

Contractor Success Guide

cygnus

A supplement to

PRO
Business solutions for electrical professionals



Marketing Your Business

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Marketing Matters



Dear Contractors,

According to a new market research study released this summer, homeowners spent a record \$44.7 billion to hire professional lawn and landscape services in 2006, an 82% increase over 2001. The survey, conducted by the National Gardening Association, Residential Lawn and Landscape Services and the Value of Landscaping indicated that lawn care and landscape maintenance services were the top residential services hired, by 27.8 million households, in fact. Following were tree care services, landscape installation and construction services, and landscape design services.

What this means for you is there are many prospective customers out there to help grow your business. How do you ensure you get a piece of this increasingly large pie? Are you offering the services they want? Whether your prospective customers are commercial or residential, it goes beyond having what they want, it's letting them know that you are the right choice for the job. In robust or lean times, marketing matters. The image you project must reflect the professionalism of your organization and must appear in every aspect of your operation, from the ads you place to the appearance of your equipment and crews.

From targeting the right customers to taking advantage of media editorial opportunities to, yes, my favorite, projecting professionalism, the *Contractor Success Guide* team has put together another great issue, this one focusing on how to market your business. Regardless of the size of your business or how long you've been in the industry, I'm confident you'll pick up a few new ideas and be reminded of other things you, maybe, *should* be doing.

Wishing you continued success,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Keeler', written in a cursive style.

John Keeler
National Training Manager
STIHL Inc.

Gregg Wartgow, editor-in-chief



Welcome to Volume 2 of the Contractor Success Guide, brought to you exclusively by STIHL Inc. The inaugural volume published this past February—which can be downloaded

at promagazine.com in case you misplaced it—talked about profitably growing your company. Much of the subject matter in that first volume circled around the notion of adding services to grow your customer base and revenue streams.

This time we're going to talk about marketing your business in a professional, cost-effective way. It's important, because any sound business growth requires a stable pool of current and prospective customers. Then, winning their business requires a professional image and effective marketing campaign that gets their attention.

Whether you're selling hot dogs on the street corner or installing and maintaining landscapes, you need customers to keep your business going. I know—duh. If you want to grow your business, though, you need profit. And to earn profit you need to raise your level of professionalism so you can 1) create some distance from those low-ballers you compete against, and 2) command a higher price for your services.

Many of you are already doing that, some of whom are quoted in this issue. You can always do more. Professionalism and image are under constant evolution and should remain at the forefront of your mind. When they are, you're well on your way of embedding your company at the forefront of your current and prospective customers' minds. Then profitable growth becomes much more achievable. ■

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Marketing Your Business

How do you market your company?

Targeting the right customers and being creative can pay big dividends.

There are many different niches, specialties and service focuses that contractors choose to concentrate on as a way to differentiate themselves and profit in a very competitive industry. Step one to good marketing is identifying which customer segment best suits your company.

For instance, Signature Landscape Services in Redmond, WA, specializes in maintenance of commercial and HOA accounts. The company not only targets specific customers, the folks at Signature do their homework.

Says general manager Greg

McDonald, “We specifically identify sites that fit our long-range business plan. The criteria are based on size, geography, business type, management company, etc. Once on our list, we try to learn as much as we can about a prospective customer regarding their business, history, future objectives and whom to contact. This is done through research on the Internet, information from existing customers, past relationship, trade organizations and more. We want to be educated before making contact, so we can create an opportunity to bid on upcoming projects.”



Some contractors focus on commercial projects, while others focus on homeowners. Service focus comes into play, as well. Signature Landscape profits from specializing in maintenance; other companies make their bailiwick design and installation. Regardless, the most important thing is to identify the customers most likely to use your services, and then maximize your marketing dollars by finding the communication tools that best spread the message.



Cutting Edge Lawn Care uses door hangers as a marketing tool in Austin, TX.

Get creative in spreading the word

Contractors market themselves in various ways. Many don't, however, use traditional "advertising" vehicles to attract new customers. Newspaper, radio, television and billboard advertising aren't investments commonly made by landscape contractors. Instead, to target the prospects most likely to spend their money on landscape services, contractors

look for ways to get their message out to very specific demographic segments.

Door hangers in specific neighborhoods. "Doorknob hangers are a major source of new customers for us," says Jerry Tindel of Cutting Edge Lawn Care in Austin, TX. "As part of our marketing plan for growth, we want to invest more into this way of marketing by increasing the quantity and frequency."

Jerry says that door hangers are effective because they are inexpensive, and Cutting Edge is able to target the neighborhoods where the company already has regular work. This not only pre-qualifies the customer, but allows crews to keep a tight route, which increases efficiency and reduces drive time costs.

By the way, Jerry says door hangers are good for existing customers, too. He uses a "we have extra time" message that lists all the company's services, which ends up bringing in extra work.

Step one to good marketing is identifying which customer segment best suits your company.

This message is enclosed with invoices, as well. "We tend to take for granted that customers know all the services we offer," says Jerry. "But they forget. You'd be

surprised how much extra work you can get just by reminding them what else you can be doing for them."

Exhibiting at home shows. People attending local home shows are already in a "home-improvement" mind-set, which is also a customer pre-qualifier. "We do the home show every March," says Julie Cole of Just Gardens Landscaping in Jefferson, OH.

Julie says that Just Gardens' display at the show attracts quite a few prospects, but she tries to generate even more interest by offering gardening "mini-seminars" at the show, as well. "I do three presentations a day during the home show in a meeting room," says Julie. "I'll prepare a PowerPoint presentation and cover topics such as flowering shrubs, Landscaping 101, how to keep your landscape low-maintenance, etc."

Newsletters. Landscape contractors find newsletters to be an effective tool to solidify the bond with current customers, as well

as create interest with prospects. "We use our monthly newsletter as one of the things we do to cement loyalty," says Bob Thompson of BLT Landscape in Dallas, TX. "A

good part of it is about who we are as people and our corporate 'personality.' It's a little folksy, but intentionally so. We want our customers to feel like they are always dealing with real people, rather than a business machine."

Showing your work in a public venue is often an ideal way to illustrate what you can create for a customer's own environment.

Bob sends the newsletter to current maintenance customers and design/build customers spending over \$5,000. He also uses it as a tool to keep the company name in front of past customers who he would like to woo back to BLT. "This regular contact really does work in that regard," says Bob.

Jerry recently started a quarterly newsletter as a way to build a rapport with customers. "We have about 600 customers, and we've never met about 70% of them," says Jerry. "So many work during the day. They'll call for a quote. We'll leave it at the door. They'll hire us by phone, and we'll provide the service while they are at work. The newsletter helps fill the gap."

For more on producing an effective newsletter, turn to page 12 in this issue.

Public garden displays. Showing your work in a public venue is often an ideal way to illustrate what you can create for a customer's own environment.

Centerville Landscaping found great success by creating a garden in front of the company's building, on a busy street in town.

You don't just have to use your own land to "paint a picture," either. In addition to using past projects as your calling card, there are other creative ways to showcase your work.

Julie of Just Gardens Landscaping called the mall manager and the Dillard's store manager, an upscale department store in the local mall. She proposed erecting a garden display in front of the store inside the mall. It's been a hit. "I worked with my suppliers to donate materials, so my only investment is labor to create and maintain the display," says Julie. "I change it out for the seasons to keep it interesting. Our sign in front of the display provides our cards and a list of upcoming events, as well as our website address. It has been a most effective tool for generating new business. And all I had to do is ask."

