

"Checking References"

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Not long ago, I had a conversation with a contractor client of mine in Indiana. Bob told me that he had just gotten off the phone with a prospect he was trying to persuade to select his company to build their multi-million dollar new headquarters facility.

Bob indicated that the call was the third he had made to the prospect to encourage him to check the client references Bob had provided him. I suggested that maybe the prospect had already decided to go with someone else, and that's why he hadn't bothered to talk with the individuals Bob had given him. No, said Bob, that wasn't the case. He knew for a fact that the prospect had narrowed his choices down to two, and that Bob's company was the clear favorite.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You mean to tell me that this guy is going to spend \$4.5 million of his own money (he owned the company) and he's not going to even talk to your past clients to see what they have to say about your firm?"

"That's the incredible thing," said Bob. "And this happens all the time. We want prospects to talk with our past clients because they love us. We do great work and we give exceptional service. But I can't tell you how hard it is to get them to check us out."

After we got off the phone, I began to wonder if Bob's experiences were simply an anomaly, or did other contractors find the same thing. I began to ask around, and much to my amazement, discovered that rather than Bob's case being the exception, it was more the rule. I had contractors tell me they had both negotiated work and won bids on projects as large as \$30 million without so much as a phone call being made to any of their client references.

Despite having given it a great deal of thought, I can come up with no logical or sensible explanation for such behavior. I know if it was my money, I'd sure as hell be more diligent about doing my homework. I suspect that most of us, even if we were spending a couple of thousand dollars for a computer, or \$30,000 on a car, would ask around to find others who had purchased the model we were considering and find out how it had performed for them.

Why, then, would successful businesspeople—the same ones who pore over online reviews of copy machines and probably test two or three different models in-house before deciding which one to purchase—place one of the most critical aspects of their business—their facility—in the hands of someone they haven't checked out from top to bottom? Are they so trusting that they believe everything they're told by the people trying to get selected?

This remains an unsolved mystery for me. If you can provide a credible reason why people don't check references, e-mail me at woody@wordsfromwoody.com. If you can't, then I suggest you exercise a degree of vigilance and check people out—and not just contractors.

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