

COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS

Kathy Copley
Editor, Grounds Maintenance
Overland Park, KS

The kind of communication we're going to be talking about this morning is primarily your communication with your prime customers. If you're in residential as well as commercial lawn service, then your typical customer has been outlined by Mobay Chemical, who did a survey about four years ago. They say the typical lawn care customer is a two-income family with income of \$30,000 or higher. The family adults are 30 years old or older. They live in a single family house in the suburbs, and the house is valued at more than \$50,000. In 52% of the households the lawn care decision-maker is the woman, and the more affluent the household, the more probability there is that the woman is the decision-maker.

As an aside, 8 out of 10 of your customers are probably satisfied with your service. One out of 10 probably says it's too soon to tell whether your service is doing what they expected it to do, and one in 10 is dissatisfied. The typical residential customer has chosen a lawn service because of convenience, because of neighborhood peer pressure and concern about chemical safety. As we all know, that's becoming an increasingly important area in which you have to effectively communicate with your customers.

Two-thirds of you use direct mail as one of your advertising methods. And for many of your customers, both residential and commercial, your direct mail piece will be the first introduction they have to your company.

People who disparage direct mail call it junk mail, but in actuality most of your customers don't think of it as junk mail. Simmons Market Research Bureau found that only 3% of the recipients throw direct mail pieces away without opening them at all. Thirty percent are somewhat selective and open some of them and 67% open all the pieces they get. Although 42% want less than they're getting, 53% figure they're getting about the right amount of direct mail.

Printed Communications

Customers have a number of other printed opportunities to become acquainted with the quality of your company. They're going to develop an image of how professional you are based on your printed materials even before they have an opportunity to meet you or any of your employees. They're going to have a chance to see things like your business stationery, your business cards (and each employee who is responsible for greeting the public should have one), your Yellow Pages ad and your door hangers. Your business image will be enhanced if you have a business address rather than a post office box, and if you have real people answering the phone rather than the answering machine.

It wasn't too long ago that the lawn servicing business and the entrepreneurs in the business were so young that it wasn't unusual to hear babies crying in the back of a telephone conversation with the lawn service.

Increasingly, how your personnel present themselves and how they look on the customer's site is an important influence on your overall image. How does your truck look when it's parked in my driveway? How do your people look when they are spraying my lawn while my neighbors are having a family picnic? Clean cut employees in uniforms and vehicles that are clean and clearly signed are an important part of this image-building activity. Boyco is a company in North Carolina that puts the same logo on its trucks, its equipment and its people.

I don't think enough of you take advantage of the great PR opportunity offered by a "thanks for your business" card or a holiday greeting card. This one is especially unique because there are small tabs underneath the star and the bill of the dove. You slip your business card under the tabs. If your card were to change or if you had several businesses, you could have this same general greeting card and slip the appropriate business card in place. It also gives an opportunity so that the sales person who calls on a particular site has a chance for his card to be the one that goes to that site.

Community involvement is another way to enhance your image as a professional. It can be something as obvious as having a booth at a local garden show or being a member of the local Kiwanis and real estate organizations so that you have an opportunity to speak to them. You could make donations to telethons, write a local gardening column or perhaps host a radio show. You can participate with the Welcome Wagon. You could sponsor a lawn care hot line in your community to which customers and non-customers could call for gardening answers, or even something even as off-base as sponsoring an athletic team. All of those are opportunities to remind the members of the community that you're there 365 days of the year. You're not just there when you're trying to sell them lawn care services.

Are You Selling Perfection

Many of the problems that arise between you and your customers arise from the fact that they think what you're selling them is perfection, and you know that this whole thing is a cooperative effort between you, them and Mother Nature. Unfortunately, too frequently your promotional pieces create the impression that you are selling them lush and effortless green. Advertising copy like the three examples I am about to show you are the kind that tend to create an unrealistic expectation on your customers' part. "Let us give your lawn the lush look of a golf course." I take pretty good care of my lawn but I'm a long way from "lush golf course." Finally the lawn you have always wanted." No--"closer than I used to be to the lawn I've always wanted." And last "Perfect partners--Grass Roots Lawn Care and You." These are the kind of promotional pieces that can set you up to fail to meet your customers' expectations.

A more effective approach uses advertising pieces that include words that create the appropriate level of expectations, like this piece that uses words like "sensible" and "down-to-earth." Other companies have found a good method to be that they offer more than one level of care. This company offers something called Pro Care, and if you were able to read the description you'd see that it is really a very effective lawn care program. But if you have a customer whose expectations are higher and who is willing

to pay more, you might put them on the program called Yearly Putter's Green, which has increased application of additional chemicals and also offers additional services at no extra charge beyond the basics for Yearly Putter's Green. Another company hasn't put quite so much effort into naming its programs--Plan A, B, and C--but notice that Plan A is two visits annually, and Plan D is five. This gives you the opportunity to more or less custom-tailor a lawn care program to the quality of the site and the quality of the customer. Carrying this idea of truth in advertising a step further, you're going to find you communicate more effectively with your customer if you explain up front that he's going to have some obligations as well as you do. Notice that this piece spells that out directly--"Here's what you do."

