

CUSTOMER SERVICE:

Words with meaning at Hermes Landscaping

■ Hermes Landscaping in Lenexa, Kansas, has built a reputation on customer service. But it's not resting on its laurels.

So that salespeople can more fully concentrate on attracting new clients to the Hermes fold, a customer service manager will be soon added to the landscape management division.

"Our service needs to be better...quicker," says division supervisor Randy James. "Our sales should be at \$2 million. We've been at \$1.2 million too long."

James admits that his salespeople, in this recessionary economy, are so focussed on servicing accounts in the true Hermes tradition that they don't have adequate follow-up time to sell additional accounts.

"We feel we have to go this route," James says. "That way, we can justify salespeople making more sales."

According to James, the customer service manager—who will take over an account after about 30 days—will be available at a customer's beck-and-call. "The customers are always amazed that the salesperson comes out for service calls anyway," James observes.



Randy James (above) says his division would like to grow from \$1.2 million to \$2 million soon. Founder John T. Hermes, James and president Dalton Hermes (right inset) helped the company win Lenexa's '1990 Small Business of the Year' award.



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Job One—With some auto manufacturers, “quality is job one;” but at Hermes, “service is job one.”

All 60 trucks are equipped with radios. Managers and salespeople are also equipped with car phones.

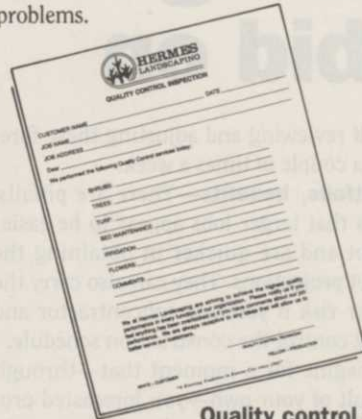
“We can do anything,” says James. “Our niche, though, is taking on the jobs that need immediacy. Some people want it, some don’t, but there are enough customers who are willing to pay 10 to 15 percent more for it.”

An example of Hermes’ responsiveness came just this past July. The company won the contract to landscape the Buffalo Soldier’s Memorial at Fort Leavenworth. Time was so compressed that workers were scrubbing boulders the night before Gen. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, appeared at the dedication.

Said Powell: “This magnificent monument is a dream come true. Artists such as...the designers at Hermes Landscaping devoted thousands of hours to the difficult task of creation.”

Corrective action is so prompt that problems are never documented on paper—they’re simply not around long enough to be written up. “I’m most proud of our responsiveness,” says Dalton Hermes, who began

with the company as a youth pulling weeds. “I’ve got a good intuitive sense about where problems are and aren’t, and I act quickly. I try to identify problems before they become problems.



Quality control forms help Hermes Landscaping service its customers more effectively.

“Complaints sometimes float up, too, and I’ve taken those calls. Not only are our managers always available, but I am, too.”

Two other ways the company makes sure customers are properly serviced:

- Management holds regular meetings to discuss cancellations and to make sure accounts aren’t being lost because of lack of service.

• The company distributes customer satisfaction questionnaires to its client list and pays close attention to the responses.

Fighting through—Excellent customer service notwithstanding, the recessionary economy has been felt.

“We want to hang in there and fight through this economy,” notes Hermes. “The decline in commercial landscaping & sprinkler sales is not unexpected but unappreciated. There hasn’t been an office building start here for a couple of years.”

Yet, expansion in the other three divisions—landscape management, residential landscaping & sprinkler, and at the nursery—has held steady. “The three divisions (not including commercial) will continue to do well, so we’ll try to put our eggs in those baskets,” Hermes continues.

The company’s growth spurt lasted from 1986-91. A seasonal color department was begun in 1989. Hermes has also added residential low-voltage lighting and paving installation services, and greatly enhanced its native and perennial lines, and its sprinkler services.

Concludes James: “We have a bunch of good guys who are young and energetic. That’s what makes the company work.”

—Jerry Roche

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