Showcase your expertise in the community. In addition to the seminars Julie conducts during the home show, she keeps customers interested through the winter and early spring months by offering free seminars. Some are at the local library, while others are live demonstrations at someone's home.

At the library, the meeting room is free. Julie's investment is \$25 for refreshments and the cost of promotional materials she hands out. However, the local garden club will sometimes sponsor the refreshments." Julie says she gets several jobs as a result of her speaking engagements. They also further position her in the community as the expert.

This year Julie and Eric Eland, owner of Reflections Natural Waterscapes, are taking it a step further by offering hands-on seminars at customers' homes. One will be a pondless waterfall and another will be a putting green. The customer is getting the installation done at cost, since they are hosting the seminar in their backyard. The customer also covers the cost of breakfast and lunch. Attendees get the chance to see—and participate in, should they choose—the transformation of a garden space.

Get customers to visit you on the web. More and more landscape contractors use the Internet as a communication vehicle with customers and prospects. Some say it's a way consumers can "shop" their services 24/7 and do research before they make the call. Research shows that more and more customers use the Internet to research their purchases.

"Most of our new contacts come either from the telephone directory or our website," says Bob of BLT Landscape. "They tend to check out both, looking for certifications,



Your trailer can be your best form of advertising, helping you get calls from customers in the neighborhoods where you are already working.

qualifications and a feel that there could be a 'meeting of the minds.' The website is becoming more and more important. They want to see what you've done and who you are before they call."

Signage, signage and more signage. Many contractors understand the importance of letting people know who did the work on a pretty piece of land. Proper signage is a good investment. "We put a sign in every yard we work on," says Julie. "This is my No. 1 marketing tool, and it's one of the least expensive." She purchased signs over the Internet with the company name, logo and telephone number for \$4 each. Permission is given to display the signs at each contract signing.

"Our second largest source of new customers are the signs on our trailers," says Jerry. "We have each one emblazoned with

our name and telephone number printed very large, in two colors. It costs us \$800 to do that for each trailer, but it's a great investment. It's our best advertising, and we get the calls in the neighborhoods where we are already working."

Jerry points out that enclosed trailers aren't only your company billboards. They are also great for crew efficiency, since they don't have to be loaded and unloaded each day.

Whatever you do, track it

There are many ways to spread your message, and they vary in time, effort and cost. How do you know which communication vehicles are most effective for your company?

One of the best ways to track your marketing efforts is simply by asking each prospect where they heard about you when they

call. Or do like Jerry does and put a coupon on your door hanger. Keep a tally of all results and use that information to determine your most effective marketing efforts.

While it is fairly easy to measure the effectiveness of the business you win today, remember, too, that there are some other benefits that may be long-term and harder to measure. "We follow the success of the sites on our target list," says Greg. "However, we have a long-range perspective, and there are times we feel we have scored a major success by targeting, contacting and being invited to bid on a site even though we weren't selected. We realize we will get another opportunity in the future."

Every contact is important. "Some will say they can't afford me," says Julie. "But they recommend me to others. I consider every contact I make a positive move for my company."

All in all, it all comes back to "what you're all about." Everything your company does makes an impression on prospects and customers. Make sure it's the right one.

As Bob says, "I am a firm believer that in providing a service the customer can get anywhere, if they know you, your people and what your goals are, it will be harder for them to make that emotional switch to sever the relationship." **PRO**

Originally printed in PRO's January 2005 issue.

Marketing Your Business

Marketing for growth

The right strategy—with the right systems and leadership—can help you overcome some of the more notorious obstacles to profitable business growth.

Let's say that you've decided that you want to aggressively grow your business. How do you jump-start your firm to achieve aggressive growth targets? Where do you start and how do you get there?

Here are some practical suggestions that are field-tested in the landscape industry that you can discuss with the leaders of your team. The benefit of putting these programs in place will help you grow your business and strengthen your organization as a whole.

Create action plans to turn goals into reality

Everyone knows that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Yet, there are many companies that forget about this valuable step and try to grow their business without a specific plan outlining how to do so. The plan should

include setting revenue goals for each area of your business. It should also identify the specific types of new contracts you plan to go after.

Try to anticipate the percentage possibility of landing those contracts and estimate when they may start. Based on these forecasts, your organization can make the necessary plans to support the growth.

This critical step of creating these action plans is the link between a vision for growth and the reality of achieving it.

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Keep your solid core base of business intact

Don't forget about your current customers—the people who know you and trust you as

their landscape contractor of choice. Their service requirements and needs are of the utmost importance. Cover this with your team.

In order for you to grow your business, you must keep what you have and add to it. Don't forget to "plant seeds" with your existing clients on what can improve their property and how to budget for large expenditures that need to be made. They will be grateful and loyal if you communicate with them.

Create a growth-oriented culture and mind-set

Organizations take their cues from their leaders. The priorities of the leader are obvious by watching his actions, then listening to his words. This means that if you are constantly seeking

ways to add new contracts to the company, your people will pick up on the importance of tracking down new leads and opening new doors.

They are a reflection of you. If you are more focused on operational issues and fail to delegate these tasks to those you have hired, your people will realize that you are more concerned about doing other people's jobs than you are about growing your business. They have to see you pursue new work, and then they will follow.

Delegate tasks to people you have hired, otherwise you will never grow your business. Spend time with people who can provide you with working capital, have your business plan with you, and seek new sources of money to fund your growth so that when you need it, it will be there for you.

Develop systems that support growth in your people

Many organizations proudly boast that they promote from within. This means there must be a systematic way of measuring performance of individuals against their expected jobs. This system creates a method by which management can reward people for doing their job well and for exceeding expectations of their customers.



Organizations take their cues from their leaders. If you are constantly seeking ways to add new contracts to the company, your people will pick up on the importance of tracking down new leads and opening new doors.

Landscape contractors are notorious for not reviewing the performance of their people on a regular basis, or for outlining the specific achievements that are required in order to move ahead. If you want your company to grow, you must put systems in place to hire, select, train, measure, motivate and promote individuals from within to support the growth and not lose your base business.

Compete where you have an advantage

What makes your company special? Take a moment and think about the unique philosophy, values and culture that you have created. Once you have a firm handle on this, seek the types of customers that value this unique blend of service, quality and expertise.

Help your own employees know what makes your operation the best of its type in your particular area. You will be able to compete where you have an advantage, a unique advantage that you can call your own.

You may be the only company that has a degreed horticulturist on staff, or you may be the only minority-owned company with clients who have been with you for an average of 10 years. Tell customers where you have an advantage and let them know that you are seeking new clients who value the same.

Achieving growth in a competitive marketplace is no easy task. With the right plans in place, effective leadership and working systems, you have begun to eliminate a few obstacles that keep many companies from moving ahead. **PRO**

Marketing Your Business

Are you perceived as an expert in your market?

Use local media and events to make sure your community recognizes you for the expert you are.

How does your community view your company? Are you perceived as an expert in your field, a craftsman, an artist? If you feel you would like to raise your profile in your community, there are some relatively low-cost things you can do to showcase yourself as the expert that you are.

Jeff Pozniak of Stonehenge Brick Paving and Landscaping in Menasha, WI, figured out how to position himself as an expert without spending much more than a few hours of his time. He began writing articles for the local paper, giving readers tips on yard care, such as “How to clean a paver patio,” “How to seed a lawn” and “Selecting the right plants for your yard.”

Jeff says that over time, people began to recognize his name and realize he’s the guy with so much knowledge about landscaping. He emphasizes that frequency, though, is important. You want to pitch a series to the newspaper, not just one article. “Just like TV or radio ads, you need to be in

more than once,” says Jeff. “But the publicity also helps serve as a marketing tool later on, as well. You can include copies in your sales packets and portfolios. When you’re a small outfit, it can help lend credibility.”

