

expects to purchase. I have found that only a few lawn care salespersons really know what customers want or expect.

Even the lawn analysis form provides customers with only technical information (weeds found, diseases present, grass types). The technician then tells the customer how the lawn care program will solve the problems identified in the analysis. But taking additional time to ask questions about what the customer expects is just not being done. Instead, because the customer asks how much the service will cost, the salesperson assumes that price is the major concern.

Learning what customers expect is critical. Only when you ask a customer, "What do you want your lawn to look like?" will you learn what it will take to satisfy the customer.

Too many technicians complain that sales are difficult to obtain, and that customers are leaving every year. If the technician or salesperson routinely asks customers what they expect when making the estimate, you would not have to worry about routes shrinking during a season.

High-tech sales—Many lawn care companies are finding telemarketing to be a cost-effective method of reaching more prospects. Telemarketers, however, are discovering that many individuals find it easier to say "yes" to a phone call than taking the time to decide what the caller is contacting them about. You must make certain that—when you meet with the prospect—you not only make the sale, but find out what the customer expects his or

her lawn to look like.

Hands-on—The most profitable and successful companies tend to service the customer the same way they operate their businesses—hands on. I believe there is no better way to service the customer than seeing customers and truly listening to them.

Companies that operate like this have three things in common: high employee morale, high profitability and excellent customer retention.

You might say, "It takes too much time to deliver all of that personal attention customers expect." But I say: spend time now working with the customer and the number of renewals will be surprisingly high. Yes, customers will pay for high quality service.

A new approach—You cannot change your sales approach overnight. Technical aspects have probably been the principal focus of your sales training. This was necessary to help you learn what products control a particular turf problem. But recognizing that a lawn has henbit, plantain, spurge or oxalis doesn't mean much to customers. You need to tell them that you can control or eliminate these weeds.

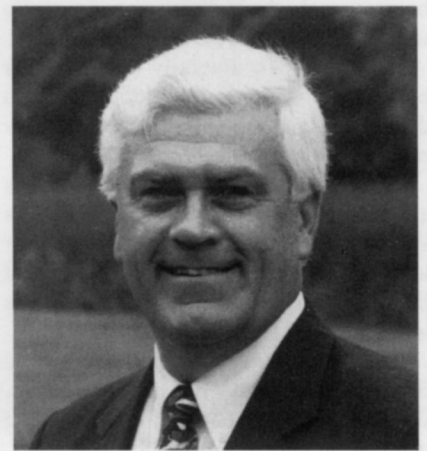
Refocus your sales pitch to emphasize what you can and cannot do. This approach is more easily understood by the customer, but it will take a great deal of effort.

Salespeople and technicians usually say a new approach to sales will not work. Most of them simply do not want to change. They find that asking a customer

what they expect and then listening to their response is a real pain.

The results—The one surefire way to success is to find out what the customer expects. Service each customer like he or she is your only customer. Remember, there is always a price for everything worth having. Only by knowing what a customer wants or expects will your company be able to deliver that level of service.

Try this new approach. You will have to train everyone to ask customers what they expect, and then decide if you can deliver it. Choosing your customers this way may surprise you in the years to come. But customer retention will increase and, along with it, your company's profitability.



—Ed Wandtke is a principle in Wandtke & Associates, 2586 Oakstone Dr., Columbus, OH 43231; (800) 966-3546.

Labor problems are cropping up all over, LCOs say in surveys

Most eligible labor lacks trainability, commitment, work ethic, according to our survey.

■ Steve Bailey, owner of Grassroots Lawn & Irrigation, knows he's a lucky guy.

He says he usually doesn't have much trouble finding good seasonal help because his business is based in Upper Arlington, Ohio, just blocks from

The Ohio State University and its 50,000-plus students.

"The last two or three years, it's worked out pretty good for us," says Bailey. "We had a crew that started with us when they were sophomores. They were all good friends and a good group of guys. If one of them couldn't work, then others could."

But Bailey acknowledges that a business can only grow so large, relying so heavily on part-time help.