Your Employees

Your employees and your switchboard operator are your closest two links with the customer. We're going to be talking about the switchboard in a minute. Right now, we're going to concentrate on that technician who has the most direct contact with the customer. With this in mind it's easy to see how important good hiring practices are. Do you hire people on the basis that they have the attitude and the ability to work with your customers? Do you select them on the basis of them being people who take pride in their appearance and their behavior? And then, do you train them in the skills of public relations?

Based on some surveys we've done, we've learned that your typical applicator or summer employee is 23 years old, single, and has a high school education or possibly one year of college. He has a very positive attitude, loves the outdoors, is an independent worker, is spontaneous and playful. He's active in sports and has high energy and enthusiasm. All of these qualities are terrific. On the reverse side, he's not very good at handling the unexpected. He's not very good at paper work or on the phone because he doesn't communicate really effectively with adults. He'll ring doorbells because you tell him he has to, but he hopes the customer won't be at home.

One of the ways to minimize this problem is to do some role playing so that your young applicators learn how to handle difficult situations before the job, not on the job. Additionally, your field technicians are the people most likely to get complaints so you need employees with knowledge of the products and equipment that you use. They need good personalities so that they are tolerant and patient. They need good business skills and organizational skills, especially, so that they will properly report to you any particular problem and their assessment of it. And they need good people skills so that they can handle emotional, picky and negative individuals.

One of the best ways you can know whether your employees do have these skills with customers is to use a management technique called MBWA--Management By Walking Around. Take some time to travel with your employees, especially at the beginning of the season, so you can assess how they do and perhaps strengthen your training program with their weaknesses in mind.

Your employees are going to play a significant role in informing your customer about good agronomic principles, about why your company has chosen certain chemicals and certain techniques.

You have another opportunity to inform your customers by using customer information pieces that are developed for you or that you develop yourself. If you are not in a position to write your own customer service literature, you can develop it in conjunction with magazines like Grounds Maintenance and Lawn Servicing. You can use materials produced by, or adapt materials produced by, your local cooperative extension service, or you can rely on materials provided by the associations to which you belong (like PLCAA). You can use materials produced by companies serving your industry like this piece from P.B.I.Gordon. Dow and Mobay have similar pieces. Commercial companies produce and personalize customer information literature. This one is from Green-Pro Cooperative Services in Hempstead, New York. Not only will they personalize it to your company, but they have a more or less standard newsletter that's appropriate to various parts of the country. None of this is meant to indicate that you can't produce good and high-quality pieces on your own. I find this one from the Puget Sound area of Washington to be especially interesting because that little piece of pink ribbon announces their crane fly prevention program. The day you find the pink ribbon tied around your doorknob, you know they've treated your site for crane flies.

Telemarketing

An increasing number of you are using telemarketing to supplement your direct mail campaign and your other advertising programs. This technique has the advantage of being much more personal than any printed literature you can mail, but it has a disadvantage in the fact that it lulls you into thinking that you're having personal communication with someone. Because you're losing a lot of the opportunity to read facial gesture and body language, you need to make a special effort to make certain the people who are doing the telephone contacting are appropriately reading their subjects.

I told you earlier about Simmons Market Research and how people responded to direct mail. They did a similar survey to find out how people responded to telemarketing and 7% hang up on all calls, 42% listen to some and 51% of the people listen to all calls. But in terms of how much they would like to receive, only 2% of the people said they want more calls than they get, 24% think they get about the right amount, and 74% of the people who receive telemarketing calls wish they got fewer of them. That should tell you something about the degree to which this is a good technique to be using. Nonetheless, if you are using it, you need to be using it most effectively so that you win more friends than you lose.

The people doing the telemarketing should give themselves a little practice with a tape recorder before they make their first call to get a better idea of how their voice sounds, how clearly they enunciate, whether they're speaking at about the right pace, etc. Secondly, they should know that people buy benefits; they don't buy features or products or services. In the lawn care industry people don't buy fertilizer, they buy green. The telemarketer should be knowledgeable about you and your products and services, but he should also be knowledgeable about the prospective client

so that he can match the benefits of your activity to the needs of the client. The first 30 seconds of the phone call are crucial because it's here that you're able or not able to capture the interest and attention of the client. The telemarketer needs to listen very carefully for voiced and unvoiced objections to accepting your service or products. And he should understand that an objection is not the same as a rejection.

