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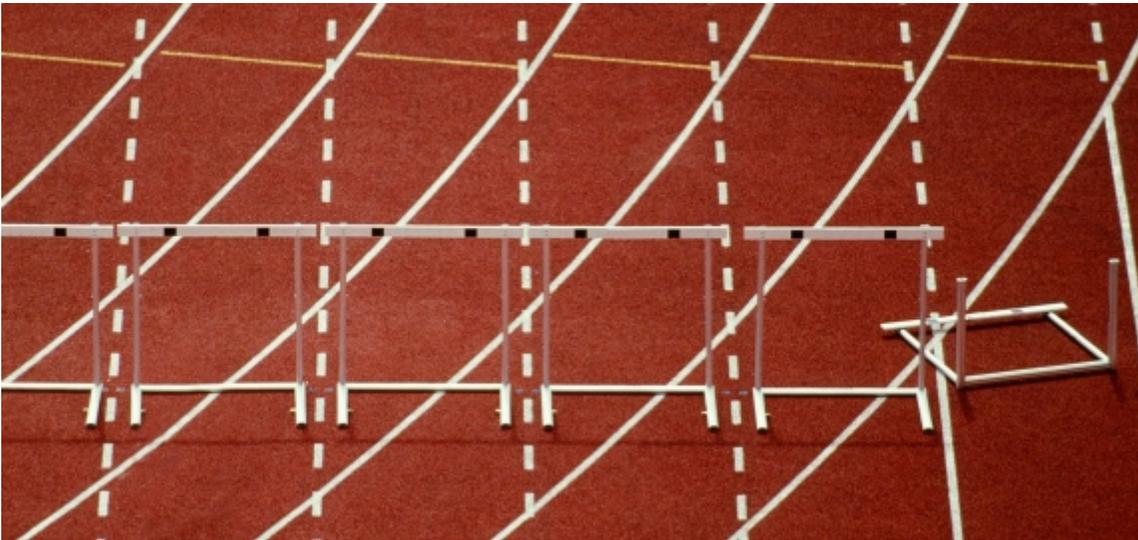
Inc.

Drew Greenblatt | Inc.com contributor

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What to Do When Speed and Quality Are At Odds

Sometimes you have to miss a deadline to make sure you maintain what really matters to your customers.



Grant Faint/Getty

We entertained an impressive group of MBA students recently from the Carey Business School at Johns Hopkins University here in Baltimore. They were bright and inquisitive. While they sat beneath a big sign emblazoned with our motto, “Quality Engineered Quick,” they posed a question I’d rarely been asked before: “What happens when the ambitions of ‘quality’ and ‘quick’ collide?”

As many business owners know, it’s not an easy question.

I told them that I don’t believe those goals are mutually exclusive. We have developed systems to do a job well and to do it fast. But quality trumps all: Someone will remember a defect in a product or a service they’ve received long after they’ll remember if it was a day late or not.

That said, I told the group that we are human and if we are ever going to be late, we consider it imperative to inform the client as soon as possible. We don’t abide by the strategy I’ve seen at some companies when it comes to negative news. They wait until the last second (or later) to inform their customers in the thin hope that some miracle is going to materialize.

Our approach is that once it becomes apparent that something is not going to work out--as soon as it becomes apparent--we pick up the phone and notify the client. It’s not an easy call to make, of course, and the reaction is usually negative because it’s bad news. But the client usually lets us know that they

appreciate that we're reaching out so they can react accordingly. Informing the customer of the problem a couple of days *after* you were supposed to have shipped is a much worse way to operate, I think. That smacks of being misleading and deceptive, because, well, it often is.

A few years ago, we had a prospective [job with a Fortune 100 company](#) that was cutting ties with its Japanese vendor. I don't know whether the switch was prompted by tsunami damage or quality issues. The customer did not elaborate. We embraced the opportunity and the challenge. It was a complex job we'd never run before, and we weren't certain that we could execute everything that needed to be done--training, software, ramping up new systems--to accommodate them.

We were upfront and transparent. We were delighted they were giving us all this business, we told them, but it would be unlikely for us to hit their dates. We wanted to let them know right away so they could adjust accordingly. It was a very tough conversation to have, but because we gave them three weeks to react, everyone along the supply chain could adjust. If we had obfuscated the issue and informed the customer three days after the fact, they probably would have axed us and gone someplace else. Since then, we've received a couple of reorders from them--a very big deal for us, and I partially attribute it to our being candid and transparent. Waiting for a miracle to occur is not a sound operating procedure.

<http://www.inc.com/drew-greenblatt/when-speed-and-quality-are-at-odds.html>



[Drew Greenblatt](#) is the president of [Marlin Steel](#), a U.S.-based manufacturer of wire baskets and sheet-metal fabrications. Marlin has grown 25% over the past three years and has a record of 1,422 days without a safety problem.

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Marlin Steel 2640 Merchant Drive, Baltimore, MD, USA 21230-3307

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