"I'm in kind of an in-between situation," he admits. "I'd like have to have

some more people to count on all year, but I have a hard time paying them competitive wages. Providing health care benefits is pretty expensive, too."

To be able to afford more full-time help, Bailey believes he has keep building his company and expanding its service offerings.

His plight isn't uncommon in the green industry where much of the work is seasonal, and entry-level employees receive anywhere from minimum wage to \$8-\$10/hour, depending on regional

employment markets. Both factors contribute to high employee turnover. It's one of professional lawn care's biggest headaches, business owners said over and over again, according to LM's "State of the Lawn Care Industry" survey.

Keeping people—Lou Wierichs of Pro-X Systems in Appleton, Wis., credits a mower service he added to his company several years ago for helping, somewhat, to keep key employees year-round. For a fee, Pro-X will retrieve a customer's lawn mower, tune up, and sharpen the blade. Pro-X promotes this service during the off-season.

But not all new services accomplish this. For instance, Wierichs says Pro-X is getting out of snow removal, partly because nobody in the company really wanted to do it anyway.

"You want to diversify to keep your business growing, but you don't want to diversify so far that you're not doing your main business extremely well."

Sudden and unexpected labor problems are probably the hardest to deal with, says Wierichs who, when a key office worker left, found himself behind the keyboard of the company computer. "It kind of left us in the lurch," says Wierichs.

No commitment—Most LCOs like Scott Sallee of Scott's K-Lawn in Durango, Col., decry the lack of commitment among younger employees.

"It's not so hard to find people, but it's hard to keep them," Sallee says. "There are so many other things to do around here; they all want to go mountain biking or kayaking or one thing or another. We try

to pay more and give bonuses, but it doesn't seem to help much.

"I went through 14 people this year to fill a mowing crew of four. Then, when customers see new people out there mowing every time, they start to get suspect."

Tim Pickering of IPC Lawn Service, Raytown, Mo. agrees.

"There seems to be a real lack of people taking pride in their work and committing to their job, especially the young guys who are most able to do this kind of work," Pickering says. "The biggest reason I haven't grown faster is the employee issue. We're to the point where we need 10 or 12 men we can count on, and we've got six."

Pickering may hire legal aliens—Mexicans—through an employment service in Texas. The service, Pickering says, guarantees the labor.

Paul Cronin of Cronin Landscaping in Northampton, Mass. says school-age kids are not an option in his market.

"I can get high school kids to work, but they can only work a certain amount of hours—after school and summers," Cronin says. "You can't get them to work every day and not the whole summer. When you *do* get them, they don't show up. The work ethic isn't there.

"I don't know why this generation doesn't want to work; when I was a kid, I was always working."

Defining services—Michael Zeller of Zeller Landscape & Tree Care in Lykens, Pa. has had to formulate his business around a lack of employees.

"I can't grow in the directions I want because the people aren't available,"

Zeller says. "So I try to get away from labor-intensive work. I'm into roadside and utility brush control, IPM, pest control, turf management, environmental testing. They're labor-intensive, but they're technical.

"NAFTA will mess things up big, too, because they'll take the factory jobs and ship them out, and all that'll be left is basically unskilled labor."

David Clark of Clark's Landscaping in Telford, Pa. has another solution to the labor problems especially evident in the East.

"We can't compete against bigger companies," Clark admits. "They're taking ethnic labor and billing at \$12-15/hour and we have to bill at \$20-25/hour. Our \$8-10/hour pay is fair, plus we're paying full benefits. So we're getting commercial jobs like retirement communities where customers want...people they can speak to...on their property."

Robert Welker of Lawn Manicare in St. Louis has had "big time" employee theft and attitude problems this summer, even though he has but three employees.

He says everything's back to normal now. And even though problems will continue to crop up, Welker sees a stronger green industry in the future.

"Manufacturers will be going abroad for cheaper labor," Welker notes, "so the remaining service industries will be strong, especially since they use both men and women in the workforce."

—Ron Hall, Jerry Roche, Terry McIver

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