Be available for interviews

Luckily, Jeff has a talent for both writing and giving instruction. Not everyone does. If you’re not a writer, there are other ways to offer yourself up as an expert in all things landscaping. Pitch to local media that you are available for interviews.

Ray Tuten of Southern Landscaping in Evans, GA, positioned himself as an expert by granting an interview to *Augusta Magazine* for an article called, “Refined Outdoor Living: From fountains to fire pits and outdoor kitchens, homeowners are finding creative ways to enhance their outdoor living.”

Ray’s expertise came through loud and clear by discussing trends, saying, “I saw the turning point around the year 2000. Everybody’s trying to create their

own outdoor living areas more. They want to enjoy their houses more.” He discussed what people’s preferences are (more fire pits on their patios), educated the reader on the differences between them and even gave a new use for fire pits (Ray explained that man-made fire pits, like ones made of copper, can be used as a cooler during events by filling them with ice and beverages). Trying to add some unique information also makes you stand out as an expert.

Show expertise by example

If you’d rather show your expertise instead of talking about it, there are many ways to do that as well. Bill Schwab of Naturescape Landscape in Solana Beach, CA, donated his services to a high-profile charity event that got lots of attention. Bill donated the installation of the irrigation, landscape and patio paving for the San Diego Historical Society’s Showcase Home in 2003.

Every year, the society chooses a home to renovate. Different decorators are chosen

for each room. Contractors and landscapers are also chosen. Once the home is complete, tours are given throughout the year to support Historical Society funds. It is also given a lot of attention by local press, including *San Diego Home and Garden Magazine*. “Being new to the market, the exposure we got from this project really added to my credibility as I try to establish myself here.”

Makeover mania

Jeff has also decided to take his relationship with the local newspaper up a notch, and generate some excitement in the community, as well.

We’ve all seen the many television shows that makeover homes, rooms, vehicles, landscapes and even people. Jeff thought it would create a lot of attention by offering a yard makeover. He convinced local suppliers to donate materials for a one-day yard makeover, so his only investment is a design and one day of labor.

Since pitching the idea to the newspaper, the event has taken on a life of its own. The newspaper received 250 entries. “People got creative,” says Jeff. “They wrote entries from a dog’s perspective, from a lawn mower’s, and they even wrote songs. It’s been fun. I’d highly

recommend trying this in your own market.”

Do it for the right reasons

Getting a newspaper, local TV station or regional magazine to consider your idea might be difficult if you don’t have a relationship with the media. Jeff offers some advice about creating your pitch. “Put together a letter that describes the idea,” he says. “Be sure to include a couple paragraphs about your work history. You need to demonstrate that you have the ability to do what you say you want to do.”

Jeff adds that the most important thing is to portray the right attitude. The media is going to shy away from you if you look like you’re just out there to hawk your wares. “I frequently hear about business owners who always want to jump right into the sales pitch when talking with reporters,” says Jeff. “You can’t take the approach of a salesman. If you can put yourself in the mind-set of being a philanthropic expert with no need for added business, you’ll be headed in the right direction.”

Bill agrees. “When I have the opportunity to do these high-exposure events, my intent is simply to do my best,” says Bill. “I am confident that the work and ethics our company provides sells itself.” **PRO**

Originally printed in PRO’s Summer 2004 issue.

“Put together a letter that describes the idea. Be sure to include a couple paragraphs about your work history. You need to demonstrate that you have the ability to do what you say you want to do.”

Marketing Your Business

Newsletters connect you to the customer

Many contractors have found newsletters to be a cost-effective, high-quality mailing piece. In the book “Getting Business to Come to You” by Paul and Sarah Edwards and Laura Campitt Douglas, the authors point out many benefits of producing a newsletter.

“Your own company newsletter can be among the most cost-effective methods of promotion. It permits you to keep in touch with your customers, give them good news, and announce special products or services. It is also a good way to offer incentives, alert customers to important trends in the industry, and, above all, give customers an opportunity to know you better. A newsletter is a great device for conveying information you might otherwise find difficult—or even impossible to report to your customers and prospects, such as news of an award you have received or some outstanding facts about your company.”

The authors also make the following points about newsletters:

- Two areas that can be especially well-handled via newsletter are price increases and product or service problems. It provides the opportunity to explain the cause of a price increase and uses subtle selling techniques to make such an increase more palatable.
- Newsletters are also the ideal way to tell customers about specialized products or services you offer that may not apply to all of your customers, or may not be mentioned in the normal course of business selling.
- A newsletter provides you with a chance to sell some of the intangibles about doing business with you.

Developing your very own newsletter

Coming up with the name of your newsletter is an important first step. Be creative. Tie it into your company name, if possible, to further develop your business identity. For instance, Cutting

Edge Lawn Care has a newsletter called “Clippings.”

In your masthead, which is the top of the newsletter that features its name and other crucial information, be sure to include your unique positioning statement (Cutting Edge’s newsletter says, “Where customers are first – ALWAYS!”), the date and any other information you want noticed easily, such as your telephone number. Just be careful not to make it too busy. You want it to be attention-grabbing without being too cluttered with information.

Next, you need a format or layout for your newsletter. There are many software programs that offer templates for these types of mailings. You could also hire someone to create your own custom template. A designer could create the layout, then give it to you on disk to use over and over again.

“We pay a designer \$75 per page to lay out the newsletter,” says Jerry Tindel of Cutting Edge

Lawn Care. “The printer charges us 86 cents per copy, and we do 500 at a time.”

To create visual interest in the piece, include photographs, cartoons or graphics whenever possible. Adding a dash of color is also a good idea if feasible. If you are having your newsletters printed, adding a second color may not be much more expensive than just printing in one color.

Another way to add color, but still keep the cost down, is to have a large quantity of newsletter paper printed with only the masthead, much like printing letterhead stationery. Then use your template to create each issue’s stories, and print them out on masthead paper on your own printer to save costs.

You can also save costs on envelopes by making the newsletter a self-mailer. Be sure to leave space for your return address, mailing label and stamp. Jerry sends “Clippings” out with the invoices to save on separate postage.

Though a newsletter can be any size, it may be best to start with the traditional 8.5”x11” paper size. It’s easy to run through your own printer and can be folded in thirds for mailing.

What is a good length and content for newsletter stories? To keep reader interest, keep stories only a couple hundred words long. Use catchy headlines. Vary your topics so you can capture the attention of more readers.

Be sure to include information about sales and events, but don’t make every story about your business. Customers will look forward to your mailings if you include “News you can use.” Include how-to topics about lawn care, gardening tips and seasonal ideas. Remember, you aren’t just selling your service, you are selling your expertise. You are selling solutions. Reflect that in every issue.

“We always include something seasonal, a Q&A and personal stories about people in our company,” says Jerry. “And we always list our services to remind customers of the other things we can do for them.”

It’s a good idea to include some sort of coupon or certificate in your newsletter. It will

add value for the customer, and will provide you with a measurement tool of how many sales were generated from the mailing.

Another cost-saving tip would be to consider letting your suppliers purchase ads in your newsletter. The revenue would help cover your investment. **PRO**

TAKEAWAYS

A NEWSLETTER CAN BE A GREAT WAY TO:

- Announce special products or services
- Offer incentives
- Explain price increases
- Allow customers to get to know you a bit better
- Promote your expertise

Marketing Your Business



Create a customer service culture

Clearly define what customer service is, and get employees to buy into your customer-centered mind-set.

