

FROM THE FIELD

Closed for Christmas

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I had a trying two weeks between December 20 and January 2. I love the holidays as much as anyone, but this has always been a difficult time to be in the heating business. My schedule is stressed to the limit as many of my techs take off this time of year just as we are trying to complete a physical inventory count of the shop and trucks. Service calls continue to roll in due to cold weather. DHW systems that are stressed to the limit. All while, holiday guests, clients, are home to observe any knock, noise, bang or other idiosyncrasy of their mechanical systems.

This year was particularly rough as I was breaking in a new service tech and my two lead techs were off.

Situation #1: The Saturday before Christmas, a high-profile client lost heat in two boilers, as well as DHW. I responded that day and found a failed circulator pump in one and a bad ignition and boiler control module in the other. All I had were my hand tools — no parts. The boilers were identical so I swapped the good parts to get one boiler operational and informed the client we would be back on Monday, Christmas Eve, to complete the repair.

My goal on Monday morning was to have my available crew work for half the day in the shop completing inventory with one tech available to catch emergency calls. We were also going to track down the part required to complete the boiler repair. If all went as planned, we would all be headed home by noon. If only...

I needed to track down an OEM ignition module/boiler control that was specific to that particular boiler. Supply house #1 (the primary distributor of this boiler) did not have it at any local branch. Supply house #2 also did not have it in stock. Both checked with the manufacturer, who confirmed they had it but no one was working in shipping. The earliest it would ship was Wednesday with a Thursday delivery, if I wanted to pay for overnight shipping. My client would be without heat and DHW in part of their home for almost a week, over the Christmas holiday — not acceptable.

I called back to supply house #1 and asked them to open a stock boiler and let me rob the part. No go. The reality was that this was not a boiler I typically used and I lacked the leverage to demand this course of action. Finally, my rep from supply house #2 saved the day. While he did not have the part, he located one of his dealers who did have the part. When all else failed, I knew I could count on a fellow contractor. He gave the part to my tech with instructions to mail him a check. I was so impressed with his trust that I hand-wrote a check and mailed it that day.

This runaround ate up several hours and we did not arrive on the call until after 1:00pm. My client was very grateful we found the part and restored the heat and DHW. Unfortunately, my tech and I did not finish the call until almost 3:00pm. So much for working a half-day. I was about three hours late for a Christmas Eve celebration. It's the price we pay.

Lucky for me and my on-call tech, Christmas Day was

It is reasonable to have a client wait a day while a part is ordered and delivered. It is not reasonable to wait for over a week for a part in the dead of winter.



quiet and uneventful. I thought the worst had passed. I thought...

Situation #2: By the Wednesday after Christmas, I figured businesses would be back open with at least a skeleton crew, as we were. I figured wrong. I called a third supply house for some fittings and materials for a boiler replacement that was scheduled for the following day. The counter man informed me that they had the parts but that they could not be picked up until Friday as they were closed for inventory. I would have rather he didn't even answer the phone. Knowing that the parts I needed were on the shelf but that I could not have them because inventory was not yet complete caused a slow burn inside of me. Rather than react on emotion, I called my sales rep and calmly explained the situation. Being a professional, he did the right thing. He pulled the parts I needed and gave them to my driver. He then handled the paperwork on his end so as to not cause inventory shortage.

Situation #3: Also on Wednesday after Christmas, a client returned home from a week away to find her home at 48 °F. We had just installed a new heat pump system over the summer. She had her elderly parents with her and was forced to put them up in a hotel. Needless to say, she was not very happy. I handled this one myself, along with one of my techs.

We found a control board not functioning in the air handler. The poorly designed control board had a transformer hard soldered directly to the board. Vibrations from the motor caused the heavy transformer to break the solder joints creating intermittent operation. The new control board had the transformer mounted separately to resolve this problem. Again, this was an OEM part that had to come from the manufacturer. I called the local rep to order the part. He informed me the manufacturer was closed until January 3! Keep in mind that this was December 26 and we had just installed this system about six months earlier. My client had no heat and was already pretty chapped. No way was I going to tell her she would not have heat for another week.

Long story short, several phone calls later, my rep located a part at another distributor in New England and shipped it to us red label. We had the heat back on the following day. While not exactly happy, my client was grateful we had restored her heat and she could now

➔ Turn to FOLEY on p 42

| FROM THE FIELD | CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40

retrieve her parents from the local hotel.

Situation #4: At 4:00pm one afternoon, I sent my driver to a fourth supply house to pick up a part my tech needed to take care of a “no heat” call. Knowing D.C. traffic, my driver smartly called ahead to confirm the part was there and to let the company know he was on his way. My driver arrived in the parking lot at 4:32pm and found the door locked. They closed at 4:30pm. He knocked and the counter worker came to the door and pointed to the closed sign. Now remember, he called ahead to let them know he was coming. He even suggested that they go ahead and ring it up and print the ticket to save time. No dice. His persistent knocking finally got the counter worker back to the door. The counter worker informed him that the only way he could get the part was to sign an additional ticket for a \$100 after hours re-opening fee. Knowing we needed the part, my driver signed the ticket and got the part. He figured he would let me deal with it in the morning, which I did.

My point in re-telling these four stories is not to blame anyone or to suggest that my company is better at solving problems than everyone else. We are not. We make plenty of mistakes. What I do want to highlight is my company’s “common sense” policy. My company has rules and policies so that we can serve our clients in a fair and orderly fashion. This covers about 95 percent of the situations my

employees find themselves in and serves them well. When a special situation arises that may go against company policy, I encourage my employees to do what they feel is

When all else fails, I knew I could count on a fellow contractor. He gave the part to my tech with instructions to mail him a check. I was so impressed in his trust, I hand-wrote a check and mailed it that day.

the right thing to do. Fix the problem first and make the client happy. In almost every case, they make the right call. When they don’t, we discuss the situation, decide what a better solution may have been, learn from it, and move on. But I refuse to let rigid company policies get in the way of common sense and good customer service.

If you are a manufacturer or distributor and you are in the heating business, you cannot shut down for two weeks over the holidays and expect ongoing support from your dealers and customers. We stock the majority of operational parts for our primary equipment brands but we service many more brands. Even for our primary brands, it is not possible to stock every part. We rely on our distributors, reps and manufacturers to support us.

It is reasonable to have a client wait a day while a part is ordered and delivered. It is not reasonable to wait for over a week for a part in the dead of winter. No one wants to work over the holidays, but there are work-arounds. If a tiny company such as mine can rotate the on-call duty to take care of our clients, it is not unreasonable for large manufacturers to do the same. Or don’t and complain about how bad business is these days. ●

Dan Foley is president and owner of Foley Mechanical, Inc., based in Lorton, Va. Visit their website at www.foleymechnical.com. FMI specializes in radiant, hydronic and steam systems as well as mechanical systems for large custom homes. Foley can be reached at (703) 339-8030 or dfoley50@verizon.net.

Solar Heating Control made simple.

ONE CONTROLLER.

Combination hardware/software system controller replaces all conventional controls and adds the most advanced solar functions in the industry.

NO PROGRAMMING.

“Plug and Play” technology eliminates costly wiring, programming and fine-tuning.

REMOTE CONTROL.

Operate, monitor and diagnose your system over the internet, reducing onsite labor and service costs.

The SolarLogic Integrated Control (SLIC) eliminates the complexity of solar heating systems.

Visit our website to register for bi-monthly live webinars and for basic and advanced SolarLogic Training, which qualify for up to 12 NABCEP CE credits.



SOLARLOGIC
A revolution in solar heating

Visit solarlogicllc.com to learn more or call 505-577-4633