

Quality: the client makes the call

Landscape service and quality have improved greatly over the past 35 years, but the customer still knows what he wants.

By JOHN B. CALSIN, JR.



Educated guesses are often wrong, especially when they're made about an industry that changes as rapidly as the landscape business. The Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA) admits as much, which is why its "Crystal Ball Report" of 1989 ran a section called "Hits and Misses," with notable misses such as the mistaken prediction that mobile homes would proliferate; landscaping would help provide a natural energy source; and "Environment Contractor" would be a new industry specialty.

As LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT—through the eyes of a few of the industry's most visible leaders—takes a look at quality and service improvements over the past 35 years, and somewhere into the future, a line from ALCA's 1992 *Crystal Ball Report XII*, seems appropriate:

"We tend to believe that we know quality. We believe that if I provide quality as I understand it, then

Clients were expected to accept technical quality as presented by the contractor. Today, they just want to like what they see.

my client will be pleased. Unfortunately, we rarely ask our clients if they are pleased or what we could do to please them more."

Depending upon whom one talks with, this view is either generally accepted in some form, or it is not accepted. Both those who do and do not hold this view are successful.

So what has happened with quality and service through the years? And, will anything new be happening as we move into the new millennium?

Tom Lied, former past president of ALCA and the chairman of the Crystal Ball Committee, begins with a look back from about 30 years ago.

Technical standards

"In the early part of landscape contracting as I know it," recalls Lied, "technical soundness had to

Due in part to increasing competition and acquisitions, some companies go for cost first, quality second.

do with the concept that we as landscape contractors knew and understood quality and were telling our



Lied: Portray what your client seeks.

clients what quality was, and expecting them to believe us and to allow us to do for them what we thought was the right thing for them to do."

Clients were expected to accept technical quality as presented by the contractor.

Some landscape architectural firms measured quality differently.

According to Lied, these firms took the time to interview clients. They took what the clients had to work with and worked out a design to suit the client's taste. The process included negotiat-

is they're looking for. The contractor, design/build contractor or landscape architect and contractor must perceive what it is that the client wants and use their talent to produce that result. Rather than the result they think [the client] should have; that's called the 'requirement'."

"Quality has a whole different definition now," agrees Drew St. John II, of St. John and Associates, Hattiesburg, Miss. "With real estate prices and competition higher and better than ever, I think landscape contractors have had to make great strides from years ago."

Follow the leaders

St. John believes landscapers are following the quality lead of major, national service organizations.

"In the last 10 years we have identified ourselves, finally, as being a quality and service delivery organization. I think other companies like Federal Express and UPS...have helped let some of their quality and customer service trickle down to industries like ours."

"Quality, when we started, was pretty low," says Mike Rorie of Groundmaster, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio. He helped co-found a small, residential maintenance business in 1980. By early 1982, they recognized the need for a large, suburban, commercial groundskeeping company. At that point, the company shifted gears.

"There were very few quality standards in the industry. The standards were minimal," remembers Rorie.

Twenty years ago, a factory business paid an employee to do the work. The image of a well-manicured property was not something widely shared or understood by the average business.

"If you go back 20-some years, landscape maintenance was 'a lawnmower guy.' You almost wouldn't tell anybody you were in the business," recalls Gary



St. John: Greater strides required.



Quality of plant material and customer interaction are major success factors on the design/build side.

ing or letting a bid to accomplish the work. Then, the contractor did what the architect prescribed and did it in a technically sound manner.

"Quality as it is defined now is quite a different animal, and not easy for many people to accept," says Lied. "The issue now is that quality cannot be determined by the contractor or the purveyor.

Quality can only be measured by the client or the recipient. The client has to be able to portray what it



Thornton: Sees a skyrocketing service business.

Thornton, president of Thornton Gardens, Inc., Maineville, Ohio. His firm is a design/build, maintenance firm that does both maintenance and contracting.

"Now, a lot of people are proud to say they are in the landscape maintenance business," says Thornton. "It's grown to be a profession on its own and there are lots of people making money doing it."

