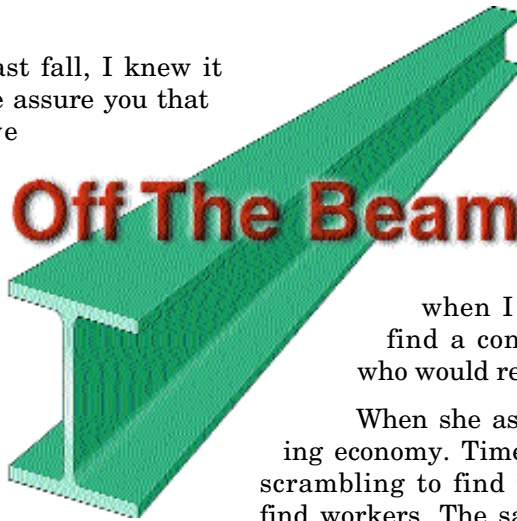


When I bought my house last fall, I knew it needed a lot of work—and let me assure you that I wasn't wrong. Sure, there've been some surprises, but what has most amazed me is the wide range of attitudes I've encountered from contractors.

For example, when we our air conditioning broke in June (just as the first big heat wave hit Chicago), I called a few companies for estimates.

Most couldn't come out immediately (understandable, considering the weather conditions). One however came out and gave an estimate. At 3 p.m. that day, I called and asked when they could install the new system. Amazingly, they said they would delay some of their non-critical calls and install the system the next day. That was impressive service. So when my hot water heater broke a few weeks ago, you know who I called.

In contrast, I'm having a heck of a time getting a new sidewalk installed along the side of my house. Sure, a decade ago I would have been out there with my own shovel. Even five years ago I would have seriously considered it. But with a new child, my time is a bit more precious (and with the extra years, my back a bit more fragile—not to mention my tennis elbow). So during the past few days, I've systematically called a dozen contractors whose Yellow Pages ads claim they do "residential sidewalks". Amazingly, only three even returned my calls. And two of those said the job (a 44 linear foot sidewalk) was too small to interest them. Finally, one company agreed to come out and give me an estimate—and only because I told them I



was only a mile from their office and I had no time table (meaning they could do the work whenever they had some down time).

My wife was shocked when I told her how hard it was to find a contractor—or even to find one who would return my phone calls!

When she asked why, I blamed our booming economy. Times are good and people aren't scrambling to find work—they're scrambling to find workers. The same phenomenon is occurring in the design and construction industry. One result is the same unfortunate happenstance that we see with every upturn of the economy: a reduction in marketing, advertising and continuing education.

However, this is a categorically bad approach to anyone who is in business for the long term. Now, while cash flow is good, is the time to promote your company for the future. Likewise, now is the time to invest in continuing education for your workforce. And just as importantly, now is the time to remember to treat every potential client as also a future client.

When my nearly 30-year-old furnace breaks, you know who I'll be calling. And when I decide to replace my very long asphalt driveway with a concrete slab, you know who I won't be calling.

Scott Melnick

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