



**BY PHIL SASSO**  
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## Dealing with disruptions

### What to do when things go wrong

Let me promise you something: As a tool dealer, things will go wrong.

It's not a cheerful thought, but it's a realistic one. Stuff happens. You need to expect it and be prepared for both good days and bad days.

You can let bad things get you down, frustrate you or make you angry. Or, you can overcome these events. Successful dealers are overcomers.

### What's the most common problem tool dealers face?

"There's a lot that can go wrong," says Cornwell National Sales Manager Dave Columbus. "I don't know if I can really come up with one in the tool business that's the most common."

Your truck could break down. You could get the flu. You could get shipped the wrong product, a broken product or get stuck by one that didn't get shipped at all. Almost anything can become a snag and disrupt your time – or worse, your whole day.

"I guess no matter what the snafu is, I think it's about keeping it in perspective and not letting it ruin your day," Columbus says.

In essence, it's not *what* you deal with, it's *how* you deal with it.

"I think [before] most of us got into the mobile tool business ... we probably didn't appreciate what our bosses did to fix the problems that came up in the course of the day," Columbus says. "When we became our own boss we [ended up] in charge of those things ...I think the main thing to

remember is that nobody's perfect. Things are going to happen. You can't let them knock you off your stride."

"There's no such thing as a successful person that got there the easy way," Columbus says. "You overcome the challenges. You deal with the things that happen, and you still continue to keep your goal in mind and work towards the goal. You don't let the obstacles stop you."

### What are some practical things I can do when facing an obstacle?

That all depends on the obstacle. But, I'd say Columbus of Cornwell is dead-on: attitude and endurance are keys to overcoming, no matter what the practical solution may be.

Let's take a look at some things that could go wrong on any given day.

### What if my customer has a broken tool?

If the tool is under warranty, it's pretty easy. You take the tool and send it in to the manufacturer. Then, depending on the price tag on the item, you may give the customer a loaner or a replacement. Most hardlines have a lifetime warranty.

### What if the broken tool is out of warranty?

"You want to take care of the customer because we're in a relationship business," Columbus says.

You don't want to win a battle

over a warranty and lose the long-term customer relationship. You can't let a customer take advantage of you, but you need to use your judgement. Your customer is spending a bit more to deal with you, so they expect a bit more.

### What if I face a breakdown?

Tool dealers rely on technology a lot. So, there is a lot that can break down: your truck, your computer, your phone, etc. But the bigger question is, how do you avoid letting a breakdown get you down?

"Some people will just say, 'Well I'm closed until I can get this fixed,'" Columbus says. "You just can't close the store down."

Maybe you need to drop your truck off at the shop, put some tools in a tote bag and jump in your car and finish your route. If your computer breaks down, use a paper receipt until you can get it fixed or get a new one.

"You can't stop in front of an obstacle," Columbus says. "You've got to find a way to go over it and no matter what it is, there's usually an alternative that you can use to go around it or over it."

It helps to have a backup plan ready before things go wrong.

### What if a product comes broken or is on backorder?

"The best thing is to be honest with your customer," Columbus says. "If it came in broken, show it to [the customer] if you can. If it hasn't come in yet, then before

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you say anything else or try to collect money ... say 'Hey I have not gotten that item I ordered for you, yet.' ... If you say it before he asks you, then he knows that you didn't forget about it."

Your customer knows things break. They have likely had items on backorder before. It's how you handle it that can set the tone and will disarm them. Avoid dwelling on the negative. Apologize. Tell your customer you'll do all you can. Then change the conversation, show them a new tool you're promoting and move on.

### How do I face rejection?

A new tool dealer quickly finds there's a lot of rejection in sales.

"What you learn when you do this long enough is that when someone says 'no' it's not a personal rejection of you," Columbus says. "There's a lot of reasons why people buy things and there are just as many reasons why they don't. So no matter what happens, don't take it personally ... don't internalize it, and don't think it's a bigger issue than it really is."

### What if I'm in a sales slump?

"Probably the best value in service a mobile tool dealer provides to his customer is to be a problem solver and help the customer get his job done faster and easier," Columbus says.

If you keep showing customers product, eventually they'll see a tool that will make their job a bit easier, faster, safer

or make them more money.

"Just getting a 'no' doesn't have to be an obstacle, it just means that you move onto the next one," Columbus says.

### What if I'm feeling burnt out?

Many small business owners work year after year without a vacation and wear it as a badge of honor. You didn't get into business for yourself to get less time off than when you worked for someone else. You need to take time off and sharpen your saw.

"It's wise to base your yearly budget and your break even on a 50-week or possibly even a 48-week year," Columbus says.

Budget time off for vacation, personal days and an occasional sick day.

"If you account for them upfront and adjust your business goals accordingly you can afford them when those times come up," Columbus says. "It's important to budget and try to take vacation and get away. Sometimes getting a little distance really helps you get that perspective back again."

### What if a customer stops paying me - Or worse, skips?

This can be frustrating. You put your trust in this customer. They have, in essence, robbed you. But you need to put it in perspective and avoid letting them rob your energy.

If you follow the rules of time payment turn and keep customer balances under control you won't lose more than about 2 to 3 percent a year - at list. That means you're collecting 97 to 98 percent of the money you lend, says Columbus.

"Yet, what do we think about more, the 3 percent that we lose or the 97 percent that we collect?" he says. "It's all about the perspective."

"Yes, you're going to lose a certain amount," Columbus says. "Everybody in the credit business loses money. Banks lose money, Visa loses money. It's all part of the business model. And it's part of the business model in the tool business

as well. The thing is that you can't put too much focus on the 3 percent, because if you do you'll lose focus on the 97 percent that supports your family. Skips are a cost of doing business, no different than gasoline or truck repairs or anything else."

### How do I deal with an angry customer?

First, determine if the customer is really angry with you or if their anger is carrying over from something else, like a tough job they're working on.

"A lot of [your customers have] a very difficult job," Columbus says. "Working on machinery can be very frustrating and sometimes you are the recipient of that frustration. You don't deserve it but you can't let it get you down, either. You always have to watch your attitude and always keep your goal in mind."

"The worst thing that you can do is throw gas on the fire and get into an argument," Columbus says. "The two easiest words are 'I'm sorry.' That usually diffuses most problems; you're not necessarily saying sorry because you're admitting fault, you're empathizing."

### What if my customer wants their money back?

"You don't have to give the money back sometimes," Columbus says.

You can credit their account. Or you can replace the tool with a different brand. There is always a way around it if you focus on problem solving and don't get into an argument with the customer.

Do your best to keep calm and be reasonable and your customer will likely do the same.

Just remember, there are likely other customers around watching how you deal with each situation you face. How you react affects their perspective on you and how they'll deal with you in the future.

Most situations can be turned around if you take it as a challenge and not a conflict. 