The telephone is an important tool through which you're going to hear from your customers. Unfortunately, likely as not, when you hear from them by telephone they're going to be calling you about a problem. None of us likes to get complaints, but to a business person the cost of not getting complaints can be a good deal higher than the cost of getting them.

Complaints

According to Customer Service Newsletter, 24 out of 25 dissatisfied customers don't complain to you. At least 6 of those 24 have a serious problem, however, in their relations with your company. Instead of telling you, the person with the complaint will tell an average of 11 other people. If you had 5 complaints this week, think of how many people are actually dissatisfied--120. How many people are they telling about your poor service or your rude employees?--1,320. Can you afford that? On the other hand, resolving customer complaints will win back up to 70% of the complainers. And prompt resolution will increase that to about 95%--all of which should indicate that you shouldn't wait to handle the problem until after the customer has worn you down. If he feels that he has beaten you, you lost even though you gave him what you wanted.

What customers complain about has changed somewhat in the last ten years. In 1970 more people complained about price than complain about price today, but today more people complain about the quality of service, the potential danger of the products and failure of the manufacturer or service organization to handle complaints promptly and properly.

It would seem legitimate to ask why customers with complaints aren't bringing them to your attention. They have three basic reasons. They think that no one cares. They don't think you'll follow through with your agreement even if you hear them out. And they don't know who to complain to. There is a lawn and garden center on the West Coast that has solved that particular problem by putting a sign on its exit doors--"Are you dissatisfied? Ask for Phoebe." There isn't anyone on the staff named Phoebe. When someone asks for her, the staff member says, "Phoebe isn't here right now, but I'd be happy to help you with your concern." What this accomplishes is that this customer with a problem doesn't leave the business site dissatisfied. The customer has no reason to tell 11 other people that your service was inferior or your products unsuitable.

A survey has been done on why customers don't return to a particular place of business and, although you may not have a place of business per se, I think you'll see that the concept is a valid one. 68% didn't return to a particular lawn and garden center because of discourteous treatment, 14% because their complaints weren't adjusted, and--in distant third place--a lower price elsewhere. In this survey 82% of the people didn't return based on a reason that you as an employer have some definite control over.

One of the things you can do is log all complaints for service calls, call backs, etc. Then you can track any patterns that involve particular services you offer--as a matter of fact weed control is the number one lawn care complaint. Those complaints could also center around your employees or perhaps your products. A company with which I'm acquainted found that complaints peaked shortly after their college student crew joined them in the spring. Primarily this was because the students weren't accustomed to dealing with the public, so the company instituted a one-day paid seminar on standards of behavior in handling customers--before the job training rather than on-the-job training.

At no point do I want to create the impression that every customer is a good customer. In fact there are customers that you would rather not have. This story out of another industry will illustrate a customer you wouldn't want to have. A fellow bought a new Lincoln from the Lincoln-Mercury dealership in Dallas and he had some minor problems with it. When he took it in to the dealership, the service manager said he couldn't get to it for four days but that these problems wouldn't get worse and they were no influence on the car or its safety. The man was really mad and the service manager couldn't do anything to calm him down. The new vehicle owner hopped in his care and sped out of the dealership as fast as he could--running over one of the dealership employees in the process. This is a person you'd rather have buy a Cadillac.

You probably remember the three ways a conflict can turn out from your days of Psychology 101. They are win/lose, lose/lose/ and win/win. In win/lose somebody is satisfied with the outcome. The customer may get what he wants and you may have given more than you wanted, or the reverse. In lose/lose nobody is happy. The only good way to end a confrontation is win/win--when both of you have given the other enough to feel satisfied with the outcome.

When the time comes to get rid of a customer, how do you do it? Twenty-five percent of you do it in person; 43% of you are not quite so brave and you do it by phone; 9% do it by form letter, 7% by personal phone call; and the least brave of you--33%--just don't renew the contract. Most of you do agree, however, that you don't terminate a customer until you've done everything reasonable to make that customer happy. That way at least you leave with a clear conscience.

Despite your best efforts at creating realistic expectations, offering good services at a good price, and training your employees in agronomic techniques, application techniques and customer handling, you hear your phone ringing and you soon find yourself ear-to-ear with a disgruntled customer. Research tells us that you have about 30 seconds in which to establish that you're interested in resolving the problem and that you know how to do so. First, you need to make it easy to complain. Do you have a customer service division or a customer service plan? What money and management resources have you allocated to the resolution of complaints that are real or imagined? Do you have a customer hotline or enough regular phone lines that customers won't be greeted by a constantly busy number? If he leaves his problem on a recorder, be certain that you get back to him the same day.

Secondly, listen to his grievances. The first three minutes can make or break the situation so you don't want to interrupt. You should take notes and review your notes with the customer to show him that you thoroughly understand.

