

Who are your customers...really?

You've got to get into their heads to effectively increase sales to both existing and potential clients, say these two experts.

Do you know enough about your customers or competitors to remain profitable? Or to grow your company?

That's the challenge every landscape contractor must meet, say Judith Guido and Edmond Laflamme of Laflamme Services, Bridgeport, Conn.

If you can't provide an accurate profile of your best customers, it's time to start asking lots of questions, says Guido.

Adds Laflamme: "Market research is gathering relevant information about current or potential customers to allow you to specifically focus on cus-

Judith Guido and Edmond Laflamme of Laflamme Services in Bridgeport, Conn., pinpoint their customers so that they can focus their marketing.



tomers who will most likely buy your service. Find out as much as possible about their mindset."

Begin with current customers. Find out who the decision-makers are. When do they budget? How do they buy? What's important to them?

In fact, you can't learn too much about either customers or potential customers, says Guido who, for example, joined a corporate purchasing agents' association.

She says she wanted to find out what made purchasing agents tick. She wanted to understand why they buy (or don't buy) landscape services. She wanted to discover how they budget for these purchases.

"I learned what they need," she explains. "I'm creating services to help them."

While you're profiling your customers, study your competitors too, says Laflamme, who started his own landscape company in 1970 with a pair of mowers. Laflamme Services now does more than \$5 million annually.

Can you name your top three competitors? Their top three accounts? Why your competitors have those accounts instead of you?

Other information you should know: Is your competitors' personnel more qualified than yours? What are their market areas? Their pricing strategies? How do they advertise?

Don't be afraid to ask customers and potential customers what they think of your competitors.

"Many times they will tell you," says Laflamme. "Ask them, where are they strong? Where are they weak?"

"Tell them why you want to know, because you want to improve your company. Nine times out of 10, they will tell you the truth."

Guido says you should match your company's strengths to your competitors' weaknesses. "In areas where you're weak against the competitors' strengths, you have two choices: get up to a competitive level or not compete."

Major domestic trends that could affect your sales

- ▶ More home-based computers, allowing the workforce to spend more time at home.
- ▶ Widespread availability of information systems (like the Internet and the World Wide Web) and computers.
- ▶ Environmentalism and the "green movement."
- ▶ Globalism and international business.
- ▶ "Networking," "partnering" and "outsourcing."
- ▶ Increasing business ethics and values; "honesty is a big part of business today," Edmond Laflamme notes.
- ▶ Not just satisfied customers, but satisfied-*plus* customers.
- ▶ Downsizing.

Guido offers these seven marketing tips:

1) **Define your product and service.** Write it down. Develop a "menu" of services. "How else do your employees know what you're doing? How does the public know what you're doing?" asks Guido.

2) **Identify your target market.** "You can't be everything to everybody," says Guido, who claims that "20 percent of your customers provide 80 percent of your revenues." Find more customers just like that 20 percent.

3) **Identify your pricing strategy.** "Can all of your employees answer the question: Why are you more expensive? Or, why are you less expensive?" asks Guido.

4) **Make your service accessible.** Is it easy for your customers to get in touch with you?

5) **Create customer awareness by get-**

ting your name into the marketplace.

Write articles for local newspapers. Speak at local clubs.

6) **Transfer ownership.** Is it easy for your company to get your services to your customers?

7) **Follow up and get feedback.** Don't let seven business days go by before following up a direct mail promotion. Either contact the potential client with a call or letter. Tailor your follow-ups on a case-by-case basis, but don't stop until you get feedback.

In addition to offering landscape services, Laflamme and Guido are partners in Grassroots Marketing, a consulting firm for small to mid-size companies. □

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