The goal of every entrepreneur who is interested in growing his business should be handing over the technical details to key people on the team. By freeing yourself from the day-to-day fires in the field, you can spend more time on important tasks, like staying in touch with customers.

However, you may be stepping out of the fire and into the frying pan. Making yourself the sole client contact and source of customer intelligence can limit your company's growth as much as if you are making every operational decision, according to green indus-

try consultant Arnold Ng.

Your bubbly personality may indeed be one of your organization's greatest assets. But Arnold says every team member must be involved to get the true customer service picture.

"That's how the competition really steals business from you; by filling in the gaps in your service," Arnold points out. "If your employees are just as conscientious as you are at listening to customer needs and understanding their priorities, then your company will have the reputation of being truly customer-centered."

Expand your definition of service

The first step in creating a customer service culture is to define what "service" really means. Arnold says a contractor's definition is often too narrow because it's based on his perception of what the customer wants.

"Most contractors think they have a pretty good idea why people choose to do business with them," says Arnold. "But many haven't sat down and really defined what makes their service valuable from the customer's point of view. Ultimately, it's more important

how your customers view your company that what you think about your organization.”

Obviously, your expertise and operational efficiency are indeed valuable. Professionalism and quality can increase value, because your services are worth more if the competition doesn't deliver what's promised or shows up on the client's property shirtless in a tired-looking pick-up truck.

But Arnold says there are countless other ways to increase value, too, many of which you could never think of on your own. That's because each customer's perceptions are shaped by every experience he has with your company—from the sales presentation to the bill.

The little things can make a huge difference

The little things can have a disproportionately large impact. Arnold asks, “Do you judge a restaurant strictly in terms of its prime rib?” Of course not. How long does it take to get a glass of wine? Is the staff courteous? What if the server forgets that it's your anniversary? The product is defined as the sum total of all these parts. A lot of subtle things add up to or subtract from the dining experience, which, in turn, determines how much you're willing to pay and whether you'll go back.”

To further complicate matters, those countless details that shape customers' choices are fluid. The game is always changing. Arnold says, “As soon as you think you know your customers, their needs and budgets shift, and competitors come up with ways to match the value you're offering. The things that make your service unique one day can become commodities the next.”

Developing the wow factor

Identifying and tracking these subtleties is a Herculean task, even for the most customer-conscious owner. That's why employees should be able and willing to collect, report and utilize customer feedback. “It is critical to establish a company environment where information on customers is shared on a regular basis,” Arnold points out.

That's how the “wow” factor develops. It's how the five-star hotel magically knows what brand of coffee you drink or activities you enjoy, making it more than just a place to sleep. But it isn't magic. Someone has either subtly asked you about your preferences or took notice when you ordered coffee. “Every time a customer comes into contact with your company, there's an opportunity to make an impression and create value,” Arnold says.

Big bucks from brief encounters

These short encounters can lead to new business, as well as solidify existing client relationships. “Let's say one of your supervisors hears that a property manager will be assuming responsibilities for additional properties a few months from now,” says Arnold. “Not only does this give you advanced warning on a possible bid, but you can use your knowledge of the client to assist him in developing meaningful maintenance budgets. Assuming that your supervisor shares that information with you, you can be proactive and demonstrate value before the property is out to bid.”

Keep ears and eyes open

The information doesn't have to be earth-shattering to be valuable, explains Arnold. “The property manager calls Mabel, your accounting manager, and asks for two invoices. Instead of just saying ‘OK’ (or, heaven forbid, ‘That's impossible’), Mabel asks the customer why that's important. The property manager explains that she needs a copy to send to the home office, so Mabel offers to send a copy directly to the home office. She might even ask other property managers if this would help them.”

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Turning Green Into Gold

Madison, Wisc., a city where bicycles outnumber automobiles three to two, is renowned for its beautiful scenery and eco-conscious culture. In fact, Madison was named one of "America's Top 10 Green Cities" in 2005 by *The Green Guide*, a trusted green living resource for today's environmentally conscious consumer.

So, it seems fitting that Madison residents Mike and Kathy Simon, owners of Landscape Care Company, established in 1983, have found success in running their business in an environmentally friendly way. And, with a roster boasting more than 95 corporate clients spanning

from a national communications firm and a state university, their green business is big business. The Simons reinforce their commitment to the environment through marketing, even touting their use of environmentally friendly outdoor power equipment in their clients' monthly statements.

Conservation-Minded • Their work crews recycle debris from job sites and sort it for landfills. They chip all brush. Used oil from small engines and mowers is returned to their STIHL dealer for disposal. Even the crew's lunchtime soda cans and water bottles are brought back to Landscape Care to be recycled.

"We're a conservation-minded company,"

Simon added. "The bottom line is that my generation is a product of the '60s. At Landscape Care, we're green oriented in everything we do."

For the Simons, that includes embracing

the latest technology in outdoor power equipment.

"When our dealer, Middleton Power Center, became STIHL exclusive, so did we. Not only have our repairs been reduced by nearly 45 percent, our equipment is more ergonomic, efficient and environmentally friendly."

Today, Landscape Care uses a range of STIHL low-emission products, including 10 STIHL FS 100 RX trimmers and 10 STIHL BR 500 back-

pack blowers, which are low-noise, and customers have noticed.

Eco-Friendly Equipment • Prior to making the change, Simon's crews were restricted in the times they could service some properties. The University of Wisconsin Medical Clinics, one of its largest clients, allowed work only outside of normal business hours or on weekends due to highly sensitive emission sensors at the clinics. And, work couldn't start in many other areas of the city until after 8 a.m. due to noise ordinances.

Because of the reduced noise levels from their new STIHL BR 500 leaf blowers and noticeable reduction in exhaust fumes,



Mike Simon is co-owner of the green-oriented Landscape Care Company



Use of the STIHL low-emission equipment—BR 500 backpack blower, sound optimized at a quiet 65 dB(A) measured per ANSI B175.2 (above) and FS 100 RX trimmer (below)—allows Simon's team to be more productive and eco-friendly.

Simon's team is now able to be more productive and eco-friendly on the job site.

"Working under those restrictions can take away from your bottom line," Simon shared. "But now that we've switched to STIHL low-emission and low-noise products, including blowers and trimmers, the only people losing sleep at 7 a.m. on weekdays are my crew members."

The low noise levels of the STIHL BR 500



made such an impact on Landscape Care's clients that property managers contacted Simon directly to let him know they appreciated the difference.

"The response from our clients has been overwhelming," Simon said. "But our crews have noticed the benefits as well—they don't have to shout over loud engines or use hand signals to get each other's attention. And, the equipment is even more powerful than traditional units, so we work more effectively."

Looking to the Future • With crews that run equipment up to 55 hours a week, Simon is always on the lookout for products that help them work more comfortably and more efficiently.

"It doesn't cost much to recycle, care for the environment or use green equipment," Simon said. "At the end of the day, we're just following our conscience. And there's no doubt that's the right thing to do."

As a result, Landscape Care Company is turning "green" into gold—enjoying double-digit revenue growth that comes from building strong customer relationships and employing ecologically friendly business practices.

STIHL®



All of these seemingly inconsequential things add up. You're not just going above the call of duty out of the goodness of your heart. You should be looking to see a return for the increased value you're providing.

Arnold adds, "You need to raise prices so you can give Mabel a raise for doing a great job serving and understanding customers. You can prove to the customer that you're helping manage the billing process, which saves the customer time."