But Thornton believes quality has not changed as a standard. "Most of the industry today is probably still based upon their own definition of quality or the vendor/industry definition of quality."

Technical expertise

There are two sides to the question of service improvements, as Lied sees it.

"Are we meeting the needs of our clients, and are we providing the service in a way that meets their expectations? The other side of it is, are we servicing our product in a technically sound manner? And I

would say that we are getting better in all of those precepts. But fewer firms are doing this."

Thornton thinks the sky's the limit for service improvements. He believes that most of the money spent in maintenance is spent on cutting grass, and "I

think things will change dramatically in the next decade. You won't have to mow once a week. That will either be done through chemicals (plant growth regulators) or new varieties of [dwarf] turfgrasses."

Rorie sees the primary difference in service between competing companies is that some are able to provide the full range of services a customer needs, rather than sharing with two to five other vendors.

Today, a company is required to do virtually all of the routing landscape maintenance services, anything relative to maintaining the site.

"That has really raised the high bar on who can compete," he said. "'Total Quality' came and went. People in all industries adapted to parts of the process and have since abandoned that process. You don't hear anything about TQM anymore. That is dead."

Rorie believes the groundskeeping business—and service industries in general—will remain labor intensive.

"The reality is you are going to have to have a worker who is low paid, provide a relatively high level of service in order to compete and grow...I would tell you you're going to have to do it faster, better, cheaper, like everything else."

"To me, quality was more defined by the service provider, namely the landscape contractor," says Steven Glover, CEO of L&L Landscape Services, Sunnyvale, Calif.

"I think we had the opinion and mindset that we knew what was best, and we knew what was right, and we'd go out and perform fast service to our level expectations. What we gave them, that's quality."

Local view not far off

Debbie Cole, owner of Greater Texas Landscape, Austin, points out that her view of quality is a local perspective, based on what has happened in Austin.

"Over the past 15-18 years, the landscape industry has really been born here. It's not all that old."

Cole says that prior to 1981, there were fewer than three landscape companies that did commercial work. In the residential segment, people either did it themselves, or had a nursery plant a tree. There were also fewer than five landscape architects in Austin, and the unskilled laborers were directed by the architect.

Shortly thereafter, says Cole, In 1982, Austin and Central Texas went through a boom. A city landscape ordinance required commercial landscaping on sites. And, many companies began to relocate to Austin. Cole believes it was not good work, but



Glover: Service as defined by the customer.

Why can't we take a lawnmower out and 'teach it' to mow grass? They do it in farming. Global Position Satellite has the capability of getting down to inches." — Gary Thornton

bad work, that got people to realize the need for quality. "Then, as bad work started to happen, people began to differentiate, they realized what bad work was, and the discussion of quality began." Cole says quality standards are "definitely customer driven now," and include responsiveness and timeliness on the maintenance side, and timeliness, quality of plant material and customer interaction on the design/build side.

Every market, says Cole, has its own perception of quality, and even clients within each market have differing perceptions.

"In Austin, they do not consciously say 'TQM'. They're doing it, but not thinking it, discussing it. It's sort of, if you want to stay in business, that's what you have to do."

Cole doesn't see any great changes in quality standards in the future, "because the clients set the parameters for quality, and that will happen for the next 10, 20 years."

"A company should find out what the customer wants and then, to the best of our ability, provide that for them," adds Glover.

"I don't think any of us are following a 'Total Quality' system by the book. I think we are creating our own systems. I think we are focused on committed to providing service and quality as it is defined by the customer."

Smarter customers

But landscaping will change, thinks Cole.

"Resources are becoming more limited, whether

it's money or water. Our clients are becoming much more educated about horticulture."

Cole says that as customers become more astute about horticulture, they are becoming more interested in managing their property correctly.

"People are willing to do what's right, as long as they understand it. I think there will be more of that."

Cole predicts the industry will have quieter equipment, equipment that is used less, and more use of growth regulators and low-maintenance grasses, or none at all.

