

The female persuasion: Can you talk the talk?



Better residential relationships are vital to building a great business.

by Lisa Wagner

Great customer communication is the best way to building a great business.



Wagner

And communicating effectively with women — the group that makes up the majority of your customers — is the most important aspect of building your business.

This fact was driven home recently when I hired two companies to provide cleaning services for my home.

The first company came in to clean my air ducts and change the heating, ventilation and air conditioning filters; the second, several days later, to clean my carpet and mattress and apply anti-allergen treatments.

Like most women I know, I clean to keep my home looking and feeling the way I want it.

And also, like most women I know, I

am “fearful” of unknown chemicals and sensitive to fragrance, so I am particular about whom I hire to work inside my home.

A man’s home is his castle, but a woman’s home is a part of her life

There are many emotions that come to a woman’s mind when bringing a service “stranger” into her home... and happiness is not one of them.

In fact, the biggest one is *fear*.

- Fear about whether she’s made the right choice
- Fear about whether this person can be trusted around her possessions, or around her family
- Fear about the chemicals and equipment being used
- Fear about whether what she’s paying for is really what she’s going to be getting
- Fear about whether this person will pay attention to the details that are important to her

A home is “personal” to a woman. It

is an extension of her, and a reflection of her.

The items she’s chosen over the years, from the furniture to the frames to

hang her kids’ photographs on the wall, were all made with

thoughtful consideration.

In most cases, she makes the decisions that affect your business.

In this industry where the majority of the technicians and owners are men, and the majority of the clients we deal



Important: You must make your customer comfortable and confident with your company.

with daily are women, these differences can be the source of struggles... and the source of successes.

Sweat the small stuff

A woman client can become your worst client just as easily as she can become your best client, and it all hinges on the small stuff — the details.

These aren't necessarily technical details; in most cases they are the relationship details.

And with the cleaning services I paid for, mentioned at the outset, I became a worst client to the air duct company and a best client to the carpet cleaning company.

I was the same "woman" on both days — what was different was how they treated me and my home.

A recent 'case study'

Calling for the duct cleaning appointment, the owner who answered the phone was distracted throughout our conversation.

Telephones were ringing, and I was interrupted twice so he could answer

The top three

"What top three things do you feel women clients are most concerned with regarding cleaning services in their home?"

Women owners and owner/operators from across the United States were asked that question, and the answers all fell into these three areas:

Appearance: Those surveyed said that the first impression is extremely important. If you work for a "cleaning" company, then your vans, your equipment, and your technicians should look CLEAN and professional.

Listen: Having someone listening to them and actually hearing what they are saying (and what they may not be saying) is important in building a positive and profitable experience. With the technicians some women in the industry employ who do not have strong people skills, they team them up with someone who does.

Trust: Will I be safe with this person in my home, and will the chemicals being used be safe for my family and me? These are huge, often unasked questions in most women's minds. Give them peace of mind through showing them your professionalism — from arriving on time, to the technical certifications you hold, to the respect and courtesy you exhibit to them and their possessions, to the cleaning job you actually do.

— L.W.

another call and talk in the background.

In case you're wondering how to always make a woman feel extremely unimportant, cut her off and let her know that another call may be more important!

Normally this would have been enough to make me call someone else, but this was a referral and I honestly didn't know whom else to call... so I was patient.

I set up my appointment. It went downhill from there.

A job gets ugly, and then uglier

The technician team arrived late despite the two-hour arrival time appointment I was given.

They showed up in an unmarked and dirty van, and with no official company uniforms.

They were subcontractors and, if I had known this, I would have never hired them.

They may have been techni-

cally trained and good people, but from a business standpoint the message to me when someone is a subcontractor instead of an employee is that the company is trying to cut their compensation to labor as much as they can.

It tells me there will be a push for more sales just to help these guys make a decent living, and that they are probably extremely overbooked.

My radar went up immediately that they were going to try to work as fast as possible and sell as much as possible — which put me on the defensive and made me watch every single movement in every single room.

Getting ready for the bomb to drop

They removed the vents, and proceeded to clean the ducts.

They man-handled my furniture by pushing it around with the same hands they were wiping their sweaty brows.

You may tell me that women have never come out and complained to you about this... but you might have no idea how nervous a woman can be when she

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has two strange men in her home and she's all alone with them.

They were done in about 30 minutes, and then came the upselling. The lead technician wanted to spray a sanitizing solution into my air ducts.

The price wasn't very high, but I asked what I think anyone conscious about chemicals in their home would've asked — what is it, and is it safe?

