

Keepers of the ‘building’ light



You don't want to chase business, but you want the phone to ring. And if you do the right thing by your clients, they will always look to you for wise advice about all of their future building problems. Jerry Tyrrell encourages builders to be ‘keepers’ of advice to protect their clients from the problems and mistakes that so many of them can make.

Building contractors have a very special place in most clients’ hearts. You have created, altered or renovated the home they live in. Your advice is trusted and respected.

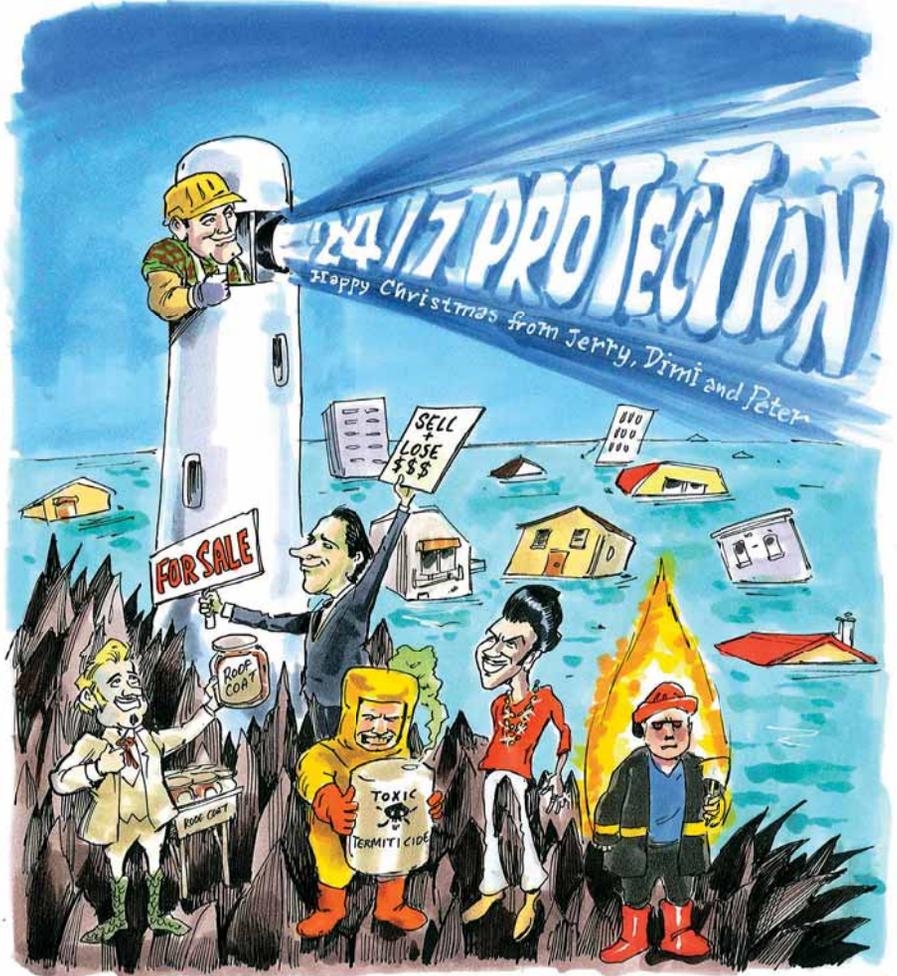
Marketing experts will tell you to ‘nurture existing clients first’ – so why don't we build a more powerful base from your years of effort and goodwill?

Builders can be ‘keepers’ of so many good things. We need to be alert every moment when we're building. But what about the value-add we offer clients after handover?

From practical tips, referrals or just making sure clients don't make the usual silly mistakes, the areas of advice that you can help with usually fall into four groups:

- Safety.
- Design.
- Maintenance.
- Timber pests.

“I have made a lot more money from sharing my ideas and giving free advice than being unhelpful.”



Safety

We contractors should all know about the new Work, Health and Safety laws. But no one is telling owners what they MUST know. This advice is valuable and will prevent accidents, harm and save money.

Design

You may not be a trained designer or architect, but you have the skill to coordinate or recommend good designs to your client. The number one regret I witness in most buildings is the client saying they ‘should have’ made better use of a view, or sunlight, or breezes, or ‘should have’ made space for two beds

instead of one, or the correct washing machine size etc.

Maintenance

I'm not a great fan of always thinking about maintenance. But a smart spender needs a clear head and knowledge of when the work must be done or when expensive replacement or repairs will be needed.