Full...fuller...fullest service

"We don't just delve into landscaping," explains Ron Kujawa, president of Kujawa Enterprises, Inc., Kudahy, Wisc. "We will delve into anything which the customer thinks we can help them with: snowplowing; curb repair after a hard winter of snowplowing; filling cracked asphalt, sealing, striping asphalt...it could be just about anything customers ask his company to do that falls under the heading of outside maintenance."

About 20 years ago, Kujawa says, quality was something you could anticipate.

"There are often many contractors working for a client. The one that suggests and the one that anticipates client needs is in a better position than the



Kujawa: Some clients see only dollars jobs cost.

It's meeting the client's requirements and exceeding their expectations."

This takes the judgement of quality off of the contractor and puts it squarely in the hands of the client. It's a transition that is happening in the industry, but not yet totally.

"I think [Total Quality] is practiced by a quarter of the industry," suggests Lied. "I think it is recognized as a goal by another third to half of the industry; and ignored, unknown or consciously declined by the remaining quarter."

"There are a group of contractors that consider their clients the enemy."

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Expectations

"They're pure emotions," says Tom Lied of client expectations. They deal with:

- ▶ how is this process delivered to me?
- ▶ are my time lines met?
- ▶ is it fun to review the designs with you?
- ▶ is it fun to have the project unroll and have your employees at my place of business?
- ▶ is it an enjoyable experience, in which I can participate as much or as little as I choose?

Requirement and expectation round out the concept of the Total Quality philosophy. "The combination of those two things is what Total Quality is.

"You don't build a long term relationship by trying to put something over on people."

—Ron Kujawa

Kujawa links the service industry to the intangibles of quality.

"What's unfortunate in the service industry, is that all you sell are promises, you don't sell anything else. You promise to do this, you promise to do that."

Often, since dollars are the only common denominator, Kujawa says it is hard for a customer to judge true quality.

"Unless he's had the experience of working with people, the person who's buying it cannot measure the contractor's responsiveness, flexibility, punctuality," Kujawa said.

"All those intangible things are very difficult to measure. They only see one thing...dollars."

Long term relationships

Kujawa says the longer he successfully serves a customer and develops a relationship, the more the customer has confidence in him.

"They know we're going to look out for them. They don't have to continually look out for the bottom dollar."

He also sees quality from the standpoint of how it functions within the company.

"We have employees who have worked here since the '70s," says Kujawa. "I've got a number of 25-year people here."

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one who waits to be asked." "The customer doesn't have to be right," says Kujawa, "the customer has to be satisfied. That's all."

Service for 'boomers'

There is one thing we need to understand about the Boomer Phenomenon. Boomers are splitting into two groups: the "rich boomers" and the "poor boomers." The rich boomers were born between 1950 and 1960. They got into their houses when you could afford them and into careers when jobs were plentiful. The rich boomers inflated the prices of goods and got a head start on their careers, leaving the poor boomers—born between 1960 and 1970—in their wake.

The rich boomers have built their houses and are in them. They are not going to be out building things but they will have the most money to spend of any age group in the country. What will they spend their money on? Service. They will not want to mow their lawns, trim their shrubs or pull their weeds. They will not want to plant a few trees and shrubs to upgrade their landscape.

One of the fastest growing segments of this business is, and will be, maintenance. All across the country I have heard and seen the same things: contractors talking about how maintenance has paid the bills, how it is the only part of their business that is growing. Companies who never even considered maintenance three years ago are now scrambling to get into it.

Maintenance billing in this nation will exceed billing for new construction someday.

From "The Complete Business Manual for Landscape Irrigation and Maintenance Contractors," by Charles Vander Kooi, a Green Industry contractor and business consultant based in Littleton, Colo. He has been in the Green Industry for more than 30 years, and has done more than \$100 million in landscape projects. To receive a copy of the book, contact Vander Kooi & Assoc., Inc., at 303/697-

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Maintenance billing in the U.S. will someday exceed billing for new construction.