

# Beware 'freeballers!'

**This landscaper charges for every minute of his time, without getting prospective clients hot under the collar.**

by Jay Turnbull

■ As professionals, we approach our work with great pride and diligence. We never quite know exactly what prospective customers want, unless a detailed plan has already been developed. Our job is to figure out what they need, make a proposal, and close the sale.

Sometimes, this takes more than a one-time meeting, requiring extra work to figure pricing and draw plans and designs. Many times, we need several hours to assimilate the needs and work up a new proposal. Most of us don't charge for that time. But then we make the proposal, only to find that the customer is shopping for the best price or trying to find out how to do the job so he can get a "non"-professional at a fraction of the cost.

Sound familiar? Frustrating? You bet! For lack of a better description, I call this "freeballing."

**Every minute has value**—Joel Lerner, marketing guru who was the keynote speaker at the Professional Grounds Management Society conference a few years ago, said we must not spend any time with our customers without charging them for our expertise. And rightly so. But how do we make the transition from giving free advice to charging for our time? Let me share with you what I am doing.

I have adopted this philosophy: no more freeballing! It has not come easily, nor has it come quickly, but over a period of time I have few cold contacts. Almost everyone I talk to has been introduced through another customer or has seen my work, or heard me talk, or read an article I wrote. So when they talk to me, it is because they want something that I have.

Warning! What happens next may be hazardous to your pocket book.

Most of us are flattered and immediately go into the sales mode and relinquish the expertise that the prospective customer is seeking. Then the inevitable question: "How much will it cost?"—the time when we discover whether the individual is shopping for information or genuinely wants you to fix his problem.

**When to proceed**—Let's back up. I have tried to stop at the warning and take charge of the situation differently. I remind myself what the first contact is about: to determine whether or not to go any further with the client. And the meeting should be fairly brief, so I don't charge for it.

I explain that I work for x dollars an hour for planning and consultation and



**Turnbull: If you are a pro, you are paying your dues.**

design, with a three-hour minimum. I also give them a ballpark figure on how much this phase will cost them and define the limits of that estimate. If, after the introduction, the prospect and I decided that we can do business, the clock starts. That means that I can now charge for the time I spend on site taking dimensions and making notes for the job.

In some cases, if I sense some resistance to this, I offer a credit toward actual work done at a future time. So I have—but not always—deducted consultation/design time from a landscape job on a pro-rated basis. But even when this is offered, I usually add my time in as miscellaneous costs in the bidding process. It all works out about the same. If they feel like they are getting a better deal that way, so be it. Perceived value is what a customer wants.

**Is it worth it?**—Now, if I go into a potential job knowing that I am bidding against a competitor or competitors, as was the case recently, I may not be able to charge right away. That's when I make the decision whether I want to work with the client or not, and what it's worth. In the recent instance, I decided that I wanted to

work with the customer. I wanted to go head-to-head with my competition, so the challenge superseded the couple of hours of unpaid time. I got the job, and will get new leads from this customer. And it felt good to know that I had the best plan for him.

Another difference is in commercial accounts. I have not had many commercial accounts pay me for time spent in proposing work, but I have almost always built it into the bid. I don't get all the jobs I bid, but the faster we educate everyone in this country, the sooner we will all overcome this problem.

The key is professionalism.

**You deserve it**—If you are truly a professional, you have paid and are paying your dues to be known as one—and that costs money. But it saves your customers money! I can do a job for a reasonable price, make a profit, and do it right. Non-professionals can do the job, do it poorly, and the customer will end up having to spend more to correct the problems they bought the first time. I can also tell a prospective customer that I cannot do the job he wants, either, because it is not my area of expertise, or because the way he wants it done is not right.

You deserve the compensation you have earned, even if it is merely proposing a job. All you have to do is sell yourself and your expertise, and the rest comes easily. But if you get into the trap of giving your time away, people will take advantage of you, and have less respect for you.

Finally, you should determine who your desired customers are. Real professionals want real professionals to do their work. Do-it-yourselfers shop price and will accept any quality job if the price is cheap enough. Don't get caught in the trap of low bidding jobs to compete with the low bidders. That philosophy puts you in their court, the only place they know where to play. I think we are better off creating our own court. Be where no one can touch you. Be the best. Be a professional.

And what is a professional? It is someone who is never satisfied that he/she knows everything. He/she is open-minded, active in industry organizations, attends educational conferences regularly, and reads trade magazines. A professional is a community leader, and is proud to show off his or her work.

—The author is a resident of North Platte, Neb., where he has his own landscape consulting business.