

Professionalism



The Goal

Clients know how they are treated. If they are treated well, they will use your services. If they feel they are treated poorly, they can easily take their business elsewhere. Your clients are purchasing more than your product or service. They are doing business with a company that appreciates them and treats them well. Clients will often seek out a particular company and pay more money for their product or service based upon how well they are treated. Clients who are not satisfied with your service can go somewhere else.

The goal for you in taking this course is learn how to better serve your clients by providing great customer service and using effective communication. Your clients, new and existing, will benefit from you taking this course. They will feel you treat them fairly, professionally and that you sincerely appreciate their business.



Satisfied Clients Talk

There are a few things required to provide great customer service, including effective communication and building relationships. When you provide excellent customer service, your clients will become a marketing tool for your business, an unpaid sales force. Customers talk. Satisfied clients who have a great experience with your company will tell 4 to 6 people on average. You can't pay for that type of word-of-mouth testimonial marketing!

Right now your clients are talking. What are your clients saying about you right now? They are telling others how your company treated them, whether you provided good customer service or bad customer service. Word-of-mouth marketing is happening all around you, all of the time, about you and every other business. The testimonials of clients should be treated like gold.

Professionalism

Satisfied clients tend to talk with others about businesses and service providers who treat their clients exceptionally well. When others hear great things about your company, they will be inclined to do business with you.

Social Proof

People look to others for guidance and will often make purchase decisions based upon what others say. This is often referred to as “social proof.” Clients feel reassured and often make decisions based upon what other people say about your company and services.

Increase your company’s “social proof” by showing on your website:

- Inspections most valued by our clients;
- “Clients who scheduled this inspection also ordered”; and
- Testimonials.

The best way to get the data required to display your company’s social proof is to:

- get *new* clients who love your services;
- maintain positive relationships with *existing* clients; and
- provide great customer service to *both*.



The Cost

Providing great customer service costs less than providing poor service. It costs more money in gaining brand new clients than it does to maintain a professional relationship with existing ones. According to the White House Office of Consumer Affairs, it costs five to six times as much to get a new (first time) client as it does to keep a current one. Satisfied clients tend to be loyal with businesses that provide consistent great customer service.

Businesses that provide extraordinary customer service can charge more, realize greater profits, increase market share, and will have clients who are willingly pay more for their services.

Customer service involves doing things right. When a service provider performs poorly, which might include making a serious mistake or error, it costs money to recover and make the client whole again. It is important to perform at a level of high quality service. Learning customer service techniques increases productivity and efficiency. It’s important to do the job correctly the first time, rather spend time, money and resources to fix problems. A dissatisfied client costs a lot more money to make happy than getting it right the first time and satisfying the client from the very beginning.

Customer Service on the Decline

Customer service in most industries is not very good, and it keeps getting worse. The standard of providing great customer service has been lost. Treating your clients well should be the standard in every business.

According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI.org,) the customer service index has been dropping for over a decade for many industries, including restaurants; department stores; property and casualty insurance. ACSI reports scores on a 0-100 scale at the national level and produces indexes for 10 economic sectors, 45 industries (including e-commerce and e-business), and more than 225 companies and federal or local government agencies. The overall customer satisfaction index for all industries is only 75, and across most industries customer satisfaction continues to drop.

Think Like a Customer

When was the last time you experienced exceptional customer service? Think about the last time you experienced really bad customer service. It's likely that you have stronger memories of the bad customer service experiences than good ones.

So, what's happening to customer service? Imagine yourself as a customer. Think about how many different businesses you encounter as a customer. Think about walking into your bank, the grocery store, the hardware store. Did you go to the doctor's office recently? The dry cleaners, or your child's school. When did you go to a restaurant or a local deli? Did you shop online recently? Did you purchase or download products from an e-commerce site? When did you call a help line for assistance with your purchase?

You, as a customer, know many businesses in your local area. You have many choices. There are many different types of vendors that provide online shopping experiences. How many department stores are in the nearby mall? How many local home inspectors are there to choose from with a simple search on the Internet? There are many different types of business all around you and readily accessible. You use many of them. Most of them you do not use.

As a customer, you have many options. If you feel unsatisfied with the service provided, you can go somewhere else. As a business owner, you have to remember that a customer can go somewhere else. They too have choices, just like you.

Now, think again as a customer. Which businesses come to mind when you think about great customer service? Which ones are terrible? You are likely to remember businesses that provide either great customer service or terrible customer service. The mediocre, average businesses are typically forgotten.

What kind of customer service do you provide?

Let's begin by going over some basics about customer service.

Professionalism



First Impressions

You begin providing customer service when you are first seen or heard by a customer. This includes a client visiting your website; reading your email; listening to your voicemail; talking to you on the phone; reading your blog, comment, or text message; seeing you at an inspection; watching your TV commercial or an online promotional video in which you appear; or seeing your business vehicle passing by. First impressions for a home inspection company are critical.

Most clients make the decision to hire a home inspector based not upon meeting the inspector in person, but upon many other factors. Most home inspectors are hired without ever physically meeting their client until just before the inspection begins. When you get out of your truck at the inspection site and introduce yourself to your client, s/he has already hired you. There is almost no face-to-face salesmanship involved in the home inspection business. For most home inspectors, first impressions are made through their website, business card, brochure, over a phone conversation, email, or some other online contact such as a blog.

What you look like, how well you speak, the words you use, how you communicate, even how you reply to a client's email all play a role in producing a first impression. If your first impression is good, then you've made the first step in providing great customer service. If your first impression is bad, then you have a lot of work to do in overcoming in what was perceived to be unsatisfactory.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. Within the first few seconds of meeting your client, you have a chance to make a great first impression. Imagine this scenario, where you are pulling into the driveway of a property that you are scheduled to inspect. The client is there. Their agent is there. They are standing near the garage door. You park your car, and get out. What do you do? Pull out your business card. No!

Give a great, big smile. You'd be surprised just how many people forget to smile when meeting someone for the first time. Smile. They'll smile back. Walk to your client and hold out your hand for a good, firm, short handshake. When you smile and offer a friendly greeting, you put your client at ease, particularly if he or she is a first-time homebuyer. By being friendly from the start, you show that you are approachable and helpful.

Professionalism

Common Courtesy Words

As children, we learned words like “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me.” As we operate and work on our business, we must not forget those simple lessons. Being courteous means using words like those we learned as children. We also know as business owners that clients appreciate courtesy, which includes paying attention when someone else is speaking; not interrupting when other people are talking; treating others as you would have yourself treated; playing well with others; being fair and honest; being empathetic and apologetic.

A courteous manner will be appreciated. When you are courteous, you send a powerful message about your personality.

Try some of the following phrases that express common courtesy:

- “May I please start the inspection?”
- “May I hold that door for you?”
- “Yes, please.”
- “Thank you, sir.”
- “You are welcome.”

Use the word “Yes” instead of “Yeah”, “Ah-huh” or “Yep.” “Yes” sounds professional. It’s more challenging to say it, particularly when you are a tired home inspector at the end of the day. Save “Yo” for your friends.

Inspectors often use “*Excuse me*” during the inspection. Inspectors need to move around the property, walking in and out of rooms, moving from one floor to the next, often carrying tools and equipment. They need room to do their work. But most often, there are clients, agents and family at the inspection too. It could get a little crowded.

If an inspector needs to move through a bedroom doorway that is blocked by their client, the inspector should say, “Excuse me, please.” If you inadvertently do something by mistake, such as forget to turn off the bedroom light after leaving, you would say, “Please excuse me.” If you did not hear someone speak or understand what someone said, you would say, “Excuse me. I did not hear that.” The next time you do bump into something or someone, please say, “Please excuse me. I am sorry.”

Using “Sir” or “Ma’am” must be used carefully with the correct intonation. Using those words shows respect, but the wrong emphasis could make you sound condescending or sarcastic. You should at all times use words and a tone of voice that is respectful.

In a business transaction, there are requests and acknowledgements. A request is incomplete without using “please.” For example, “May I please have the correct spelling of your last name?” An acknowledgement is incomplete without saying “thank you.” For example, “Thank you for providing your email address.”

Words like “please” and “thank you” seem to be slipping away from our vocabulary, not just in our everyday use with each other, but particularly when it comes to providing customer service in business-related transactions.

There are three basic ways to say “Thank you.”

- You can *say* it after every encounter.

Professionalism

- You can *write* it at the bottom of every message.
- You can *give* it as a gift to help your client remember you.

Words of courtesy are powerful. Use them. Often. They show that you care about people.



Smile When You Say That

Smile when you say that. Smiling when you are speaking is not difficult. Try it. Stand straight, plant your feet, hold out your hand to shake someone's, smile, and say, "Hello. I think you picked a *great* day for an inspection."

It doesn't matter if you are smiling face-to-face with someone or smiling over the phone, your voice will sound much better when you smile. You want people to see and hear that smile.



Smile Over the Phone

Try smiling before answering the phone. You will see a difference in the way you speak to people. And more importantly, they will hear your smile in your voice.

A smile is one of the most important parts to effective communication. It works. It's universal. Try smiling at someone; they'll smile back. Make it a habit to smile at someone when you're speaking with them.

What's in a Name?

If you know your client's name, use it. Everyone enjoys hearing their name spoken by someone, particularly by someone they just met. If you don't know your client's name, ask for it. And remember it. Use it in conversation. If your client is following you around the property while you perform the

Professionalism

inspection, use your client's name. It gets their attention. It demonstrates that you care who they are. And don't forget to give your client *your* name. Have your business card handy at all times.

You can form a strong foundation of customer service by combining a good first impression, a language that is courteous, and a smile.

Scenario

Mary has scheduled a home inspection at 123 Main Street for 9AM with the assistance of her real estate agent. Mary chose Bob's Inspection Company to perform the property inspection. Mary and her agent arrive at the property at 9:00 AM. The inspector is late. At 9:20 AM, a truck pulls up to the property. Driver-side window is rolled down, and loud music is playing. It's the inspector! He's late for the inspection. His inspection vehicle is dirty, with mud and dirt covering the truck. It doesn't look like the vehicle has been washed for weeks. He parks, and get out of his truck. The inspector is not the owner the company, Bob, but an employee of the company. His name is Jim. As Jim gets out of his truck, he's grabs his tool bag and picks up his stepladder. Wearing dirty worn out blue jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, he walks to meet Mary. Jim's attire is inappropriate. His hair is a mess. He smells like cigarette smoke. He strolls towards Mary. She asks if he's the inspector, "Hello, are you the inspector?" Without stopping his pace, he says, "Yeah, I am. I'll start on the roof. Sound good?" and walks past. Mary doesn't know his name. She doesn't know what to do or where to go. Should she walk with the inspector; stand there and wait; or go inside? She's not impressed at all by Jim. Mary feels confused. Her real estate agent is very disappointed. Both are reconsidering their choice for an inspector.