The fear of the unknown

The tech said he had never had a problem with the solution before, and that the air duct cleaning job he had just done for me wasn't really going to help my home unless I got the sanitizing solution sprayed through the home.

For all I know, it could have just been

It's harder to sell to women, but once she's bought from you she'll be more loyal and will refer three times as many people to your business as men will.

— Bill Yeadon, *Jon-Don instructor, from his Marketing to Women segment of the Strategies for Success program*

water being sprayed in the ducts, or it could have been something toxic that I'd be breathing.

So, I did something he didn't expect from me: I asked for the material safety data sheet (MSDS). And when he didn't know what MSDS meant, I decided to transition from this company's cleaning client, to this company's migraine of the day.

Beware of angry women!

I didn't get angry with the workers.

I could tell when talking with them

that they didn't have the training that professionals should be given, and that company owners should value.

They were cheap labor working for even cheaper owners.

I had them wait while I called the main office to ask

what ingredients were in the "mystery solution" that the men said they go and fill up their "jug" with each morning.

The man who answered the phone couldn't tell me what it was, but told me: "I assure you it is safe."

I asked for the owner, and asked for the MSDS to be faxed to me. They had none.

Then I proceeded to tell him that government regulations require that all chemicals must have a MSDS accessible for any requests or emergencies.

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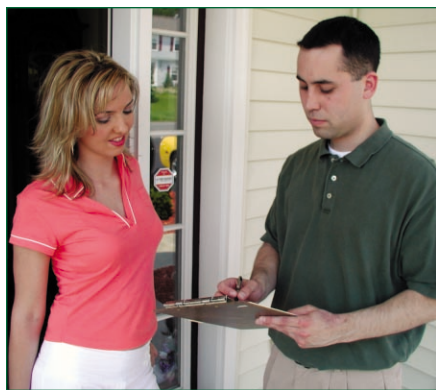
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Sincere communication builds better business relationships.

I told him I operate a rug cleaning business and know what rules I am required to follow, and that he was certainly in violation of the Occupational, Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regardless of whether or not he was using subcontractors.

Phew... end of the job

I tipped the guys even though they didn't move my furniture back. I didn't want more dirty fingerprints on them.

It wasn't their fault that they were stuck working for an unethical company.

I did, however, call my Realtor friend to let him know that if he ever referred this company again I would unleash my wrath on him in some creative but destructive way. Hey — what are friends for?

I did tell dozens of people during the following weeks that this company was one to stay away from.

I did file a consumer complaint to a consumer advocacy group in our city.

Small mistakes created more than just an unhappy client. It created a loss of one of their strongest referral sources, and other costs that are certainly on the way.

The next experience

The carpet cleaning experience ended up being a night-and-day comparison.

The phone appointment made with the woman who handles their scheduling was more than pleasant.

We chatted about what I wanted done, and then chatted about other things as well that had absolutely nothing to do about the job.

The owner of the company was a Carpet & Fabricare Institute member, and his son would be performing the work.

Both are certified to the hilt, and they

gave me an exact time he would be arriving.

Half an hour before arriving, the son called from his mobile phone to let me know he was going to be a little early and to see if that was okay.

It was a great way to start off.

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**A better job begins:
This is what women want!**

The box van pulled up, clean and clearly marked.

The tech was in uniform, and also clean-cut (no untucked shirt, no un-

shaven face, no smelling like smoke or anything worse).

He came to the door first to meet me and talk about the job, as opposed to dragging out the equipment right away and rushing to begin.

He asked if it was OK to come inside and walk around with me, and we pro-

**Technical skills
are important,
but people
skills are vital**

From the first initial scheduling contact on the phone, to the final contact in the follow-up quality control call, having employees who work on creating good feelings between their women clients and their company is a win-win for all sides.

It makes these clients more comfortable during the entire experience, and more confident that they have hired the best company for their home's needs.

Most businesses in just about every industry have mediocre to horrible customer service, and so it does not take much to shine and set you apart from everyone else.

— L.W.

ceeded to walk throughout the house, and he did what every woman likes — he asked questions and then patiently listened to me answer them. (We love that!)

We spent about twenty minutes talking.

He asked what my concerns were, and I told him.

I was concerned about the chemicals being used. I was concerned about my allergies. I was concerned about dust in the air.

He proceeded to tell me every single step he would be taking, to address every concern I mentioned, and what equipment and solutions he would be using.

He stressed the environmentally-friendly, people-friendly products he would be using, and that he would be using an air scrubber to clean the air as it circulated around during the dry time.

He let me know how long the process would take to do, and how

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long the air movers and scrubber would need to be on.

