

Keys to satisfying (and keeping) clients

Top lawn and landscape pros share what they've learned about putting smiles on customers' faces.

By ROBERT E. REAVES

Customer retention equals survival in the landscape business. Increasingly, it seems you have to provide legendary customer service to retain and grow your customer base. But once you catch the customer satisfaction fever, you'll soon realize it's contagious!

"I think customer satisfaction starts in the way we present and perform our service. If your delivery is good, it takes away the variables that promote dissatisfaction," says David Harris, president of Liqui-Green Lawn and Tree Care, Bloomington, IL. His company provides fertilization and pest control for a customer base that is 90% residential and 10% commercial.

We're always ready

"We're on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week," says Howard Freilich, CEO of Blondie's Treehouse Inc., Larchmont, NY. His company is the eighth largest interior landscape management company in the country — with more than 800 clients in the New York City and tri-state area.

"The customer satisfaction philosophy

is the foundation of our company and extends from our employees to our customers," says Wayne Conrad, who built Clean-Cut in Austin, TX, which is now a part of TruGreen LandCare.

Pam Stark, vice president, client relations of Environmental Care Inc., Calabasas, CA, says ECI has a passion for customer satisfaction. "We reinforce the



Environmental Care Inc.'s Pam Stark

importance of customer satisfaction through an ongoing customer survey program, face-to-face client interviews and in-house training programs." ECI has five divisions, including exterior landscape management, interiorscape, water management, golf course management and tree care. They have service centers throughout the United States.

importance of customer satisfaction through an ongoing customer survey program, face-to-face client interviews and in-house training programs." ECI has five divisions, including exterior landscape management,

"We're in a service industry that must deliver excellent customer service," says Richard Akerman, whose Northwest Landscape Industries, Tigard, OR, was an industry leader when it was purchased by TruGreen in 1998. "A company can deliver the absolute best quality landscapes, but if you don't maintain exceptional customer satisfaction, you'll probably lose the business." With three branches in the Portland area, his business is 65% landscape management and 35% landscape installation.

Be quick on the draw

One important way to keep customers satisfied is to respond to service calls quickly.

"If nothing else, leave the customer a note and let them know you have an action plan. Your response time is very important because it lets the customer know you value their business," explains Harris.

Written communication can be an effective tool. "After a contract is signed, we always send a letter thanking the customer for their business," adds Matt Stano, owner of Stano Landscaping, Milwaukee, WI. The company's services include residential





that you value them as a customer," he remarks. His commitment to customer satisfaction even extends to customers who have canceled contracts. "One example is to have focus lunches with people who have actually fired us. Several months later, many of these customers come back to us."

Check and recheck

Job site inspections are an essential part of customer satisfaction at every company we interviewed. Liqui-Green has an inspection program called GoldCare, with one to three inspection of a customer's lawns per year. "We look for any problems and make recommendations for a customer's future needs," Harris explains.

Clean-Cut has an impressive three-step inspection program for its commercial customers. Wayne Conrad visited accounts in his territory every Monday. He walked the properties and visited with the property manager about special needs or problems. The second visit of the week was by the Clean-Cut crew leader, who checked in with the property manager when the crew arrived at the site. At the end of the week, each property was inspected by the director of operations to ensure the work was done to the customer's satisfaction.

Survey and find out

Used correctly, surveys can be an excellent way to evaluate customer satisfaction and strengthen relationships with customers. When ECI begins a contract with a

new customer, they survey the client about 60 days after the contract begins. Existing customers receive a written survey once per year. Survey results are tabulated by service center, region and division — providing an excellent snapshot of customer satisfaction levels.

"Complaints from customers are seen as an opportunity at ECI," comments Stark. After a service center receives a complaint, the service center manager contacts the customer to resolve the problem. Several weeks later, Stark contacts the customer to make sure the service center responded to their complaint. "We actually encourage complaints. When we take action and exceed customer expectations, it makes the bond even stronger between ECI and the client." Stark says this ECI philosophy is called "service recovery."

Harris believes surveys can be valuable when used under certain guidelines. "A company should use surveys strictly as surveys — not vehicles for up-selling a customer. In many cases, companies take surveys to the extreme and constantly use them for up-selling," he says. That can irritate clients.

Your customer satisfaction program? Build it on getting back to customers quickly, listening to them and delivering what they want—when they want it.

Robert Reaves is with Irricom, a communication and PR firm located in Austin, TX.

and commercial landscape design, construction and management, as well as a snow and ice control operation. "When a major snowfall comes, we do mass faxing to update our customers on snow plow service to let them know we are coming back. We remind them if they have any special needs to give us a call, allowing us to stay one step ahead of the customer."

Stano believes that aesthetics are important to customers — little things like placing tarps over piles of topsoil or sweeping the sidewalk. Some landscape construction projects can leave the customer very upset. "There is a tendency in the landscape construction business is to start a job, leave and come back later. We try to get as much done as possible at a construction site. This leaves the customer with the feeling that the project is progressing well."

Let customers tell you

Meanwhile in Oregon, Akerman knows nondefensive listening is an integral part of customer satisfaction. "It is essential to ask the customer what they like or don't like about your service. This sends a message

Suggested reading on customer satisfaction

Barlow, Janelle and Claus Møller. *A Complaint is a Gift*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1996.

Gerson, Dr. Richard. *Great Customer Service for Your Small Business and Beyond Customer Service*. Contact PLCAA at 800/458-3466 or www.plcaa.org.

Gross, T. Scott. *Positively Outrageous Service*. Warner Books, 1991.

Heskett, James L. *Service Breakthroughs: Changing the Rules of the Game*. The Free Press, 1990.

Karr, Ron and Blohowiak, Don. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Great Customer Service*. Alpha Books, 1997.

Kessler, Shiela. *Measuring and Managing Customer Satisfaction*. ASQC Quality Press, 1996.

Leland, Karen and Keith Bailey. *Customer Service for*

Dummies. IDG Books Worldwide, Inc., 1994.

Salant, Priscilla and Don A. Dillman. *How to Conduct Your Own Survey*. John Wiley & Sons, 1994.

Spector, Robert and Patrick D. McCarthy. *The Nordstrom Way*. John Wiley & Sons, 1995.

Whiteley, Richard C. *The Customer Driven Company*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1972.

Willingham, Ron. *Hey, I'm the Customer*. Prentice-Hall, 1972.