

# Improving Public Perception

by Guy Sperb



**INADEQUATELY EDUCATING THE PUBLIC HAS MADE US EASY TARGETS**

**T**he nation's first volunteer fire company was founded in Philadelphia in 1736 as a direct result of a vigorous public campaign by Benjamin Franklin, and fire departments have been actively promoting their importance to the communities they serve ever since. In contrast, it is common knowledge that the vast majority of the U.S. public are unaware of the benefits they enjoy on a daily basis from building and fire safety codes and their enforcement. At the very least those benefits are greatly misunderstood, with code requirements too often looked on as little more than governmental interference into people's private lives.

Clearly, building departments have a lot of catching up to do. As construction continues to become more expensive, building lots smaller, houses larger and commercial buildings taller, it is imperative that communities understand the importance of building departments and the crucial services they provide. Unfortunately, not only is the public largely unaware of the purpose and value of permits, they are also generally very undereducated about the permit process.

I recently witnessed proof of this firsthand during two focus groups conducted for the Oregon Building Officials Association (OBOA) as part of the development of "Think Permit", its new public outreach program. The focus groups were conducted by an independent research firm to determine the public's basic knowledge of permits and the permit process, and to gather input on possible slogans and logos for the program.

The two groups consisted of a representative sampling of members of the public who had undergone a “home renovation” project. Participants had no idea for whom or why the research was being conducted. Although they were aware of my presence, I had no input in the two-hour discussions held with each group—which I observed from behind a two-way mirror.

I can say in all honesty that those four hours were the most eye-opening and informative I have spent in my twenty-plus-year career in building code enforcement. Phrases like “too rigid,” “too much of a hassle,” “too expensive,” “no value” and “unnecessary” were frequently used, and the participants clearly communicated what we had long expected: that we have drastically failed to educate the public about the value of permits and inspections. The majority of the participants didn’t even understand the connection between inspections and permitting!

## The Value of Understanding

Our history of inadequately educating the public about why we do what we do has made us easy targets for frustrated property owners—so much so that we routinely get blamed for problems not caused by our departments, such as those having to do with engineering, planning or zoning issues, and even poor construction management. Code officials everywhere will agree that our primary goal is public safety, yet I dare to ask the question: How truly effective are we if people avoid getting permits because of negative perceptions?

Twenty years ago, when I was a new inspector, an incident occurred in my jurisdiction that shaped my career and the focus of my efforts—a house fire claimed the lives of six children. As the parent of two young daughters myself at the time, I could not begin to imagine the grief their parents suffered. The tragedy was compounded when the source of the fire was determined to be the installation of a woodstove too close to combustible materials and that no permit had been issued for the stove installation. Although I don’t recall the exact amount, a woodstove permit at that time was approximately \$15.00 and I often wonder if those parents had realized its true value—and, just as important, if we as a department had made an extra effort to educate them—would those children still be alive today?

We clearly need to change the public’s perception of us from unfriendly, unreasonable, overbearing and inflexible to courteous, helpful, understanding and fair. Rules exist to serve, not enslave, and the codes are neither irrefutable gospel nor rocket science. We will never improve our image worrying about potential litigation. It is time to start using our extensive code knowledge to help find solutions, not to create problems.

## Customer Service is Key

Several years ago I attended a class instructed by City of Lacey, Washington, Building Official John Neff on professional development for code officials. He stressed that being a professional is not a label you give yourself, it is a description that you hope others will apply to you, and went on to say that “very few professionals are known by their clients as ‘great’ because of their technical abilities.”

We are so familiar with the codes and their application that it is easy to forget how important it is to take the time to explain why we must enforce them. An improvement in general perceptions and understanding of the benefits and value of permits will not only yield an improved image of code officials but will also lead to increased voluntary compliance. Simply put: we need to start treating our customers like our business depends on it, because it does! We spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars to become more technically informed, why not become just as informed about customer service? There is a nearly endless number of books available on the subject, but *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service*, by Kristin Anderson and Ron Zemke, is one of the best topical resources I have found and should certainly be considered for inclusion in your department’s resource library.

The employee handbook for a prominent department store chain includes just one rule: “Use your good judgment in all situations.” Each and every department member plays an important role in an effective customer service program, and they should all be empowered to use such a mantra. Above all, fear of administrative or legal action should never prevent them from doing their jobs.

Research indicates that the most frustrating part of waiting is not knowing how long the wait will be, so work hard at keeping your customers informed during the permit process. Statistics show that customers who

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have a negative experience will tell an average of nine people, while those who have a positive experience will only share their stories with three others. This suggests that we may need to work three times harder at providing positive experiences just to maintain our current image. One of the best ways to find out how you are doing is to conduct customer service surveys. Better yet, send out two, one to contractors and the other to property owners, and use the results to make improvements to your overall department operation.

### An Ounce of Prevention

Benjamin Franklin is credited with coining the phrase, “an ounce of protection is worth a pound of cure,” in a letter published in the February 4, 1735, issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette* titled “Protection of Towns from Fire.” If we want to be more effective at protecting everyone in our jurisdictions from potential hazards in the built environment, we must improve public perception of building codes and those of us who work to enforce them. This will require an ongoing commitment every day of the year to make customer service an integral part of our job, not just an extension of it. ♦

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