He told me everything that I wanted to know, and made sure all my questions were answered by always asking "do you have any other questions or concerns?"

What is 20 minutes really worth to your business?

I'm much more educated in this industry than most homeowners you are going to work with.

I'm certified in carpet and upholstery cleaning, and I helped to write portions of the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning and Restoration (IICRC) rug cleaning certification exam.

I knew what he was going to do and why.

I knew what equipment and chemicals he'd be using because I had specifically scheduled a hot water extraction cleaning using specific procedures.

He spent twenty minutes talking with me, but there was nothing that he learned during that conversation that was going to change what he was planning on already doing.

Not a single thing.

But I'll tell you what it did. It made me feel that he knew exactly what I wanted, and it made me feel that he would be treating my home — essential-

ly a part of me — with great care.

Impress the customer with 'small stuff'

Then he reinforced this feeling with a sequence of important "small" stuff.

- He brought in corner guards to protect walls from any marks from his hoses
- He brought in tarps to cover up my bookshelves, and to protect certain pieces of furniture
- He brought in hangers to lift up and pull away the curtains and sheers in my bedroom so they wouldn't get damp
- He placed tarps along the hard floors to protect them

Once I saw this — I was sold.

I knew I could leave my house and it would be in good hands. I had no need at all to stay and keep an eye on him.

Twenty minutes was worth it for him to freely be able to practice his craft, and to give me peace of mind.

I went to my favorite café with my laptop to write a rug article, and didn't think about my cleaning job again until he gave me a call a few hours later when he was finishing up.

Not only did he do everything he said he would, but he also cleaned the bench at the foot of my bed (which we had not discussed) and all of my door mats at no extra charge.

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My mattress and pillows, and my freshly cleaned carpet were all drying. He told me how long to keep the air movers on, and gave me some booties to put over my shoes so I could walk around my house during the dry time.

It was a great job, and a really great in-home experience which I shared with everyone I talked with that week.

It boosted the number of referrals I had already been giving to them because I was eager to tell others about the job.

It also impressed me enough to send a thank you card with a certificate for Outback Steakhouse to him.

He called to thank me later, and said he ate the largest steak ever.

How this benefits you — the cleaner

I don't know how many men — when they are happy with a cleaning job — run around to tell friends and strangers about it... but *women* tell.

Especially if someone from an industry known for its lack of service delivers way beyond expectations.

This one happy client (me) will be worth thousands of dollars to this particular cleaning company... and all it cost was

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Women cleaners speak out

I know how I feel when I have a service person come out to my home — I'm terrified, skeptical, and uncomfortable. I'm sure that women who call our company feel the same way. Being a woman does give me an advantage (in communicating with clients) in that I know what is really behind the questions they are or aren't asking.

— *Laura Bankston, co-owner of
EnviroCare Professional Cleaning, Anchorage, AK*

During the job we pay attention to details. We may go out of the way to clean something extra like entryway mats or rugs. We put runners down to protect any surface that we are not cleaning to protect their investment in the home. We ask questions like "Are there any spots or areas you are concerned about?" After the job we thank our customers for letting us work for them, we leave them after-care tips, thank you cards and, of course, clean carpets.

— *Shirley Andersen, Minnesota
Steamway, Saint Cloud (mother)*

If I didn't have the proper training, knowledge, chemicals and equipment it would definitely make this job much harder. Physically it sometimes gets a little challenging after working what (mom and I) call a "marathon" now and then... but I have to say what one carpet layer told me and I agree with. He told me "Take your time doing the job right first time around. It's the extra time and care you give to the customer that will make you stand out from the rest.

— *Neva Andersen, Minnesota
Steamway, Saint Cloud (daughter)*

Women want to know what you are doing and why. When I talk to them about their rugs or carpet, I talk on a level they can relate to no matter what they do for a living. I explain wool as an animal hair, just like our hair. I explain the carpet or upholstery cleaning process step by step equal to the steps in doing laundry. I go over the post-cleaning steps before I leave and ask them to please call me if they have any questions about their textiles. They are comfortable in the presence of a woman.

— *Linda Plunkett, owner/president of
AWPOV Rug Specialist, Inc., Brooksville, FL*

— *L.W.*

twenty "non-working" minutes and little extras that reinforced his respect for my home. □

Lisa Wagner and her mother Kate own K. Blatchford's Oriental Rug Cleaning, Repair and Restoration in San Diego. Lisa is a business consultant, rug care instructor, and author of the Rug Secrets' Rug Shop Success program. For more information about her Rug Secrets' program, you can visit her website at www.rugsecrets.com.