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Ask 'em what they think

How would a weekend at the Chicago Ritz Carlton sound to you? Would you treat yourself to a great meal? Check out a blues club? Take in an afternoon Cubs game at Wrigley? I can think of about two dozen things to do in Chicago on a weekend, particularly if somebody else is picking up the tab.

Robert Kinnucan is president of Kinnucan Total Landscape Management. I sat with him and several other landscape pros at an ALCA round table this past November.

Robert’s company, based in Lake Bluff, IL, competes in the take-no-prisoners Chicagoland market. Some of the biggest and toughest regional operations in the nation duke it out there. Thousands of smaller operators growl over pieces of the market the big guys don’t snap up.

If you want to be in the landscape business (and stay in business) in this market, you can’t afford to be timid. And Kinnucan’s firm is not timid.

Give to receive

Several seasons ago, it put up the money for the Ritz Carlton weekend and offered the promotion in a survey to homeowners in several upscale neighborhoods it wanted to penetrate. The Ritz Carlton agreed to a special rate, realizing it would reap some positive publicity in those neighborhoods. The response from potential clients was great, says Robert.

Even though that was a one-shot deal, Kinnucan preaches the value of ongoing customer contact. He regularly mails clients a one-page survey folded in thirds that they can complete and return within 30 seconds. Respondents are eligible to win $100 in free services from his company. Drawings are held quarterly.

The mailer’s purpose is to measure client satisfaction. If there’s a problem with his firm’s services, it will show up on the survey and his managers can take action.

Kinnucan says the surveys keep his company’s name and services in front of customers’ eyes, serving as another form of advertising, subtle but effective.

But even the lure of winning a valuable prize sometimes can’t generate the kind of response, at least not quickly enough, that Kinnucan sometimes feels he needs to keep his operation on track. “Often you get a delayed bounce on these surveys,” he says.

Then it’s time to call or meet with customers personally and find out what they think about your services and, perhaps, find out what else you can do for them.

Nobody in this business can afford to offer an expenses-paid weekend or $100 in free work to a client every time you contact them. But almost all customers will appreciate that you’ve asked them what they think anyway.

Take this opportunity to thank clients for allowing you to serve them, too. Your brief and simple customer satisfaction surveys probably pack a lot more goodwill than you think.

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Brief and simple customer satisfaction surveys probably pack a lot more goodwill than you think.
Help! Manager is in a funk

Everybody, including great performers like Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, suffers the occasional slump.

Those of us in the landscape and lawn industry are far from immune. Our business is intensely competitive, the work can be physically and emotionally demanding, and sometimes the days and weeks never seem to end. It's understandable why some of our most proficient managers or top-producing employees sometimes lose focus.

"Ouch! This scenario sounds similar to situations that we have encountered," says K. Biene Schaefer, Landscapes By Atlantic Nurseries, Long Island, NY. "Our biggest error was avoidance. We didn't know if the employee perceived the company to be the root of their situation or if it stemmed from elsewhere."

She advises to come right out and find out what's bothering the employee. "Ask the question and be prepared for a tough answer or criticism. Then we can tackle the problem and perhaps arrive at a win/win situation.

"Or, we may be able to extend a helping hand. In either case, the outcome will be better than if we avoid the situation. We don't have to play therapist, but we should provide a listening ear. We don't have to fix their personal problem, but we may be able to do a bit of legwork and come up with outside resources for the employee," says Schaefer.

Experienced landscape company owners are on the lookout for struggling employees, and try to get them out of the slump before their behavior affects co-workers and the organization. Or, threatens their own careers.

Steve Corrigan, Mountain View Landscape, Chicopee, MA, favors having a "heart-to-heart" with an employee whose performance suddenly sags.

"I ask the employee, 'what's happening? We have customers and team members that aren't happy with your attitude and performance. Is there something wrong at work or at home? Is there something that we can do?'

"The team member will usually start to tell you the problems and issues that are causing this unacceptable behavior and performance. That's when we must listen!"

Corrigan says that after he and the employee talk over the points that have been discussed, they'll lay out a path to get the employee functioning as a valuable team member again. After that, it's up to the employee.

Some problems are beyond a business owner's control. "Family issues are tough," admits Corrigan. But if the employee is suffering burnout, the solution might be as simple as some time off. "Work will be there tomorrow," he says.