

QUALITY - THE KEY TO RADON BUSINESS SUCCESS IN THE 1990's
It Only Costs a Little More to Go First Class

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ABSTRACT

During the 1980's, thousands of companies entered the radon industry. Many of these businesses have succeeded, many have failed. The factor determining success or failure was most often a matter of quality: quality of management, quality of service, quality of products, quality of analyses, and quality of technology. Success for radon companies in the 1990's will require an emphasis on quality in every aspect of the radon business. Successful businesses will implement the principles of good quality assurance, not just in their measurement programs, but also in customer service programs, in written and oral communications, in staff training, in production and sales, in accounting, in management, in state-of-the-art technology, in ethics, and in professionalism.

Quality starts with you as a business owner or government program manager. The public will not buy or support your service when there are doubts about the integrity, ethics, professionalism, and/or competence of management. It is up to you as a business owner or manager to set the standards for quality and to demonstrate quality by example. Achieving a quality revolution in the radon industry will require that management and staff at all levels become obsessed with quality. A commitment to quality means that quality is at the top of every agenda. It means training everyone to assess quality and establishing rewards for quality. Furthermore, quality improvement never ends. To recognize and implement all of these attributes of quality is the surest road to successful radon businesses in the 1990's.

INTRODUCTION

While growing up in Vermont, I remember my father saying, "Son, it only costs a little more to go first class." At the time, I assumed he was talking about traveling first class. But now, 40 years later, I am wondering how this could be. Because, you see, my father never went to high school, never owned a house, never flew in an airplane or rode on a train, and never stayed in hotels. He never owned anything except an old car, his clothes, some old furniture (much of which he made), and some carpentry tools. So, what did my father know about "first class?"

What he meant by "first class" has only become clear over the past few years as I have struggled to build a radon business. I now realize that my father, as a life-long, independent-minded Vermont Yankee, was attempting in his own way to pass along a work ethic. For him "first class" was not about travel, it was about "pride in workmanship." It meant using high quality lumber and materials, doing some extra sanding, applying an extra coat of paint, and giving a final polish. First class meant the extra finishing touches that go beyond what is expected.

I am still learning from the example of this rustic Vermont craftsman that operating a successful business is as much a matter of basic values as it is about knowledge and experience. Although I have worked for 30 years to establish credibility by education (several diplomas in engineering and science), by certification (licensed professional engineer and certified health physicist), and by experience (20 years as a program manager in the U.S.P.H.S. and E.P.A., and 10 years as a business owner), I am coming to understand that while these factors may open some doors for credibility, they do not establish credibility.

I am learning that credibility is established primarily by demonstrating quality in basic values and integrity every day. Real credibility must not only be earned, but earned repeatedly. Long term credibility is determined by long-term performance as demonstrated by the little extra effort every day that transforms ordinary service into high quality, first class, service.

My father never used the word "quality." Instead, he talked about "doing a good job" or "doing the job right." Today, however quality is the new buzzword for successful businesses. Most of you in the radon industry will probably think of quality as quality assurance of radon measurements. When EPA comes out with the soon expected "Guidance on Quality Assurance," then QA of measurements will become an even higher priority. I would like to extend that concept of quality, however, by offering a few additional insights that I shared in my continuing education seminars at the AARST conference in October 1991. I like to think of quality more broadly as "a way of doing business."

Quality as A Basic Value

During the 1980's, thousands of companies entered the radon industry. Some of these businesses have succeeded, many have failed. The factor determining success or failure was most often a matter of quality in management, service, products, analyses, and technology. Continuing success for radon companies may depend on emphasizing quality in every aspect of business. Successful companies will implement the principles of good quality assurance, not just in their measurement or mitigation program, but also in customer service, written and verbal communications, staff training, production, sales, shipping, state-of-the-art technology, accounting, management, ethics, and professionalism.

What is Quality?

At each of my workshops on quality assurance, I ask, "What does quality mean in your business?" Here are some of the responses:

Courtesy	Efficiency	Doing the job right
Promptness	Neatness	Customer satisfaction
Service	Caring	Durability of product
Carefulness	Productivity	No complaints
Dependability	Cheerfulness	Job satisfaction
Excellence	Trouble free	Meets expectations
Integrity	Follow-up	Committed attitude

As you can see, quality is an element of every part of our radon businesses. Dr. W. Edwards Deming (*"Dr. Deming - the American Who Taught the Japanese About Quality,"* by Rafael Aguayo) says that quality is "Pride in Workmanship." Homeowners and other radon clients expect our services to be prompt, efficient, courteous, careful, cheerful, and competent. In the 1990's, the public will have little patience for anything less in service as they become more concerned for quality. Our credibility with homeowners will depend on careful attention to all of the above factors related to quality.

