



How to Hire an Electrical Contractor”

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Summary: In this article I discuss an experience I had as a buyer and how a CustomerCentric selling approach was used on me very successfully. There are numerous lessons to be learned about what to say and what not to say and how “positioning” is not selling. As always, your feedback is appreciated!

I recently added a garage/office addition to my house and although it overran the budget and took twice as long to complete the project was a success. That is a euphemism for “it’s done!”

One of the critical path tasks in building the garage was the “electric rough-in.” In this step all the wires are run through the walls and the lights, outlets and switch boxes are installed. I decided to interview electrical subcontractors from listings I found in the local yellow pages. I called three companies and they all agreed to come to the house, review the plans and tell me how much it would cost.

The first company showed up a few days later and the owner introduced himself. Mel was his name and he arrived in a well worn pickup truck. There were no markings on the truck but it did look like it was stocked full of supplies. I showed Mel the electrical blueprints and he proceeded to study them and walk around the project. We looked inside the car park area and then visited the second floor. During the whole time he was looking up and down with a very inquisitive and studious look on his face. With his inspection finished I asked him how much he thought it would cost. He said to be fair he would like to take a copy of the plan back to his office to study it further. He agreed to give me an estimate the next day. (Notice he said “estimate” – not “price”)

“Mel, can you tell me about your company?” I asked.

He answered, ***“A1 is a local company – we’ve been doing business in this town for 30 years and I took over the business from my father. We have a couple guys and since you are local, we’ll give you a good price”***

Later in the day the second contractor showed up. He drove up in a brand new truck with the name “Tri-State Electrical Contractors” emblazoned on the side. A man jumped out of the truck and introduced himself as Pete and without taking a breath said, “Wow. *You have a beautiful home*”. Now, at the time it looked like war zone. There was a huge dumpster in the front yard, the grass looked like hell and I had a half finished garage sticking out of the side of my house. The fact that the color of the roof shingles of the old section (brown) were not the same of the new section (gray) didn’t deter him. Pleasantries completed we followed the same routine that I had with Mel. Pete was more inquisitive and wanted to know how long I had lived in the house, what was my timeframe for having the work performed and who was doing the rest of the construction. I could not tell from his reaction whether the answers I gave him were helpful – or scared him. In any case, I gave him a copy of the plan and he said he would send me a written proposal within a week.

“Pete, can you tell me about your company?” I asked.

He answered, ***“Tri-State Electrical Contractors is the largest contractor in the area. We have over 200 employees and manage both residential and commercial projects. We’re doing all the work for the new high school and we also do work for the state.”***

I thanked him for visiting. We shook hands and he drove off. As he left I stood in my driveway thinking that, based on the information so far, I could not decide which contractor to use. Was price going to be the determining factor? Is price the only issue? What sort of risk does each option present? Is bigger better? Is smaller better? Is someone with specialized residential experience better than someone with a broad range of unrelated skills? I just couldn’t decide.

The following day Tom from Princeton Electric arrived. He had an average looking pickup truck without markings. I sucked in my breath and waited for the next round to start. Tom introduced himself and asked, “How can I help you?” I gave Tom the blueprint explain to him what I had in mind. His first question was, “What are you going to use the garage for?” I told him about my upstairs office but also mentioned that the downstairs area, in addition to housing my daughter’s car, would serve as a wood shop and storage for other yard equipment like my tractor, etc.

“Where do you do your woodworking now?” Tom asked.

“In the other garage, I replied”.

“Can you show me?” he asked.

I proceeded to open the door of the existing garage and as the door slowly opened I had the same sinking feeling I had as a kid when my mother opened my

closet doors. There, stacked to the ceiling was all the junk and shop equipment that eventually was going to be moved into the new space.

Tom turned to me and asked, “Until now have you been using this existing garage space as a shop?”

“Yes”, I replied.

“I notice”, he continued, “that there is only one outlet in here and it’s a 15amp GFI circuit. Does that cause any problems when you try to run more than one piece of equipment at the same time? For example, running both your saw and that big shop vacuum?”

Instantly, I knew he was on to something. Most garages in the US have a single 15Amp GFI (ground fault circuit) in the garage. They are installed there primarily for small appliances. Most wood shop equipment is power hungry and needs 20A or more. What Tom knew (or suspected) was that I was constantly tripping the circuit by overloading it. In fact, if you ever tried to run an extra refrigerator off this circuit and then try to vacuum your car – the circuit pops!

Tom looked at me and said, “Mr. Lewis, You have only one circuit in the new garage space. Although it is a 20amp circuit, it’s almost the same problem. Why don’t we put in two circuits and add a breaker so you have a total of 40amps?”

“That’s a great idea”, I said.

We then proceeded to look more closely at the other power needs of my upstairs office. Ultimately we decided to add a few more circuits there as well.

While we were discussing these changes Tom mentioned that although the additional lines would not be difficult to install it would require one more change. The circuit breaker box did not have enough opening to accommodate the extra lines. We would need to go to a 20 slot breaker box versus the 10 slot breaker box that was in the plan. (This is the box where all the wires and power originate.)

Again, I agreed with the change. And so it went...

You can probably guess by now that I chose Tom and his company for the Job. Was Tom the cheapest? No! In fact he was the most expensive – about 10% higher and the scope of work increased. But as a result of understanding my needs and the application I had a significantly higher comfort level about the job being done right the first time. I also knew that if any unforeseen issues arose I could work with Tom and his team to sort out the details.

Thinking about what had happened I was astonished at how simple the whole experience was – but how powerful.

Electrical wiring is buried inside the walls of your house which means you don't see it. Everyone uses the same wiring materials and has to follow strict national code compliance laws. All the work is inspected by a town official for safety. In other words, *there is virtually no "product" differentiation*.

I didn't even ask Tom about his company until he came back with his crew to do the work. The company isn't even located in Princeton.

Notice also that the **positioning** of the first two contractors did nothing to help me decide which to use. In fact, if I had been predisposed to go to either a big or small firm – the other would have been eliminated immediately.

By thinking about the way I would use the space and my electrical needs Tom was able to ask probing and qualifying questions to help me see a better solution. He had effectively extended my viewpoint from simply executing the blueprint plans (consider it an RFP) as the first two had done. They had just assumed that it was right because it was in the blueprint with an official seal.

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