

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

'What do customers want?' is a question top green industry companies ask themselves every day. The most successful ones answer it.

by Rudd McGary, Ph.D.

Henry Ford was once asked if he would have been a millionaire had he not invented the automobile production system. He replied, "Yes. I would have found out what the customers wanted and gotten it to them at a fair price." That's why Ford was a millionaire.

But some obvious questions can be asked about the solution above, brilliant as it is. The big question is: "What do consumers want?"

The green industry offers certain services to the public, but there is more to this industry than treating lawns, mowing grass, working on trees and designing outdoor space.

Fair service is key

Basically, all green industry companies offer nearly identical services at nearly the same prices. Granted, some companies are better than others in their technical ability to perform the services, and some companies are more professional. But there is still a very fine line between the successful, growing company and the company that either stays the same size or disappears after having been open for only a few years.

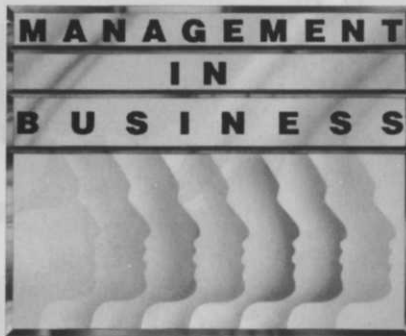
The key to a company's success or failure goes back to Ford's idea: giving the customer what he or she wants at a fair price. (Remember throughout this column that we are talking about "wants," not "needs." The difference between the two is significant, particularly in industries where some of the services are cosmetic.)

When customers purchase "wants," they are buying because of a desire. If the service is one which is absolutely necessary, such as telephone service, the consumer is buying because of "need."

Beyond price

The reason this is important is because the consumer in the green industry can make choices about how he/she wants to be serviced—and one of the choices is to not take a service at all. This is very different from those services which are "need" based.

Given the fact that the good com-



panies providing consumer services are very close in the way the services are performed, the consumer then selects service providers through other factors. Then, job performance becomes an expected part of the service to be bought.

For more than a decade, research has been done on why people buy ser-

What does the customer want? A knowledgeable, competent professional.

vices in the green industry. The reasons, which have changed dramatically in the past five years, are tied very closely to the concept of want vs. need.

For example, when consumers consider buying a service, they generally set up a group of expectations. The expectations may not necessarily be based on the real possibilities of the service, but that doesn't matter. If the consumer has a set of expectations, that's what the consumer wants to get.

Results tell all

On the other side are the results: the final outcome after the service has been performed. I have been suggesting for some time that the difference between the consumers' expectations and the results is what causes problems in the service industries. There is, however, another part to this.

It's not only the results that determine customer satisfaction, it's the way in which the results come about.

For example, you and your crew have been out working on a property and have done fairly extensive landscaping work on it. You're not quite finished with the work, and the customer calls your office to ask about something. The person in the office is having a bad day and is obnoxious to the caller. No matter how good the property looks, the consumer isn't going to be satisfied with the way in which the results come about. This becomes important in industries where there are more and more good companies working.

Stand above the rest

The work can be done by a lot of people; it's the way in which the overall results are accomplished that determines whether or not you have a satisfied customer. Since much green industry work depends on referral for its marketing, it's a good idea to have satisfied customers or the company will have severe problems trying to grow or even survive.

What does the customer want in 1990? Let's go through what we have learned over the last decade about consumer expectations in the green industry.

1. Professionalism. The single dominant factor when consumers choose service providers is the way the company presents itself to the consumer. The word most often used by consumers to describe what is expected is "professionalism." There are several parts to this, including appearance of the workforce, appearance of equipment and vehicles and, very importantly, the manner in which the first interview/sales presentation is handled.

Office staff cooperativeness and how they handle the customer is also very important. Companies using answering machines are not thought of as professional and therefore lose some business. Companies where the office staff isn't polite or helpful are also considered out of the "professional" category. (In general, this is a

feeling as much as a concrete category, but without the feeling of a professional company, the company isn't going to sell much.)

2. Knowledge. This is particularly important in the beginning stages of a customer/service company relationship. The customers want to be confident that service providers have a strong understanding of how to complete the job. In addition, it is important to the consumers that the service providers are able to problem solve quickly.

One other consistent comment

from consumers is that they don't want to be presented with too much technical talk. While consumers want information, they don't want a complete doctorate in green industry technology. The complaint is that some personnel seem to overwhelm consumers with technical information.

3. Communication. This very vague word translates into two different areas of consumer concern. The first is the way the customer is treated on the phone—politeness is a necessity. No matter how well the

company can provide the service, people who aren't polite on the phone kill sales opportunities.

The second area deals with problem solving. Customers who give strong referrals mention the companies' abilities to solve problems. They say that the people identify the problem, tell them how they are going to deal with it, do what needs to be done, and then call afterward to make sure the customer is satisfied. Sound like a lot to make a customer happy? How big do you want your company to be?

Looking at factors

There are a lot of other factors. Certainly price is important, but if the other three things listed above are not available, the price doesn't matter at all. People buying on low price alone are a small group, and generally not a group that you want to deal with anyhow.

What does the customer want? The customer wants a service company, not a company that thinks that results alone are all that matter.

What does the customer want? To be treated as if they were important to the company. (They are: they pay all the bills.)

What does the customer want? The customer wants a professional, competent, knowledgeable company.

What does the customer want? The customer wants results and more. How those results come about are as important as the results themselves.

Remember Henry Ford? This is what the customers want. And they're out there waiting to make you a millionaire. **LM**



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