

Be creative in selling your firm's services

Innovative ways to set your company apart. Build reciprocal deals with competitors. Increase community visibility. Tout your fine employees.

by LARRY IORII/Down to Earth, Inc.

After 23 years in the landscape business, a large amount of practical experience adds up, with successes and failures. I strongly feel, however, that the following formula will provide a solid foundation to insure your survival.

There must be a two-pronged attack that consists of:

1. Innovative and unorthodox ideas, with
2. Old-fashioned selling principles.

This sounds like opposites, and you're right! But success is built on the diversity of your approach.

'Referral centers'

Let's think of our suppliers as a sales force. Back in the late 80s, when corporate America began to "downsize," and grounds care felt the crunch, I met with various suppliers—garden centers, seed companies, equipment dealers—who handled retail trade. On a typewritten sheet was a list of services I wanted them to promote for us. In addition, a stack of business cards was placed next to the cash register. When a customer requested a business reference to provide quality service that fit into our



Iorri: consulting service opens doors.



marketing, the sales lead came into play.

Our key referral centers are updated annually on the services we prefer to perform. In return, our suppliers, who provide our company with a steady flow of business receive:

- ▶ continued purchases of products;
- ▶ advance payment or "net 30" for products purchased;
- ▶ referrals to them from our consulting business.

Do-it-yourself homeowners receive 10

Excellent employees are an excellent sell. Emphasize their dedication to the company.

percent off their purchases if they mention Down to Earth, Inc. (See Table 1)

New sales from competitors

Down to Earth sells directly to its competition.

During the winter months, I select companies—members of a professional association—and meet with them to discuss the possibilities of reciprocal referrals. The

object is to seek companies that excel in specialized services. Also, the type of equipment these companies have is another factor to consider. If they have expensive machinery that is used periodically, why invest in such costly equipment.

TABLE 1 'REFERRAL CENTER' TRADE-OFFS

Down to Earth		Garden Valley Nurseries	
Maintenance	\$12,000	Mulch purchases	\$3800
Lawn renovation	\$6000	Shrubbery purchases	\$2400
Consulting	\$400		
Down to Earth		Sweeney Seed Co.	
Lawn renovation	\$6000	Purchases	\$12,000
Core aeration	\$1400	Referrals	\$4000
Consulting	\$600		

TABLE 2 'COMPETITOR REFERRALS' WORK

Down to Earth, Inc.		Absolute Lawn Care	
Equipment rentals	\$840	Mowing subcontracting	\$27,000
Sales referrals	\$1680	Leaf removal	\$300
Landscape services	\$1500	Clean-up services	\$5000
Lawn renovation	\$2000		
Sale of used equipment	\$2200		
Clean-up services	\$3000		
Down to Earth, Inc.		Grass Roots, Inc.	
Core aeration	\$2800	Mowing subcontracting	\$55,000
Equipment rentals	\$640	Leaf removal subcontracting	\$6000
Grading work	\$1500	Mulching subcontracting	\$7000

Work out the details. Jobs will be referred to that company with that specific piece of equipment. Table 2 shows actual real-life breakdowns.

Consultations work

Did you ever consider being a consultant? A natural way to entertain this idea would be to capitalize on your field of expertise. Consulting has propelled our business into a new era. The category of consultant sets your business apart from the competition, and clients respect your opinion more readily. Naturally, when you are the consultant for the job prospect, your company will usually secure the work.

Consulting services have opened the door for multiple sales with existing clients. Also, consulting is a nice part-time job when you retire. If you are patient and excel in a specific area, this golden opportunity will be a winner for you.

Speak up!

Speaking engagements allow a business owner an avenue for excellent sales leads. When you are the guest speaker, it is safe to assume that your company is an authority on the topic. Some in the audience may want to hire you for their work. From practical experience, here are some establishments that regularly need speakers, and most will pay a fee:

- ▶ garden centers
- ▶ university extension programs
- ▶ horticultural clubs
- ▶ professional landscape associations
- ▶ suppliers
- ▶ retail stores

Employee advantage

Your employees are an excellent sell in today's marketplace. If you have superb employees, use this during your sales call. Here are the fine points about our employees we highlight during the conversation with potential customers:

- ▶ our average employee has more than 10 years experience;
- ▶ 35 is the average age of our employees;

- ▶ the average level of education is three years of college;
- ▶ absenteeism is negligible;
- ▶ they are technically adept, courteous and willing to please;
- ▶ the same employees are always assigned to the customer's property.

Three year contracts

When proposing commercial contracts, write the contract for three years. The first two years should offer services at the same prices each year. In the third year, there should be a large increase. This selling approach has worked well in securing contracts over a large number of uninterrupted years of service.

Generally, when the committee or purchasing agent looks over the proposal, they like the idea that the price will not go up from the previous year's contracts for two years.

Most importantly, this method protects landscape management companies from new, over-ambitious board members who want to change the world.

The three-year period tends to weather all changes in personnel, and provides a good backbone for your business. □

—The author is founding owner of Down to Earth, Inc., Wilmington, Del., and a member of the LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT editorial advisory panel. Look for Part II of this 'Selling' series in April's LM.

Two crews from two different companies combine efforts to get sod down before a rain storm.

