

CASE 32

"Well, Excuuuse Me!"

Background Information

Samson and Son Plumbing recently received a copy of the letter below from Alan Johnson. The contents of the summary mentioned in the letter are presented on the following pages.

ALAN JOHNSON
123 Oak Lane
Arlington, ST 55546

February 10, 1994

Owner or President
Samson and Son Plumbing
6660 Dobbin Road
Arlington, ST 55546

Dear Owner:

My wife and I recently used your business services. It was a very unsatisfactory experience, and I want you to know why we will never use S&S Plumbing again. Furthermore, we will also go out of our way to counsel friends and acquaintances to avoid using your services.

I prepared the enclosed summary of what happened during that service visit so that I would have a record of my experiences. I offer it to you for your information. No reply is, of course, necessary and would be in character with the quality of service received to date.

A very unhappy customer,

/s/ Alan Johnson

Enclosure

After recently refinishing our main bathroom and installing a new toilet, we found three remaining problems: the new toilet wobbled, the shower cut-off knob dripped, and a water stain appeared on the basement ceiling tiles, underneath the bathroom. Because we had a coupon ad from your business, I called your office around 9:00 a.m. The woman with whom I talked was very nice, and I was pleased to learn that a plumber could come that afternoon. She called me back later that afternoon to confirm that the plumbers would arrive sometime soon.

Within half an hour or so, the doorbell rang. I opened the door to find two men waiting. I said hello and invited them into the house. The taller, younger of the two said, "S&S Plumbing." The second, older man followed him in, but made no eye contact or any other acknowledgement. Both men stood in the foyer, waiting impatiently, communicating an attitude of "Don't mess with me. Just hurry up and move it." They did not introduce themselves further or make any conversation. After no more than 30 seconds of being exposed to them, I was uneasy.

I asked: "Did they tell you what we need?"

The younger man grunted some sort of noncommittal response. There was still no comment or acknowledgement from the other man.

I continued: "Well, let me show you the projects we have in mind." I led them into the bathroom around the corner. As I started to explain what we wanted, the older, silent man walked over to the box containing the shower fixture replacement kit we had purchased. Without any comment, he opened the box and began taking it apart. He had still not looked at or said anything to me.

I was becoming more and more irked.

Without saying a word, the younger partner walked out of the bathroom and began to search for the access box to the shower pipes. He looked in the closet, which was loaded with coats. He started walking back towards the bathroom.

When he finally did speak to me, his voice was just barely audible, and at first I thought he was talking to his associate. His tone was domineering and abrasive. Because at first I didn't know he was talking to me, I didn't hear exactly what he was saying, but it was something to the effect that I had to move those coats. It came across as an insulting command.

I wheeled around and said pointedly, "Are you talking to me?" By now, I was mad and was deciding whether to throw these bozos out of the house. We all froze.

I think that the younger man may have realized that a problem was developing, and his demeanor softened slightly. I waited, then decided to go ahead. I led the younger man downstairs to see the water damage on the ceiling tiles and told him I would be removing the ceiling tiles and replacing them while he and his partner worked upstairs.

They removed their tools and supplies from their truck, then began working. During the next half hour or so, I could hear them talking to—or rather arguing with—each other. The younger man seemed to be making argumentative, belittling remarks to the other man, who seemed to be doing his work. The quarrel seemed to revolve around how to remove the plaster standing around the pipes—whether they should just go ahead and "knock the crap" out of the plas-

ter, ignoring any other consequences, or should take a more gentle approach. It occurred to me that the reason they may have been so rude was because they simply didn't like each other. Whatever the reason, it was extremely unpleasant to have to listen to them work together.

After about 20 or 30 minutes, the older man came downstairs and, for the first time, talked to me. He said there was a problem. I followed him upstairs and found the younger man sitting cross-legged in front of the access box, gently chiseling away the plaster caked around the pipes. The older man explained that they had to remove the plaster in order to install the new fixture. However, there was a "50-50 chance" that the tiles in the shower stall might be knocked loose in the process. He wanted to know whether I would authorize them to proceed.

