avoids errors

The information from the customer and the installation site has to be interpreted into many parts with a high degree of accuracy and efficiency. Often this is left to one person under conditions of multi-tasking. This is a clear prescription for errors if not checked by another. We almost always look over an initial error made when checking the work ourselves.

Once the information is in the shop and production begins, most errors have already been made, resulting in 60 to 70 percent of go-backs. These errors are systemic by nature and not readily identified, but they are clearly the most important ones. The old adage that "all's well that ends well" may apply from a philosophical point of view, but does not bode well for efficiency and profit. In cabinetmaking the converse is true: If a thing starts bad it never stops being bad.

Right tasks, tools and flow

The rest of the go-backs are all about execution of the work designed and the data processed. Here it takes the right tool for the job at a dedicated work station and clear expectations of functionality for the avoidance of go-backs. Each task requires a dedicated skill set as determined by the owner. The quality of machinery and the proper work flow determine the outcome of a clean execution of the work to be done.

Finally, the culture of enabling workers and holding them accountable for their work will vastly contribute to the work delivered to the install site. Remember: What is delivered are only parts of a thing, but the installed product, once completed, is the only value being created.

Gero Sassenberg's experience in the woodworking industry spans more than 30 years on three continents. He is the lead field consultant for CabinetMaker Consulting. For more information about consulting services, phone 203.270.0025 or email wsampson@wattnet.net.

Updated: Oct 15, 2008