

► **Keeping it Civil** by Wendy Cole, Senior Editor, *REALTOR Magazine* **Realtor Magazine October 2010**

The best way to deal with difficult customers is to communicate expectations up front. But if the going gets tough, you've got to know how to respond.

If you're like many real estate brokers and salespeople, you joined the profession because you enjoy working with people. You thrive on helping customers find their dream home or accomplish a successful sale.

Yet, once in a while, a difficult customer will come along, forcing you to rethink whether you're really a "people person" after all.

Maybe it's a couple of buyers whom you've accompanied to dozens of showings but who still won't give any indication that they're going to make a decision soon. Or an unrealistic seller who's fixed on what his house was worth in 2005 and won't accept a penny below that figure.

In today's tough market, you may be more willing than usual to deal with these troublesome clients because there are simply fewer buyers and sellers out there from which to choose. But the fact is that you and your sales force don't have to be a doormat.

By communicating your expectations up front and having a clear plan for responding when something goes awry, you'll reduce frustrations across the board.

Prepare for Peace in Advance

After too many experiences with customers who tested her patience and confidence, Erica Cuneen, SFR, broker-owner of Beyond Properties in Oak Park, Ill., tried a new technique for preventing most conflicts from happening—or at least keeping them from escalating into full-blown battles.

While attending a business workshop several years ago, she learned about a Blueprint of WE Collaboration Document, developed by business consultant Maureen McCarthy and her husband Zelle Nelson of Flat Rock, N.C. The document, available at www.stateofgracedocument.com, can be customized to communicate your expectations, interaction styles, time frames, and conflict-resolution techniques to clients at the start of the relationship.

"It's a great tool for gauging at the front end whether a business relationship will work," Cuneen says.

"Sometimes I realize that it's better not to go forward with someone. If it's going to be really hard to work together, it's just not worth the money."

In her document, Cuneen provides a frank assessment of her working style, warts and all: "I like to call myself a butterfly," Cuneen writes. "I say this because it puts my flitting from one project to the next in a better light. The good news is that I am a great multitasker. The bad news is that I sometimes get a little unorganized." She

also lays out the warning signs that her stress level is rising: "If I feel crunched for time or I have too many balls in the air, I will get impatient if things are taking too long or if we are wasting time by getting off task."

Honesty Is the Best Policy

The idea of revealing such personality quirks may sound unsettling to some, but Cuneen says the Blueprint of WE tends to promote a sense of openness and trust with her clients and colleagues.

Cuneen encourages prospective clients to fill out the document, disclosing the same sorts of revelations about their personalities and expectations. It's not mandatory, but she says most clients do go through the process. And when they do, she learns valuable information about their behavior and hot-button issues. "I would have avoided a lot of problems with hypercritical sellers and overly demanding buyers if I had had this before," she says.

McCarthy says there's value in addressing the potential for conflict at the beginning of a client relationship. "If something doesn't happen as quickly as clients want or doesn't turn out as they expected, part of their brain can shut off and they're not as compassionate or understanding as they might otherwise be," she says.

Reaction Is Everything

Sometimes, even with clients who've been a dream to work with, a high-tension scenario will arise. In the worst case, it's your fault. But in any case, you need to know how to react. What do you do to restore balance?

"Offer an apology when you've made a mistake," says business development consultant Maribeth Kuzmeski, author of *The Connectors: How the World's Most Successful Businesspeople Build Relationships and Win Clients for Life* (Wiley, 2009). "Then make things right with a peace offering. It doesn't need to be extravagant. It can be as simple as a handwritten note or a coupon."

Regardless of who's at fault, if a client is blazing mad your instinct may be to argue back, Kuzmeski says. But that's a big mistake. Resist the temptation to explain why you're right or why they're overreacting.

"Fighting anger with anger seldom works," she says. "No matter how tough it is, do the opposite of what you feel like doing. Take a deep breath and remain calm."

