

Business Integrity

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

This article describes my interaction with two local business entities to illustrate how customer service experiences with contractors on the same job can vary greatly. I had an occasion to hire a chimney sweep this year and had vastly different experiences with two different organizations.

My masonry chimney was glazed with many years of creosote buildup, so I called in a "reputable chimney sweep." The owner told me that it would cost a lot more than just a regular cleaning because they would need to use a special rotary chain technique to chip off the buildup. The guy came and looked at my configuration. He said I would need to have it cleaned, then the chimney would need to be lined with a stainless steel liner, and finally I would need to purchase a new woodstove, which he would be happy to sell me and install. The estimate came to over \$5,000. He used scare tactics indicating we would have to get it done eventually to be up to code, and he did not mention that we might get help from our homeowner's insurance.

That kind of sticker shock along with his high pressure approach sent me looking for a second opinion! I came across an outfit called Mr. Sweep - Monroe. The owner discussed my problem on the phone and gave me an estimate to do the rotary cleaning. He also said he could line the chimney, if necessary. His price was more reasonable than the first outfit, so, after checking with the BBB, I set up an appointment.

Bob and his assistant, Mark, arrived mid afternoon on a Saturday. They went right to work, after closing the chimney damper so all the soot would not spill into the house. Bob went up the fully-extended 40-foot ladder, removed my chimney cap, and started cleaning with the rotary chain device. It was a very cold day, and they were outside for over an hour, working from the top.

Mark shared with me that he had many vertebra fused in several operations, and his neck was held together with stainless steel screws. He was particularly susceptible to cold and suffered for days if he got too much exposure. Mark came in to vacuum up the ashes from the bottom. There was so much debris that he could not get the damper to open. He and Bob worked for 4 hours, vacuuming the particles through a small slit next

to the damper until they could finally get it open. The job ended up being many times the effort than was estimated. Much of the work was out in the cold, yet they charged me the estimated cost at the end.

Bob told me that my chimney tiles were cracked from a recent chimney fire, and I would need to have a liner put in. He gave me an estimate of \$2,175 to bring my chimney back up to code and make it safe - less than half what the other guy wanted. He said because the damage was due to a recent chimney fire, my home owner's insurance should cover the liner. I would only have to pay my \$250 deductible. A total of \$250 sounded much better than \$5000. I was thrilled! We made a date to install the liner for the following week.

Bob and Mark arrived on schedule and proceeded to unroll the massive flexible stainless steel pipe. Bob immediately noticed that there was a kink in the pipe caused by rough handling by the shipper. He just did not think it was right to install a kinked pipe, even though many chimney sweeps do it, so he got on the phone and ordered another one to be shipped out that same day. Two days later, they were back to install the second pipe. This one was in good shape.

Bob and Mark set out some special insulation to wrap around the pipe for better performance. Bob shared that many sweeps do not insulate the pipe because there is one interpretation of the code that makes it unclear whether insulation is required or not. Bob said that he refuses to install a liner that is not insulated, but he said over half of the sweeps manage to slide by without insulation. That lowers their cost and makes the installation much easier, but it is not a quality job.

The afternoon they picked was even worse weather than the first day, but Bob knew I wanted to use my stove on a very cold weekend, so on an 18-degree Friday with lots of snow and 25 mile per hour winds, Bob and Mark went up the 40-foot ladder carrying the heavy and bulky pipe to line my chimney. Bob had to carry the pipe out onto the snowy roof balanced on the peak and leaning into the wind while Mark worked to stuff the pipe down the chimney. Bob had to arch the pipe upward while balancing on the snowy rooftop in the wind (the pipe looked rather like the shape of a fishing pole when you have a big one on the line) so it was nearly vertical at the top of the chimney. I was petrified, but he seemed to take it in stride, even though the wind chill was -25 degrees F.

They got the pipe in and got down safely, much to my relief. Then they went inside to hook up the pipe to the stove. This process was significantly more complex than they had estimated it would be due to the configuration of my chimney, but they stayed with it until the job was done. Mark, with his bad neck, went up to install the cap on top of the chimney, alone in the howling wind. It was brutal.

They finished the job, charged me the original estimate, cleaned up every bit of their mess, and left to go soak in the tub. As they drove out, I thought about the entire experience. These days we are so used to shoddy work and contractors trying to take advantage of customers.

With Mr. Sweep, there were many opportunities for them to take the easier way out, but they adhered to a customer-focused approach, and absolutely did not skimp on the quality, even though the weather was awful and they made less per hour than expected. I was really impressed with their work and service that was evident with both Bob and Mark. Their actions and attitude of service rather than sale made me trust them as business people displaying high integrity. They communicated with me throughout the process, so I understood the logic of what they were doing and why.

You can bet I will be going with them any time I need service in the future. If you ever need chimney service from a company with high integrity, I suggest you call Mr. Sweep! If you do not have a chimney, but are a local business person, consider these individuals as role models for what great customer service is all about.

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