

CONCRETE IDEAS | Randell Riley, P.E.



NO QUESTIONS ASKED?

Last Thanksgiving I went to one of my local big box stores to exchange parts for one of my many weekend projects. I was second in line at the service counter, close enough to overhear the customer, who was returning one of those large deep fryers generally used for cooking turkeys. It was fully assembled and, though clean, had clearly been used.

She claimed the cooker “did not meet [her] needs.” The clerk gave her a skeptical look, but put the transaction through anyhow, handing her a full cash refund.

Which made me think: Try doing that with a load of concrete!

For good or ill, experiences like these have changed the way consumers think and act – a trend that’s making its way into the concrete business.

As an engineer serving ACPA and IRMCA members, I often find myself acting as the “responsible party of last resort.” A phone call comes in from a property owner whose new patio has a bird bath, a mottled, colored appearance or some light map cracking. The customer is searching for advice, and I try to be sympathetic. Sometimes the call comes from an attorney – an even tougher situation to handle.

The growing number of these calls doesn’t mean we’re letting quality slip. Instead, I think it’s a sign that customers expect more and more from us – even as they push us to deliver at the lowest possible cost.

This mindset affects commercial building and public works projects, too. Remember how rough concrete roads used to be? This was an accepted norm. Now we’re tightening specifications to the point that we’re asking, “How smooth is smooth enough?”

Setting realistic expectations can make a world of difference for you as a producer. Teaching customers up front what to anticipate can minimize callbacks down the road. We need to be clear that we do not necessarily produce a perfectly uniform-looking product.

Performance-related specifications that tie lack of uniformity to payment are creeping in to concrete production. This won’t be an easy transition for some. Mother Nature provides many of our raw materials, including sand and aggregates. It’s hard to assure perfect “six-sigma” quality control over what she gives us.

I do not think we can change the views of customers who expect perfection or instant refunds. But we do need to take full responsibility for quality and customer education.

Keeping in mind that we are slowly moving into an era of performance-related specifications, in the next few issues I’ll touch on statistical anomalies I’ve encountered in my 30-plus years and guide you to tools and studies that can help. If you have stories or examples that will help your fellow concrete producers, I hope you’ll share them. Let’s see how we can prepare ourselves for folks who want to return that truckload of concrete 6 weeks later, no questions asked.

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