

# AQUA

YOUR TRUSTED PARTNER IN THE SPA & POOL INDUSTRY

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## PSP EXPO ISSUE





# How to Manage Bad News With Your Customers

**T**HE PANDEMIC MAY HAVE been a godsend for every pool company that desperately needed the phone to ring. But now it's a nightmare for every business owner who is trying to fulfill the delivery of what they've sold.

This is especially true with new pool construction, where ridiculously long lead times and rising costs are frustrating everyone, and putting many projects at risk of losing money. Adding insult to injury, the homeowner's frustration will often boil over into an ugly one-star review for you, even though you're doing your best to manage a nearly impossible situation.

Well, I'm afraid I don't have any secrets to help you shorten lead times, but I do have some suggestions to help you keep client tensions from boiling over. Borrowing heavily from Dr. Robert Cialdini (author of "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion"), we can leverage several of his proven principles to manage expectations and retain clients as raving fans, rather than disgruntled complainers.

## LONG LEAD TIMES

Let's start with that first phone call, when the homeowner delightedly calls to inform you they've decided to let you build their new backyard dream. And they're ready for you to start next week.

Likely the first words out of your mouth will be, "Well, we've got an eight week (or 18 week, or whatever) backlog, so we can't start your project until (fill in the blank here)."

These words are 100% true. And the homeowner needs to hear them. But I suggest there's a better way to deliver that news. Instead of focusing on the negative part of the story (which is that you can't start in the timeframe they want), let's try this more pre-emptive, positive spin:

*"Hey, that's great to hear! That's our specialty, and I know you're going to love it when it's finished."*

*"Now, as for timing, let me tell you a little bit about what's going on in the pool industry right now — and maybe you've heard this already — but thanks to COVID, there's been overwhelming demand for this kind of thing, all over the U.S. and beyond. In fact, the demand is*

*unprecedented. As a result, there have been numerous shortages and delays in materials and labor. That means our start dates and our completion dates are a bit longer and later, and more unpredictable than we would like.*

*"But don't worry. We've been dealing with this for nearly two years now, so we've gotten pretty good at it. We've got people dedicated to managing our projects, to minimize delays as much as possible.*

*"The good news is that we can absolutely get this done. I just want you to know up front that we are likely to be hit with some surprises and delays along the way. But if you are patient and willing to work with us, I promise you will be thrilled with the end result."*

What we're doing here is leveraging at least four of Robert Cialdini's six principles of persuasion, as follows:

- **SCARCITY / Fear Of Missing Out:** "There is an overwhelming demand for backyard pools right now, but there's only so much equipment, and so many slots available. If you really want this, you'll need to move



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quickly.”

- **CONSENSUS / Social Proof:**  
“Clearly, everybody else wants what you want and is convinced this is the right thing to do. So it must be the right thing for you also.”
- **AUTHORITY** – “This is a complicated and challenging situation. But this is not our first rodeo. We know how to handle this. You’re in good hands with us.”
- **LIKING** – “Hey, I don’t blame you for wanting a new pool. If I lived in a beautiful home like this, I would want the exact same thing. So I’m going to be honest and straightforward with you, and treat you like a friend. This will be a challenge, but if we work together, we’ll get you that new backyard you really want.”

With this sort of pre-emptive, proactive conversation, you’ve set expectations right up front that there will be challenges, but if they are patient with you, and work with you, it will all work out fine in the end.

You’ve also let them know — without directly pointing a finger at them — that the longer lead time is a direct result of them waiting too long to contact you for a pool. It’s not your fault that you can’t build it in their desired time frame. It’s a result of their own poor planning.

## PRICE INCREASES

Now let’s move on to the next big disappointing news that you’ll probably have to deliver at some point: “The price we quoted is going up.”

If you were thorough in your explanation of the “new normal” in the pool construction industry, then this should not come as an overwhelming surprise. Still, they are likely to feel like they are trapped in a corner and/or the victim of unscrupulous business tactics. So you’ll need to give them some options. I suggest a conversation somewhere along the lines of:

*“Well, as we both feared and expected, we’ve been hit with some price increases. In this case, it’s <whatever item is worthy of this conversation>. Fortunately, you’ve got some choices:*

1. “We can procure the materials at a higher price and proceed with the project. I just need you to sign this

price adjustment agreement” (or whatever document you want to use).

2. “Or you can attempt to procure the materials yourself at a lower price, if you think you can (1) locate the materials, and (2) get a better price.
3. “Or we can look at some alternative materials” (presuming that’s an option).

Obviously, the above conversation would be a lot easier if you have, in fact, discussed this possibility and put it in writing in the contract. The following is not the exact clause I would use in a contract, but this is the heart of the conversation I would have with the homeowner:

*“Due to widespread material shortages in 2021, just about every contractor in the country (pool builders, home builders, roofers, remodelers, etc.) has been forced to add clauses to their contracts to deal with untenable cost increases. For example, lumber, concrete, steel and chemical costs have all doubled and tripled in recent months, with no warning. A builder will go out of business if the cost of materials doubles after the price is quoted. And if that happens, you will have an unfinished pool on your hands — and no recourse, because the builder is bankrupt.”*

Again, I’m not an attorney, but I’m quite certain the above is a conversation you need to have with the homeowner before the excavator starts digging the hole.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

Our industry is experiencing a new reality, and a “new normal” that isn’t what homeowners were hoping for, nor anything we could have imagined. Clients will get upset if you don’t meet their expectations. But if we proactively set and manage those expectations up front, we have the potential to create lifelong raving fans who appreciate the extra efforts we went to, to help them get what they wanted in these extra challenging times. ~

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