The same strategy applies when a client comes to you to complain about one of your agents. "Ask what you can do to resolve the issue and be sincere," says Scott Cary, a sales manager with PMZ Real Estate in Oakdale, Calif. "Many times, the client is right for being angry. So it may come down to you taking the client's side over the agent's."

Kuzmeski notes how important it is for you to be accountable on behalf of the brokerage. Take responsibility—even if you feel you haven't done anything wrong—and offer solutions, she says. "You can't control the way your client is going to act, but you can control your own actions. If you're reasonable, your client will eventually come around."

Handling Difficult Clients on the Phone

Have you ever had a phone call with an irate client who doesn't really seem to care about what you have to say? You may be tempted to hang up the phone, but don't do it.

You risk losing not only their business but also potential business from their sphere of influence, says former real estate professional Jeremy Blanton, cofounder of 210 Consulting-Social Media Advisors. Talking on the phone presents extra challenges because you're unable to assess body language or use facial expressions to communicate.

To dial back the tensions, Blanton offers these five tips:

- 1. When on the phone with angry people, let them do the talking.** Sometimes they just need to blow off steam and get what has been on their chest for the past week out in the open. If you begin cutting them off, you'll just increase their anger about the situation.
- 2. Don't argue.** No matter how wrong people may be, if you challenge what they're saying and argue with them on the phone, you'll never make progress toward solving the problem. Instead, you'll intensify the situation, and they may hang up on you. Try to remain calm and see their point of view.
- 3. Show sincerity and concern.** The age-old saying "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" is key to problem-solving, Blanton says. They want you to acknowledge that their problem is a big deal to them; they don't just want you to tell them what you're going to do.
- 4. Don't patronize.** Don't try to fake your attitude by behaving in a way that seems to be kind and friendly but nevertheless shows that you're being condescending. People hate that and can pick up on it almost instantly.
- 5. Lead them to the answer.** "My father tells me constantly that it's not always right to be right," Blanton says. When dealing with difficult people on the phone, if you can lead them to the answer and allow them to discover it on their own, it will make them feel better. You may have to eat a sizeable piece of humble pie when they tell you that they figured it out, but at least they'll end the call feeling good instead of wanting to torpedo the business relationship. Remember, it's not about you; it's about them.

Create Your Own Blueprint

The goal of the Blueprint of WE, developed by business consultant Maureen McCarthy and her husband Zelle Nelson, is to build and maintain healthier relationships—both business and personal. The document, they say, should "enable day-to-day interactions to be more effortless, more graceful."

Ideally, you complete the document with input from your clients or business partners, capturing personal preferences and expectations and a "path back to peace" in case a disagreement occurs. The document should be updated as the relationship evolves.

Here are the five Components:

- 1. The Story of Us.** What draws each individual to the situation? How did the relationship come about? What qualities do you admire in the other person? You can reflect back on this "story" when the going gets tough as a reminder of why you're there.

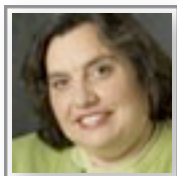
2. Interaction Styles and Warning Signs. This should be a "blueprint" of each individual in the relationship. Describe how you work best and what the other person can expect from you on a good day or a bad day. Do you need to work from an agenda? Are you high-energy? Do you lean toward the optimistic? Also, what are the behaviors that you exhibit when things aren't going well?

3. Expectations. Include core values, important timelines, and the mutually agreed-upon duties that you and the other person will seek to accomplish as part of the relationship.

4. Questions to Return to Peace. To shorten the frequency and intensity of difficult times, list questions that you and the other person will ask each other as you try to resolve a disagreement. For example: "What do you need from me right now?" "What are you afraid of?" and "What do I gain by continuing or ending this relationship?"

5. Short and Long-Term Agreements. What will happen if you and the other person are unable to "return to peace"? Explain how you will end the relationship and what you agree to do afterwards. For example: "We will not speak negatively about each other or do outright harm to one another."

Learn more and download sample documents at www.blueprintofwe.com.



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