

Win over the wealthy

Understanding the mindset of the prosperous can be the key to effectively serving the top-tier clients.

BY HEATHER TAYLOR

The recently made popular phrase “one-percenters” comes with the implication that the most affluent Americans and their lifestyles are worlds apart from most other Americans. Does the same philosophy apply to their service expectations?

While lawn care and landscaping clients with home values passing the million-dollar mark might have more zeroes at the end of their maintenance or construction contracts than those with more modest homes, does that make them a different breed of customer?

Even the contractors who serve the upper echelon say the champagne and caviar set wasn't insulated from the past few years' economic downturn, which makes it even more important to try to make efforts to cultivate business as much as possible.

Some lawn care and landscaping company principals have set their focus on satisfying what they say are higher expectations of their more high-end clients. Other contractors are of the mindset that the most effective way to serve the client base is to employ the same principles that would be put into

play when serving any other client. Either way, there are tune-ups that can help make sure customer service is fit for royalty.

Constant contact is key

Naturally, customers want to be kept in the loop about ongoing projects or upcoming maintenance. Some contractors take it a step further. This rings true even more for high-end clients who spend tens of thousands of dollars

on large projects or yearly contracts.

Glenn Bonick, founder of Bonick Landscaping in Dallas, TX, makes sure his crews keep the



Glenn Bonick
Bonick Landscaping

clients updated daily or weekly — either in person or via e-mail — when they're working on a big maintenance project.

“As long as we set expectations correctly, there's less of a chance for miscommunication,” he says. Green Acres Landscape & Design in Monroe, CT, keeps lines of communication open with its clients, even when

there are no upcoming appointments.

“(Wealthier clients) expect more communication and a higher level of attention,” says Craig Kopfmann, president of Green Acres. “They also expect to hear from you whether or not service is scheduled. They like a phone call just to check in. We ask if they're happy with everything and if they have any additional needs.”

It's not just phone communications. Kopfmann hired a property care manager to make face-to-face interaction more frequent. The company targets some of the more well-to-do clients for monthly visits.

“We found that it's beneficial having someone who can stop by and knock on the door to check in and make sure all their needs are being met,” Kopfmann explains.

Green Acres also sends a periodic e-mail newsletter to keep clients informed and promote upsell items such as seasonal color.



Craig Kopfmann
Green Acres



Affluent customers know referrals are the highest compliment they can give a company.



Go to the source

Understanding the customer's background and mindset can go a long way toward ensuring their satisfaction. Wealthy customers in Jay Townsend's home turf of Charlottesville, VA, haven't necessarily been born into the opulent lifestyle, he says. Many of the higher-end clients in have made a comfortable living by being busy professionals.

"Affluent customers may have higher expectations, less time and expect a higher level of service; in fact, that is true," says Townsend, president of J.W. Townsend, adding, "Remember, our products and services are largely purchased out of disposable income. Our products are not a necessity."

The fact that this customer set has more disposable income than less wealthy clients seems to have an impact on what attracts them to a company. Contractors find it's less effective to advertise low prices than it is to showcase quality work.

Bonick Landscaping places ads in local high-end publications with the purpose of branding and keeping the

company top-of-mind with customers and prospects. The ads aren't meant to present a call to action so much as they are designed to inspire clients and to promote the brand.

Ads and other forms of marketing aren't nearly as effective as word-of-mouth referrals, Bonick adds.

"Our customers know referrals are the greatest compliment they can give us and we appreciate them," he says. "We're never too busy for work."

Several companies also build brand awareness by participating in the same community and charity events as their clients or donating to their clients' causes.

It pays to be well connected

Becoming the preferred landscape or maintenance provider of the well-to-do can often mean going beyond the usual mowing and hardscaping jobs. Several firms have developed additional specialties or skills that help them stand out.

"Our reputation for doing quality work and being able to help solve the many permitting issues related to working along the water have helped us separate ourselves from the competition," says Michael Prokopchak, president of Annapolis, MD-based Walnut Hill Landscape Company.

If there's a task that's out of Green Acres' realm of services, Kopfmann

makes sure his crews are prepared with recommendations on service providers that can tackle the job, such as electricians, plumbers and firewood providers. It's not uncommon for clients to turn to them with such requests, he adds.

To help them and make informed recommendations, it's good to foster relationships with other local businesses.

It can also work the other way, when clients ask their builder, for example, for recommendations for a good landscape contractor.

Many contractors work to make sure they're the first company that's mentioned upon inquiry. "I throw a happy hour every year at



Jay Townsend
J.W. Townsend



Michael Prokopchak
Walnut Hill
Landscape Company



Personal attention and proper communication are key to keeping affluent customers happy.

Christmas for a custom builder, architecture firm and landscape architecture firm that provides us with the opportunity to work with their affluent clients,” Prokopchak says. “We work very well with these groups and they are always opening the doors to opportunities that may not exist without the personal relationship we have with them.”



cially the affluent, don’t want to spend time taking care of their gardens.”

A Green Acres company attribute that clients appreciate — although it can be a pain — is the willingness to take on a job at short notice.

“When the client is having an event, whether family is coming in or they’re hosting a charity event, if they have a request that’s over and above normal service, we bend over backwards for them — even if it’s only a 24-hour notice,” Kopfmann says. “It’s something we see pretty regularly when it comes to clients entertaining at their homes.

them respect, with the way our contractors handle themselves on the property and we also communicate with them — we show that we care about them and their project.”

But whether a client’s home is worth \$100,000 or \$1 million, it’s wise to be respectful all the same, Townsend says.

“We treat all customers this way, not just the affluent; remember that many customers are not born into affluence,” he says.

In fact, he adds, lower end clients could end up being more valuable to contractors than they realize.

“As long as we set expectations correctly, there’s less of a chance for miscommunication.” – GLENN BONNICK

The little things

Smaller details can have a huge impact when it comes to retaining upscale clients. To begin with, they seem to require help more so than other clients, Kopfmann says.

Walnut Hill offers additional help by proposing additional maintenance services after the landscaping is installed. The additional services answer the client’s need for help while keeping the company’s name on the tip of the clients’ tongues.

“I basically tell the client we will handle everything on the outside of their house so they can enjoy the spaces we have created without lifting a finger, Prokopchak explains. “This has been very beneficial to us as our clients, espe-

They expect you to get things done within a timeframe.”

The company has found success with other small gestures as well. Its monthly face-to-face communication program includes periodically delivering unique gifts to clients, such as tree saplings or vegetables from a local organic farm.

Respect the money

Contractors should remember to appreciate the chunk of disposable income that clients entrust to you, Bonick, says. This is especially true with larger projects.

“When people spend money with us, we have to respect the fact that they’re spending money,” he says. “We show



“We believe that every client is a source for the next client and that non-affluent customers can become affluent (i.e. even better future customers).” **\$\$**

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