



## PROFITING FROM DESIGN

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# Never give a client a ballpark number

**Q** We provide our clients with landscape master plans and charge a design fee for our drawings. Our problem is that a lot of times we scare them off and lose the work and the relationship when we give them a price for the entire project. Is there something we should be doing differently?

—Bob Pedatella, Kodiak Landscape, Haskell, NJ

**A** Absolutely! This is a very common problem and one that can easily be rectified by just slightly modifying your design/sales process to make this happen.

Let's walk through the traditional scenario.

You meet with prospects and do a walk through of their property. You've made a list of the things they would like to include in their design and developed what we refer to as a "program." After showing them a sample plan from another project and photos from your portfolio they agree that creating a master plan of their property makes the most sense, and they give you a deposit for the design fee.

With property survey in hand, you create a base map, complete a site analysis of the property and develop a solid concept plan. You have a second meeting with your clients to review the design. So far, so good. As you present the ideas and concepts, based on their program and your site analysis, the prospects begin to envision what the project will look like.

After your 30-60 minute presentation to the clients, the inevitable question comes up. "So what's this going to cost us?" As you squirm and hedge, your clients sense you are becoming uncomfortable and suggests, "Just give us a ballpark. Don't worry, we won't hold you to it."

I have three words to say about that: "Yes, they will." If you don't know it yet, any number discussed with clients is immediately locked into both short-term and long-term memory. What's worse is, they will "hold" you to that number. I guarantee it.

So here's what you must do to avoid this trap.

I call it the 5 D's to a successful sale (design the dream counts as two)

- › **Develop** the program
- › **Determine** the priority
- › **Discuss** the budget
- › **Design** the Dream

Now many of you are thinking that what I have just described is exactly what you do now. I can tell you, openly and honestly, that you don't. Your process might be similar, but there are some nuances that make this process work much better than yours.

Let's walk through our scenario again, but this time using the 5 D's.

Walk the property and *develop the program* as previously outlined and make sure you get a design fee deposit. But before you leave the table and begin your site analysis, make sure you *determine the priority* and *discuss the budget* of the project. In other words, you need to ask, "What are we doing first and how much do you want to spend?"

This allows you to still "*design the dream*" and get them excited about the possibilities. However, instead of getting tripped up and being forced to throw out a ballpark number for the entire master plan, you should only create a proposal for the work that is their first priority and within their predetermined budget. It's a subtle difference, but a brilliant one.

So the next time your clients say, "Wow, we love everything, what's it going to cost?" You can calmly and comfortably reply, "I'm really not sure, but here is a proposal for phase 1 that fits your budget perfectly. Why don't we start with this?" Not only will you sell and upsell more, the time that you spend on estimating will be cut in half, if not more.

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**Profiting from Design** is a quarterly column from award winning landscape designer, consultant and former design/build contractor Jody Shilan. Shilan is also the President of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association. If you have a question you would like answered in Profiting From Design, please contact Shilan at jshilan@gmail.com.