Mary's first impression of Bob's Inspection Company is not favorable. The inspector was late. Mary was expecting Bob, but Jim showed up. Jim's attire and communication was terrible. Jim could have been on time, but he wasn't. Jim could have at least explained and provided a reason for his tardiness. His dress, appearance and attitude were inappropriate. He could have at least met and greeted each Mary and her agent, with a handshake and a polite, "Hello, I'm Jim. It is good to meet you." It seemed that Jim did not care about his client very much, and Mary was disappointed.

Mary's First Impressions

First impressions matter. First impressions include how a person looks, their cleanliness, their attire, their tone of voice, language, attitude, and more. Think about yourself. What type of first impression do you make when you arrive at a property? Do you look and act like Inspector Jim?

Mary's first impression of Jim was not favorable. When Jim did not approach his client, meet her and properly introduce himself, Jim was clearly demonstrating that he did not value Mary as a client. Even if Jim had a clean truck and was well dressed, his attitude and impolite behavior was not good.

Taking Clients for Granted

When business is good and you have clients booked solid, there may be a tendency to take clients for granted. When that happens, you might not stop caring how you treat your clients. This might be the view Inspector Jim has taken. Some inspectors, like Jim, start to see clients as interruptions to their workday. The work itself becomes the most important thing, and the client is forgotten. When you start to take your clients for granted, and treat them poorly, you may find yourself very soon without any clients at all.

When clients are treated well, they will tend to do business with you. When you treat others poorly, they will leave you and conduct their business with someone else. There will always be options.



Arriving at the Property

It has been researched that people respond mostly to your body language. Your tone of voice is the 2nd most important factor. What you actually say is third. Therefore, be aware of what you are physically doing and how your clients perceive your actions.

Here are a few recommendations about arriving at a property:

- Schedule enough time for lunch. Try not to eat while driving. If you do, check your clothes for drips of food and stains before arriving at the property;
- Wash your vehicle in the morning before arriving at your first inspection;
- Identify your company on your vehicle, possibly with car magnets or vinyl lettering;
- Do not pull into the driveway with loud music playing;
- At all times, particularly when meeting a client for the first time, you ought to have a calm demeanor;
- Before exiting your vehicle, check your breath, nose and teeth;
- Allowing empty cans to fall from your vehicle as you open the door should be embarrassing;
- Do not slam the car door;
- Do not arrive smoking or chewing tobacco;
- Never spit;
- Keep your inspection tools and equipment organized and maintained;
- Do not wrestle your inspection ladder from your vehicle;
- Have your business cards ready as you approach the property;
- Do not carry coffee or any drink in your hand as you approach your client for the first time;
- Wear a nice watch. It shows that you respect your client's time; and
- The next time you pick up the phone, give a good, hearty "Hello" to the other person.

Professionalism

Dress Chart

People first see you, and then they hear you. Therefore, check first your appearance. The first thing to do when improving your first impression is to check your appearance. Do not let something as simple as dirty clothes or an unwashed vehicle be an obstacle to your client forming a favorable first impression of you. Make sure your hair and hands are clean and neat. Your face and teeth should be clean. Your dress should be clean, decent and in order. Your overall image should be professional.

Use the following numbered chart to help you. What number are you?



Should an inspector be judged by what he/she wears? Perhaps not, but the reality is that proper attire is an important part of an inspector's success. An inspector's core product is him/herself, and the product should be packaged professionally.

When you know you look good, you feel good. When you dress appropriately, you do not draw negative attention to yourself. Figure out what is the appropriate dress in your area. Dress shorts might be appropriate in hot climates, whereas they might not be appropriate in northern, colder climates.

Below are some tips for inspectors:

Clothing:

- Never arrive to an inspection in dirty clothes. It is fine for clothes to get dirty during the inspection because the client expects this to happen.
- Consider bringing coveralls or a Tyvek® suit. They will keep your clothing from getting dirty while you crawl through attics and crawlspaces.
- If you have more than one inspection scheduled for the day, consider bringing a change of clothes, or at least a fresh shirt.
- Consider dressing up a bit (by perhaps wearing a tie) when working in more expensive neighborhoods, and dressing casually in more modest neighborhoods.
- Dress for the type of property. Inspecting a horse farm may require boots. A dentist's office may require shoe covers.
- Dress for the climate. Shorts are fine in southern and beach areas but are often not adequate in cooler, northern climates.
- Cut-off jeans and gym shorts are not appropriate. Nicer shorts with pockets to hold inspection equipment are acceptable.
- Khakis or jeans can both be appropriate, depending on the client base.
- Tank tops are never appropriate on an inspection.

Professionalism

- T-shirts are generally not recommended unless they sport an inspection-related logo or your inspection company's name.
- Polo and collared shirts are fine, as are sports jackets.
- Sports teams, political or pop-culture printed t-shirts are never appropriate. Such messages and images can passively offend clients.
- A suit is not appropriate, as it implies that you are not dressed to inspect crawlspaces. A rare exception is made for leaders of multiple inspection teams.
- It is acceptable for inspection clothes to be loose-fitting. Inspection requires a great deal of reaching, climbing and crawling -- activities that will be made more difficult by tight or restrictive clothing.
- Shoes should be lace-up and rugged. Laces ensure that feet will not slip out of the shoes. Inspectors should be prepared for a dirty and strenuous job.
- In warmer climates or on summer days, you can wear clean tennis shoes or boat shoes.
- Outside of beach towns, open-toed sandals are not appropriate, even in summer.
- Female inspectors should not, of course, wear dresses or high heels.
- Bring an extra pair of shoes. Boots or work shoes can be swapped for a nice pair of slippers or sneakers before entering living areas. Never track mud, roofing tar or pet droppings into a home. Also, some customs require the removal of shoes and hats upon entry.

Personal Hygiene:

Before an inspection, make sure you have:

- showered;
- brushed your teeth, flossed, and used mouthwash;
- trimmed your nails;
- shaved or trimmed your beard, if you have one;
- combed your hair; and
- applied deodorant. Also, go easy on the cologne/perfume.

Between inspections, freshen up with a travel bag that contains:

- a hand mirror (or a camping mirror);
- a comb or brush;
- chewing gum (preferably a minty or otherwise sanitizing flavor);
- mouthwash;
- deodorant;
- a spare bag for dirtied clothing; and
- wet-naps. These can be used to clean and sanitize your hands before meeting with the client.

Inspectors should carefully consider how their clients perceive them. Clothing and hygiene can create impressions that are as valuable to repeat business as the quality of the inspection. Remember: You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression.

Shake

Shake hands properly. It's odd, but people judge you by your handshake. Grasp the other person's hand so that your palms touch. Provide a firm grasp. Give an intentional shake, two or three actions at most. Do not grasp excessively tight. Don't test the other person's strength. Don't force or squeeze. While shaking, make eye contact to show you're interested in the other person, and also to pick up on the other person's nonverbal clues. Then release. That's it.

Professionalism

Ethics

Being ethical means being honest, doing what's right, and being accountable. The International Association of Certified Home Inspectors (InterNACHI) promotes a high standard of professionalism, business ethics and inspection procedures. InterNACHI members subscribe to the InterNACHI Code of Ethics in the course of their business, including: A duty to the public, a duty to continuing education, and a duty to the profession.

The entire Code of Ethics can be found at http://www.nachi.org/code_of_ethics.htm. Inspectors following the code shall be fair, honest, impartial, and act in good faith in dealing with the public. The inspector shall not discriminate in any business activities on the basis of race, color, religion, or sex. The inspector shall be truthful, and shall always act in the interest of the client.

Be honest, doing what's right, and be accountable.

What You Can and Cannot Do

Say what you mean and mean what you say. Become a person others can rely on. When you say something to a client, mean it. If you say that you'll be there at 9:00 AM, then arrive there no later than 9:00 AM. If you do not get on roofs to inspect them, then do not tell clients that you do. If you tell your client that they will have a complete report by tomorrow morning, you'd better start writing. If you cannot do what your client asks of you, then tell them. Tell them what you can and cannot do.

Undertake not what you cannot perform but be careful to keep your promise. – George Washington

If you do not know the answer to their question, then tell them. It's okay to not know. Home inspectors are not supposed to know everything. Home inspectors are not experts, but generalists. If you don't know, tell them, "I don't know." You can also say to your client, "Please ask me any question. If I don't have the answer, I will make every effort to find it for you."

Be truthful about your services, your capabilities and qualifications. If you provide Wood Destroying Insect (WDI) inspections, be sure to inform your client. They have a right to know that you provide other services they might be interested in. If you provide WDI inspections, make sure that you are capable of doing them, able and skilled. If you provide any services that require certifications or licensing, be sure you communicate those qualifications to your client. Always be truthful about what you can and cannot do. Never make misleading claims about your services.

Perform your inspections in accordance with the Standards of Practice. The International Residential Standards of Practice of InterNACHI are located here <http://www.nachi.org/sop.htm>. The Standards of Practice explains to your client in great detail what a home inspection is and is not. It explains what is and what is not required of an inspector during an inspection. It helps you set your client's expectations. You must get the Standards of Practice into the hands of your clients. They must read the Standards of Practice before completely understanding what you can do and what you cannot do for them. Make sure you communicate to your clients that:

- you perform your inspections in accordance with the Standards of Practice; and
- it is imperative your clients read and understand the Standards of Practice before hiring you.

Advertising

Professionalism

Make sure your advertising about your qualifications and certifications actually represent the services you intend to provide.

Attorney for the International Association of Certified Home Inspectors (InterNACHI.org), Mark Cohen, issued a statement reminding inspectors to be cautious in advertising themselves as “code-certified” or “ICC-Certified.” The warning comes in the wake of a recent court ruling in which a home inspector who marketed himself as “code-certified” was held liable to a client for misrepresentation after a local government determined that the home he had inspected was not “up to code.” Training offered by the International Code Council (ICC) can be beneficial to home inspectors, but Cohen says home inspectors should be careful not to suggest or imply that their home inspections will ensure that the residence is in compliance with all applicable codes. Codes vary from one jurisdiction to the next, and whether something is “up to code” is often a judgment call made by a government employee. Unless an inspector intends to warrant that the property is in compliance with all codes, the inspector should make clear in his advertising and in his contract that the inspection seeks to identify defects, but does not attempt to identify code violations.