Putting the focus on your customers

The most important, and difficult, aspect of the feedback process is getting employees to recognize customer service opportunities and remember to share them.

Arnold says exceptional customer service is only possible if every employee sees the connection to the customer. "The astute manager tells Mabel that she is essential in selling the company's

services," Arnold tells. "You tell her, 'When we say we do A+ work, that includes you, Mabel. Your work in handling receivables is just as important as the guys out in the field.' If she isn't able to help the customer, she should know who to talk to and understand that it's her responsibility to follow up."

It's also important to establish a means to process that information. Customer Relationship Management software exists to gather the data on customers from the beginning of the relationship to the end.

Setting customer service guidelines

With guidance and time, Arnold says the customer-focused culture can evolve to the point where employees know how and when to take appropriate action. That's why employee retention is so important (hopefully Mabel's raise will keep her on board).

Employees' service instincts can also be reinforced with perfor-

mance guidelines, such as:

- Returning calls within a certain time and following up until the customer is reached
- Resolving on-site problems, such as an irrigation problem, immediately after they are discovered
- Setting deadlines for completing proposals and meeting service requests until they become organizational habits.

Regular customer contact might also be scheduled. Crews might deliver a standardized form that asks, "Were you satisfied with our services? Why or why not?" ... in addition to more in-depth, but less frequent, surveys.

Soliciting input with surveys

Everyone should also be attuned to customer expectations, taking note if a client expresses like or dislike for any part of the company's service package. To get a clearer idea of customers' perceptions, Arnold suggests proactively seeking input with surveys and/or customer interviews.

"You can't assume customers are happy just because you're not hearing from them," he says. "Plus, the fact that you're actively soliciting their input demonstrates that you care. That in itself adds value."

Ideally, Arnold says, surveys should be conducted by a third party such as a market researcher or consultant to get objective feedback. But he says in-house

efforts can also be effective. He suggests first mapping out the company's points of contact with customers—sales, on-site, calls to the office, billing, etc.—and basing questions on those areas.

“You want to steer away from broad terms like ‘quality,’” Arnold emphasizes. Ask specific questions about their experiences: “Did the estimator clearly explain what would be done on the property?” “Have all specifications been met consistently?” “When you call our office, are your questions or concerns addressed adequately?”

Charting progress

Arnold says you don't have to invest a great deal of time and money to investigate customer preferences and opinions of your service. “The reality of day-to-day pressures probably won't allow for number-crunching and empirical analysis,” he relates. “You're looking for impressions; matches

between customer needs and the company's capabilities.”

Arnold suggests taking time every few months to map out where the company stands, using the “points of contact” as an outline. “Make a big chart on the wall and put each process—the areas covered in the survey—in separate columns,” says Arnold. “Include the survey results and any relevant notes from your customer files. You'll start to get a picture of the company's strengths and areas where you might need work. Use your strengths to sell your services, and find out more about your weaknesses by talking to customers.”

Solidifying relationships

It takes a lot of effort to keep in touch with customers, says Arnold, but not as much as getting new ones. Consistently collecting feedback through employees and surveys helps you adjust to indi-

vidual client needs, reducing the chance you'll lose the investment you've made in them.

By customizing each relationship, you increase its value. At the same time, you make it harder for competitors to duplicate it.

You can accomplish the same thing through the sheer force of your own personality, if you have the time. But that makes the company dependent on your availability, as well as your perceptions.

“A lot of companies just say, ‘These are what we think our strengths are. Let's go convince the market,’” says Arnold. “But without feedback from customers, there's no way to know.

“You may be producing quarter-pounders and offering speedy service, when what customers really want is prime rib and ambience, or vice versa. Your customers will tell you a lot about themselves and your company. You just have to listen.” **PRO**



Marketing Your Business

The image of a professional company

What contractors do to show they are professionals worthy of earning top dollar.

Ofentimes, the way customers perceive your company and the landscape industry in general falls down on the list of things to worry about for busy contractors. After all, there are jobs to execute, routes to plan, payroll to meet and requests to answer.

“We lose sight of the customer’s view of what we do,” says John Orinkawitz of Genesis Landscaping in East Meadow, NY. “As business owners, we have to think about making money today and all the other details of our businesses. We don’t worry about whether we are thought of as professionals.”

John says that most contractors feel they are doing all they can day-to-day, and assume that customers translate the hard work and high standards as professionalism. “But you have to step back and look at your business as how a customer sees it,” says John. “It’s not how I see myself as being professional. It’s how my customer views my business.”

And that view may not always be what you hope. It’s really a matter of semantics. Too many times, when you say “landscaper,” customers think “yard guy.” Then

you are just someone who cuts grass and weeds flower beds. This is a real barrier to getting people to realize all that you do.

Furthermore, this perception is difficult to change, especially when you consider the number of landscape contractors who call themselves “professionals,” but do the job in tank-tops and flip-flops, using the consumer mower they bought at the big box store, willing to charge a flat \$20 per cut because they have virtually no overhead. For everyone like this that leaves the landscape contracting market, there are five more breaking into it.

Customers won’t see it if you don’t see it first

While that is an oversimplification, it brings attention to the other side of the coin: Customers can’t perceive landscape contractors as professionals until contractors themselves do.

“I can’t tell you how many customers I pick up because they are disappointed in the guy who was giving them ‘such a good deal,’” says John. “Not many of those guys can provide the support and service

customers look for on the money they bring in. I just want to tell them: Command a certain price and stay at that price. Once you start giving deals to bring in new customers, you’ll never get what you need to run your business.”

That said, most contractors will agree that there will always be low-ballers entering the market, and there is nothing you can do about that. However, there are things you do now, and can do in the future, to reinforce the perception that you are a professional. You can change the way the world views your company.

How do you convey professionalism?

We posed a question to landscape contractors: What would you say are the three most important things you and your company do to convey the professional image necessary to get the clientele, price and respect you desire?

The answers were varied, but there were certain things all landscape contractors agreed on. For instance, there are certain “minimums” that companies do to illustrate professionalism.



Uniforms; lettered trucks; clean equipment in good repair; consistent logos on business cards, invoices, advertising, etc. Once held up as the example, these elements are expected today.

Landscape professionals instead talk about the less tangible, but increasingly important, aspects of the business that help illustrate professionalism.

One contractor said professionalism comes down to three things: image, image and image. He's really talking about the three different aspects of image:

- Your company's image
- Your interpersonal image with prospects and clients
- The image that that comes from your work.

Your public image

How you portray yourself and your company to the community is not only a very important way to distinguish yourself from your competitors, but also a way to help

improve public perception of the landscape industry in general. You have to show an image that suggest you are an expert.

Contractor Jesse Howley says the folks at his company have developed a great relationship with the garden editor of the local paper.

Someone from Trees by Touliaos is quoted whenever an expert is needed in a story. "We also do seminars for garden clubs, continuing education classes and the botanic gardens," says Jesse. "The people who attend these tend to be upper-class, residential customers. In other words, our prospects. Every time we give a seminar, we are reinforcing our credibility. Give a public face to your knowledge. Let them know you can do what they can't."

Jesse adds, though, that it takes a certain personality to be a public figure. "You need to be able to read your audience and provide the right information."

Jason Cupp of Highland Outdoor in Olathe, KS, says the most important element to this

"It's not how I see myself as being professional. It's how my customer views my business."

— John Orinkawitz, Genesis Landscaping

and all aspects of professionalism is "brand consistency." He says that creating your brand goes well beyond a logo. "It's a culture, a communication plan that we have created and enforced," says Jason. "We communicate our brand with everything we do."

