

WHERE IS THE NEXT CUSTOMER?

In your own backyard. Using word-of-mouth advertising combined with a frontal assault on neighbors usually means new business.

by Rudd McGary, Ph.D.

No matter what the business, the constant question of owners is, "Where is the next customer?"

In landscaping, this is also a constant. Perhaps this question, more than any other, worries most companies. Owners understand how to do the work, but often don't understand how to get the work. Here are some ideas about where the next landscaping customer can come from.

Next door!

The best place to find a customer is next door to someone who has purchased your work in the past year.

The buying patterns in landscaping follow what is known as "two-step diffusion." This means that when someone wants to find a landscaper, they seldom ask a landscaper. Instead, they ask someone who is in the same basic age and income range and who might have a recommendation. The most logical person to ask is often a next-door neighbor, particularly if they have seen you doing work on their neighbor's property.

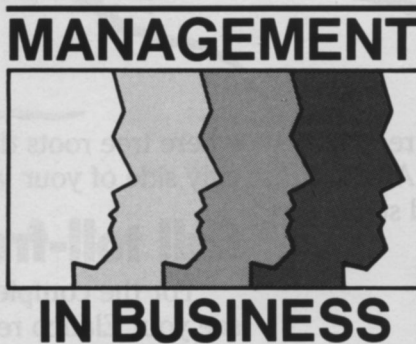
Two-step diffusion simply means that we look for someone who is very much like us and who we feel can render an objective opinion. If you have a group of satisfied customers, then you have a group of next-door neighbors, too.

We need to find ways to get this group to buy what we have. If we can reach them, we should have fairly good success. This holds true whether we are looking at commercial or residential work.

Getting the referral

Most of your customers will give you a referral. They will give you a letter of recommendation if you want one. However, in order to simplify the process of getting such a letter, you should offer to type one out and then have the customer sign it.

Please note that I'm not suggesting that you send them a letter asking for referrals. This is done from time to



time, usually in a panic when enough work isn't booked for next month. The response to these letters is usually underwhelming: almost none at all.

If, on the other hand, you have a recommendation letter, you can be more aggressive.

Choose the area

Ask your client if you can take a picture of the work you've done to show other people. Most people are proud to show off their landscaping, and they'll almost always let you take as many photos as you need. That way, you can have both letters of referral and pictures of the type of work you do on file. Both are handy tools that can be used later.

Certain parts of the town or city are better for you. Customers have bought from you in these areas and you have also done some installations. These are the areas in which you are going to look for the next-door neighbor who can be your next client.

Potential customers

People in the three houses across and the two houses next door to your current customer are the most likely to buy your services. (You can find their names in a telephone criss-cross directory.) You need to mail them a brochure showing the sort of work you do. Let them know at the same time that you worked for their neighbor.

Often, blueprints and plans for installations make good backgrounds for bro-

chures. You should put together a short, full-color, no-photo brochure—one that has line drawings instead of photos. People are attracted to good line drawings. If you can't draw, find someone at the local college to help you. Usually, the art professor will know someone he or she can recommend.

In the brochure, explain that you have worked with people living close to your prospects. Then you need to let them know, as simply as possible, the types of services you provide. Finally, let them know how to reach you, and you've included all the necessary information. Don't write too much: the prospect will get bored. If the artwork is nice, you'll be fine with very few words.

When they call

If you've done all of the above things, maybe one of these people will call you. When they do, set your appointment and gather up all your different tools, particularly the referral letter and the photographs.

When you make your presentation (or at least at the opening of your call), make sure that your letter of referral and photographs are seen by the prospect. Remember: you can talk a great deal, but it makes a difference if someone to whom the prospect can relate has already actually bought your services. Let the pictures do the talking; if they're good, they'll help do the selling for you.

Finishing up

When you begin this new job, make sure you snap photos on the day you begin and on the day you end. If you are doing major work, there should be dramatic photographs showing the changes.

Once again, the person living next to this one will be the best next customer, and by saving evidence of how you did with your current customer, you can make a much stronger impression on the next one. **LM**

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