

My January epistle (written in November) was motivated, at least in part, by agreeing to spend what then appeared to be an inordinate amount of money to fix something that wasn't really broken. As you might suspect, the initial inordinate financial outlay turned out to be little more than a launching pad for what was finally expended.

Program budgets like this don't give the Feds a second thought; it's not their money. But it sure has given me more than a few gasps and groans, watching my personal trade deficit parallel the country's.

What, you might ask, does all this have to do with the truck business, the parts business and perhaps your business? Is there a lesson or two buried under all my construction debris and invoices that might apply to serving the truck parts and service customer? I think perhaps there are. Let's try these on for size.

Commitment: On November 20th, my contractor told us that he would be done by the end of February. Yup, we've all heard stories about contractor

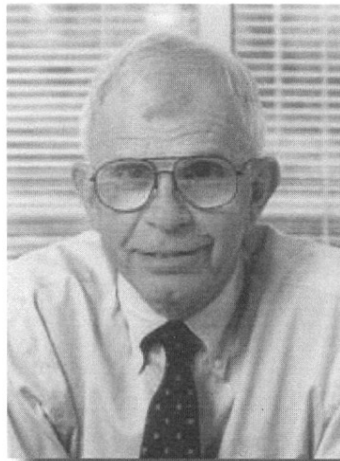
completion promises and when they finally actually finished the job. Did we believe this guy? Not a chance; we nailed down a rental through April.

What happened? On February 28th, I wrote the final check. Sure, we have a punch list of odds and ends to be completed. But do you think I will tell friends looking for a contractor recommendation

that this guy gets it done on time?

You bet—and your business works the same way. Whether it's a brake job that takes a couple of hours or an 18-speed transmission that takes a week to find, committing and delivering go hand in hand.

Flexibility: No job goes exactly as planned; something always comes up that changes who does what and when. Our guy was able to go with the flow—and still the timetable didn't slip. Are we measured by our customers in the same fashion? You bet!



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Chasing down some oddball part on a weekend to get a truck back on the road Monday morning gives customers the comfort that we're able to meet whatever challenges they throw at us.

Reliability: These guys were here every weekday morning at 7 a.m. and some Saturdays when that was needed. And the contractor himself was here every morning about 8:30 to ensure that everything was happening as planned. And if they weren't here, we knew in advance why and when they would arrive.

A lesson for us here? Yup, if customers can depend on suppliers, they'll stay with them. We have a

pile of market research that supports this.

Appearances: I have no idea whether our contractor operated out of his basement or from a multi-story office building. We never went there. We didn't need to because he came to us.

His crew arrived in a moderately battered ex-Air Force vintage step-van full of tools and equipment. Which raises the question: Are we in the parts and service business judged by how spiffy our facilities look or how well we get the job done for the customer? I'd put my money on the latter.

Pricing: Although we spent a bunch more money than originally anticipated, every add-on was documented in detail and priced individually. We obviously were sensitive to price but things were handled in such a way to accommodate this sensitivity.

Interestingly, every survey we conduct on the importance of several factors in determining where truck parts are purchased puts price meaningfully behind factors like availability, service, etc.

Bottom Line: Overhauling a house and overhauling a transmission are worlds apart, no argument. But both involve customers, and customers are customers, regardless of the product or service being purchased.

The business environment everywhere has become very competitive. But treating the customer well, from my perspective, is the best way not only to retain his business, but to get him to refer others to you.

And, if the new owners of this publication would like to pay me \$50,000 for each of my next few columns, I can get my magnificent overhaul paid off!

Stu MacKay has headed MacKay & Company since its inception in 1968. MacKay & Company serves manufacturers and distribution organizations serving the vehicle, equipment and engine businesses. The company provides its clients with proprietary research and consulting, participation in multi-client studies and its DataMac aftermarket tracking services.