

# Are you assuming customers are happy?



After servicing a property, prepare a report for the customer.

Photo courtesy Senske Lawn & Tree Care

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■ Customer satisfaction requires regular confirmation. Most companies, however, do not take the time; rather, they "assume" the customer likes the job because he or she is paying the bill.

Now that the spring rush is over, take the time to check up on how well you are meeting your customers' expectations of your services.

You don't have to be a mind reader to understand what the customer wants. You do need to ask the right questions. And expectations will vary by the type of customer and the way a property is being used. Until you learn what the customer wants from your service, it will be difficult to measure if you are delivering it.

Here are some tips you should consider, depending on the type of service you offer, and to whom you offer it.

## Commercial customers:

**1) Review your customer sales records first.** Dig into them to find the objective the customer had in choosing you and the type of service he or she expects you to perform. Under ideal conditions, this information should be evident from sales contacts or from written information given to you when you obtained the bid packet.

You might have to look carefully, though: more than 90 percent of the companies we have observed in the last five years do not have this information in their customer contact or sales files. If you have this information on file, congratulations—you're one of the elite 10 percent.

**2) Plan site visits.** Call the person who's contracting the job and plan to walk the property with the buyer and your contact. This is an opportunity to obtain immediate feedback on the quality of your service.

Let the customer know that this is part of your continuing customer relationship and satisfaction pulse check.

Some companies provide a checklist for the customer to complete, and then compare it to the one they complete at the same time. Then, stop and discuss variances between your two views.

**3) Provide written reports and feedback.** Provide a report on the property after every visit. This lets the customer know what problems you see. Either the customer or you can follow up on your appropriate recommendations.

Don't be afraid to critique your own shortcomings. The customer likes to know that you see the same problem that might be troubling him or her.

Include comments on curb appeal, turf

color, plant and tree appearance, groundcover, weed control, mowing patterns and flower beds. Add comments on trash, turf renovation, plant placement and irrigation needs also often helps increase the value to the customer of the written report.

## Residential customers:

Unlike commercial customers, residential customers will frequently phone when they have a concern. Effective handling of the ensuing service call is critical in maintaining a satisfied customer. Here are some other tips:

**1) Communicate.** Talk to your customer each time you service the property. This means that your service personnel must be prepared with questions for the property owner, and the questions need to be open-ended (not just "yes" or "no").

Don't expect customers to be specific unless you ask the right questions. You can expect to get three questions in, before the customer loses interest.

Employees need to be trained as effective listeners. After contact with a customer, a written form should be prepared. Act on any follow-up items and keep the form in the customer's file.

**2) Survey customers.** Enclose a reply card asking for comments. When few replies are received, the company believes that customers are satisfied.

Or, hire a professional research firm to contact customers for you. These professional researchers can ask questions that provide information about specific customer attitudes. This method can also provide insight into ways you can expand your service offerings.

The cost of an outside group to perform the survey will range from \$2,500 to \$5,000, depending on the number of questions and the number of customers to be surveyed.

**3) Phone check-ups.** Customers are not always available when the services are being performed. Call them (within a reasonable time after the service) for input. These calls can be made by the service person, or by an office employee. If timely, the check-ups can save a customer or resolve a problem before it becomes a crisis.

Customer retention levels continue to increase for companies that have implemented these few tips, which will help you earn customer loyalty.

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