Your interpersonal image

Jesse calls this salesmanship. "Being able to relate to people is important," he says. "This is your

up-close and personal chance to separate yourself from others and show customers you are their guy.”

John says it goes back to looking at things through the customers’ eyes. “I make sure my customers know that I take ownership of their project,” says John. “I try to treat every project like it was my own. I aim for perfection. I make sure we are on time. We return calls. We jump on requests for added work. I want nothing less from the contractors who work on my house.”

He puts it a different way. “Customers are like the plants and flowers we work with every day. They need certain things. If you nurture and care for plants, they will respond with healthy growth. Customers are the same way.”

Nurturing the customer is important, and making sure they are satisfied is essential. However, Jesse makes one distinction. “I hear contractors say, ‘Give the client whatever they want.’ I disagree. It’s more important to give them what they need. Many times customers don’t know what they want, or fail to realize the consequences of what they think they want.”

Jesse says the key to illustrating your professionalism here is to, 1) really listen to what clients ask for, and 2) take the time to educate them, and help them make the choices that best suit their needs.

“Let’s say a customer asks for a certain kind of plant, but also indicates she wants a low-maintenance landscape,” Jesse relates.

“I could install that plant anyway, knowing that it has to be pruned back four times a year and is a lot of work. But then I haven’t done a good job for her. I need to help her make choices that will make her much happier in the long-run.”

Jason says it’s important to give customers a sense of consistency in every interaction, from the big stuff to the little stuff. “Sometimes it comes down to word choice,” says Jason. “We call our customers ‘clients,’ our employees ‘team members’ and our company ‘a firm.’” Other policies that convey professionalism include:

- Highland Outdoor uses the same font for everything from correspondence to billing to advertising and promotions
- Correspondence is always typed, never handwritten
- The phone is answered by a live person
- All calls are returned within one business day.

“Every team member has embraced our way of dealing with clients,” says Jason. “Clients know what to expect from us. All these things give us a leg up on the competition.”

The image of your work

Positioning yourself as an expert in the community and having great interpersonal skills will likely help bring in some business. But you won’t keep that business or generate future jobs if you can’t

walk your talk. Your work has to speak for itself.

“While it is unrealistic to be a perfectionist, we still seek perfection in everything we do,” says John. “Your reputation precedes you, so always bring your A game.” John says that when your work really stands out, you can justify getting paid more. “Customers will recognize the difference.”

Always producing stellar work means having to make tough choices from time to time. “Protecting your image is not always easy to do,” says Jesse. “Sometimes it means turning down work. But if the end result of a job will be something you aren’t going to be proud of, then don’t take it. Like somebody said, ‘You’re only as good as your worst job.’”

Make sure you showcase your best jobs in some way. Many contractors have portfolios. Some contractors also take prospects on a tour of their finished work, or provide a list of addresses for customers to visit jobs at their own convenience.

Others have grounds around their businesses where they’ve built a “live” portfolio. Jesse says that while his company doesn’t have an extensive portfolio to bring to clients, they have plenty to show prospects on their own grounds. “We have a nursery, a nature center and an arboretum,” says Jesse. “We have display gardens everywhere. We’ve made our business a destination where people like to come and enjoy the

surroundings. We've gotten a lot of landscape business from this."

While most established contractors admit they get much of their business from referrals, it bears repeating. Your current customers are your best salespeople. Be sure to collect and present testimonials, and maximize referral opportunities.

Depending on what kind of customer you are targeting, showcasing your work can be even more important. For instance, John targets high-end clientele who have just moved in.

"We market to new arrivals in the neighborhoods we work," says John. "These people aren't necessarily aware of our reputation yet. But we use this as a chance to get our foot in the door and prove ourselves. We point to past jobs and happy customers, and make sure they know that if they hire us, they'll never have a problem or a question. We've been in business 29 years. We're not going anywhere."

When it comes down to it, you want to make sure every example of your work reinforces the caliber of company you have to offer. Jason puts it this way, "Our company has a life. And like anything that lives and breathes, it has a story. We try to tell that story in everything we do. When you look at one of our landscapes, you'll know our story. We are a professional company, and we deliver exceptional results." **PRO**

A person is shown from the chest up, holding a magazine titled "PRO Contractor Success Guide". The person is wearing a blue shirt and grey pants. The background is a library with many bookshelves filled with books. The magazine cover features a person working on a lawn. The text "PRO" is written in large, bold, black letters at the top of the magazine cover. Below it, in smaller black text, is "Business success for landscape professionals". The main title "Contractor Success Guide" is written in large, white, bold letters with a black outline. Below that, in red, bold letters with a white outline, is "Missing the first volume of Contractor Success Guide?". At the bottom of the magazine cover, in white, bold letters with a black outline, is "Visit http://www.promagazine.com/pdf/CSG_v1_low-res.pdf to download it FREE of charge!".

PRO
Business success for landscape professionals

Contractor Success Guide

Missing the first volume of Contractor Success Guide?

Visit http://www.promagazine.com/pdf/CSG_v1_low-res.pdf to download it FREE of charge!

Marketing Your Business

Projecting Professionalism

Take control of how the public perceives your company.

Driving into tiny North Manchester, IN, one begins to see a pattern. It begins with a billboard: “Extraordinary Landscaping! Scott’s Landscape Service ... all landscape and maintenance needs.”

A few miles down the road, at the entrance to a development of retirement cottages, a truck with the distinctive yellow-and-green Scott’s Landscape Service logo on the door is pulling onto the highway with a trailer full of mowers in tow. A few more miles later, there’s a Chevy dealership at the town’s busiest intersection. Across the street in front of a big white garage there’s a big sign with the logo for, you guessed it, Scott’s Landscape Service, along with more of those white, branded trucks. No one is getting out of this town without the words “Scott’s Landscape Service” being tattooed on their brain.

Drive down any side street, and you’re immediately struck by the glaring difference between lawns; the manicured, deep-green ones and those over-

run with dandelions. “All landscape and maintenance needs,” you catch yourself muttering.

The public’s misperceptions

It’s not as if Scott Manges desperately needs this overpowering publicity. He’s lived here all his life, after all, and has been caring for North Manchester’s landscapes for more than 30 years. And aside from the occasional one-man mowing operation and franchise lawn care truck from Ft. Wayne, he’s the only game around.

But he’s leaving nothing to chance, carefully grooming his reputation as carefully as he does his customers’ landscapes. “We want people to think Scott’s when they think landscape,” he says.

Although he has no competition from similar-sized companies, Scott had to weed out the negative connotations of what a “mower” or a “landscaper” is. In this tidy, rural Midwestern town, those words used to conjure up a number of negative images with many consumers. In some instances, people may have pictured a teenager—earnest, perhaps, but not especially serious—

looking to make spending money on the weekends. Others may have seen lawn and landscape services as a frivolous luxury.

Getting proactive

Scott has worked hard to dispel both impressions. Local homeowners’ opinions began to change when they watched him plant trees for the Tree City USA program in 1992.

Sensing the opportunity to attract residential customers, Scott began to re-engineer everything about the company that involved contact with customers, from logos and literature to handling phone calls, to project seriousness, consistency and quality. The recently added signage and billboards (a tradeout with the billboards’ owner) are capstones of a long-term effort to increase his exposure and capitalize on years of working hard to build the company’s reputation.

“I think you really have to understand where your customer is coming from,” Scott says. “A lot of wealthy homeowners in the

city probably wouldn't think twice about hiring someone to care for their property because their time is valuable. But here, people tended to think it was just an excuse to be lazy on the weekends."