Cohen warns inspectors to use care in advertising their services, saying, “Statements contained in an advertisement or on a website may form the basis for subsequent claims of misrepresentation by clients who did not understand the inspector’s role.”

Professionalism

Putting Clients First

A business must operate to suit your clients' needs not the needs of the company. If you can always fulfill your client's needs, you'll avoid the risk that they'll go somewhere else.

To ensure that you meet and exceed your client's demands and expectations, and continue to get their business, you need to put your client first. You can anticipate your client's needs by identifying who your clients are, understanding them, and listening to them. To satisfy your client's expectations, you need to always strive to improve your services in comparison to your competition.



Identify Your Clients

Make sure you identify your best clients. And keep in regular contact with them. Your best clients are not necessarily those who bring you the biggest profits, but those who will keep using your services and will keep making referrals to new clients. It's costs less to keep existing clients than to get new ones. So focus on keeping your best clients. List 10 of your top real estate agents who refer work to you, and talk to them frequently.

Real Estate Agents

If you deal with real estate agents on a regular basis, get interested in their business. Ask real estate agents how their business is doing. You're likely to gain insight into your own inspection business. Sign up for e-newsletters that real estate agents are likely to be signed up with, such as the newsletter from the National Association of Realtors at <http://www.realtor.org>. Get NAR's latest news releases delivered directly to your RSS reader. <http://feeds.feedburner.com/RealtororgPressRoomHeadlines>. Ask the real estate agent at your next home inspection, "How was it finding this home for my client?" Show interest in what they do with your client.

For real estate agents, or any client, who continuously refer work to you, create a loyalty program that awards discounts to those valued clients.

Feedback

To satisfy your clients' needs, you need their feedback. You need to know their needs, wants, and the reasons why they use your services. Using a customer/client survey form is an extremely effective way to gain information about your clients' needs and wants since the information comes directly from them. Consider using this survey <http://www.nachi.org/survey.htm>.

Professionalism

Don't wait for a complaint to arise or hope that your clients will not experience any problems with your service. Be proactive and keep in contact with past clients.

Everything Your Company Does

Everything your company does should have a direct connection to satisfying your clients. The knowledge and skills gained in your training and education should always benefit your clients. If your company's goals and objectives do not have your clients in mind, then you risk losing them.

It is important to review all of the procedures or business processes that your company does to ensure that each one puts your clients first - even if it is only the process by which the phone is answered. Ask, "How does the way in which we answer the phone impact our clients?"

Buying Decisions

Your client's buying process can be complex and not so easy to understand. Few buying decisions are based solely on price. When clients are trying to decide to hire you, they'll consider several factors in making their decisions, including:

- Will the service do what I need it to do?
- Will it fulfill my perceived need?
- Will it be delivered on time?
- Are these inspectors certified and properly trained?
- Will it include customer support if needed?
- Do I like the people of the inspection company?
- Are they legitimate?
- Can I trust this company?
- Do my colleagues and friends like the company?
- Does the company offer good value?
- Do I like the way they look?
- Did they talk nice to me on the phone?
- Are the inspection fees competitive?
- What do other people think about this company?
- Would I spend my money and time better elsewhere?

Be aware of the many reasons a person will hire you in addition to price. Not all potential clients who call you are price shopping. The initial phone call may start out with, "What do you charge for a home inspection?" But that likely not the most important factor involved in their decision to hire you as their inspector.

Make sure you express to a potential client who may be price shopping for services that buying a home is probably the most expensive purchase they'll ever make.

Tell them, "This is no time to shop for a cheap inspection. The cost of a home inspection is very small relative to the home being inspected. The additional cost of hiring a certified inspector is almost insignificant. As a home buyer, you have recently been crunching the numbers, negotiating offers, adding up closing costs, shopping for mortgages, and trying to get the best deals. Do not stop now. Do not let your real estate agent, a "patty-cake" inspector, or anyone else talk you into skimping here."

Professionalism

Tell them, either on the phone or through your website, that you perform the very best inspections. You earn your fees many times over. You do more and, yes, you charge a little more. Communicate to the callers to do themselves a favor...and pay a little more for the quality inspection they deserve.

Professionalism

Communication

Communication is *not* all about words. Essentially, communication is your *behavior* that someone else interprets as bearing a message. Success in your business will often depend upon how well you communicate.

Almost everything you do involves communication, and we're not just talking about writing your inspection report. Communication involves your body language, your look, your posture. In a conversation, you are either speaking or listening. If you're speaking, you want to choose the right words and use positive nonverbal communication. Your tone of voice is critical. Oftentimes *how* you say something is more important than *what* you say. Even if you choose the right words, and say it in the right tone of voice, you still have to pay attention to your nonverbal communication.

Let's talk more about how to effectively communicate.

Effective Communication

It is important to your company to have everyone, field inspectors to office staff, understand how to effectively communicate to clients.

The inspector who arrives at the inspection is your client's primary source of communication. If your subcontractor or employee of the company performs the inspection, they represent not only the inspection company, but in the mind of the client, they *are* the company. So, as the company's representative, no matter who it is, how that person communicates to the client is very important to the company. It is vital to build a relationship with your clients through effective communication.

The most effective way to communicate is through face-to-face conversation. When you are speaking with someone in front of you, you can pick up clues to their personality, mood, and intention by their facial and physical expressions.

Most often inspectors are hired days before ever meeting their client. You may find that many of your communication skills are used long before you arrive at the property – on the phone, in writing emails, leaving voicemail messages, and communicating via your website. Before being hired, home inspectors usually do not have the advantage that face-to-face communication provides.

Good Choice of Words

Using good grammar is essential in effectively communicating to your clients. Choose the right words. Think before you speak. Pause and consider what you want to say.

Choose words that will be understood by your client. Use short and simple phrases. Using familiar words instead of technical ones will help you convey the correct message. Don't use big words to impress people.

For example, while checking the HVAC system with you're the home buyer, you could say, "Burning a natural gas can be explained by the general equation: $\text{CH}_4 + 2\text{O}_2 = \text{CO}_2 + 2\text{H}_2\text{O} + \text{heat}$. Natural gas is about 85 to 90% methane (CH_4). Burning natural gas (CH_4) with oxygen yields carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water vapor ($2\text{H}_2\text{O}$) and heat. This is referred to as complete combustion." But all of that would be too much for the situation.

Professionalism

Instead, you could use more simpler, easier words to convey the message, “Combustion involves the burning of a fuel that produces heat energy.” Know whom your speaking to, and if possible, their level of understanding. Most of your clients will be home buyers, and many of them will be first-time home buyers. Understand their viewpoint, and shape your conversation to be easily understood.

Jargon

Refrain from using acronyms and jargon, or “inspector speak.” There are phrases that inspectors use that would likely not be understood by everyone in conversation. Not everyone knows what an FSBO or FHA inspection is. You may sound exclusionary when you say, “It’s an old 3 and ½ ton air-to-air R22 com RTU over a pizza shop,” because not everyone will understand what you’re saying. If you’re not sure if you’re client understand you or not, check their nonverbal communication for clues as to whether your message is being understood. Your inspection report can be filled with technical terms and robust vocabulary, but when you are speaking in person with a first-time home buyer, you may want to use easy-to-understand terminology and phrases.

Lee Iacocca once said, “You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get anywhere.”

Tone of Voice Exercise

How you say something is more important than what you say.

Let’s do a fun exercise in verbal communication. Pretend that you are asking the following question to a client in an excited tone of voice: “Will you be attending the inspection?” Then repeat the question in an angry, irritated tone of voice. Then try a bored, disinterested tone. Then try an insecure, doubtful tone. See how you can say the same thing in four different ways? It all depends upon your tone of voice.

Your tone of voice is very important when speaking to someone, either over the phone or face-to-face. People pay attention mostly to how you say something, and not what you say. If a client is upset about something, use a tone of voice that is concerned and attentive. If a client needs your help, use an excited and interested tone of voice. If you are face-to-face with someone, pay attention to his or her nonverbal communication. That will help you adjust your tone of voice.

Albert Mehrabian is noted for finding that our nonverbal communication accounts for 55 percent of our message’s impact; the tone of our voice accounts for 38 percent; and the words we use accounts for only 7 percent of our message’s impact.

Nonverbal Communication

As the old saying goes, “Actions speak louder than words.” People pay more attention to what you *do* than what you *say*. When you’re in the presence of another person, you are communicating. What is mostly being communicated is what you are *not* saying. One UCLA study suggests that 93 percent of our most effective communication comes through nonverbal communication.

If you are looking at someone, smiling at your friend, speaking face-to-face, talking over the phone, texting, emailing, listening to someone talking to you, uploading a picture on your website, playing video of a crawlspace inspection, you are communicating. If you appear frustrated with your paperwork, if you come down from the attic space irritated, if you appear excited about inspecting the roof, you are communicating. If you are not saying anything at all, you are still communicating. If you ignore someone, you are communicating. If you walk past someone without looking at him or her, if you do not step aside for someone walking past you, or if you do not wave back to someone waving at you, you are still communicating. Your nonverbal communication speaks louder than words most of the time.

We speak with our body, our actions and our face. We speak with smiles, frowns, or raised eyebrows. We even communicate with the distance we put between us and another person. Have good posture. Keep your head up and eyes towards the other person. Don’t slump. Keep your hands comfortable by placing them on your hips, holding something like an inspection tool or a pen, or gently clasping your hands together in front of you or behind your back. When listening, nod your head occasionally. Always be aware of your body language.

Everything you don’t say sends a stronger message than the actual words you do use.

By the way, the convention is to keep about a 3-foot space between you and the person you talking to.

Look ‘Em in the Eye

It's one of the most challenging aspects of communicating for many people. To look someone eye-to-eye while speaking is difficult, but can be the most powerful tool in communicating. When you look at someone in the eye when you speak, you convey confidence and awareness. Eye contact elevates the conversation into something meaningful. Allowing your eyes to wander around during a conversation may convey that you are not interested or that you're interested in something else. Eye contact is a powerful tool. Don't stare. Try holding eye contact for 3 or 4 seconds at most. Staring will make the other person feel uncomfortable or will convey that you're being threatening. Look. Don't stare.

