

# WEFTEC<sup>®</sup>'98

## Getting Our Customers to “Buy-In”

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Infrastructure projects contain many different aspects which municipalities must take into consideration. These include the design, bidding, meetings, construction, change orders, legal issues, environmental issues, and lastly but most importantly - our customers. Our customers are those people we serve day-in and day-out in our positions. We work hard to provide them with a good transportation system so they can get their kids to school on time, themselves to work, and can travel anywhere they want to go within a reasonable time span. We provide them with water that has won awards for “great taste”. We collect their wastewater and garbage, and we provide a drainage system that keeps their properties from flooding. We all do everything we can to serve our customers and ensure that these services are a way of life.

Most of our customers appreciate us and understand the hard work it takes to keep the infrastructure in working order. Whenever we work on the streets, sanitary and storm sewer systems, or water distribution system, customers are patient and allow us to enter their property, temporarily remove their improvements, block their driveways and streets, and turn off their water.

A few of our customers are not so patient. They cause problems that delay projects, delay completion, and cost us all time and money. Almost every project I have ever been involved in has had at least one, what I call the “complex customer”. They won’t allow us on their property, or sell us an easement. They complain about pot holes, interruption in water and sewer service, and/or standing water in the street. When we try to eliminate these problems they stand in our way by interrupting our progress, reporting us to our bosses, and even suing us.

I categorize these “complex customers” into six categories. These include:

1. Give-me Customer
2. Competitive Customer
3. Intolerant Customer
4. Explosive Customer
5. Let-me-tell-you Customer
6. Complaining Customer

Give-me Customer - this customer is the one that fights and complains about rate increases,

right-of-way acquisition, construction, etc. unless there is a direct benefit to him, such as money or new services. This customer wants his own way, and uses techniques such as intimidation and aggression.

Competitive Customer - the customer that calls you with complaints about how things are being done. The contractor is digging in the wrong place, his water was off for several hours and should have only been off for a few minutes. He compares himself to others, and is always interested in being one-up.

Intolerant Customer - This customer is all for improvements as long as he is not inconvenienced. He complains when his street is blocked, if anyone enters his property, if his improvements are not restored better than before. He wants the progress but won't allow us to do it. He is very impatient and has high expectations.

Explosive Customer - this customer does whatever he can to sabotage consultants, contractors, and City crews. When we are not at the site he removes our barricades, damages our materials and equipment, pulls up our construction stakes and parks his vehicles so that we can't continue our work. This customer overreacts to situations and is very vocal and loud. He is easily angered, aggressive, and possibly dangerous.

Let-me-tell-you-how-it-is Customer - this customer constantly calls us to point out our mistakes. He always has the answer and always calls us to express his opinion. He is very smug and never lets us offer any kind of explanation.

Complaining Customer - this customer complains about everything we do, when we do it, and how we do it. He criticizes most situations, finds fault, and picks at details. This customer is very needy and is looking for attention.

Ignoring our "complex customers" is not the solution - they won't go away. In most cases they turn into bigger problems. We have to communicate with these customers using diplomacy and tact. We must resolve conflicts in a way that minimizes defensiveness and hostility. We must get these "complex customers" to buy into the project in order to get it done on time and within the dollars budgeted.

As managers it is our responsibility to respond to our "complex customers" and find methods to get these customers on our team. By assessing the characteristics of these customers we sometimes must alter our approach to resolve these conflicts. Resolving conflicts requires changing attitudes and situations. We must communicate with tact, set a good example, and remain professional at all times.

This paper will include some techniques on how to improve our strategies for dealing with these "complex customers" and will cover some specific incidents that happened with each of these types of customer, how they were handled, and what the results were.