Third, put yourself in his shoes. The caller is irritated and often what he wants more than anything else is sympathy. Use nurturing words like "I can understand your concern," but realize that sympathizing with the problem isn't the same as admitting responsibility.

Fourth, ask him what he wants you to do to rectify the situation. Sometimes he'll expect less than you expected you'd have to offer. At least you'll know what he expects and whether the solution you intend to propose is likely to satisfy him.

Fifth, tell him exactly what you intend to do. The caller wants commitment. Maybe you can't decide on the spot what you're going to do, so you can say, "I'm going to tell my supervisor" or "I'm going to visit the site personally." Give the customer a time limit. Forty-eight hours is common for a return call or a personal visit. Never tell the customer to call someone else. If in fact the customer needs to report the problem to someone else, have that someone call the customer.

And last, follow up on the complaint. Whether or not you call or visit, plan to follow up with a letter. Ask the customer whether the situation was resolved to his satisfaction. At this point over-extending yourself is good customer relations. It sort of goes along with the Murphy's Law--Some is good. More is better. Too much is just right.

What we've been talking about is called the Customer Service Loop. You ask questions. You listen to the answers. You probe for additional information. And then you resolve the problem.

Body Language, Etc

We've been talking about what you do. How you do it is equally important. Here are some good ways to present yourself in what could be a confrontational situation. First, establish in the first three minutes that you intend to be helpful. Never point out the customer's errors. It will put him on his defensive and make it hard to establish rapport. Try to avoid the word "you", which puts the customer more on the defensive. If possible, use his name. Realize that at first, while he's angry with you, he might not level with you. You have to give him a chance to calm down before you get the truth. Use gentle gestures. Pointing your finger at the customer is an aggressive gesture. Folding your arms is an indication of resistance. Use good eye contact. People telling us the truth look us in the eye. Be aware that your dress and general appearance are important in establishing your credentials as an expert. We tend to get less angry at well-groomed people, and better-groomed representatives tend to be more believable. Consider the man dressed in a business suit versus the Bowry bum. This is not the time that you should run down your company. Short term it may calm him down if you say, "You know, it's almost impossible to hire good technicians." But the long term effect is that you destroy confidence in you and your company. And lastly, use common sense, and

assume that the people you are dealing with possess a good deal of it themselves.

Not Everyone Is Rational

I've been creating the impression that all customers are rational, reasonable and calm people, which of course they aren't. Sometimes they're verbally abusive or physically threatening. The best advice I can give you is to find a polite and speedy way to get out of a situation. On the phone, you could say something like this. "Its clear that we aren't going to be able to resolve this problem right now. Let me call you between four and five o'clock tomorrow at the number you gave me, and I'll have more information then. Possibly we'll be more able to resolve the problem. I'm going to hang up now but we'll talk again tomorrow." Click. Notice you don't slam the phone down. Similar phrasing is suitable in a face-to-face situation, although it may not be as easy to carry off. If you have your own vehicle, get in it and leave.

We would all be kidding ourselves if we believe that every complaint can be handled to the customer's satisfaction and yours. Some of those complaints are going to result in cancellations. A year or so ago when I cancelled my lawn care contract with a large national company, I received this letter. "We realize we may have made a mistake." The letter stresses that they want a second chance to prove that they are dedicated to serving their customers. It included two options I could check--to resume my program or they should call me to talk. One side was a self-mailer. The closing emphasized the tone--"Looking forward to a new relationship," it said. Now, I'm just cynical enough to think of it this way--did they have so many cancellations that they need a form letter?

I think the story I'm about to tell you is true because the person who told me wouldn't have told me otherwise. It's about a salesman who generally stayed at a particular motel that was part of a national chain. It had the right amenities at the right price and he just generally liked the particular company. On the occasion that I'm about to describe, he was most disappointed to discover his room had bugs in it. The chain had a good reputation, so he wrote to the local manager to bring the bug problem to his attention. He received a letter in reply which said such things as "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I assure you this is a problem of which we had been completely unaware. Our housekeeping staff prides itself on clean rooms and it will take whatever steps necessary..." The tone of concern was tempered by the note from the manager to his secretary that, unfortunately, was still attached to the letter. The note said, "Send this guy the bug letter."

Communication In A Nutshell

From my point of view, which is more as a customer than as a businessperson, the problem is frequently one of communication. Communication will be improved

- * if you educate your customer about your services and your policies
- * if you create realistic expectations and

* if you support your customer. When problems develop the customer has to know that he can call you, that you're going to listen to his problem, and that you will take action.

For better or worse, every contact you have with the customer is a form of communication. From whether the truck is clean and the technician is in uniform to how the switchboard puts him on hold, you're telling the customer what you think of him and what you think of yourself.

Behind a National Car Rental desk in the Portland airport there is this sign. "If you think something is more important than a customer, think again."