

The New Rules of Commercial Trades

Written by: Michael Carey, Vice President of Strategy, BuildOps

When I started in commercial trades, no one talked about customer notifications or reviews. Most contractors didn't think their customers cared about getting updates or having a direct line of communication. Commercial was all about big jobs and long timelines – efficiency was measured in projects delivered, not customer satisfaction.

But that's changed.

Today, commercial trades are under pressure to deliver the kind of transparency and responsiveness that customers have come to expect from residential contractors. Residential businesses have spent over a decade perfecting practices like booking confirmations, real-time dispatch updates, and reputation management. These practices aren't optional anymore – they are how trust is built, and trust wins contracts.

In residential services, customers get text messages when a tech is on the way. They get follow-ups asking about their satisfaction. Many homeowners book services entirely online, without ever picking up the phone. These expectations are bleeding over into commercial, where building owners, facility managers, and general contractors are no longer willing to tolerate vague scheduling or unclear timelines.

In the past, some commercial contractors may have overlooked these trends. After all, their work is different – big projects, sophisticated clients, and long-term relationships have always been the foundation of success. But commercial clients are still consumers at the end of the day. They're used to real-time tracking, seamless digital interactions, and easy-to-access



information. The expectations are the same for contractors.

WHY REPUTATION MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

Online reputation is now a major factor in contractor selection. Decision-makers are turning to Google reviews and industry-specific platforms when vetting vendors. Contractors with a strong digital reputation are winning more business.

Think about how many customers research businesses online before making a decision. If a facility manager is looking for a mechanical contractor, they're going to search online. If one company has 50 five-star reviews and another has none, which one do you think gets the call? A contractor's reputation is no longer just about word of mouth – it's about what can be found online. It is important not to underestimate the impact of a digital reputation. It may be easy for some

commercial contractors to think their work speaks for itself; others believe their long-term relationships will keep business coming in. But as new decision-makers enter the workforce, those old dynamics are changing. Younger property managers, procurement officers, and investors are relying heavily on online research. If your company isn't visible – or worse, has no digital presence – it may not even be considered.

TECHNOLOGY IS CHANGING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

A big part of this shift is being driven by technology. Automated notifications, online scheduling, and instant invoicing are no longer “extras.” They're becoming baseline expectations.

For example, real-time scheduling software helps eliminate guesswork for customers. Instead of waiting around for updates, they can get automatic alerts when technicians are en route or when a job is complete. Digital invoicing also speeds up payment cycles, reduces disputes, and improves cash flow for contractors.

And it's not just about communication – technology is also making service agreements more seamless. Contractors who offer customer portals where clients can track maintenance schedules and service histories are getting ahead. These digital tools don't just make life easier for customers: They also streamline internal operations and create efficiencies that improve profitability.

LESSONS FROM RESIDENTIAL TRADES

Much of this momentum is coming from residential trades, which have been the testing ground for customer-centric workflows. Residential contractors had to master customer engagement because their market is so competitive. Customers demand updates, quick responses, and transparent communication. In many ways, these are lessons born out of necessity.

In my experience, commercial trades haven't faced the same pressure – until now.

Take, for example, the way residential HVAC companies sell service agreements. They've turned preventive maintenance into a predictable revenue stream by offering customers scheduled inspections, priority service, and discounts on repairs. Commercial contractors are now adopting similar models, recognizing that long-term service agreements

provide stability, improve cash flow, and strengthen customer relationships.

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE EQUITY IN DRIVING CHANGE

Private equity (PE) firms are accelerating this transformation. Many firms are buying commercial contracting businesses and restructuring them to operate more like service-driven organizations. They're investing in technology, streamlining processes, and prioritizing customer engagement.

For PE-backed contractors, operational efficiency and scalable systems are no longer a competitive advantage – they're the expectation. And customer satisfaction metrics, such as retention rates and online reviews, are becoming just as important as revenue growth. For contractors, this presents an opportunity and a challenge. Those who can adopt a service-first mindset, invest in technology, and focus on customer experience will thrive. Those who resist will struggle to keep up in an industry that's becoming data-driven and customer-focused.

OVERCOMING OBJECTIONS & BARRIERS


Despite the obvious benefits, some contractors are hesitant to make these changes. Here are the most common objections:

- » **“We've always done it this way.”** Long-term relationships and word-of-mouth referrals have worked for decades. But customer expectations have changed, and past success doesn't guarantee future competitiveness.
- » **“Technology is expensive.”** Yes, there's an up-front cost to implementing new systems, but the long-term return on investment – faster payments, fewer disputes, and higher customer retention – far outweighs the investment.
- » **“Our customers don't care about this stuff.”** They might not have cared five years ago, but today's decision-makers are younger, more tech-savvy, and used to digital-first experiences.

What's often overlooked is that these changes don't just benefit customers – they also make life easier for contractors. Companies that use real-time communication tools spend less time fielding unnecessary status calls. Teams that use automated invoicing spend less time chasing payments. And contractors with a strong online presence don't have to rely solely on cold calls and networking to find new business.

THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

For commercial contractors, the writing is on the wall. The days of relying solely on relationships and reputation are over. Customers expect transparency, responsiveness, and accountability, and the tools to meet these demands are already available.

But here's the good news: This shift isn't just about meeting customer demands. It's about making life easier for contractors too. Companies that invest in customer engagement see fewer disputes, higher retention rates, and more repeat work. Contractors with strong digital reputations don't have to fight as hard for new business – it comes to them. 



About the Author

Michael Carey is vice president of strategy at [BuildOps](#), helping contractors grow through smart technology. He previously led teams at ServiceTitan and Bluebeam Software, driving millions in growth. With a background in innovation and industry expertise, Carey focuses on equipping contractors with the tools to stay competitive in a changing market.

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