Quality of Communications

The ability to perform and prove high quality measurements is not enough. Business conducting radon measurements are also learning that:

1. Radon measurements are not complete until the results are communicated and understood by those requesting the measurements;
2. Radon measurements only have meaning in terms of how they are interpreted.

Consequently, communication is one of the most crucial elements of a successful radon measurement or mitigation business. Since homeowners have to judge the degree of risk they are willing to accept from radon, then technical understanding and perceptions of radon risk are very important. The credibility of your radon service may be determined by how well you communicate these factors to your customers. They will judge you not only on your technical competence, but also on your ability to relate to their feelings and to understand their needs. Hearing and empathizing with concerns for radon risks and costs of mitigation are the surest ways of earning credibility with your customers.

Quality of Service

Perhaps the single most effective area for quality improvement and success in radon businesses for the 1990's is customer service. Responsiveness to consumer interests and needs will be critical over the next decade. The radon industry has to go out to meet the needs of homeowners, to educate them on the risk of radon, to help them understand testing and mitigation, to motivate testing, and to provide caring technical support. The radon industry has to take the initiative to earn and develop the trust of homeowners.

Homeowners will more likely choose your business when they see that you are concerned for their welfare and needs. You earn their trust by building a reputation for superior quality of service. A satisfied customer is the best advertising available. However, you cannot gain such trust overnight. It accrues over years of unrelenting attention to quality of service. This means consistent delivery beyond expectation. Matchless service may take longer and cost more, but the dividends will accumulate in time with customer loyalty and goodwill.

Quality of service means many things. It means promising less and delivering more. It means building long term relationships. It means taking the time to answer customers' questions. It means providing written information and reports on radon results that are clear and understandable. It means prompt courteous response to inquires.

Training for Quality

Achieving excellence in your business requires training all persons on your staff to recognize and implement quality. Companies in the radon industry must realize that radon measurements and mitigation require careful attention to science and technology. Learning this technology and keeping up with new developments requires a continuing commitment to training. Continuous skill enhancement is the best way to build quality into a business. Training should not only include the skill necessary to perform certain tasks, but also skills such as communications, time management, accounting, statistics, writing, customer relations, and negotiations. Make such training available to every person in your company, including the receptionist, the secretary, the lab technician, the shipping clerk, the truck driver, etc. Upgrading your company is a constant process of training and retraining. Continuing education is a key factor in achieving quality improvements and building long-term credibility for your business.

Success in the 1990's

In the 1990's, you can expect that your customers will want, expect, and demand the best in every service or product that you offer. The public is becoming more knowledgeable about radon programs and will become increasingly critical of deficiencies in quality. In the last decade, the Japanese have taught us that American consumers will pay more for quality. Companies that provide the best quality will thrive. Also, as each company improves its products and services, the standards of quality will continue to rise. The result is that your competitors will continue to improve quality and possibly gain your market share, unless you also improve your own quality at an ever faster rate.

An Invitation to Go First Class

Tom Peters, *"Thriving on Chaos - Handbook for a Management Revolution,"* offers several guidelines for a quality revolution in industry that could be applied to radon businesses in the 1990's. These include:

1. To emphasize quality as the main focus of your business requires total commitment from top management. This means putting quality as a priority above all aspects of your business. Peters says, "Starting today, don't ever walk past a shoddy product or service without comment or action - ever again."
2. Constantly seek measures of quality in your business. Although, most people feel that they can recognize quality instinctively by comparison with their own values, quality improvements require documented performance to build a track record.
3. Reward your staff for quality improvements. Make quality goals a part of everyone's performance evaluations.
4. Train everyone to assess quality. Make everyone into a quality control expert, especially in their work areas. Provide them the tools and skills they need to judge and enhance quality every day.
5. Constantly look for opportunities to refine your products and services in small ways. A quality revolution is the result of thousands of small changes. Every improvement is a step closer to excellence.
6. Encourage constant innovation to stimulate improvements in quality. Set new goals and new rewards for improvements, no matter how small.
7. Invite everyone who interacts with your business to get involved in your quality revolution. Get feedback from your customers to improve quality. Seek out criticism and complaints. Ask for help to meet customer needs.
8. Paying attention to quality now can save you big bucks later. In the long run quality saves money. It usually costs less to do the job right the first time.
9. Quality improvements never end. There is always room for further improvements. If you do not believe so, check with your competition. Successful radon programs in the 1990's will be those that constantly strive to improve, not those that succeed one day and then decide to rest on their laurels.

What Would My Father Say

Although my father did not know about the modern concepts of quality, he did know about setting an example of pride in craftsmanship. He was willing to commit the extra effort to achieve satisfaction in knowing that a job was well done. When he finished a job, he knew he could be happy with it. Consequently, his services as a carpenter and fix-it man were always in demand. What would he say if he could see my radon business today? I hope he would say, "Perhaps this old man was able to teach you a few things after all. I see by your example that you are doing the job right. Pass the message along. It only costs a little more to go first class!"