

No response = no business

Last week, I had an urgent need to get my roof repaired. We'd had a severe windstorm in the Washington area that blew off several shingles off my roof, and rain was in the forecast. In order to prevent further damage, I knew I had to get someone to fix this right away.

First, I contacted several friends to ask for their recommendations. This way, I got three names. Then, I went on Consumer Checkbook to check ratings and get more names. I wrote down a few names, and noticed that a couple of the names my friends had provided were on the Checkbook site, and had good ratings. First thing on Monday (I noticed the damage over the weekend), I called all the names I gathered. This is how it went:

1. Call to roofer listed as good value/good quality in Consumer Checkbook. I spoke to an office person, who added me to a list, with no guarantee or timeline for when I would get someone to fix it. She told me that there were several other calls ahead of me, so she could not tell me when someone would be available, but she did provide me with pricing.

2. Call to another qualified roofer listed in Consumer Checkbook. I left a detailed message, which was never answered.

3. Call to roofer (who was highly rated in Consumer Checkbook), referred to by a close friend. There was no answer and the voice mailbox was full, so I had no way to contact this contractor or leave a message.

4. Call to roofer referred to by my neighbor who recently had her roof replaced. When I called, I got a message saying that they were overwhelmed with calls, to either leave a message or send an email. I sent an email, to which I received an answer more than a week later, explaining pricing, etc.

5. Call to handyman referred by a friend. He referred me to a contractor friend of his, a jack of many trades, who answered immediately. This contractor offered to come by to give me an estimate, and then was able to complete the repair the same day.

Now, this was an unusual situation. Many, many people had damage to their roofs from a strong and unusually long-lasting windstorm. Roofers were slammed. Yet, their responses showed a lot about how their businesses are run and how they deal with customers.

I am sure I will have a need for a roofer in the future. Based on my interactions here, I would contact the first and the fourth roofers because they were responsive and I got the sense of professionalism. As to the contractor who actually fixed my roof, I know I have found someone who is punctual and reliable, but he is not primarily a roofer and I would not ask him to do more than repair shingles.

Not being responsive and not even having a mechanism to leave messages is the sign of a business that is overwhelmed and incapable of dealing with emergencies and not very professional and customer-centric. It's better to get a late reply than no reply at all.

No response leads to no business.

What can a small, one-person business do to be more responsive? There are several options.

- Have a website that explains how you respond in emergencies, and which also provides a phone number, email, and contact form to get in touch (in other words, many ways to get in touch).
- Have an online booking system. There are several paid and non paid options out there that allow your customers to book time with you, either for a consultation or a full-fledged appointment.

- Consider having an answering service, virtual assistant, or in-house administrative person so that customers can talk to a person in real time.
- Make time to answer every email, contact request or phone call that you receive, even if it is to say we can't help you at this time.

No amount of marketing or beautiful website design is going to overcome a lack of responsiveness. If you want business, you have to respond to inquiries. If you don't respond, you will not get that business now or in the future.