Timber pests

These ‘elephants in the room’ are not nearly as serious as pest control companies want you to believe. But if your client builds with susceptible materials ►

Safety	The detail
Slips and trips	Mainly slippery tiles/stone, half steps, uneven paving and unexpected lips in concrete joints.
Balustrades	Below 1m high, climbable or gaps exceed 125mm. Upper floor window sills should not be less than 1m without openable space in the window being limited to max 125mm gap.
Pool fences, especially gates	Latches do not function, hinges do not self-close or the fence may be bridged by planting or even the dog kennel.
Asbestos risk	No Asbestos Register means your client faces a major claim if the contractor works unknowingly on materials containing asbestos.
Electrical hazards	Residual current devices or tagging of any maintenance/workplace equipment.
Smoke alarms	Tell your client there needs to be 240V linked photoelectric detectors in EVERY bedroom beside the hallway.
Glass safety	All older glass in doors and low level windows may not be toughened or safety glass.
Design	The detail
Masterplanning	Get the best advice about aspect, connections, stair location and widths of rooms, especially halls and stairs and any complex design issue.
Little projects	Even the smallest projects need careful planning – it is so easy to get window sill heights and door locations wrong.
Drawings	Most of the problems clients face when building come from errors and omissions in the plans – refer your client to a good designer or architect.
Interior advice	Yep, interior designers can make a big difference to entry, cabinet, ceiling and lighting choices.
Colours	If your client can't afford a designer, they can at least get advice for all exterior colours – and so should you.
Energy savings	You can advise contractors to insulate the building or install solar photovoltaic systems.
Maintenance	The detail
When to repaint	Often owners paint too soon or too late. Or they choose silly finishes like lime wash and face nightmares if the coating is not properly applied. Or they cut corners on quality (e.g. parapet elastomeric coatings etc).
Safe roof/building access	Your client has a duty now to make sure every area that needs maintenance is safely accessible – mainly roof fall arrest systems and anchors in those hard-to-get-to-places on the facade.
Names of all appropriate tradespeople	Why not give your clients the details of all the 'star' tradespeople in your team? Be specific. Make sure you include their specialist skills e.g. roofing specialist, problem solving carpenter, deck expert etc.
Advice when anything can't be easily fixed	So often owners make a small problem worse by not getting advice if something is complex or recurs, such as a basement leak or chronic termite infestation.
Timber pests	The detail
How to avoid unnecessary chemical application	You can help your client avoid wasting money on unnecessary poisons around their home.
How to fix the reasons why you are getting termite or rot problems	In most cases your client needs to upgrade the timber which is rotting or remove the timber built into the ground, which is causing the termite entry into their building.
Tips to limit risk of future damage	You can tell them about treated timber, not to build up the gardens over the slab edges, and why stopping leaking pipes will limit risk of rot and termites.

or builds high-risk timber structures, they will have a nightmare of costly damage during ownership and eventually face criticism when he or she sells.

I like helping people. I like puzzles. I think being seen as competent and knowledgeable is pretty cool. Also, I have made a lot more money from sharing my ideas and giving free advice than being unhelpful and selfish. The problem solving and troubleshooting role we can offer all of our clients will keep us in their hearts and minds and will help us increase our knowledge and maintain our relevance.

Our role as 'keepers of the building light' for our clients should be a key objective in 2013 and beyond. ■

Please email me any thoughts or experiences at jwtyrrell@tyrrells.com.

Jerry Tyrrell is founder of the Institute of Building Consultants and co-founder of Tyrrells Property Inspections. He has more than 39 years' experience as a labourer, tradesman, contractor, architect, mediator, building consultant and author.

Next issue: Basements.

Mistakes we should never make: What I have learnt this year

- I continue to dream about the possible benefits from our national BCA – but instead, this badly structured and inaccessible bundle of text and tangled Australian Standards continues to strangle our industry like a cancer. The ABCB can change this including making publications free, stitching in durability standards and how to limit slips and falls.
- Everyone in the industry, from tradesmen to architects, needs more training about fire safety issues – especially how to achieve fire resistance of materials and systems.
- I have been reminding all contractors and owners that they must maintain emergency evacuation systems DURING construction. This includes Exit signs, handrails and paths of travel.
- Developing real estate without an end buyer is a bad business decision.
- Adding value to the RIGHT building or property with clever improvements is the way of the future.

[property inspections]

Case of the Cost Plus stuff up

In future editions of *Building Connection*, Jerry Tyrrell, co-founder of Tyrrells Property Inspections, will provide you with real case studies of builders who have gotten into trouble on site and explain how you can avoid making the same mistakes. Here's the first installment...

A builder convinces a client to use a Cost Plus Contract for straightforward work. He costs the work and gives fair estimates with trade breakdowns.

Once the work starts, it runs over budget and he invoices all costs together in an attempt to confuse the client. The client is confused and seeks advice.

The advice requires the builder to detail all costs including a breakdown of materials and labour related to each item in the estimate. The contractor cannot do this because his charges are excessive and when he tries to document them his charges are at least three times more than the rates a quantity surveyor would accept.

He does not recover all of his costs from the client and ultimately falls out with a long-term good client over the project.

Lessons learnt

- Cost Plus Contracts are ideal when a client doesn't know what he or she wants and the work is complex or difficult.
- Avoid Cost Plus on easy jobs – you'll spend too much time justifying your fees.
- Do not work inefficiently because you have a duty to prove you have acted diligently, i.e. make sure the costs you charge are fair and reasonable.
- In all jobs, be transparent. If the client is wasting your time, charge for it as soon as it starts. It will be a variation, or extra, or a fee. If you have a Cost Plus Contract and a disorganised client, advise them that any uncertainty, change, addition or delay will be chargeable.
- Cost Plus Contracts take time and careful cost control and reporting – it's a lot more admin time than most builders think. And if anything goes wrong, you will have to justify everything and any profit margin on the job will be eroded.