

A Solutions Strategy

By Stan Pohmer



Like many of you, especially those in the Millennial generation, I like to tinker and try to fix things on my own, without calling in professional help or taking the problem in for servicing. I enjoy learning about how things work, and the challenge in accomplishing something I had never attempted before. The sense of satisfaction gained when I've successfully "conquered" the project is sweet.

I've developed a scale to judge the complexity of a project, one based on how many trips back to the store to return or exchange a part or component purchased in error, or to buy a part I didn't think I'd need on my initial trip to the store, or to obtain a specialty tool I didn't already have in my shop that I didn't think I'd need.

The average project is a two or three tripper, but when it comes to electrical or plumbing projects that I am far from expert in, they could be four trippers or more.

Though I enjoy the challenge, learning process and sense of accomplishment that come from DIY projects, time is a finite resource that I never have enough of; if there was a way where I could be better prepared, better schooled on how to do things and could eliminate some of the trips back to the retailer, I could save more of this precious commodity, time.

Like you, I do my due diligence and research the project online to learn as much as I can before I go to the retailer to purchase the tools and materials I think I'll need, but invariably, the repair/replace/install project I'm working on bears only a distant resemblance to the instructions and pictures online, and there are almost always complications the instructions don't anticipate and address.

Bottom line, the clock is ticking and time is wasting.

Searching for an Expert

I've learned from years spent in the school of hard knocks that if I know exactly how to do something and know exactly what pieces and parts I need to complete the project, I can probably save a few bucks by shopping at the big box.

But if I only have a vague notion about the project and what I need to purchase, I generally go to a specialty retailer, where I can describe my problem or explain what I want to accomplish and then have an expert tell me exactly what I need and exactly how to repair/replace/install it.

I may pay a bit more on a per item basis, but I'm paying only for what I really need!

For example, nothing frustrates me more than needing two 12-inch spikes for a landscape timber repair and being forced to purchase a box of 20 of these spikes at the box store; my cost per spike used skyrockets and now I have 18 spikes I don't need.

At the hardware store, I can purchases two spikes; I may pay more per spike, but I'm not purchasing extras, so I'm actually saving money there.

The Value of Expertise

Think about these two projects and you may see this more clearly.

How many of you have ever had to fix a doorbell that stopped working? I'd guess very few of you.

I've owned homes for more than 40 years and I'd never had any doorbell problems until now, so I had no experience of what could possibly have caused the problem and what was needed to repair or replace it.

My first stop was the box store where I found a replacement kit that included the push button ringer, the transformer and door chimes. The kit stated that wire to connect these components needed to be purchased separately, but since I didn't know the distances between all of these components or where the wiring in my wall was routed, I'd have to make at least one more trip back to the store to purchase the wire.

Still somewhat confused, I went down the street to my local Ace Hardware store, a third-generation, family-owned franchise store that still had those little cabinets and drawers where you could buy individual nuts, bolts and screws.

I explained my doorbell problem and the salesman asked a series of questions to identify what had most likely caused the doorbell failure.

He walked me over to a peg hook that had a replacement transformer on it. Though it wasn't the exact replacement for the 37-year-old original, he explained exactly how to modify the wiring to accept the replacement.

The replacement worked. The transformer cost 20 percent of the big box kit, and I only had to make one trip to complete the project.

Ace Hardware's brand promise is "amazing every customer every time," and they sure lived up to that promise with me!

An integral part of the Ace culture/DNA is

providing expertise, their core differentiator.

They stock replacement and repair items for older homes and have even referred me to one of their competitors when they didn't stock an item I needed.

Did I pay a bit more for the transformer? Sure, but how can you put a cost on the expertise

shared, the confidence gained and the time they saved me?

Ever tried to replace the headlight filament on a late model car? Not a simple task. Access to the headlight assembly "door" is buried behind all sorts of wires, lines and engine parts.

The replacement filament is available from any

discount store, but the installation directions are generic and you have to figure out access to the headlight assembly on your own.

I chose to go to NAPA Auto Parts for the filament. I paid a bit more for the part, but the salesman printed off a diagram of the engine compartment for my specific make/model and showed me what parts needed to be removed to gain access; he even sold me a \$3 shop tool specifically made to allow me to bypass the majority of engine parts to facilitate the filament installation.

Yes, I paid a little more for the part and added the cost of the tool, but the expertise was free and the time saved, immeasurable!

Focus on Key Differentiators

Here are a few takeaways to consider:

- Your team and their expertise are the most important differentiators you have to offer your customers.

- Make things easy for the consumer post-purchase and work to save them time.

We spend a lot of time focused on how to get the customer in and out of the store quickly, but that's only a fraction of their time spent; most of their time with our products is spent post-purchase. Value their time!

- The customer is coming to you looking for a solution to a problem or opportunity they've identified. Be the solutions provider, offering the simplest solution at the lowest costs of price and time.

Ace Hardware and NAPA are profitable and growing where many independent retailers are struggling; the reason is their solutions-based focus on the consumer and providing expertise.

I'm a believer in their strategy based on personal experience; I can't underestimate the value of the time they've saved me and this helps breed loyalty.

It's not just about product and price; it's also about providing solutions, confidence and valuing their precious commodity of time... **LGR**

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