Eight straight months of hand-weeding around the clock can take its toll on the average Worker.
ties. For instance:

• The leading commercial landscape contractor
• The leading residential landscape contractor
• The leading locally owned lawn care provider
• The leading multi-family or homeowner association maintenance contractor
• The leading outdoor lighting contractor
• The leading irrigation contractor

Key #7. Define your leadership niche and build your credentials around it. Use the power of your credibility to increase sales and strengthen your claims regarding product benefits.

Where quality fits in
I’m a big proponent of high quality. And I truly hate shabby products and poor service. But when it comes to building your brand, quality alone won’t do it. What’s needed is the perception of quality. In a ranking of 16 small cars, the top-quality car was 12th in sales and the second-highest quality ranking came in 9th in sales. There may be objective ways to test the true relative value of two landscape or lawn care firms, but customers don’t conduct these tests when making a decision. They go with their perceptions.

Three things create the perception of quality that leads to increased sales:

• Positioning your company as a specialist organization rather than a do-anything outfit
• The power and memorability of your name
• Higher prices

Contracting your vision and your company’s scope may fly in the face of what’s actually taking place in the Green Industry, but it does help create the perception of being a specialist. And specialists charge more, right?

You should build as much quality into your product or service as you can afford, but don’t count on quality alone to build your brand.

Key #8. Narrowing your focus and charging higher prices strengthens and builds your brand.

Why competition is good
Many business owners dream of having a huge, unfair advantage in their market. Or, better yet, being the only game in town. But for building your brand, competition’s good.

When customers have choices, demand tends to increase. Competition keeps customers from becoming suspicious of price or quality. If there’s nothing to check you against, the customer has no yardstick for measuring the value of what you’re offering. On the flip side, when there are too many players, customers tend to get confused and demand may drop. But in the Green Industry, this doesn’t tend to happen because of the way estimates and proposals are given. Customers may call three contractors for prices, which gives them a manageable selection from which to choose.

If you’ve used all of the keys we’ve provided and built your brand into a high-quality name, you’ll tend to come out ahead of the competition anyway.

Key #9. Welcome competition. It drives up demand. And maintain and build your leadership position by not just talking up your company and products but promoting the whole category’s value, whether it’s landscaping, lawn care or maintenance.

Key #10. Get help, at least in laying out your blueprint for brand building. You may want to bring someone with publicity and media experience on staff, or hire a freelancer or professional marketing firm to manage part or all of the process.

— The author started Focal Point Communications in Cincinnati, OH, in 1987 and opened a LA office in 2001. The Focal Point staff specializes in the creation of company identity, print marketing and public relations programs for Green Industry companies. Contact him at 800/525-6999 or mshooner@growpro.com

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Easy-to-use fire ant control for hard-to-reach areas. Featuring the powerful active ingredient fipronil, FireStar delivers a unique, low-dose, granular bait to landscape beds, sign bases and trees to control fire ants for 12 to 16 weeks. Works great with TopChoice and can be used in areas adjacent to water.
Even if you’ve been a lawn care professional for a long time and have spent years streamlining procedures, it seems like you still have to frequently go out do the same work twice no matter what. Weeds, of course, can be stubborn.

Unfortunately, repeat service calls are part of the business. But there are some simple things you can do to reduce callbacks, which will lessen your labor costs and enhance your bottom line.

Communication 101
Callbacks happen when a customer feels that a service provider hasn’t done an adequate job. More often than not, the customer’s unrealistic expectations due to a lack of knowledge are at the core of the problem.

“The principal cause of callbacks is the difference between perception and reality,” says Tom Speirs, President of Agro-Lawn Systems, Inc., Vienna, VA. “You have to understand the process of weed development and weed control throughout the different seasons. The problem is, the customer doesn’t understand. He has the perception, ‘Hey, I’m paying for weed control... why do I still have weeds?’”

Ideally, both the service provider and the customer would make time to discuss the realities in advance. But it’s not always that simple in the real world.

“The key is communication at the point of sale so that customers will start out with more realistic expectations due to a lack of knowledge are at the core of the problem. The calls move along more quickly — the staff is overloaded, running down leads, giving estimates, and there’s not enough time to offer customers enough education.

“On the other hand, people hear what they want to,” Speirs points out. “They just want to know how much it’s going to cost and whether you can take care of their problems. So, oftentimes, the reality is that you have to educate as you go.”