Scott says the public's exposure to marketing campaigns by big turf care and home and garden companies has helped shift perceptions. And he says opinions shifted dramatically when people witnessed how efficiently and effectively his crews could complete a wide range of tasks.

Scott's expansion into other services such as lawn care, smaller landscape and hardscape construction projects, and irrigation was

mostly due to the necessities of operating in a small market. But he says he's benefited from cross-promotion between services.

"When people saw us performing services other than mowing, it reinforced the notion that we're serious about improving landscapes," Scott points out. "People were shocked when they saw what we could do; they began to understand that our training and equipment allows us to perform the work more cost-effectively and with better results. And I think people began to understand the value of investing in their landscapes."

Change your own thinking

Scott's perceptions of the importance of his company's image have also

changed over the years, and he makes few decisions without considering the impact on public perception.

In recent years he's brought in two retirees as seasonal employees, and says their impact has extended beyond the jobsite. "They can't do a lot of the heavy-duty physical work, but their work ethic is phenomenal and they're great on the mow crews," Scott says, adding that they've also proved to be a great customer relations asset. "A lot of our customers are older; they love chatting with these guys. They know everyone."

A move to a downtown shop from his farmstead on the edge of town has also paid dividends on the image front. The primary reasons for the move were increased space/storage and a good price on the property, but it also placed the company smack in the middle of town.

It's a powerful visual reminder of how the company is now one of the town's mainstay businesses, alongside the auto dealership and a bank (both of which are maintenance clients). That fact was highlighted when Scott's company was named Business of the Year by the local chamber of commerce.

"I never would have thought it was possible 20 years ago," Scott says. "It's amazing how things can change." **PRO**



Marketing Your Business

Selling your value

How to convince customers that your price is the best deal in town.

The common phenomenon of the lowballer is, at best, an annoyance, and, at worst, a temporary business-stealer. How do you help clients understand that, while someone else's price is lower, your company provides the best value?

Cutting lawns vs. being a business owner

Everyone has to start somewhere, but there are differences between folks looking for quick cash and those looking for a career. "Being 'big' doesn't mean anything," says Dennis Barriball, CLP, of Hemlock Landscapes in Chagrin Falls, OH. "I started small, with one truck and one helper years ago. Back then I was the crew leader and the production

manager. But from the start, I was also a business owner, and I always had that mind-set. I always had a vision of professionalism."

Dennis says that, whatever size you are, you distinguish yourself from lowballers by being first and foremost a business owner. "That's the first element to being a professional," says Dennis. "You have to approach everything you do with a business owner mind-set. This is your career."

"We feel that lowballers are taking the path of least resistance," says Corwyn Wipf, president of Coastal Landscaping Services in Santa Rosa Beach, FL. He says it's not just the expectations the client has for their landscape company that separates "value" companies from "price" companies. Corwyn says it is also

the expectation you set for yourself.

"Our attempt from inception has been to set ourselves apart from the competition by developing and maintaining a high level of standards that are the common thread for our firm," Corwyn relates. "This standard touches every aspect of our company, from the appearance, our timeliness, our ability to communicate professionally with customers, to the organization and upkeep of all our equipment and vehicles."

Communicating quality

Obviously, communicating your value is crucial to making sure customers embrace the fact that they are getting the best "deal" with your company ... and that has nothing to do with price.

Make frequent personal contact. There are many forms of communication with clients and prospects. Premium landscape contractors place a premium on good client relationships.

“Customers see me on their property every week,” says Mike Lake of Oceanfront Landscapes in Las Vegas, NV. “I inspect every property personally. That’s an opportunity to talk with the client every week. I go in and tell them what I see, and what we can do about it. I bring up ways to solve problems before they even know there is one.”

Customers also have his personal cell phone number. They always have access to the head of the company, and know problems will be solved quickly. So, does Mike get calls at midnight? “Not at all,” says Mike. “My customers don’t abuse the privilege.”

When it comes to prospects, Mike makes sure he does a lot of communicating before making estimates or bids. He first tries to get as much information as he can about the job and the budget. Then he makes sure his next visit is with the decision-maker.

“Most building and housing association managers want to impress their boss, and focus on saving dollars,” says Mike. “I insist on speaking with the decision-maker, who knows that the

cheapest is rarely the best value in landscaping. Then I can show the decision-maker everything my company can offer them. By the time I provide the estimate, they can see what that price brings with it.”

Educate the client. Clearly communicating the services that come by hiring your company is important. It is often helpful to

give customers a short class in “Landscape 101” to help them understand all the steps to the process of the job they’d like to get done. This also helps customers realize the value you offer, and reinforces your expertise.

“Our work is predominantly design/build,” says David Brown of Land Expressions in Mead, WA. “We educate our clients as to the specifics of what quality is: good soil, proper grades, the right plant in the right place, a thorough warranty, attention to detail, etc. It helps them understand the importance of quality at each step of the job.”

Be dependable. Common sense would tell us this is a given

in any service business. But every professional landscape contractor interviewed for this story brought this up as a key way to distinguish their companies from the competition, and especially from lowballers.

“Show up,” says Chris Orser of Chris Orser Landscape in Doyletown, PA. “Return every phone call. You’d be amazed at how

“Customers see me on their property every week. I inspect every property personally. That’s an opportunity to talk with the client every week.”

– Mike Lake, Oceanfront Landscapes

many contractors don’t do either.”

Some contractors have said clients hired them because they “showed up.” Price doesn’t always enter into it; some clients are much more interested in whether you will make them a priority.

“Do what you say you are going to do,” says Dennis. “It’s simple, but very important. And keep the client in the loop when things change. For instance, we have rain days, which put us behind schedule. If you aren’t going to be there, call. That’s all they want. Let them know you are two days behind. Don’t make them wonder where you are.”

Convey the right message. “The most valuable thing we sell

our clients is a relationship,” says Richard Lowrey, COO of Coastal Landscaping Services. “If you don’t build a relationship with your clients, you will never know how to truly serve them. Through relationships and meeting your client’s expectations, you will find the best marketing program you will ever have.”

Be sure to take the opportunity to deepen that relationship during all contact, including the good and not so good. “If our customer relationships are strong, the customer is more apt to talk to us when there is a problem, and resolve the issue rather than shifting to a competitor,” says Rocco Fiore of Rocco Fiore & Sons in Libertyville, IL. “We build on loyalty and customer satisfaction in the resolution of the problem. It is far less costly to work at keeping our current customers than to find new ones. Our goal is to keep our customers for life.”

Present a value package

There are also many ways you convey your quality and value without ever coming into contact with the clients and prospects. When people drive by one of your crews at work on a property, what do they see?

“We wear uniforms,” says Chris. “We drive clean trucks that are all the same color and

have our logo. We use high-quality equipment to service properties. We sharpen our blades every day for the best cut. We have a mechanic who makes sure our equipment is in top shape. Appearance means a lot.”

Mike says you should make sure people know each property is a product of your work, whether your crews are there or not. A beautiful job is your calling card. “On every property that I’m allowed to, I put company signs out so people know we did the work,” he points out.

“Show up. Return every phone call. You’d be amazed at how many contractors don’t do either.”

*– Chris Orser,
Chris Orser Landscape*

Mike also provides each prospect with a list of client properties, and includes a contact name. He encourages prospects to visit properties. “Clients are all willing to talk to prospects about us, because they love what we do.”

Chris says that appearance, which translates into a perception of professionalism, is reflected in every part of your business. “We have very professional-look-

ing invoices,” says Chris. “It’s an extension of our business.” He also sends monthly newsletters as stuffers in the invoices, which discuss weather, provide gardening tips and offer specials for additional services.