If there is more than one person joined in the conversation, shift your eye contact from one person to the next. Even if you are engaged in conversation with only one person, make eye contact with the other person, letting them know that they are welcome to listen and join in.

One study suggests that which eye you look at is important in what message you want to communicate. If you want to communicate something that is emotional, such as empathy, then you'd look into the person's left eye. If you want to communicate something that is intellectual, such as when making a serious point, then you'd look into the person's right eye. Give it a try. It might work.

Remember prolonged eye contact can increase a person's discomfort level with you. People from various cultures have varying beliefs about using eye contact. Be considerate.

Nonverbal Exercise

Let's do a fun exercise in nonverbal communication. Pretend that you are explaining to a client that the roof is leaking water. As you speak out loud, imagine being face-to-face and smiling, and say, "The roof is leaking water." Now try looking down at your feet and mumble. Then try looking up at the sky, yawn, stretch your arms and speak. Lastly, stand with your arms crossed over your chest and say the same words. See how you can say the same words, but convey very different meanings with your nonverbal communication.

When you are smiling, face-to-face to someone, your nonverbal communication conveys that you care, you are interested. When you look at your feet and mumble, you must not be interested or you're not being honest. When you yawn, you must be exhausted or bored. With your arms crossed, you communicate that you are impersonal or angry by creating an imaginary wall between you and your client. It's important to understand how you can say the right words, but convey the wrong meaning.

When you convey the wrong meaning, it wastes time. It wastes your time and energy, because you have to correct the other person's understanding of what you said.

Scenario

Mary is in the kitchen with her home inspector. Mary is concerned with a few things in the house and wants the inspector to concentrate on them before completing the inspection. The inspector is filling out his paperwork and appears very busy.

Mary says to the inspector, "Jim, there are a few things that I'd like you to check before you leave. Would that be possible?"

Without looking up from his work, Jim says, "Yeah, sure. No problem. What's up?"

Mary has a small list of items written on a piece of paper she holds. Mary continues, "I'm concerned about the roof. I have no idea how old it is, and I'd like to know if there are any problems with it." As Mary speaks, she notices the inspector is not looking at her and is very concentrated on his paperwork. Mary finishes, "The toilet upstairs wobbles on the floor. I'd like to know how thick the insulation is in the attic floor. And is there a way to check the heater? It looks really old, and I'm not sure if it's working. And my husband wants to know how much a radon test is."

The inspector says, "OK. Roof, toilet, insulation and radon. I'll start the radon test today. That'll be an extra \$120."

Mary says, "Well, I just wanted to know how much the radon test is. I'm not ready to order it just yet. Thank you." She wonders if the inspector heard her list completely and adds, "And you will check the heater before you leave. Yes?"

Without looking up, the inspector replies, "Yeah, of course," in a somewhat irritated voice. The inspector just then finishes his paperwork, and slides the documents to Mary over the kitchen counter. He says, "Please read this stuff, and we take checks or credit cards. I'll be outside on the roof." And he leaves.

Mary is concerned that the inspector will not address her list of items properly. He didn't seem to pay any attention to her or listen attentively. To Mary the inspector seemed mostly concerned with his paperwork and getting paid. His inattentiveness, choice of words and poor grammar did nothing to help his conversation with Mary. To say the least, Mary is not having a good experience with the inspector.

Professionalism

Asking Questions

We ask questions for many reasons. Inspectors use questions in order find out more information. There are two different types of questions: open and closed. Open questions are open-ended, require more than just a *Yes* or *No* answer, and are designed to encourage the exchange of more information. A closed question can be answered with a word or two. A yes-or-no question is a closed question. Closed questions are used to clarify something.

Open questions may begin with What, Why, Would and How. Closed questions may begin with Is, Are, Can, and Where.

Examples of Open Questions

“What is that blue tarp doing on the roof?”

“Why is there a blue tarp on the roof?”

“How do you explain the blue tarp on the roof?”

Examples of Closed Questions

“Is that a blue tarp on the roof?”

“Are there other tarps on the roof?”

“Can you see that tarp on the roof?”

If you are answering a client’s question, be sure you understand the question before answering it. If you do not know the answer, tell them. Don’t make things up. Respond, “I do not know, but I’ll find out the answer for you later.”

If you are answering a question, try providing more than a one or two word answer. There’s a reason for this. By providing a longer answer, you may be able to increase sales.

Let’s look at a conversation that involves asking questions.

Scheduling

A client calls you office to schedule a home inspection. Mary says, “I see on your website that you do home inspections. I’m calling to schedule one for next week. Do you have anything available?”

Your office manager could respond, “Yep!” But instead, your office manager responds positively with more than just a one-word answer, “Absolutely we do! We have an open slot in our schedule next week. How’s Tuesday at 9:00 AM work for you?”

“I’ll be there,” Mary says. She asks, “Can I pay with a credit card?”

Your office manager could respond with, “Yep!” But instead, your office manager says, “Yes. We do take credit cards, including Visa, MasterCard, Discover and American Express, for payment of our home inspection service. Are you interested in any other inspections?”

Mary asks, “Do you do radon tests?”

“We sure do! We are trained and certified to perform radon tests. We also perform infrared thermography inspections, mold inspections, water quality and wood destroying insect inspections.”

“I’d like to have you do a radon test, please.”

“Would you like any other inspections?”

Professionalism

“No. Thanks.”

“Okay. Just one more question. Do you want your report printed onsite or emailed to you?”

The office manager did not respond with one-word answers. The office manager was able to ask an open question about other types of inspections, then followed by a closed question to clarify. By providing more than a one or two-word answer to the potential client’s questions, the office manager was able to continue a dialogue and sell the companies services effectively.

Professionalism

Listening

You can't talk and listen at the same time. A conversation is like a tennis match, each person having a turn. Let the other person speak. Respect the other person's point of view. When you are speaking, choose your words correctly. When you are listening, pay attention. Without learning how to listen, you'll never be able to effectively communicate with your clients.

Focus on the other person when listening. Pay attention to them. Do not allow your mind or eyes to wander about. If face-to-face, don't look over their shoulder to see who else is coming into the room. Try to stay interested. Smile. Make eye contact. Occasionally nod. Say things like, "Yes. I see," or "Hmmm."

It is a good practice to count $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 second after someone finishes his or her sentence before you begin yours. Take a moment. Allow a moment of pause or silence to exist after someone finishes his or her sentence. It will help prevent you from talking while someone else is.

Avoid rushing in while someone is speaking if they have created a short pause in their conversation. Allow the speaker to pause and think about what they are saying. A pause in the conversation does not necessarily mean you need to jump in and say something. Refrain from breaking in and injecting simply because there is an opportunity to do so.

Slow

Sometimes an inspector is hurried in the activity of the inspection. When there is a need to communicate to the client, the inspector might speak too fast and trip over words, being excited about the inspection process. Your client might not understand what you're trying to say, or they may lose interest in listening to you ramble on. Slow down. Emphasize a point by slowing down your speech slightly. Not too slow. Just enough to demonstrate that you have confidence and poise in what you are saying. Speaking clearly does not require high speed.

If you see that your client is losing interest in what you're saying, try speeding things up a bit. Increase your speech rate or pace only to avoid being dull or droning.

Try to be a communicator that can vary the rate of speech. Slowing down to emphasize and make clear; speeding up to avoid droning and to increase interest.

Be Yourself

If you are excited about your inspection service, then show it. Tell people that you're passionate about your inspections. If you believe in your inspection company, don't be shy. Show your conviction, your enthusiasm to help home buyers make an informed decision. Allow your feelings to come out naturally. Avoid faking it.

Humor

Having a sense of humor can help you communicate with your clients without ever telling a joke. Humor breaks down walls of communication. Humor relaxes everyone. It opens you up to others. You can find common ground using humor.

- Pay attention to the other person's mood
- Joke about yourself, instead of anyone else
- Use self-deprecating humor
- Point out the humorous aspects (lighter side) of your work
- Don't expect laughter, but you can laugh at your own jokes

If you think that you're just not funny, well, I disagree. Try keeping a notebook and pen in your inspection vehicle, and when something unusual, funny, humorous, strange, or just plain interesting happens, write it down. It'll be like a little humorous story journal for retelling to your clients.

For example, I was doing an inspection for a home buyer on one hot summer day. I had to wear a long-sleeve sweatshirt during the entire inspection. It was so hot, I started to really perspire, and then I started to sweat. A lot. My sweatshirt was wet by the end of the inspection. And everyone noticed. My head was sweating, and I looked quite overheated. It was obvious that I had some type of attire problem. At the end of the inspection, my client said that she *had* to ask me why I wore a sweatshirt during the inspection on this very hot day. It didn't make sense. I said that I didn't *want* to, but I *had* to. And I lifted up my sweatshirt to reveal my business dress shirt underneath. It was a mess with a huge stain on it. And I proceeded to tell a humorous story... While driving to the inspection, I tried eating a hot dog with chili sauce, and I hit a bump in the road, the dog and sauce squirted out of my hand, and went all over my good shirt. I wasn't paying attention and I swerved off the road and hit another bump, which sent my coffee flying and landed on my backup shirt I carry in my truck. I couldn't show up looking like this, so I went to the nearest store, a sporting goods place. And for some *strange* reason, the first thing I thought of was to purchase a sweatshirt. A sweatshirt! I wasn't thinking. I was running late, so that's what I did, not thinking that what I really needed was a light cotton shirt. Now I'm stuck wearing a nice shirt with a chili sauce stain under a heavy sweatshirt, which cost me 13 bucks. ...

And as I told my humorous story, everyone was laughing and giggling at me at my expense, and I didn't mind it one bit. It was great. That's humor. Making others laugh a little. I admit that I did add emotion, sound and color to the story. But I gave my clients a great inspection and an enjoyable, memorable experience - I'm sure.

Humor reduces stress. And your client, if s/he is a first-time home buyer, is under a lot. Lighten things up a bit. Here are a few cartoons you might enjoy for yourself <http://www.nachi.org/cartoons.htm>.

Building Relationships

Clients are the lifeblood of any inspection company. Successful companies establish and maintain client relationships. The ultimate goal for building relationships is to increase profit. But there are other benefits for building relationships with clients. Building client relationships helps improve customer service, reduce costs and complaints. The number of satisfied clients will increase. And satisfied clients will increase referrals to new clients. Growth in any business is an indicator of having good relationships with clients.

