

The pro's guide to selling water features

By GREG WITTSTOCK

Selling water gardens is unlike selling any other type of landscaping. Most people have no concept of what water gardens cost, the maintenance they require or how they compliment a landscape design. These misconceptions can make selling a water feature a lot more complicated than selling traditional landscaping. However, once you master the sales and marketing of water features, you'll notice your entire company will benefit from the additional business water features create.

Qualifying the lead

The sales call starts the moment the phone rings in your office. More often than not, the first question out of the homeowner's mouth will be, "I'm interested in a small water feature. Immediately answering their question about cost is a mistake, but not answering it at all is even a bigger mistake."

The first thing you need to do is build perspective so that you and the customer are talking about the same topic. If you simply state a price off the bat your customer may be picturing a pre-formed tub with a fountain while you're picturing and pricing a beautiful water garden and waterfalls.

Educating the customer

Compare the investment of installing a water feature to the cost of purchasing a hot tub. After all, a hot tub has a pump, plumbing and mechanical filters. Comparatively, a pond has a rubber liner, stones, gravel, underwater lights, a biological filter, a landscaping berm and often a stream.

Clarifying that a water feature is not just a hole in the ground with a liner, and associating the cost with a familiar expense, such as a hot tub, helps educate the customer about his/her purchase. This also justifies the investment.



Explain how you'll help them pick out the best size, shape, design, and location in their yard for a water feature.

Selling the value

If after speaking with the customer about the wonders of water features and educating them about the value, they still do not buy in, wish them luck and hang up!

Set a price based on your costs and overhead, and stick to it. It's a proven fact that any project that dips below your base cost will cause you more problems than it's worth.

Once you have qualified a customer by informing them of your base cost for constructing a water feature, they have officially become a worthwhile lead. Now is not the time to let them know how you go about designing a water feature.

Tell the customer you'd be happy to mail them literature (i.e. brochure, video) about the product so they can see for themselves what is involved with owning a water garden.

Take notes about what interests them about water gardening. The customer will reveal valuable insights about their buying motives to you at this time. Explain how

you'd be happy to visit them and go over different design ideas. Tell them you'll come to their house whenever it is convenient for them.

Let them know you'll explain how to choose the best pumps, filters and even plants and fish based on their unique designs and desires.

Let them know you'll do all of this for a nominal charge of say \$30-\$50 (depending on where they're located and how much you feel your services are worth.)

The consultative process

At Aquascape Designs, Inc. we charge for design consultations. We believe customers who are willing to pay a modest fee for design time are definitely serious about spending thousands of dollars on a water feature. Furthermore, we explain to our customers that this procedure keeps us from charging them for unsuccessful sales calls. We don't want to penalize our customers for all those who don't buy. If they hire us, our design consultation is free!

When you go on a design consultation, the homeowners often greet you and ask you if you'd like to see the backyard. Let them know you'd prefer to start inside so you can first discuss their waterscape design options.

Building a rapport with your customer should always be the first thing you do on your visit. When you enter their home, resist going directly into your sales pitch. Compliment them on something unrelated to the pond. Small talk with prospective customers will put everyone at ease and will break down initial barriers. Additionally, you may learn some valuable insights that can be helpful for you to close the sale.

When the customer is ready, begin your presentation. Show them your work portfolio and let them know about your business. They may have already viewed literature you mailed earlier, so many of their questions may have been answered before you have arrived. Ask them what their desires are with a pond, continuously thinking about different design styles that would fit into their landscape and fit what they're looking for.

After you've gone through your presentation, talked about your company, water gardening and their expectations, go outside to begin the design.

Selling your expertise

Customers who know exactly what they want may not have the best design in mind. For instance, if someone wants you to build him/her a pond in the far corner of their property behind a pine tree, listen to their ideas. When they're through tell them you could build it there, or if they'd prefer for the same cost, you could build it right off their deck, just outside their sunroom.

Explain the advantages and disadvantages of their ideas and the reasons behind different options. Let the customers' comments convince them that you are trying to give them what they want (They spend most of their time inside the sunroom, so put the pond close to where they live—they'll enjoy it more.) It's good to let customers know it's the same cost no matter

where the water feature is placed.

A customer with no ideas on design is just as difficult to sell. Just like the customer who seems to know everything, you will need to educate this customer on his/her options. What you don't want to do is give someone too many options. Too many will confuse your customer and not allow you to suggest the best one.

Designing the pond

Few people understand scaled drawings. A garden hose is a perfect design tool.

A key to justifying the total expense for the job is breaking down all the itemized costs.

Simply lay out the size pond you feel would look good in the yard and is in line with what the customer described they desired. Almost everyone who sees a garden hose marking out an 11x16 pond is shocked at how little room it actually is.

Laying out a hose is the best way to convey size and shape to a customer. Once the hose is placed, ask the customer to adjust it to their liking. Make sure they make physical contact with the hose! Involving them in the design, however slight it may seem, greatly enhances their feelings of contributions to the project.

After the final adjustments are made, have them view the outline from different areas in the yard and various rooms in the house. Make any final adjustments and spray paint the area around the hose.

Writing up the contract

Now that the pond size and shape are determined you can write up the contract. Based on the square footage of the pond you can determine all your material costs for the job. Determining man-hours is difficult. Site conditions will vary from job to job. However, unless a major unforeseen problem occurs, you should be able to factor your typical installation to ± 10 percent of the total man-hours required to complete the job. As with anything, the more

jobs you do, the faster your crews will become at constructing the water feature.

On average, your typical crew of four to five laborers perfects the One-Day Pond System between their fourth and sixth installation (40-50 man-hours for ponds 200 square feet and under). Aquascape Designs, Inc. charges a flat rate of forty dollars per man-hour and gives the customer a guesstimate of how long it's going to take. If we bid out 50 man-hours and the job takes 45 we make out ahead. If the job takes 55 man-hours we don't charge the customer anymore. Approximating man-hours lets the customer feel the more efficient you are, the better your prices are.

A key to justifying the total expense for the job is breaking down all the individual itemized costs. By including items that only cost a few dollars, you're showing the customer you're thorough in your pricing, while letting them see everything that's involved with putting a water feature together.

Closing the sale

You can't close the sale unless you give the customer an option to buy. Additionally, it is often necessary to create a buying dilemma to convince a customer to commit. Every contractor has the ability to create a buying dilemma with their prospects. After you've given them the proposal, and they say they will think about it, tell them to take as much time as they need to feel comfortable making the decision. Inform them however, of your current status with back-order work. If you're booked for two months, let them know you could schedule the job for the first available day after you have finished your current obligations. For example, it is close to the end of the season and you may get a big job or two while they're thinking their project is over. You may not be able to get back out to do their job until next year (unless of course they can give you a deposit today so you can put them on the schedule). □

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