Your people represent you

One of the biggest points of distinction for many companies is the people they choose to represent their business. “Employees are the key to the future success of the business,” says Dennis. “If they succeed, then we will succeed.”

Dennis says to hire people with talent, and then train them well and pay them well. “We focus on people who want careers, not jobs. We have employees who have been with us for 10 and 15 years.”

Use your employees’ expertise in your pitch. “We stress the professionalism of our workforce by informing our clients that all our foremen are Certified Landscape Technicians (CLTs) through PLANET,” says David. “We explain what that means, how the program works and what they had to go through to become certified. Certification and continued training make us true professionals.”

Price shoppers vs. value shoppers

Most contractors will say that, for the most part, there are different kinds of customers, and

lowballers tend to work for the “price shoppers” while professional companies tend to work for the “value shopper.” But several have also said that those lowballers can turn a customer’s head with a pretty price—for a while at least.

“Customers are fooled because they are bombarded with an endless variety of products and services,” says Rocco. “Customers end up frustrated and choose based solely on price.”

That’s where you come in, helping the customer understand those choices, and the value to them that comes with each choice. “We show our client that dealing with us offers intangible benefits that make our company a better choice than the competitors,” says Rocco.

What do you do when a client does leave for a more appealing price? Chris might tell you to just hang tight. They’ll be back. “We did lose a client to another company cutting at half price,” says Chris. “But it wasn’t long before the contractor didn’t show up. When the client called them, the telephone number was disconnected. The client came back with their tail between their legs.”

That story brings up a good point. “Part of being a professional is knowing the financial aspects of your company,” says Dennis. “Your balance sheet is a critical snapshot of the business. Know where you

are financially. Lay it all out every month, and for every job.”

When the lowballers are tugging at your business, it may be tempting to try and be a little more price-competitive. Dennis says, though, whatever you do, never lower your price.

“I explain it,” says Dennis. “This is my price. This is why, this is what we are going to do for you. It doesn’t matter what other

melting pot for the ultra-successful,” Corwyn adds. “With this type of customer, they are used to quality and can very easily distinguish between quality and lack thereof. Those accounts have needs that take the lowballers out of the competition.”

“If you rank your clients into an A list, a B list and a C list, I think you’ll find that most customers who leave to hire a lowballer are likely on your C list,” Dennis

“We build on loyalty and customer satisfaction in the resolution of the problem.”

— Rocco Fiore, Rocco Fiore & Sons

people charge. Costs are costs. When you pull up to a job in your truck with a trailer full of equipment, you’re probably looking at a \$60,000 investment. You’d better make sure you can pay for it.”

Still, we can’t deny it. We can’t ignore them (completely). The lowballer enters the field from time to time. But overall, contractors say that they don’t take away a lot of business, and the business they do take may be better suited elsewhere anyway.

“Here in Florida, you can drive down Highway 98 and see a fleet of landscape maintenance companies,” says Richard. “Our philosophy is to let them lowball each other. We steer clear of that battlefield.”

“We are in a resort area that is a

says. “So their leaving is really OK. They are probably folks that don’t want enhancements made to their property, and you’ll probably never evolve them into B clients anyway.

“We just don’t see lowballers as competition,” Dennis continues. “We’re probably not going to work for the people they work for. We have to find the clients that match the services we offer.”

When it comes down to it, landscape contractors who do a good job of selling their value to the right set of customers can’t be bothered by their fly-by-night, low-cost counterparts. They simply don’t have time to—because they’re too busy satisfying their good customers. **PRO**

Marketing Your Business

Marketing Masterpieces

Strong branding, powerful images, compelling web pages and outstanding marketing pieces can make or break that upward sales curve you crave. In today's market, your customers are influenced more than ever by the visual presentation of your mar-

In today's market, your customers are influenced more than ever by the visual presentation of your marketing pieces.

keting pieces. If they are well-designed, they're likely to be read, remembered and respected.

Here are five simple, but essential, tricks of the designer's trade that you can use immediately, at little cost, and with excellent results.

Take advantage of quality clip art and stock photos

You can use clip art—sometimes at a very low price—to enhance your layout. Check out the Internet for sites that feature clip art or stock photo libraries that provide a wide variety of quality and prices to choose from. Use the same style of graphics throughout your piece to create a consistent look.

Add dramatic contrast

Using contrast means having clearly apparent differences

among the design elements that come together on a page, business card or computer screen. These include contrasting colors, shapes, fonts, and sizes of text and graphics. A high degree of contrast helps create dramatic interest and draws the viewer's eye to specific areas of your page. White space also provides contrast, aids legibility, and gives the reader's eye a resting point. Controlling the amount of white space you use affects the overall page design.

Repeat certain elements

Good design calls for repeating certain elements throughout your piece to make the whole piece come together visually. For example, use the same color, shape and size for all your bullets. Also, make all your headers the same size, color and font. Go for more and repeat specific graphic elements (e.g., boxes, banners, rule lines, etc.) throughout the piece. A word of caution: When you review your work, look carefully for any inconsistencies.

Pay attention to proximity

Proximity refers to the exact spatial relationships between elements. For example, you create visual relationships between photos and their captions by keeping

the captions close to the photos. For subheads, a pro positions them closer to the text below than the text above. Apply this principle of exact spatial relationship to all other graphic and text elements where appropriate.

Know when to use serif and sans serif fonts

In general, when you have a large amount of text, it is best to use a serif font because it is easier to read than a sans serif font. Serifs are the tiny horizontal strokes attached to the letters that help the reader's eyes flow from letter to letter. Bold sans serif (without serifs) are good for headlines and subheads because they slow the reader down, thus bringing more attention to each word or concept. Some examples of serif fonts that are good for body copy are Times, New Century Schoolbook, Garamond and Goudy. Some examples of sans serif fonts that are good for headlines are Arial Bold, Helvetica Black, Univers Bold and Trade Gothic. **PRO**

Karen Saunders is the author of the e-book, "Turn Eye Appeal into Buy Appeal: How to easily transform your marketing pieces into dazzling, persuasive sales tools!" available at www.MacGraphics.net. You can phone her at 888-796-7300, or send an e-mail to Karen@macgraphics.net.



*Blake Williamson
Diversified Services
Lawn & Garden
El Dorado, AR*

“What do we do after clearing 330 acres? We start all over again.”

“When we got the contract to maintain one of the largest independent power plants in the world, I went out and got the most powerful and durable equipment on the market. So my guys carry nothing but STIHL trimmers and edgers. This property has it all—storm drains, slopes, ponds and acres of tough vegetation—so the increased

power keeps the crew going 12 hours a day. We cut downtime, too, thanks to increased fuel efficiency and interchangeable parts. I opened my doors with STIHL equipment, now I wouldn't use anything less. I have 330 reasons why.”

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*Kurt and Matt Bland
Bland Landscaping
Apex, NC*

“Our most effective cost-cutting measure was buying 58 new blowers.”

Sometimes you have to spend money to save money. That's what Bland Landscaping did by replacing their entire fleet of blowers with 58 new STIHL BR 550's. "Our philosophy is to always do the right thing," Kurt says, "and that includes environmentally. We heard the fuel efficiency claims of the BR 550 and we ran our own tests. They were 40 percent more efficient than our other machines and we calculated

we'd save enough on gas to pay for the new blowers in less than two years." Fuel efficiency, low emissions – any other benefits, Matt? "The entire line of blowers is really powerful. And, my crews can work longer before refueling. We're doing more work, saving money and we're doing it clean."

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