A home inspector will typically see their client only once, during the inspection. The home inspection business is different than any other business in that you don't get to meet your client until *after* s/he hires you. Even if a client does business with your inspection company only once, they will remember your company by their relationship with the inspector. That relationship could be a good one or a bad one. No matter what type, they will tell others. People talk. People talk with others about the experiences that had with you. Therefore, it's important to build good relationships with clients. Building relationships with clients is critical to providing positive customer service.

For the client, the inspector is the company. The inspector who performs the inspection for the client represents the inspection company. The client will judge and remember their experience with your inspection company essentially by how they interacted with the inspector at the time of the inspection. It's important for the inspector to interact positively with the client and demonstrate a sincere desire to help the client in order to building a good relationship.

We've learned how the inspector can be courteous, communicate effectively, use nonverbal communication skills, ask the right questions and listen carefully. Now let's learn about relationship building. There are two types of relationships for a business – new and ongoing. A business can work on building new relationships and maintain ongoing relationships.

Rapport

Imagine arriving at the inspection. You exit your vehicle, and approach your client who's waiting for you in the driveway. You smile and hold out your hand for a shake.

Now say, "Hello." And establish a rapport with your client by speaking about something in common. Try, "How are you today?" "This is an awesome day for a home inspection." "I just drove through a really nice neighborhood!" "What can I do for you today?" From the first few words that your client responds with, you have the opportunity to be positive and genuinely interested in what they say. Don't ask, "How are you today?" if you're not really interested in the answer. If you are truly interested in your client, then you will listen to what they say and will respond accordingly. If your client says, "I'm really nervous about this whole thing. I don't know what to do. I'm really excited to see my new house." Respond with more than just an "Oh." That doesn't sound like you're very interested, right? Why did you bother to ask? Instead, be interested in your client. Listen and respond accordingly.

To demonstrate that you are listening, try repeating what your client says. For example you may respond, "From what I understand, you are concerned with the roof and finding any moisture problems. Is that correct?" Summarizing your understanding of what your client has told you shows that you have been listening and are interested in helping.

If your client is feeling overwhelmed by the inspection process, try providing them with the information contained in the following short article written by Nick Gromicko:

Buying a home? The process can be stressful. A home inspection is supposed to give you peace of mind, but often has the opposite effect. You will be asked to absorb a lot of information in a short time. This often includes a written report, checklist, photographs, environmental reports and what the inspector himself says during the inspection. All this combined with the seller's disclosure and what you notice yourself makes the experience even more overwhelming. What should you do?

Relax. Most of your inspection will be maintenance recommendations, life expectancies and minor imperfections. These are nice to know about. However, the issues that really matter will fall into four categories:

1. Major defects. An example of this would be a structural failure.
2. Things that lead to major defects. A small roof flashing leak, for example.
3. Things that may hinder your ability to finance, legally occupy or insure the home.
4. Safety hazards, such as an exposed, live buss bar at the electric panel.

Anything in these categories should be addressed. Often a serious problem can be corrected inexpensively to protect both life and property (especially in categories 2 and 4).

Most sellers are honest and are often surprised to learn of defects uncovered during an inspection. Realize that sellers are under no obligation to repair everything mentioned in the report. No home is perfect. Keep things in perspective. Do not kill your deal over things that do not matter. It is inappropriate to demand that a seller address deferred maintenance, conditions already listed on the seller's disclosure or nit-picky items.

Professionalism

Sympathy vs. Empathy

By being sensitive to your client feeling overwhelmed by the inspection process, you are being empathetic and considerate. When you respond to clients with sympathy, you are getting as upset as they are. That's not good. When you respond to clients with empathy, you acknowledge and affirm a client's emotional state. You're being empathetic. A good response would be, "I can see that you are really upset about the whole inspection process. I understand. But try to relax." That's good customer service.

Common Ground

There are ways to find common ground. You can say a few things to your client that might help establish something in common. Try the following: "I'm a home owner." "I bought my house a few years ago." "Have you taken off work to be here at the inspection?" "Do you have any children? I have two." "Do you have any concerns that you'd like me to check for you?" "Have you been to a home inspection before?" "Here's my cell phone number if you have any questions after I leave."

If you see a repeat client, or someone who has used your services before, you can add, "It's so good to see you again." If it's a real estate agent, you could mention something that you remembered about them. "How did that inspection on Main Street last week work out for you?"

Establishing a rapport may include demonstrating that you can be trusted. The best, easiest way an inspector can demonstrate trustworthiness is to provide the Code of Ethics to your client. Inform your client that you perform your inspections according to a Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics. The International Residential Standards of Practice and Code of Ethics are located here <http://www.nachi.org/sop> and http://www.nachi.org/code_of_ethics.

My Promise

There is way to convey to your client that you are committed, committed to your service, your company and your clients. It is a promise.

My Promise to You

Choosing the right home inspector can be difficult. Unlike most professionals, you probably will not get to meet me until after you hire me. Furthermore, different inspectors have varying qualifications, equipment, experience, reporting methods, and yes, different pricing. One thing for sure is that a home inspection requires work, a lot of work. Ultimately a thorough inspection depends heavily on the individual inspector's own effort. If you honor me by permitting me to inspect your new home, I guarantee that I will give you my very best effort. This I promise you.

Education

It's one thing to be a nice and sensitive inspector. But a client will truly value an inspector who is knowledgeable and educated. You can establish credibility with your clients by informing them of your training and certifications related to your business. Learn something new about your inspection business every day. InterNACHI education is free to members and all their courses are listed here at <http://www.nachi.org/education.htm>.

Maintaining Relationships

Once you establish a new relationship, your work is not done. You need to maintain an ongoing relationship. Clients who are in a business relationship with your company will either use you a second time or they will provide referrals to new clients.

One of the best ways to maintain an ongoing relationship with a client is to remember them. Remember the last time you saw your client. Remember something about them. It will make your client feel valued. The most important thing to remember about a client is their name. Make it a point to learn their name and use it.

For those repeat clients, try to do something special for them. Try offering a complimentary long-term radon test, a free home maintenance book, a gift card, or a new 9-volt battery for a smoke detector. Show your repeat clients that you appreciate them.

In your dealing with your clients, always try to be:

- Calm;
- Patient;
- Professional; and
- Respectful.

Professionalism

People with Disabilities

Learn how to communicate and interact with people with disabilities. You may be concerned that you will say or do the wrong thing. Listed here are some suggestions on how to relate to and communicate with and about people with disabilities.

Words

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind," "the retarded" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality or dignity of people with disabilities. Further, words like "normal person" imply that the person with a disability isn't normal, whereas "person without a disability" is descriptive but not negative. The accompanying chart shows examples of positive and negative phrases.

Affirmative Phrases	Negative Phrases
person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability	retarded; mentally defective
person who is blind, person who is visually impaired	the blind
person with a disability	the disabled; handicapped
person who is deaf	the deaf; deaf and dumb
person who is hard of hearing	suffers a hearing loss
person who has multiple sclerosis	afflicted by MS
person with cerebral palsy	CP victim
person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder	epileptic
person who uses a wheelchair	confined or restricted to a wheelchair
person who has muscular dystrophy	stricken by MD
person with a physical disability, physically disabled	crippled; lame; deformed
unable to speak, uses synthetic speech	dumb; mute
person with psychiatric disability	crazy; nuts
person who is successful, productive	has overcome his/her disability; is courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)

Actions

Etiquette considered appropriate when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy. Outlined below are tips to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities.

General Tips for Communicating with People with Disabilities

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.

Professionalism

- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Blind or Visually Impaired

- Speak to the individual when you approach him or her.
- State clearly who you are; speak in a normal tone of voice.
- When conversing in a group, remember to identify yourself and the person to whom you are speaking.
- Never touch or distract a service dog without first asking the owner.
- Tell the individual when you are leaving.
- Do not attempt to lead the individual without first asking; allow the person to hold your arm and control her or his own movements.
- Be descriptive when giving directions; verbally give the person information that is visually obvious to individuals who can see. For example, if you are approaching steps, mention how many steps.
- If you are offering a seat, gently place the individual's hand on the back or arm of the chair so that the person can locate the seat.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Gain the person's attention before starting a conversation (i.e., tap the person gently on the shoulder or arm).
- Look directly at the individual, face the light, speak clearly, in a normal tone of voice, and keep your hands away from your face. Use short, simple sentences. Avoid smoking or chewing gum.
- If the individual uses a sign language interpreter, speak directly to the person, not the interpreter.
- If you telephone an individual who is hard of hearing, let the phone ring longer than usual. Speak clearly and be prepared to repeat the reason for the call and who you are.
- If you do not have a Text Telephone (TTY), dial 711 to reach the national telecommunications relay service, which facilitates the call between you and an individual who uses a TTY.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- If possible, put yourself at the wheelchair user's eye level.
- Do not lean on a wheelchair or any other assistive device.
- Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.
- Do not assume the individual wants to be pushed —ask first.
- Offer assistance if the individual appears to be having difficulty opening a door.
- If you telephone the individual, allow the phone to ring longer than usual to allow extra time for the person to reach the telephone.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Speech Impairments

- If you do not understand something the individual says, do not pretend that you do. Ask the individual to repeat what he or she said and then repeat it back.
- Be patient. Take as much time as necessary.
- Try to ask questions which require only short answers or a nod of the head.
- Concentrate on what the individual is saying.

Professionalism

- Do not speak for the individual or attempt to finish her or his sentences.
- If you are having difficulty understanding the individual, consider writing as an alternative means of communicating, but first ask the individual if this is acceptable.

Tips for Communicating with Individuals with Cognitive Disabilities

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

Remember

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

Scenario

Inspector Joe arrives at the inspection. Mary and her agent are waiting outside at the end of the driveway for Joe. Joe gets out of his car and walk up to Mary. Joe says, “Hey there. I’m Jim. I’ll start on the roof. Good?” Joe walks past Mary. There’s no handshake, no greeting, no small talk. Mary is uncomfortable because she’s a first-time homebuyer. She stands outside for a long time, no knowing what to do or where to go. Should she follow the inspector or go inside? Her agent is inside, busily working on the phone. Mary decides to go inside and sit at the kitchen table. She’s not comfortable. She wants to look around, but is unsure that she should without the inspector. But the inspector is nowhere to be found. Mary is not enjoying her experience.

When you meet your client for the first time, give a smile, an interested look, and provide a greeting that is friendly. Be happy that your client is there. Be happy to be there. Say more than just “Hello” when greeting your client. Try something like, “My name is Joe. I’m your inspector. I’m very happy to be here. It’s a great day for a home inspection.” If it’s a repeat client, or an agent you’ve seen before, address them by name and say, “It’s great to see you again.”