Application efficiency
Although customers can sometimes misperceive the situation, they can also be correct. Mistakes happen. The best way to avoid them is to recruit the best people for the job.

“One of the root causes of callbacks is the individual making the application,” says Todd Graus. “If we don’t hire people who take pride in what they’re doing, the chance for misapplication increases.”

Graus, President of Green Turf Landscapes, Worland, WY, stresses the importance of screening job applicants and offering ongoing training to ensure happy customers.

“When they first come in the door, we
Callbacks: main causes and remedies

- Unrealistic customer expectations — Often, a client doesn’t understand what’s involved in weed control. Communication is key. Explain the service you intend to provide and what to expect, including that you’ll address each problem promptly as it appears.

- Inadequately trained crews — State certification is only the beginning; people require ongoing training to do their jobs well. Check their work often and point out areas where they may be falling into a pattern. It’s human nature to develop habits, but you can help your crews stay alert with positive, regular reviews of their work.

- Product selection — Keep apprised of new chemicals, and be open to changing the products you use when something better comes on the market. A small investment in enhanced products could result in big labor savings from reduced callbacks.

- Things you can’t predict — Weather changes, what the customer does when you aren’t there (such as watering and mowing), and indigenous factors (earthworms, etc.) are just some of the things you can’t control. Again, the key is customer education and prompt response when an uncontrollable factor comes into play.

“Get right on it, and build the cost of callbacks into your pricing. Whether it’s misapplication, weather, customer ignorance, or whatever, you’re going to have to contend with callbacks.”

— Tom Speirs

prefer to hire people who are already certified by the state,” Graus says. “We do regular training and provide financial incentives for them to improve their skills, with raises tied to education. If they want to make money, they’ll come up to speed as fast as they can.”

Understanding products and procedures, weather conditions, the status of the current plant pallet, and how to handle contingencies — if a mowing crew arrives right after an application has been put down, for example — are all part of the ongoing training for Graus’s crews.

He also suggests setting up a system to monitor the amount of product use to better ensure proper application.

“One thing we do is compile production reports at the end of the day telling us whether we’re over or under on the amount of herbicide we should have used,” Graus says. “It gets us more in tune with what we’re actually doing and sets up an environment of accountability. The more that we understand our operation, the less callbacks we have.”

Along with keeping track of usage, applying the best products to get the job done is also a prime consideration. Kevin Johnson, President of All-American Turf Beauty, Van Meter, IA, recommends keeping up on new product development.

“Part of our strategy for reducing callbacks is using newer products or better products that may cost more initially but achieve better control,” says Johnson. “It’s less costly to spend a little more up front for the better products if necessary than to cover the labor costs of having to go back.

“It’s trying to solve the problem before you have it. Everybody’s got their own standard products, but sometimes they may not give the best control on some of the things that cause callbacks.”

Even if you’ve streamlined your customer communication skills, trained your crews to peak efficiency, deployed top-of-the-line products, and closely monitored usage levels, you’re still going to have callbacks. Why? Because you can’t control Mother Nature.

“You can’t do everything under ideal circumstances. You’ve got production de-
mands that have to be satisfied," says Spiers. "Say the forecast is for rain. But the reality is, half the time they're calling for rain, it doesn't. So you go out and do the job and, 20 minutes later, the skies open up and negate the herbicide application. The point is that we understand that there are some circumstances under which we might not be successful, and those would require some follow-up work."

Kevin Johnson agrees. He advises his customers that, in the event of rain, another treatment will be applied in a certain time frame — usually about two weeks. "Again, it's about keeping very good lines of communication open," Johnson says.

There's no single "best" method for handling callbacks. But one thing that all companies should have is a contingency plan to let the customer know right away that they'll be taken care of.

Handling customer complaints is a delicate business, especially because people tend to be irate when they call. Tim Doppel, President of Atwood Lawncare, Sterling Heights, MI, recommends an effective approach that remedies the problem quickly and eliminates the customer's irritation. "A timely response is vital," says Doppel. "Our experience is that when a customer calls in a complaint, they're typically going to be very rude and angry on the phone — especially if they're a new customer, because they assume that they're not going to get service unless they rant and rave. The important thing is to be very accommodating, listen and write down what they're saying."

If you do get a callback, the best thing you can do is put yourself in the customer's position. How would you want it handled if the roles were reversed? "We try to perform our services in the same manner we'd like to receive them if we were the paying customers," says Johnson. "If I were the customer calling in a complaint, I'd want someone to follow up right away and follow through."

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