I asked him how difficult it would be to reset the loose tiles. He said it could be tough going and costly. I was not encouraged and wondered whether I wanted these guys doing this work. On the other hand, I knew the fixture had to be replaced, the plumbers were here, and the plaster was definitely caked around the pipes. So I told him to go ahead with the work.

The older man started to walk away. I asked whether it would make sense to put a towel in the tub to catch any falling tile. He said that if they fell, they would probably break, but then he shrugged his shoulders and added, "Why not?" Otherwise, he was completely indifferent to the tile problem. It was as if he were saying to me: "Tile is someone else's problem, like yours. It's not mine. If we break 'em, we break 'em."

After putting a towel in the tub, I left the bathroom, expecting them to break three or four tiles and leave me with holes in the shower. I returned to my work downstairs, dejected and angry. They continued working together and arguing. I concluded that the fate of my bathroom tiles was in the hands of men who could care less. They were more interested in doing the job fast than in protecting my property. I thought of what it would be like to be in the hands of a doctor who was more concerned about making a 3:00 p.m. tee-off date at the golf course than about attending fully to my needs.

During this time, I would occasionally go upstairs to see how things were going. On one visit, I found, much to my surprise and relief, that there were no missing tiles in the tub. It would have been nice if the plumbers had let me know.

I returned to my work downstairs. The two men upstairs seemed to be working together more smoothly, and I began to sense that they were finishing up. At one point, the older man came down to look at the ceiling/bathroom drainage problem, but did not look at it again.

Finally, the younger man called to me from upstairs. He had a dust pan in hand. The closet had been returned to a normal state, the tools and equipment were gone, and the older man was in the truck. The younger man, much more personable now, indicated they were finished. He seemed like he was ready to go, so I asked him whether I should pay him or send a check to S&S. He replied that the other guy was in the truck, writing up the bill. I followed him outside, thanking him for the work and apologizing for our old and difficult plumbing. He laughed it off, saying that it was not my fault.

I went back inside and looked in the bathroom. There was still a lot of crumbled plaster lying in the tub. The nozzle flange around the showerhead was hanging loose, and I could see small cracks in two pieces of tile near the handles. The towel I had placed in the tub was still sitting there, soggy and dirty. I waited in the kitchen.

The older man returned with the bill. He led me to the bathroom and explained that they had reseated the toilet in order to stop the leak into the basement. He told me to caulk around the base of the toilet as a way to anchor it to the floor. He also told me to caulk around each of the collars around the faucet, handles, and showerhead. He also suggested using caulk on the cracks in the tile.

I pointed out to him the loose collar around the showerhead. He jiggled the head, showing me for the first time that the head itself was still somewhat loose. He advised filling the hole with caulk and then trying to sit the collar to the wall.

We chatted while I wrote the check. He handed me a copy of the invoice, and after a few more pleasantries, he left.

After my wife returned, we noticed that the pipes throughout the house sounded funny. (Obviously, during the course of the installation, it was necessary for them to cut off the main water supply.) We think—and hope—that this problem is just a temporary one due to air in the pipes. However, the plumbers left without either advising us about this or, even worse, making sure there was no problem.

Here's the outcome. The new shower fixture was installed, but at the cost of two new small cracks in shower tiles. This scenario was explained to me in advance. However, to complete the installation, it is now my job to buy caulk and put some around the collars and the toilet. The collar around the showerhead hung loose, and the showerhead itself was loose. The tub was left dirty, although the closet was cleaned. The toilet now has a new seal, but it is not clear whether that will fix the leak onto the basement ceiling. I had a very unpleasant and stressful time working with these two guys.

CASE QUESTIONS

1. What should the owner of the company do upon receiving this letter?
2. Prepare a service quality training plan for plumbers.
3. What kind of management practices should be instituted to create and maintain service quality?

