

# An ear to the customer

## Tune in—before, during and after the service delivery process—to enhance your customer retention and profitability.

by Ed and Aaron Wandtke

■ A man went to his doctor complaining of poor hearing. The doctor took out a pocket watch and asked his patient if he could hear it ticking. "Yes," the man replied. The doctor went into the hallway. "Can you hear it now?" he asked. "Yes," said the patient.

The doctor moved to another room. "Can you hear the ticking now?"

"Loud and clear."

The doctor returned to the examining room. "There's nothing wrong with your hearing," he said, "you just don't know how to listen."

It's true of many people. They don't know how to listen.

As children, we were taught to "listen to others." But the older we became, the less we felt we had to listen to certain advice. Not until we've had a variety of unfortunate experiences do we begin to remember the importance of being a good listener.

The ability to listen well contributes much to human development. People do learn from mistakes and from trial and error, but many of the errors can be avoided if they learn to listen to people who have experienced similar situations.

**The trade-off**—When we spend our money, we expect good service or a good product in exchange for the money spent. Customers can inspect and use the product only after purchase. But sellers of professional services are scrutinized in three stages: before, during and after the service is provided.

Therefore, your employees and the company they represent are both under scrutiny by the customer through the length of the contract.

Along with the physical abilities required to perform professional lawn and landscape management services, your employees must be able to communicate with your customers. Many employees love to talk, and will often talk to their hearts' content. But these same employees may not realize the

importance of *listening* to the customer, and must find a happy medium between prolonged talking and attentive listening.

**How to listen**—When your employees listen to (and address) customer concerns, the customer feels more comfortable about both the property and your company. Effective listening builds, sustains and expands customer confidence.

A new customer, for instance, may be unsure about what he or she expects from the service. The simplest way to overcome this obstacle is for employees to ask questions so they can better understand what the customer expects.

Have your employees do the following to improve their listening skills:

- Ask questions during a conversation rather than during a question-and-answer session. Allow questions to flow with the conversation.

- Restate their understanding of what the customer said.

- Ask the customer to restate his or her answer to a question. This serves two functions. First, your employee might not have completely understood what the customer explained. Second, asking a question a second time requires the client to re-think his or her answer and breaks it down into simpler terms, often clarifying what was intended to be said. Both frequently cause the client to change his or her position after better understanding what he or she expects.

Your customers often enjoy the satisfaction of coming home from work or stopping by on their way out for the day to observe the progress made on the property. These opportunities allow your employees to interact and listen to the customer while the job is in progress.

**Careful follow-up**—After a job is completed, most lawn and landscape companies will follow up. Most programs, however, don't integrate the customer's suggestions with the ongoing operations. Companies might record the customers' suggestions but never apply them—which, more often than not, only enhance the services it can provide.

Customers who actively participate in a follow-up program are extremely valuable to your company, because they are willing to share their positive, negative or indifferent feelings about your service.

Good listening is essential if a company wants to experience the most value from a customer. Before and during a job, listen-

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ing should focus on the customer's needs and how these needs can be met. By listening to customer comments after the job is completed, your company can measure how well it did what the customer wanted.

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