Checklist

You can provide a checklist of things your client can do while you perform the inspection. It gives them something to do, instead of feeling uneasy about the whole process. You can tell your client, “This is your time to get to know your new house. Walk around and look at everything. If you need me in the beginning, I’ll be on the roof.” “Here’s a checklist of things you can do while I’m inspecting your house.” The checklist is as follows:

CHECKLIST: 10 Things You Can Do at Your Inspection

- _____ Read the Standards of Practice to which the inspection is performed.
- _____ Be sure you know where the main water and fuel shut-off valves are located.
- _____ Open and close all the windows and doors your inspector doesn’t get to.
- _____ Operate the kitchen appliances.
- _____ Operate the clothes washing and drying machines.
- _____ Run water at all of the plumbing fixtures and look for water leaks.
- _____ Walk the entire property outside.
- _____ Ask the seller about prior roof leaks or any other problems recently experienced.
- _____ Bring to the inspector’s attention any problems that you might find.
- _____ Make sure all of your concerns are addressed before the inspector leaves.

Pay attention to the body language, the nonverbal communication, of your clients. Tune into them. You’ll be able to pick up on their attitudes. A first-time homebuyer might be tentative and cautious. A property owner, the seller, might be scrutinizing and insulting. A real estate agent might be concerned or suspicious. By tuning into your clients attitude, you can help them better.

Professionalism

Thank You

Thank your clients for using your business. Whether they are present at the inspection or not, let your clients know that you appreciate their business. Make sure you say at least, “Thank you very much for allowing me to inspect your new home.”

You might include a few things with your service that provides extra value and shows your appreciation for your client’s business. You might insert the printed inspection report into a 3-ring binder. Inside the binder you could include inspection related articles, including those related to home maintenance. A new 9-volt battery for the smoke detector might be a memorable gift. Some inspectors will give their clients a cookie. Something simple like that will demonstrate your appreciation and thankfulness.

Many inspectors provide a client/customer satisfaction survey at the end of the inspection. Satisfaction surveys appeal to a client’s desire to be coddled and reinforce feelings that they may already have about your business and make them more likely to purchase its services. Surveys can also increase people’s awareness of your company’s services and thereby encourage future purchases. The very act of asking clients about their opinions can induce them to form judgments that otherwise might not occur to them: that, for example, they really do like your inspection services and ancillary services and would not hesitate to recommend them to others.

You might include a book about home maintenance with your inspection service. This makes a physical connection between you and your client and helps maintain your ongoing relationship.

Inspectors send thank you messages shortly after the inspection report has been provided to their client using email. Writing a thank you note after an inspection can be the key to maintaining a good relationship. In these days of electronic communication, it appropriate to send thank you letters by email. But not by text. Save texting for your friends.

Using email, you can send your thank you message immediately, rather than waiting for the postal service to deliver it. The thank you email should be brief and to the point.

In addition to thanking your client, the thank you message reinforces that your company will be available long after the inspection. Use your email to address any issues and concerns that came up during the inspection. Use the email to reinforce your qualifications, and availability if needed in the future.

Thank You Notes

Most people appreciate a handwritten letter than an email. It takes more time to make a handwritten letter, but it might be worth it when considering its impact. Most inspectors are not handwriting notes to thank their clients. So if you’re considering gaining a competitive advantage, handwriting a thank you to your client may be worth the effort. Keep a box of thank you notes, envelopes and stamps in your inspection vehicle. At the end of the inspection day, write the thank you note and stick in the mailbox. It’s not too difficult. Inside your thank you note, thank your client for their business and remind them that you’re available in the future for any questions or future services. It is appropriate to include your business card. Mail your thank you as soon as possible.

Maintenance Inspections

Inspectors are providing home maintenance inspections in order to keep their ongoing relationships with their clients. A home maintenance inspection should be conducted at the property every year. It would identify any defects, safety hazards, and delayed maintenance.

Perform annual inspections and inspections that have nothing to do with a real estate transaction. At the end of your home inspection, are you reminding your client that you'll be back in a year? Tell them something like, "Now remember, every home should be inspected every year as part of your overall home maintenance plan. In 11 months, I'll call you and remind you about your annual inspection, and we'll schedule it. Okay? Until then, study this book about home maintenance, and when I come back I'll see how well you've done?" The home maintenance book can be found here <http://www.nachi.org/now>.

Why spend time and money trying to find new clients, when you've already have clients that trust you and value your service - and they are just sitting there. They could be calling you every year. At the end of the inspection, you should be offering your client their next inspection.

Referrals

Many inspectors are investing in referrals. They are using referral tickets. At the end of your inspection, give your client 5 referral tickets. Each ticket has your client's name on it. You tell your client, "I want to give 5 of your friends \$50 off of their next inspection. And it doesn't have to be part of a real estate transaction. And when I get this ticket from your friend, it'll have your name on it. And I'll knock off \$10 on your next annual inspection." Give your client something that they can give to their friends, which incentivizes them to use your services.

Professionalism

Phone Talk

When a client calls your company, then expect two things from you:

- Be nice; and
- Do good.

Being nice means that you are going to be courteous, respectful, and you're going to listen. Doing good means that you will help the caller in whatever way you can. Whoever in your company picks up the phone, they become the company. It doesn't matter if they are the owner or the field inspector. Whoever picks up the phone, they become the company. During that phone call, they have the opportunity to create for the caller a positive experience with your company.

What memorable experience do you convey when you pick up the phone?

- "That the inspector who knows a lot about homes."
- "That inspector is very friendly."
- "That inspector will go out of his way to help me."
- "That inspector cared about my situation."
- "That inspector remembered my birthday."
- "That inspector answered his own phone."

When you are talking with a client on the phone, listen. Listen. Listen. Focus entirely on your client and what they are saying. Listen carefully to not only what they are saying but also how they are saying it. Tune into their tone of voice.

The first words out of your client's mouth usually tell you the reason for the call. It's the most important thing your client wants to tell you, and you shouldn't miss it. Never ask the other person to repeat their opening statement. Listen and pay attention, particularly in the very beginning.

Have a pen and paper handy. Or if your handy, you can take notes on your computer software that handles phone calls, communications, and scheduling. If your client gives their name, write it down. If the client is emotional in any way, particularly angry or upset, jot that down in your notes. You don't have to write everything down like a transcript of the conversation, just the highlights or the most important points.

Do not interrupt. If your client is calling because you inspected the house last month and now the roof is leaking into the bedroom ceiling, do not interrupt. If you interrupt your client in this situation, they will even more upset, thinking that you do not have the time or desire to care about the situation.

Answer on the first ring. Do not allow the phone to ring more than 4 times. Most people expect a business phone to be answered quickly. Before you pick up the phone, smile. Your smile will be heard over the phone. Identify yourself by stating your business name, your first name, and your opening statement. Or it could be a question such as, "How may I help you?" Speak with a smile and in a friendly tone of voice. Be ready and eager to help and please. Establish a rapport by finding common ground. And use their name if you have it. "Thank you for calling Joe's Inspections. This is Mary. How may I help you today?"

Reiterate what the other person has said or has requested before proceeding. Make sure you understand what the other person wants. Summarize, "Okay. Let's see if I understand. Inspector Joe performed an inspection last month. Now the roof is leaking. Water is dripping into the ceiling. You're calling to see what should be done and how Inspector Joe can help. Is that correct?"

Professionalism

If you need to look something up or retrieve some information that requires you to be off the phone or silent for a few moments, then inform the other person on the line what you are doing. Tell them what you're doing. Don't let there be a lot of silence on the phone. Tell them, "Alright. I'm writing down the information you provided." "I'm looking up the report documents..." or "I'll have to put you on hold while I get the inspector. It'll only be a few moments."

If you are going to put someone on hold, explain why and provide an estimated time. It's common courtesy. "I'll have to put you on hold so I can find that inspection report. It'll take about a minute. Will you hold?" If you find that it's taking longer than a minute, get back on the phone line and tell the other person that it'll be longer and provide an update. When you finally get the information and return to the call, thank the other person for waiting. You should not expect anyone to wait more than 5 minutes. If the wait time is 5 minutes or longer, tell the other person that you will call them before the end of the day. Refrain from using phrases such as "I'll call you back as soon as possible" or "... as soon as I can."

When you talk on the phone with someone, you need to use your words more carefully than when you talk with someone face-to-face. The phone eliminates all of that important nonverbal communication. Effective phone talk is short and to the point. And sounds such as "hmm" and "I see" that indicate you're listening are very important.

Tone

Your tone of voice over the phone is critical. It conveys your emotions. It provides evidence of your feelings. Be aware of your tone of voice at all times. Before you pick up the phone, forget the last phone call or conversation you just ended, and smile. Smile. Then pick up the phone. Your smile will be heard over the phone. Soften or increase your tone of voice depending upon the situation. Soften it particularly if the caller is experiencing a problem.

Saying No

Good customer service does not mean always having to say, "Yes." Sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself and your client is to say, "No." The key to providing good customer service includes knowing what you can do and not promising anything else.

Before you say that you can't do something for a client, such as walk upon a very steep, slate roof during a rainstorm, work with your client to try to find an alternative. Maybe it's possible to inspect the slate roof from several vantage points, or maybe with the assistance from a professional slate roofer. While you might not be able to do exactly what the client requests, you might be able to do something just as good.

Remember, you don't have to accept work from everyone who wants to retain you. If a client starts off difficult or unreasonable, it usually gets worse, not better. While it may be hard to walk away from an inspection fee, it's sometimes cheaper in the long run.

Furthermore, an added bonus to refusing to allow these consumers to become clients is that they become your competitors' clients. Pity those competitors.

Ending the Phone Call

Professionalism

Your client will judge your company based upon their interactions with you on the phone. Ending the phone call effectively will produce a positive impact. Ending the phone call effectively starts with summarizing the call. Repeat what your client has requested. This will assure the client that you will handle the request correctly. “Mary, I have you schedule for a home inspection on Tuesday May 5th. You’d like us to bring a radon test just in case you later decide to hire us to perform a radon test. You will be there at the home inspection. And I will gain access to the property through your agent, whom I will call immediately after our phone conversation. Is that right?” Wait for your client’s acknowledgement. This recap will help reduce errors in scheduling and increase client satisfaction.

