

Be **HONEST** With Your Customers— Especially When It's Difficult

By **Tim Reed**

As human beings, one of our deepest instincts is to do whatever it takes to get out of a tricky situation. Whether the choice is to fight, to lie, to cheat, or to run, we all know the crippling pressure—and irrational desire for immediate action—that comes when our backs are against the wall.

And while this instinct may be helpful in extreme cases of life and death, for most situations that leaders in our industry deal with daily, it generally isn't.

When we find ourselves in a difficult spot with our customers, how do we handle it? Are we the kind of people—or the kind of companies—that operate with virtue and honesty? Or do we prioritize to self-preservation above all else?

Think about it: When was the last time you told a “little white lie” to a customer on the showroom floor? Or the last time a sales rep brushed over the uncomfortable truth to spin a yarn of company propaganda for their dealer? Or the last time an installer crew covered up a mistake they made before the homeowner was able to see it?

At its core, I believe that regardless of what's said, most companies mold their employees—consciously or unconsciously—to act as if we're adversaries with our customers. Our job, then, is to do what it takes to get paid and get out.

On the Job Training

Early in my career, I'll never forget walking into a customer's house after getting a part out of the service truck only to have the lead installer shush me as he beckoned me over to the corner to try and help him fix a mistake that he made before the customer could see it.

“When we find ourselves in a difficult spot with our customers, how do we handle it?”

Later on, another upset customer asked me to come back out to the house after we had just installed a gas insert. When I arrived at the home and saw the dented surround panel on the insert, it was clear that the installers found the freight damage but didn't want to deal with a return trip, so they just installed it and hoped the customer wouldn't catch it.

Over time, these situations rubbed off into my character, and I can shamefully remember visiting a job site where the fireplace front wasn't fitting due to an installation issue and carefully jockeying the fireplace front so it covered the



gaps—hoping and praying that no one would ever bump the decorative front and expose the gap that wasn't supposed to be there.

Each of these situations reinforces a belief that taking care of ourselves comes above all else and assumes that our customers (who are *obviously* less important than we are) simply exist to keep us in business.

When we train our people this way, is it any wonder that they don't prioritize our customers' needs the way that they should?

Personally, I'm still unlearning many of these bad habits that were ingrained in my character early on, but one thing I've found is that a relentless—and public—commitment to the truth can create incredible buy-in from team members and deep loyalty with customers.

The truth is unbiased and inconvenient, but being honest with your customers—especially when it's difficult—will set you apart from everyone else who doesn't value them enough to share what's actually going on.

Treat Your Partners the Way You Want to Be Treated

Would you want a home service company to cover up the fact that they cut a corner on your project even though "it still turned out okay"?

How would you feel if you knew a salesperson stretched the truth about the features of a \$7,000 appliance you were buying?

We all know what it's like for someone to pull the wool over our eyes in order to take advantage of a situation—and it isn't fun. Given that, we can't use these types of tactics if we believe that our customers have the same dignity, value, and worth that we do.

The Wise Teacher said to treat other people the way that we ourselves want to be treated—and this rule, while much easier said than done, can fundamentally transform our business if we follow it.

A couple of years ago, one of my friend's best employees was hired away by one of the top manufacturers that he sold in his store. This left him in a terrible spot—he was heading into the busiest part of the season without a key member of his leadership team. To make matters worse, the manufacturer never even approached him about it. And if the foolishness of this doesn't shock you already, this team member who left my friend's business was now his new sales rep trying to sell him more products from the company that cared so little about his business.

As I listened to all of this in disbelief, I remember my friend saying, "I guess this just shows what they really think of me."

Even in difficult situations, when we treat people the way that we want to be treated, more often than not, good things follow.

"Even in difficult situations, when we treat people the way that we want to be treated, more often than not, good things follow."

Whether it's an installation mistake, an oversight on the sales floor, or a situation between a manufacturer and a retailer, we have the choice to ascribe dignity and value to our customers or indifference and disdain.

And, while it isn't easy, starting an email, phone call, or text message with these phrases can lead to incredible trust and growth:

- "I'm really sorry about this . . ."
- "We made a mistake and I wanted you to know about it . . ."
- "Something went wrong, and we're trying to figure it out . . ."
- "This is going to be a difficult conversation, but it's one that we need to have . . ."
- "I dropped the ball on this and would like to make it right . . ."

By treating our customers the way that we would want to be treated if we ourselves were a customer, we do right by them. And doing right by your customers will create loyalty and trust for your brand.

The Cost of Dishonesty

There's a way that may seem right to a business at the moment, but in the end leads to certain death. This paraphrase of ancient wisdom literature highlights the fact that in the heat of the moment, when our backs are against the wall, the price of honesty often seems too high.

But that's just the lizard brain telling us to run—to do whatever it takes to get out of the situation and deal with the consequences later.

When a business continues to spin the truth, hide things from customers, and fall back on the company line, it starts to corrode trust. Slowly and gradually, the foundation of goodwill that attracted customers in the first place hollows away until, just like a home with a rotten frame, the business falls with a great crash.

And, while the price of honesty is high, the cost of dishonesty is even higher in the end.

In my company, Matt Bradley is the champion of honesty—always pulling back the curtains to let in some light and expose what's actually going on. And I can't tell you how frustrating—and incredible—it is to have someone who cares more about our customers' well-being than our short-term profit.

"In the end, we have to decide whether we're after short-term revenue or long-term partnership."



In your business, empower your people to tell the truth. Celebrate them when they do; punish them when they don't. Hold everyone accountable to it and never let up.

Because companies that publicly champion honesty with their partners have a self-correcting mechanism to improve.

When we're honest about the way that things are, we can make them better. When we cover it up or fall back on company propaganda, we stay mired in complacency, and eventually, the market will pass us by.

“**There's no fear when you're living in the light.**”

Confessions of a Recovering Liar

The reason this hits so hard for me is because I know my heart.

I know that, when my back's against the wall, everything in me screams to do whatever it takes to get myself away.

When left to my own devices, I'll choose self-preservation every time.

But that's not the life I want to lead—or the company that I want to run.

By staking the claim that we will be honest with our partners—especially when it's difficult—I've found that, more often than I'd like to admit, the only thing that keeps me honest in difficult moments is the public declaration that we will do so. It's like a light in the darkness guiding me toward the right decision, even when everything else inside is pulling me away.

And, while I've failed more times than I can count, choosing honesty above fabrication has led to incredible relationships with customers who have helped me get better than I ever could have on my own. It's also helped me understand the market—and our industry—in ways that would not have been possible without difficult conversations and admissions of failure on my part. And it's reminded me that there's no fear when you're living in the light.

To be clear, this isn't easy. Because the truth shows our frailty and weakness. But I'm learning day by day that true power is only perfected in weakness.