

Tackling the 'Ugh' Projects

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Fate somehow selected the hottest weekend of the summer for me to move into my new house. I say "new" house, but what I really mean is a 1930s bungalow in need of a few renovation projects, ranging on a scale of "minor" to "ugh."

So last weekend when everyone else was out grilling and firework-ing, I was filling holes and removing switch plate covers, only to find out that the interior paint colors I'd carefully selected were far too conservative. Instead of dove grey, light sage, and silver sky, I had three vaguely tinted versions of off-white.

Since paint doesn't come cheap these days, I was determined to haul my cookies back to Home Depot and obtain some sort of a fix. The problem was, by the time I elbowed my way up to the bustling paint counter, I didn't really know what to say. I was looking for something a little darker, so it couldn't be much harder than adding a few drops of color, right?

Well... not exactly, the rushed paint department associate (Michael) explained to me. With some colors, you can add hues to create a darker, richer blend. With others, he said, you are working with a totally different base combination so it's more complex than just adding another squirt of syrup to your snow cone.

I stood back for a second, contemplating my next move. These were the exact colors I had asked for initially, so this harried man in the paint department was really under no obligation to fix something he hadn't done wrong in the first place.

But before I could plead my case, Michael had grabbed the paint cans from me and taken them behind the counter. I watched as he started flipping switches -- adding drops of this or that -- shaking and customizing for what felt like forever.

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

Finally he looked up from his task, grinned and said "I guess I'm a bit of a mad scientist."

Mad Scientist Mike then dipped a fingertip in each concoction and dried the sample to the top of the can. Each color was perfect. The strangest part of the whole experience was how he knew exactly what I needed when I didn't even know myself.

This experience was an excellent reminder of what kind of outcome can result from that perfect combination of technical knowledge and customer service. In my case, the paint expert had so much tribal knowledge rolling around in his head that he had a good idea of what he could do to fix the problem, even if it meant flipping the script a bit. It meant a lot to me that the script was flipped on a busy afternoon.

With this in mind: As you send all of your mad scientists out roving into the field, think about ways in which you can cultivate their skill levels. Show your customers that you don't just offer them a commodity or a product, you offer them a solution -- and one they might not even quite know how to ask for, at that.

The paint department would have been well within its rights to send me packing when I came back with the product -- after all, I'd ordered it. It certainly wasn't their fault that I had flubbed the specs on this customized item. That said, every account is going to have an "oops" moment. Are you confident your associates will react appropriately, with the customer in mind? The important thing in my case was that this particular company employed the expertise behind the counter to make sure that -- at the end of the day -- my jumbled and rambling paint order wound up actually on my walls. And based on that, when I move onto the "ugh" projects, I know exactly where I'll go for my supplies.

Thoughts? Email me at anna.wells@advantagemedia.com [1].

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