Before ending the phone conversation, ask your client if there is anything else that your company can do. Give your name again. “My name is Mary. If there’s anything else we can do for you, or if your schedule changes, feel free to call me. Until then, Inspector Joe will see you on Tuesday.”

Thank the other person for calling. “Thank you for calling Inspector Joe’s. Have a great day.”

When someone calls, it is no time to be shy. If you provide a good home inspection service, you have an ethical duty to allow as many of your fellow citizens as possible to enjoy the benefits of your good work. Convert!

Professionalism

Voice Mail

Try to answer the phone on the first ring. Most callers care less about the number of rings and more that the phone is eventually answered by someone who can help them. Make sure you understand your voice mail and answering system. Many voice mail systems are designed to take the call after 2 and ½ rings. So if you want to talk with a caller, you have to pick up the phone before the 3rd ring. Having a roll over system is good for when you want the call to roll over to another line if the call is not answered by the third ring. The objective is to ensure that the phone calls are answered.

In an article titled, "At the tone, please hang up and call my competitor," Nick Gromicko writes the following:

Make sure someone who can convert or sell is actually answering your business phone. If your potential clients are reaching voicemail, an answering service, or an untrained employee or spouse... you are probably not converting many of them into clients. Real estate agreements limit the amount of time a buyer has to schedule an inspection. Buyers don't have time to leave a message. Try having your calls forwarded to your cell phone and answer them yourself.

Many inspectors refuse to allow their cell phone to interrupt them on an inspection. I think this is a mistake. The client you are performing the inspection for is already sold. His money is in the bank. The client calling you, trying to schedule, is new money. Get that new money.

When I first went into the inspection business, I had two cell phones. I had one for new business. All my ads, flyers, brochures, etc., contained this phone number. If it rang, it was most likely new business. I kept this phone with me on my inspections and always answered it. I had another phone for everything else. On my home inspection report, I would include this second phone number (not my new business number). That way, if my client had a question, they would call my second number, leaving my first number free for new business.

Upon meeting a new client for the first time (on an inspection), I would ask, "If my cell phone rings during the inspection, would you mind if I answered it?" Nearly all my clients gave me permission to answer my cell phone during the inspection. Because I only carried my new business cell phone with me on the inspection, calls that interrupted an inspection were new business.

An added benefit: During a home inspection, your client is still sizing you up, so to speak. Your client is wondering if they hired the right inspector. I'm sure many of my clients thought, "Gee, this Nick guy looks too fat to fit in the crawlspace." Having your cell phone ring during an inspection shows your client that others seek your services and that you are in demand. If someone calls you who is not new business, just explain that you are in the middle of an inspection and will call them back. If your wife calls you to bring home a gallon of milk, just tell her in front of your client, "I'd love to do that inspection for you; let me call you back." But, of course, if it is new business... book it!

Your Website

The goal of your website is to lead a visitor to make a decision to hire you. Your website must quickly make visitors believe that the information they're seeking is just a click away, and then shape the delivery of that information such that it leads each visitor toward a decision to hire you for an inspection.

The way people read your website is different than the way they read any other written information. Here's some advice about communicating to people who visit your site.

- Make sure you understand who is visiting your website. Talk to them specifically.
- Make sure you understand what they need from you. Provide that information effectively.

A home inspector's clients are nearly always home buyers, and most of these will be first-time home buyers. Many of these home buyers are conveniently all in one place... online. They are online touring new homes, researching schools, emailing their real estate agents, shopping for mortgages, and looking for home inspectors.

Since you will not have an opportunity to sell your inspection services face-to-face, it is important that your website be capable of doing your selling for you. To a potential client, your website is your way of communicating who you are and what you do. The most important page on your website is your home page, and it's your first impression you give to everyone.

As a home inspector, you might work on some of the most expensive real estate in the world, but no home is as valuable, per square foot, as your own inspection website's homepage. The right homepage can generate you many thousands of dollars in inspection business, if it is designed correctly. You only get one chance to make a good first impression.

Website Communication

People do not read a website word-for-word. Do not simply copy/paste all of your marketing materials onto your website, including articles, brochures and documents you've written. It would be a waste of prime real estate. What is written for your website needs to be written specifically for that purpose. Think about to whom you are talking to (potential clients) and what your potential clients need to know in order to make a decision to hire you.

People do not read websites - they scan them. Their eyes jump from pictures to individual words. Instead of reading a page on your website from top to bottom, beginning to end, visitors will most likely scan a page for relevant information. If they want to read that information later, they'll print it.

Visitors jump around. They quickly move from pictures to words to video to ideas to phrases, back and forth, here and there, at a very fast pace. The idea is to capture a visitor's attention with a chunk of information long enough to keep them interested, provide them relevant information, and provide them an easy way in making a decision to act.

When writing content for your website, think in lists, not in paragraphs. If you need to write in paragraph form, make it less than 100 words. If your content is long and comprehensive, provide a short summary for the reader.

Professionalism

Make sure that the information you are providing to your visitor is easy to find and navigate through. Highlight the information that your visitors need. Bring those chunks of information to the front. Have each chunk of information linked or connected to the other with easy to follow paths. Make sure your information can be easily printed or provide downloadable pdfs for your visitor to save and print later.

There are certain things potential clients are looking for when they visit your website. They include:

- You are credible;
- You can be trusted;
- You are personal; but
- Most importantly – how to immediately contact you to hire you.

They want to know you are credible. You must show them that you are real, legitimate, and true. Tell visitors that you are a legitimate company. Have a page that lists your experience and certifications. Display your certifications on a page as if they were on your office wall. Tell them how many years you've been in business and how many inspections your company has performed. Provide several testimonials. Put the InterNACHI logo on your website. Include a guarantee or warranty with your service. State your promise to your clients. Put your InterNACHI certification verification seal somewhere above the fold of your homepage and with the other logos at the bottom of every page (where a visitor wouldn't need to scroll to notice). The seal is an InterNACHI member's most powerful sales tool, designed to be interactive with your visitor. Use it. <http://www.nachi.org/webseal.htm>

They want to know you can be trusted. Buying a home is the biggest decision that people make. And they are relying upon you to do a great job for them. They have to make an informed decision to hire you based upon how trustworthy you seem. Use testimonials that help convince the visitor that you should be hired. One way to convey that you are worthy of their trust is by promptly answering their emails. If they inquire about scheduling an inspection, immediately answer with an email. Better yet, reply with a phone call, assuming you have their phone number. The more attentive you are with your email communications, the more trust you will gain.

They want to know that you are personal. You can show them that you are by putting your picture, and the pictures of every employee of your company, on your website. Include a small bio that is more personal than professional. If you have children, a hobby, a particular interest, show them. In your emails, be personal and friendly. Let your personality come through.

They want to contact you. Now. Provide your contact information. Make sure it is easy to find. Use a "Call me now" button on your site. Every page on your website should direct your visitors to contact you. All of the content that your site contains should be providing reasons to contact you. Give your visitor immediate gratification by adding this button. An automated assistant calls you when your visitor asks to be contacted. <http://www.nachi.org/immediategratification.htm>

Test Your Site

Ask someone to go to your website and check it out. Have them use it, read it, click on it. Assess the site for ease and speed of use. Make sure your site loads fast and is not frustrating. If your site has a sign-up or a log-in, test it by acting like one of your clients. Is your contact information correct? Does the phone number work? Does the email address work? Are you providing your office number or cell phone number? What happens when someone click the email link? Test all links.

Keep in Contact

Thank your clients using emails. Inform your clients about updates to your business, discounts, or new services. Let clients know of any changes that take place in your business or if you're introducing something new. Ask clients to sign up for your business newsletter, which might include home maintenance tips and recommendations. Don't send a regular newsletter to your client if the content is useless to them. Make sure the newsletter contains information that is relevant and applicable to your client's lives.

Be proactive about contacting clients to check on them. See if they're happy with your services.

Be sure to have a "Have me call you button" on your website. That will help convert visitors to your site into callers. This button placed on your website will allow a visitor to automatically call you when a client needs an inspection. InterNACHI members can find this call button for their website at <http://www.nachi.org/immediategratification>.

Schedule inspections online. Provide different ways for your client to order inspections. Client should be able to call you to schedule the inspection. And they should be able to schedule their inspection using a website scheduler. Clients should have the ability to schedule an inspection using your company's calendar and their desired inspector's schedule.

Professionalism

Emails

All inspection orders should be confirmed using email. Automatic emails should be sent to clients and agents before and after the scheduled inspection. 24-hour reminder of an upcoming scheduled inspection could be provided. Thank you messages via email are appropriate.

Make sure your subject line represents the message of the email. Always begin an email with the person's name, if you know it. "Dear Mary..." or "Greetings from Inspector Joe..."

Keep your email messages short and to the point. Your client will likely not read long blocks of print.

Be sure to proofread your email before clicking the send button. Read the message out loud to hear how it sounds. Keep lingo such as LOL, IMHO, and smiley faces for your friends, not for your clients.

When you introduce yourself via email, not only are you making a first impression, you're also leaving a written record. – Virginia Shea, Netiquette™ Guru

Here are some simple email etiquette rules:

- Don't use capitals in email, unless you want to shout and be rude;
- Emotions do not transmit very well over email;
- Humor is particularly hard to communicate;
- Never use sarcasm in an email;
- Don't over-react to emails you receive; and
- Be overly polite.

Handling a Complaint

A complaint provides the opportunity to learn what your client really thinks about your service and to make changes in your company. Complaints are more valuable than compliments. Welcome them. It provides an opportunity to learn. Clients who go through the trouble of complaining are usually interested in giving you the chance to make things right.

The number one rule to receiving a complaint from a former client is to listen. And always remain calm and composed. A person calling with a complaint may be insulting and rude, but you must be professional throughout. You must not react in the same manner or tone of voice. Try to defuse the fuse.

Assure the client that you will do what you can to help them. Have a pen and paper handy. Write down any notes that are critical to the conversation. Dates, what happened, who discovered the problem, has it been corrected, etc. Use a template to log complaints systematically. Use the complaints as a learning tool for the entire company, including field inspectors and office staff.

Listen to what they say. The first couple sentences will tell you exactly what problem(s) they are experiencing. Pay full attention to what is being said without interrupting them. Make sure that you listen completely to the caller's account of their experience and the situation. If the caller is upset, rambling, and not able to verbalize well, then help or assist them by asking questions such as, "And then tell me what happened after that." "Could you tell me more about that?" "What happened next?" "How can I help you?" "What are you expecting from us?"

