

10 ways to KEEP your

customers

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Lawn Care: Fertilizer: 4/5; 6/1 Pre-Weed: 3/10
Flower Beds: Weed: 6/3

Steady customers are the backbone of your business. But losing them could break your back.

Like most alert lawn and landscape entrepreneurs, you know how hard it can be to attract new customers. But do you

also do all you can to keep your old reliable "steadies"?

It's often thought that the customers who are the backbone of your business will always be loyal—unless some actual damage is done to his or her lawn or landscape. However, it has been proved that unless such mishaps are really drastic, they will be forgiven when they're corrected.

But what is rarely taken lightly by most

"old" customers—and will often lose them—is the inability to observe some simple, considerate and very easy common-sense business practices. To be sure that you and your employees are careful, check your answers to these "yes" questions:

1) Are your trucks neat, clean and businesslike in appearance? They should be spotless and freshly painted with the name of your company clearly visible. Many customers who employ a lawn/landscape contractor consider having the truck in the driveway to be a status symbol. But even the most loyal customers won't like a shabby, unpainted vehicle looking like a fugitive from a salvage dump in their driveway.

Handling complaints

- Problem customers include those who:
 - never seem to be fully satisfied with the completed work;
 - always seem to want some extra service for free;
 - are sure they're not getting their money's worth; and
 - insist on supervising the work to an annoying degree.

Proven ways to handle such sticky situations successfully include:

Guarantee your work. Offer to make good in any way you can.

You may need to warn the customer that "I'll do this your way, if you insist, but I won't be responsible for the results."

Offer money-back guarantees on any product you sell that is offered to you on the same basis by the supplier or manufacturer. "If you have a receipt and if you use this product according to directions and it doesn't deliver as promised, just tell us exactly where it failed."

Pay attention to details and more details. Let your client know this, even while you are working on the property. This can be extremely impressive, and will make your company and its services look very good indeed.

Offer to match the prices of your competition to customers concerned about prices. These prices should be in writing and include everything the customer has requested. (Ask for proof of a competitor's bargain price on that specific job; they are often only offered infrequently as "loss leader" bait.)

Never forget: it can cost a great deal to replace loyal customers. They are the lifeblood of your business, and your best sales reps. Remind your employees: if the company has no customers, there will be no business—and, consequently—no jobs.

—B.R.M.

2) Are your drivers safe and courteous?

Since your logo is (or should be) printed boldly on your trucks, they and their drivers are really moving advertisements. This makes it especially important to drive carefully and obey all traffic rules.

It's also important for your employees to avoid arguments with a customer's neighbor concerning traffic-related matters. Neglecting to do so can often result in losing a valuable customer—regardless of whether the employee is right or wrong.

3) Do your drivers show courtesy toward other motorists and pedestrians?

Or do they cut people off and then smirk at them? Rude and unnecessary traffic-related practices have a negative impact on the company's reputation.

4) Are your drivers' job-site parking practices considerate?

Do they always park away from driveways and the flow of traffic, or do they cause troublesome traffic jams by parking on busy highways during rush hour?

5) Do your employees wear near and appropriate uniforms?

With their name and company name embroidered on a pocket or on the backs of the shirts? Or do your people look like skid row characters rather than competent and reliable landscape workers because of their unwashed, unkempt hair and ragged and dirty clothes?

6) Do employees cooperate with each other?

Do they work together in harmony, efficiently and quietly, or do they quarrel with each other about who does what, where and how?

7) Are your employees considerate of your customers?

Your answer to this question must be "no" if workers don't bother to:

- * carry empty trash cans from the curb to the garage (or another location designated by the customer) simply because it's too much trouble or they're too busy keeping to their production schedule;

- * bag lawn clippings, pulled weeds and other trash and dispose of it properly and neatly, as directed by the customer. Or (even worse) do they leave it lying around in a pathway or garage?

8) Do you train your workers to be considerate and responsible?

For instance:

- * always moving garden furniture, croquet and other games, children's toys, and similar items on lawns before mowing, and—if appropriate—replacing them;

- * always carefully covering all items which can't be moved before spraying;

- * always neatly coiling and storing hoses near a faucet or some other practical place as designated by the customer, if you are responsible for watering.

LM GRAPEVINE

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT hears through the grapevine that the Professional Grounds Management Society will probably name a permanent executive director at its next Board of Directors meeting. **John Gillan** has been serving as interim executive director since the board decided not to renew **Alan Shulder's** contract in March...

Golf course designers are catching up with superintendents in the environmental arena. In the June 1992 issue of LM we reported on superintendents who provide excellent golfing conditions as they improve habitat for wildlife on their courses. Earlier this year, American Society of Golf Course Architects president **Art Hills** said, "Today, we're working closely with environmentalists to design and build courses that are...havens for all types of wildlife." Funny, **Joe Kosoglov** at Wolf Run and **David Stone** at The Honors Course (and many others) have been looking out for birds and wildlife for years...

The 13-mile-long Monarch Levee ruptured on July 31 and the swollen Missouri River rushed over the Chesterfield Valley in West St. Louis (Mo.) County. The showroom of dealer/distributor Outdoor Equipment Inc. got clobbered, but **Tom Walker** and his staff apparently had time to move equipment to another location on higher ground. LM drove through the valley the day U.S.40 reopened (Aug. 16) and saw the cleanup at Outdoor under way...

A tip of the LM hat to **Trey Rogers** of Michigan State University, leader of the research team that prepared sod for the Pontiac Silverdome prior to international soccer games this

past June. Rogers, **Paul Rieke** and **John Stier** not only created a great playing field, but also garnered positive national press for the green industry. Next summer, the MSU team faces the real test at Pontiac: the opening round of the World Cup...

Professional Applicators await indications of the Clinton administration's views on urban pesticide use. So far, the Prez has had his hands full with things like the budget and health care. **Carol Browner**, appointed EPA's top gun this year, has yet to take a strong stand. "She has continually made statements saying that reduction of pesticides will be a hallmark of the administration," **Allen James** tells LM. "But they've done very little so far." James is executive director of RISE, Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment, a consortium of pesticide manufacturers, distributors and applicators...

SPORTS TURF GURU **George Toma** says he's taking it easy in semi-retirement, shifting much of his workload to son **Chip**. But he was an excellent host to Turf & Ornamental Communicators Association members earlier this year. He gave TOCA members the grand tour of Royals Stadium, presenting his opinions on everything from synthetic turf to world politics. He also treated TOCA with some door prizes from his vast collection of sports memorabilia. (TOCA executive director **Den Gardner** won an autographed baseball, and LM's **Jerry Roche** took home an official "NFL Ground Crew" Super Bowl cap.)...

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9) Do you offer your customers more than the usual services?

Sodding, seeding, liming, irrigation and installation work are good examples. This is an important way in which many companies hold their important "steady customers" and keep them loyal as well as generating considerably more trade and profit. You might also put together a complete lawn care program which includes preventive disease control and keeping customers' landscapes looking good all year round.

You may feel that angling for and obtaining such added business isn't worth the trouble, but neglecting to do so carries the

risk of losing "steadies" to the competition—especially when cut-rate fees are offered.

10) Are problem customers handled tactfully?

Smart companies do their utmost to answer complaints (see sidebar). Customers will usually promptly spread the word to others about their experiences. These verbal reports can be negative and result in the loss of a "steady" plus other potential or actual customers. Or they can be positive and have the opposite effect on business.

—The author, *Bess Ritter May*, is a freelance writer specializing in business topics for numerous trade magazines. She is headquartered in Philadelphia, Pa.