

What is

PROFESSIONALISM

'Look the part, act the part, and then charge the part,' one landscaper says. There are many other opinions, though.

■ Many companies in the lawn and landscape industry aren't even professional enough to know they're not professional, say those on the other side of the fence.

Ask any well-known businessman and you'll hear "horror stories" about the unprofessional and "low-balling" competition they confront on an everyday basis.

"The first problem with professionalism in this industry," one landscaper tells *LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT*, "is that there isn't any. When you say landscaper to somebody, the first thing they think of is somebody with a pickup and a mower. Education is part of the problem. Historically, it's been a lesser educated person who didn't understand the ramifications of being in business."

According to Jack Robertson of Robertson Lawn Care, Springfield, Ill., it's mandatory that smaller companies be professional. "The smaller company that says it can't afford to be professional is admitting a lack of professionalism," he notes. "The scapegoat is pure cost. But how can you afford *not* to be professional?"

For the record, here are some keys to professionalism, and their sources:

● "Professionalism is doing a job better than the customer could ever expect. The difference is knowing more and being able to produce at a higher level." (*Russ Adsit, Adsit Landscape & Design, Nashville, Tenn.*)

● "Professionalism is employee education, keeping up with government regulations, knowing your costs, knowing

enough to ask for outside help, being properly insured, knowing the safety and environmental aspects of the job. And it's taking responsibility to communicate to the customer what professionalism is." (*Arnie Sieg, The Bruce Company, Racine, Wisc.*)

● "Professionalism connotes a high level of commitment to your clients, to the industry, and to keeping yourself knowledgeable and skilled in the latest technology and developments. A professional is sensitive about, and committed to, projecting a positive public image at all times...and to treating his co-workers and associates with respect. A professional is ready and willing to share ideas and information to promote the industry." (*Mike Frank, David J. Frank Landscaping, Germantown, Wisc.*)



Fogarty: 'High value' is not always equal to high quality.

'Low-ballers'—For some reason, the question of professionalism always seems to come back to those "low-ballers" undercutting prices on the true professionals. These companies are in business for a mere blink of an eyelash, then



Adsit: Do a better job than they would ever expect.

go out of business so others can quickly replace them.

"Not all customers are only concerned with the lowest price," notes Larry Wright, president of the Metropolitan Detroit (Mich.) Landscape Association. "But unless you prove to them that you are more professional than the low-ballers, they may not have any other choice than to use price as the determining factor."

And low price-quoting is not limited to the smaller companies, says Phil Fogarty of Crowley Lawn Care, Cleveland.

"Some of the bigger companies are not striving for quality lawn care any more," he says. "They're just calling it 'high value.' That makes me nervous because it can really hurt the overall image of the industry."

"If we don't get back to TQM models then, as a whole, our industry will even get worse as far as professionalism. Some trends are going in the wrong direction."

"Low price has never made a great company yet."

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Here's a list

■ Larry Wright, president of the Metropolitan Detroit (Mich.) Landscape Association, lists these professionalism prerequisites:

- 1) Courteous, knowledgeable employees, neatly groomed and in uniforms;
- 2) Clean, professionally lettered vehicles with association decals on them;
- 3) Good employee work habits;
- 4) Professional office staff;
- 5) Courteous and helpful phone habits; and
- 6) Limited use of answering machines during normal business hours.

—J.R.

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Stephen M. Pollan, in his book "The Field Guide to Starting a Business," had some interesting thoughts on pricing.

"It is a double-edged sword," Pollan wrote. "It's one of the most complicated issues facing the entrepreneur."

Prices should reflect what the potential

WANTED:

ILLEGAL LANDSCAPERS

■ Eight unlicensed California landscapers were set up, caught and arrested last fall in Walnut Creek when the California Landscape Contractors Association and the Contractors State License Board combined forces during an undercover "sting" operation.

"More than \$400 million was lost in tax revenues between 1990 and 1991," said CLCA Licensing Committee chairman Richard Cohen. "The loss total could be significantly higher today, considering the apparent upsurge in illegal construction activity the past couple of years. Rather than going toward the state budget, the money's going into the pockets of unlicensed operators like the eight arrested the other day.

"Everyone suffers: consumers because they have virtually no recourse against poor workmanship or failure to complete the job; licensed contractors because of unfair competition.

"These days," Cohen continued, "it's a disadvantage to be a professional. But fortunately, the state board wants unlicensed operators to become part of a legitimate, tax-paying society. So CLCA and the Contractors State Licensing Board are joining forces to set up sting operations against individuals performing landscape work without a license."

Consultants, Ft. Worth, Texas.

"Businesses have similar commodities and clientele," Roberts writes, "but they do not leave the same impression. These mental pictures are images. History establishes a reputation, but present actions determine an image.

"Creating a positive and impressive



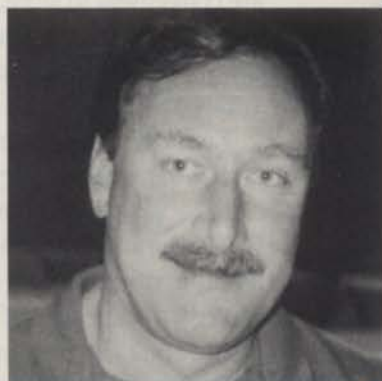
Sieg: Professionals educate employees, follow regulations.

customer believes to be the value of your service, first and foremost, according to Pollan. Larger businesses have lower production costs and can take advantage of volume discounts. Established businesses, therefore, should be able to sell at lower prices than smaller businesses.

"Entrepreneurs who provide a service," Pollan continues, "may feel their lack of experience forces them to charge lower prices. But undercharging does more harm than good. If you set your price too low, customers may believe that what you are offering isn't as valuable as what the competition offers.

"Believing that selling for less will bring success quickly can be fatal."

Image the key—Jerry W. Roberts, writing in *North Carolina Turfgrass*, believes, correctly, that image is the key. Roberts owns Roberts Management



Frank: Be committed to clients and industry.

image for your business involves several ingredients:

"Innovation: the willingness and inclination to explore new avenues, different products and contemporary techniques.

"Direction and pace setting: the appearance of your facilities, employees and their equipment, the appearance of the mail that leaves your office, telephone operators trained to take care of customers.

"Advertising: a steady low cost program of advertising using (various) media.

"Steady growth: a balanced approach to steady growth allows management and employees to mature with responsibility and still project a positive growth image.

"Single-mindedness: Ethics, using honesty, integrity and communication when dealing with customers."

Finally, the key, our anonymous landscaping friend says: "You've got to look and act the part, and then charge the part."

—Jerry Roche