

"A SIGH IS JUST A SIGH..."

by

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Not long ago, I got a call from a cousin who I hadn't spoken to in many months. We spent some pleasant time catching up on family matters, and generally shooting the breeze. But when we got around to our usual "gripe" session, Cousin Bob really got my attention.

Bob heats his home with oil. Like many homeowners, he relies on a full service oilheat dealer to maintain and repair his heating system. And, like many oilheat customers, Bob has invested in a service contract to make sure that the system is kept in good shape, and that his service needs will be met promptly.

Thus, the "gripe." This past winter, Bob arrived home from the office to find his house cold. A quick check of the basement uncovered a small puddle, the source of which appeared to be the boiler. Bob quickly dialed the telephone number of his oilheat dealer, ironically happy to finally have a use for his service contract.

After too many rings, the telephone was answered by an obviously annoyed representative. Explaining the problem in as much detail as possible, Bob asked what he thought was an allowable question. When would help arrive?

Then came the sigh.

It may be that this individual was at the end of a long, tiresome day. Or that Bob's ignorance of technical issues made things difficult. Or that many, many customers were calling, all with pressing needs. Whatever the reason, the response to Bob's question from the representative of the full service oilheat dealer to a personal crisis was a weary, impatient sigh.

Bob paid \$159.99 for that sigh.

That's the price of the service contract he had paid for with such high expectations last summer. That's the amount Bob shelled out to prevent a cold house, and to have any problem that might occur corrected quickly. In return for his money, Bob expected concern, compassion and action. Not sighs.

Needless to say, Bob was less than pleased. He promptly raised the roof and, through sheer vocal power, managed to get a service technician out to the house that night. He switched oilheat dealers the next day.

Over the past few years, I have openly questioned the value of service contracts. Most are under priced, many provide only limited coverage and all

have flaws. But they are a fact of life for oilheat dealers, and must be fully supported and implemented.

Many retailers today take great pains to identify and cater to their "best customers," through special benefits, extra communications and a higher level of service. In the case of oilheat customers, those that sign service contracts have "self-selected" as preferred customers, and are paying for the privilege. They expect a minimal level of comfort and assurance that problems will be addressed.

Service contracts must be more than just a profit center. They must also be viewed as an opportunity to cement strong customer relationships. If you allow your company's representatives to treat customers as an interruption, the next sound you hear will be doors slamming as your customers seek out more helpful dealers.

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