Professionalism

Before proceeding to a resolution, make sure that you understand the situation. Ask questions to see if there's been a simple misunderstanding that can be easily resolved. If the complaint is more than just a misunderstanding, ask questions to genuinely understand the complaint and the problem your client is experiencing. Summarize what you understand the problem to be. The caller will acknowledge or correct you. Try, "So, what you're saying is..." "Do I understand you correctly or did I miss the point?"

Express empathy to the caller. Let the caller know that you understand their situation and what they're going through. Tell them again that you will help them.

If there is a solution, make sure that the client has no doubt as to its specifics and how the issue will be resolved. Ask the client to confirm that they agree with the proposed solution to their situation. "How do you feel about the solution I've suggested?" "How does that sound to you?" "Are you in agreement with that so far?"

If the caller wants to speak to the owner of the company, try the following, "Mary, please give me the opportunity to resolve this matter. I am sure I'll be able to help. But if you are still not satisfied, I'll personally get the owner on the phone with you."

If the caller uses profanity, you might say, "There is no reason to use profanity. Please continue without using those words."

Professionalism

Incident Report Form

Some companies use an incident report form. Here's one that can be adapted for use by your company.

INCIDENT REPORT FORM

- This form might help us understand the problem you are experiencing.
- Please complete this form and mail it to us.

Your name: _____ Your email: _____

Your phone: _____

Inspector's name: _____

Property address: _____

Date of the inspection: _____ Date you moved in: _____

Did you read the inspector's report? Yes No

Did you read the inspection agreement? Yes No

Did you read the Standards of Practice to which the inspection was performed? Yes No

Detailed description of the problem:

Did you attend the home inspection? Yes No

Was the problem observable at the time of the inspection? Yes No

When did you become aware of the problem? _____

Was this problem identified in the seller's disclosure? Yes No

Did you have your inspector perform a pre-closing walk-through for you? Yes No

Was the problem observable at the time of the pre-closing walk-through? Yes No

Was any action taken to solve the problem before closing? Yes No

Was any action taken to solve the problem after closing? Yes No

Description (include estimates for repair/service or paid invoices):

Please attach any additional information.

MAIL TO: Inspector Joe Company

Leave-Behind Letter

A complaint may arise from someone other than a past client. A seller of a property that you inspected might call up and issue a complaint. Some inspectors use a leave-behind letter that is addressed to the seller or occupant of the property they inspected. This letter is designed as a preemptive strike at addressing problems that might arise immediately after the inspector leaves the property.

Dear Home Seller:

Thank you for allowing me [and the potential buyer] to inspect your home. We realize that we are guests in your home, and we conducted ourselves with the utmost respect for your property. Although I had to open and close windows and doors, and test systems and appliances, etc., I made every attempt to leave your property in the same condition that I found it. However, please take a moment to check the following to make sure that I have reset them for you properly:

door locks	thermostat/s	range settings/oven & cook top
window locks	GFCIs	faucets
lights	attic access	drapes/shutters
alarm codes	gates	other: _____

Additional comments: _____

Once again, thank you very much for allowing us into your home. If you have any questions or observations, you may reach me directly by calling 123-456-7890, or by emailing me joe@joeinspections.com.

Also, if you are moving locally and are in need of an inspector, please don't hesitate to contact me. You can find a comprehensive list of my services at www.joeinspections.com.

Sincerely,

Joe Smith, Owner
Joe's Inspections

Professionalism

Keep Caller Informed

Tell the caller who has a complaint what you are going to do. Tell them that you are going to retrieve the inspection report, and you'll pull other documents from the file. You will notify the inspector by the end of the day. Inform them of your company's policy for handling complaints. It may include scheduling another inspection with the inspector and the owner of the inspection company. A re-inspection and a meeting face-to-face with the claimant often defuse the situation and bring a quick resolution. Do not take or assign blame. Do not try to point blame to the caller while speaking to them over the phone. Express empathy by letting the caller know you understand. You understand the situation, their feelings, and what they must be going through. The goal is to work together, avoiding the filing a formal complaint, and coming up with a resolution that is mutually agreeable.

General Release

If you achieve a resolution that includes a release, here's some suggested language that may be included.

GENERAL RELEASE

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME OR MAY CONCERN, KNOW THAT your client, as the RELEASOR, for good and valuable consideration received from [Inspector Joe], as the RELEASEE, the receipt and adequacy of which is hereby acknowledged, each hereby releases and discharges the RELEASEE, each of the RELEASEE'S subsidiaries and their respective principals, affiliates, related entities, shareholders, officers, directors, agents, employees and their respective heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns from all actions, causes of action, suits, debts, dues, sums of money, accounts, reckonings, bonds, bills, specialties, covenants, controversies, agreements, promises, variances, trespasses, damages, judgments, extents, executions, claims, and demands whatsoever, in law, admiralty or equity, which against the RELEASEE, the RELEASOR and the RELEASOR'S heirs, executors, administrators, successors and assigns ever had, now have or hereafter can, shall or may, have for, upon or by reason of any matter, cause or thing whatsoever from the beginning of the world to the day of the date of this RELEASE solely in connection with the home inspection services performed by [Inspector Joe] arising out of that certain home inspection dated date of inspection.

Statistics

According to the White House Office of Consumer Affairs:

- For every complaint you hear, there are twenty-six additional clients with unresolved problems and six of these are serious. You will never hear from these twenty-six again, and they are the ones who could tell you how to make your business better.
- 56%-70% of the clients who complain will do business with your company again if you resolve their problem. If they feel you acted quickly and to their satisfaction, up to 96% of them will do business with you again, and they will probably refer other people to you.
- A dissatisfied client will tell 9 to 15 people about their experience. And about 10% of your dissatisfied clients will tell more than 20 people about their problem. You cannot possibly afford the advertising cost it would take to overcome this word-of-mouth, negative publicity.
- It costs five to six times as much to get a new (first time) client as it does to keep a current one.
- The rule of 10's: It costs up to \$10,000 to get a new client; 10 seconds to lose him/her; and up to 10 years for the client to get over whatever made him/her leave you

Do you know why most clients stop using your services? White House Office of Consumer Affairs, 1% simply die, 3% move far away from your business location, 14% are dissatisfied with the service, 9% leave because of your competition, and most importantly, 68% stop using your services because of an attitude of indifference towards the client by the company's staff. For most people, it was your attitude that mattered most.

Make sure your company is doing the right thing when it comes to satisfying clients. Imagine how you would like to be treated if you were a client with a complaint.

Professionalism

Inspection Reports: Present or Past Tense?

Should inspectors write their report observations in the past tense?

Yes. It may help reduce your liability.

Isn't the report a document stating the condition of the property at the time of the inspection? Yes. Then, why use the present tense?

Some of our everyday reading and writing habits may infuse our report writing. For example, in newspapers, we almost always see the use of present tense, as in, "The governor says..." and "The prosecution states..." even though these typically refer to past events. This lends immediacy to the story, especially for breaking news.

But at the point that you sit down to write your inspection report, you have already completed your inspection, so you should use past tense in your report to record what you did, what you saw, and what you recommend based upon the inspection performed in the past.

When explaining what you did in your inspection, use past tense. Whatever you did, opened, turned on, checked, saw, observed, found, discovered, thought, deduced, guessed, recommended – ALL happened at some specific, definite time in the past. In other words, it is not still being done.

Examples:

"I walked on the slow-sloped roof and saw a large, standing puddle. It was more than 48 hours since the last rain storm."

"There were no indications of moisture intrusion as I performed my visual observation of the second-floor bedroom ceiling."

Your inspection results were relevant only in the past or to a particular time, and should not be accepted as a present observation, present condition, or present truth.

Example:

PRESENT TENSE:

The heating system is turning on, is functional, and is responding to normal operating controls.

PAST TENSE:

The heating system turned on, appeared functional, and responded to normal operating controls at the time of the inspection.

It is clear from the use of past tense that the heating system worked at the time of the inspection. There is no room for misinterpretation.

Present vs. Past

But aren't there times when an inspector should use the present tense?

Professionalism

Yes.

You should write your report in the present tense when you want to express something that will continue to be true.

Example:

PRESENT TENSE:

InterNACHI is the world's largest trade association of residential and commercial building inspectors.

Use present tense to express general truths, facts and conclusions supported by your inspection results that are unlikely to change – in other words, something that is believed to be always true.

Example:

PRESENT TENSE:

The garage door is one of the largest moving objects in a home. Improperly installed "safety eyes" of the garage door is a main cause of property damage and bodily injury. Testing and monitoring the garage door's operation is an important task related to home maintenance.

You might use PRESENT TENSE to report your final conclusions. You might use present tense to discuss your observations and their implications.

Example:

"The roof covering material was in poor, deteriorated condition at the time of the inspection. Roof covering in poor condition will likely present a water intrusion problem in the future. Water intrusion and hidden moisture damage is a major concern when the roof system is in poor condition. The roof system requires further evaluation and major repair by a professional."

What if you're concerned about having your report introduced into evidence in a court of law? This is perhaps the most compelling reason for using past tense.

Some inspectors contend that their Inspection Agreement already contains a disclaimer, stating something along the lines of: "Conditions observed and recorded in this report were true for the time and date of the inspection." They figure that this will cover them in terms of legal liability, in case an unhappy client tries to argue that a condition observed for the stated date of the inspection still holds true for the future, as well. And, technically, these inspectors would be correct.

Hopefully, things won't get to a point that you'll be appearing in front of a judge, if your report is written clearly and your client's expectations were set properly. However, we review many home inspection reports every week. Over the years, we've learned that what gets inspectors into trouble is the answer to this following question:

"What does the report say?"

Most times, the report says things such as:

- "The roof is in good condition."
- "The AC unit works."

Professionalism

- “There are no water leaks.”
- “The sink drains.”
- “There are no foundation cracks.”

Notice that all of these routine observations are written in the present tense.

In court, however, there's a huge advantage for the inspector of having the plaintiff's attorney stuck quoting PAST-TENSE statements from your report. When an inspector writes, "The roof is in good condition," a client may interpret that as a warranty of some kind. But the attorney will only be able to quote what you wrote, which is written in past tense: "The roof was in good condition." This helps your case and legal position immensely.

We understand that the disclaimer and agreement can state that the report documents the condition of the property on the day of the inspection, and inspectors should not neglect to include this disclaimer in all their inspection reports, regardless. But it's a stronger position to be in when someone reads your report that is written in the past tense.

Consider writing your report observations in the PAST tense.

It may help reduce your liability.