

Putting yourself in the customer's place

When bidding for a job, always put yourself in the customer's shoes. And be sure you know what they really want before you jump to a conclusion. "Don't assume—find out."

That's the advice of consultant Eric P. McCarty, president of Management Concepts, Inc. He has worked with a number of lawn care and landscape companies.

While McCarty's tip may sound simple, many landscape professionals fail to execute that crucial part of a sales presentation.

It takes some careful inquiries to determine what the customer wants. "We call them open-ended questions," McCarty reports. One example: "What are some of the things you're thinking about?"

"They'll tell you things and then you have to pin down what's most important," McCarty says. You can do that by asking, "What do you think is most important to you?"

Then it can be narrowed down by use of a closed-ended question: "Is the entry way the thing we have to concentrate on?"

"You get their needs and what their priorities are," McCarty explains. He cautions contractors against listing all that they offer—let the customer say what is wanted, and then describe what you can do to meet their needs.

McCarty uses the words "features" and "benefits" to illustrate the point. A feature might be that three inches of mulch is put on each bed. The benefit is that unsightly weeds won't compete with the colorful spring flowers and shrubs.

You could tell a customer that the lawn will be mowed or sprayed at certain times, and the customer's response may be, "So what?"

You can say to the prospect words to the effect that "you're going to see a lovely lawn with this backdrop and your neighbor's going to enjoy it, too."

Creating "word pictures" is a good way to describe benefits. An offer of mowing service can include a statement about how the customer can sit back and relax in the shade while a trained professional does all that hot work. And think of the extra leisure

time you're getting.

McCarty urges contractors to use picture books when selling their services. And the pictures should include happy people in them. "That's what we sell in our business."

A firm that installs Jacuzzis has a picture book with several color photographs.

One picture is of a happy couple with drinks enjoying the tub.

Another shot is of a happy mother and baby in the tub.

The third photo is of a happy older man relaxing with a cigar and drink.

The photos depict how people with different needs can enjoy the facility.

When talking about the cost, refer to it as an "investment" rather than using words like "price" or "spending."

Avoid asking, "How much do you want to spend?" McCarty says a good method is to say, "We can really do these things, but it would help me to find out how much you plan to invest."

"That tells them why you are asking the question," McCarty explains.

Try not to back down too soon on price, McCarty advises. "It's been our experience that landscape sales people tend to assume that people won't spend as much as they will."

Defend your prices by noting that property improvements don't depreciate like cars and boats—and that a beautiful yard can be enjoyed every day.

Above all, try to put yourself in the customer's shoes. To illustrate the point, McCarty, 61, tells of when he sought to have a Jacuzzi whirlpool constructed in his backyard deck. He says the reaction of the salesperson seemed to imply: "You want a Jacuzzi at your age?"

Needless to say, that salesperson did not make the best impression. He also did not get the job.

"He jumped to a conclusion about what I wanted or didn't want," McCarty recalls.

"When you're talking to people you want to address where they're coming from," says McCarty. "It always has to tie in to what they perceive."

In the Jacuzzi episode, McCarty sought a place to relax after a hard day's work. The salesperson was thinking about "yuppies and swingers" enjoying the tubs and he determined that "people my age don't do that," McCarty remembers. "Don't go prejudging it," he advises.

"You're trying to tell me something about where I'm coming from—and you don't know."

—James E. Guyette □



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