CASE DISCUSSION: **"Well, Excuuuse Me!"**

Summary

The owner of the Samson and Son Plumbing Company received a letter from a very unhappy customer, Alan Johnson. Included with the letter was a summary of his experience with the plumbing service he had received at his house. The customer promised never to use their services again and that he would advise others to do the same.

As Alan explained it, he had several problems that needed a plumber's attention after he and his wife remodeled their bathroom. When he called Samson and Son, Alan was pleased to learn that the company could send a plumber to his house that afternoon.

When Alan answered the front door, there were two plumbers there. They were less than polite as they entered the house, and were unresponsive and rude to Alan as he showed them the bathroom projects. After a very short time, Alan was just about ready to tell them to leave because of their attitudes and behavior. The younger man, who was doing all the talking, was abrasive and dictatorial. The older man made no contact with Alan at all.

Alan finished showing the the tasks to be done, then went downstairs to do some work on his own. He heard the men working together, apparently in an abusive and argumentative fashion. Alan began to think that they did not like each other.

At one point, the older man told Alan that there could be a problem on one project: Some tiles might be knocked loose, and they wanted his approval to proceed. Alan, feeling little choice in this bad situation, said to go ahead with the work. He expected disaster.

Finally, after about an hour and a half, the plumbers finished. They were more cordial now. However, Alan noticed that parts of the job were still left undone and that they had only partially cleaned up after their work. The older man, presenting the bill to Alan, indicated what Alan could do to fix the problems. The plumbers then left.

Answers to the Case Questions

1. What should the owner of the company do upon receiving this letter?

First, he should call Alan Johnson and apologize. He should also offer to send over his best plumber at a time of the customer's choosing to examine the unfinished work and complete it at no charge.

Some service specialists recommend stronger actions, like a partial or full refund or a voucher good for an equal amount of service at a future date. The owner should follow this communication with a letter of apology.

Second, he should ask the two plumbers to describe what happened during the visit before showing them the letter. When he has heard their explanations, he should let them read the letter and ask for their reactions.

Barring a convincing rebuttal from them, the owner should clearly communicate that their behavior was inappropriate and unsatisfactory. Suitable disciplinary action may be indicated, which might include a personnel letter of apology from each to Alan Johnson.

The owner's third step should be to review his company's customer service training programs. These employees should be required to attend the training. The owner should make sure the training is being conducted effectively for all applicable employees.

2. Prepare a service quality training plan for plumbers.

The training plan should be designed around the "moments of truth" or points of contact that the service personnel have with the customer. This begins with the phone call requesting service and extends through the post-service call assessment.

The training should establish a procedure for greeting the customer (on the phone or in person), for listening to customer service requests, for clarifying what the service will involve (including time involved, materials needed and costs, potential hazards, and so forth), for cleaning up after the job is finished, and for checking up on the level of customer satisfaction after the service is completed. The training should also include instruction in how to maintain a pleasant working climate (including how to handle disputes if there are two or more plumbers present) and how to resolve difficult customer situations. The training should combine standards of performance with practice exercises for each of these skills.

3. What kind of management practices should be instituted to create and maintain service quality?

There are several steps which the owner should take:

1. The selection practices used to hire plumbers should be evaluated to make sure that there is adequate attention to customer service skills (either in terms of hiring criteria or in terms of expected job performance if hired).
2. The owner should make sure all customer contact and service personnel receive adequate training.
3. A process of regular customer satisfaction assessment should be instituted after a service call. This could take the form of a leave-behind customer satisfaction mailer or a call from the office the next day. This information should be reviewed promptly by a senior official.
4. There should be some process in place for a supervisor to make spot inspections/visits to work sites to see how the plumbers are performing.

Beyond these immediate management actions, the management of the business needs to send clear signals to all employees that quality customer service is essential and a top priority. Senior management can do this in little ways—through the actions noted above and through such

things as employee recognition and reward programs that reinforce service excellence, regular training, management involvement in customer satisfaction reports, and the like. One very important way that management can signal the importance of quality service is through how it pays people. Incentive compensation programs that reward quality service is a powerful way for a company to put money where its mouth is.