

Take the *plunge* into irrigation

By PALMA PATRUCCI

For many landscape maintenance professionals, making the decision to expand your services to include irrigation system installation and maintenance not only requires increased product knowledge, but a renewed focus on sales techniques as well.

The best place to start is with your local irrigation equipment distributor. A distributor will be able to walk you through various irrigation products, show you how the products work and provide valuable guidance for setting up your new venture. Additionally, they'll be able to put you in touch with manufacturer sales and technical support personnel.

Before taking the plunge into irrigation, it's best to learn as much as you can about the products currently on the market. Talk to your distributor and see when they will be holding a product field day in your area. Also, try to meet with a distributor sales representative, who may also recommend additional sources of training.

Arming yourself with the correct product and sales information is vital. Competition can be fierce. Focus on offering your customers and potential customers quality products and service. This will help set you apart from your competition.

Seven steps for success

The following 7 steps will help you sell irrigation services to your customers:

TIP #1: Talk to existing customers.

▶ Do they have an automatic irrigation system? Is it water efficient, automatic and was it installed properly? Repairing or

retrofitting an existing system can be an excellent source of revenue and can provide some valuable experience as well.

▶ Do your customers' properties have extensively landscaped beds? Do they have a drip irrigation system? If not, find out why. Demonstrate a drip irrigation system.

▶ Explain the benefits of automatic irrigation: eliminating hand watering; efficient coverage; and the ability to apply water at the correct time (early morning).

▶ If they have a front yard irrigation system, is there an opportunity to do the backyard or hanging pots?

TIP #2: Ask customers for referrals.

▶ In addition to asking friends, family and your existing customers' neighbors, talk to local suppliers. They can be an excellent source to find "overflow" work from your competitors.

TIP #3: Use direct mail.

▶ Develop and send out business reply cards (BRCs). One side discusses your services and a place for interested potential clients to respond. The other side has your address with prepaid postage. Include your phone and fax number.

▶ A BRC can advertise a special price if your potential customers act now. Put a time limit on the special to create urgency.

▶ Place a flier in a third-party coupon pack mailer like "Value Pack."

▶ Pay a teenager to canvas nearby neighborhoods and place fliers on doors.

TIP #4: Immediately cultivate leads.

▶ Call the potential customer *immediately* and set up an appointment.

▶ Be prompt for the appointment and dress professionally. Your image will affect the first impression you make.



Develop a list of pertinent questions to gather information about the needs of the potential customer. Give some background on you and your company. Have references ready.

► Make sure your truck or car is clean.
► Develop a list of questions to gather information about the needs of the potential customer. Explain why you need the questions and give some background on you and your company. Have references and phone numbers handy. (Get approval from the references beforehand).

► Set up a second appointment so you can come back with your recommendations and a proposal.

Some manufacturers provide homeowner literature to include in your presentation. Use it.

► Present a typed, professional and clear proposal. Include prices, service and all value-added services you will provide. If your proposal is higher than most competitors' prices, be prepared to explain why you're worth it.

► Ask for the job!

TIP #5: Keep promises

► Follow through on your promises, prices and commitments. Show up for the job on the day you said you would come and be prompt. If you're delayed, call and explain your situation.

► Inform your customer how long you expect to be working on their property and try to keep to that timetable.

► Clean up the job site daily.

TIP #6: Promote yourself

► Place your company sign and sales brochures in a visible place on the job site, with the client's permission, of course.

TIP #7: Educate the customer.

► Once job is done, walk the homeowner through the system. Explain the controller, basic troubleshooting, and cleaning or changing a nozzle. Place a sticker with your company name and phone number on the controller cabinet.

► Follow up with the customer either by phone or mail two weeks after completing the job to ensure satisfaction and to answer any questions. If the customer is happy, ask to use him or her as a reference.

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A-TO-Z IRRIGATION EQUIPMENT TERMS

Application Rate: A measurement of the volume of water applied to landscape in a given time. (In the United States, usually expressed in inches per week. Its metric equivalent is centimeters per week.)

Automatic Control Valve: A valve which is actuated by an automatic controller by electric or hydraulic means. It is synonymous with "remote control valve."

Automatic System: An irrigation system which irrigates in accordance with a preset program.

Controller: A controller is a timing device (usually electronic) which activates, times and sequences control valves according to a user-defined program.

Coverage: The area of landscape watered by a sprinkler or grouping of sprinklers.

Cycle: The completion of a controller's watering time when it sequences through all the zones in an irrigation system.

Domestic Water: Potable or "drinking" water. It can be used as a source of irrigation water, but once water enters an irrigation system it is no longer considered domestic or potable.

Drip Irrigation: This is a low-volume method of irrigation utilizing specially designed components to deliver precise amounts of water directly to the root zone of plants. Used primarily in landscaped and planter areas, this irrigation method maintains an optimum moisture range in the soil.

Dynamic Pressure: The pressure of the irrigation system during operation. Synonymous with "working pressure."

Evapotranspiration: The amount of water lost by the plant and the soil through both evaporation and transpiration.

Irrigation Efficiency: The percentage of water which is actually stored in the soil and available for use by the landscape as compared to the total amount of water provided to the landscape.

Irrigation System: A set of components which includes the water source (e.g., domestic

service or pump), water distribution network (e.g., pipe), control components (e.g., valves and controllers), emission devices (e.g. sprinklers and emitters) and possibly other general irrigation equipment (e.g. quick coupler and back-flow preventer).

Irrigation Requirement: The quantity of water needed by the landscape to satisfy the evaporation, transpiration and other uses of water in the soil. The irrigation requirement is usually expressed in depth of water and equals the net irrigation requirement divided by the irrigation efficiency.

Precipitation Rate: The rate at which a sprinkler system applies water to the landscape over a period of time. PR is expressed in depth of water per hours of operation, usually in "inches per hour."

Radius of throw: The distance a sprinkler will distribute, or discharge water. It is conventionally the radius of water discharged from the sprinkler nozzle.

Rain Shut-Off Device: A device which prevents the controller from activating the valves when a preset amount of precipitation occurs.

Remote Control Valve: A valve which is actuated by an automatic controller by electric or hydraulic means. Synonymous with "automatic control valve."

Rotor: A rotor is a rotary sprinkler, usually with an adjustable arc. Generally, rotors have single or multiple nozzles which rotate across the area of coverage to distribute water. Rotors have a distance of throw from 15 to 160 feet and economically apply water to large areas by using fewer heads than spray heads.

Spray head: A spray head is a fixed-arc sprinkler that requires no moving parts to distribute water. Generally, sprayhead sprinklers emit single or double sheets (or "fans") of water in a fixed pattern. They have a distance of throw of 5 to 18 feet and are used in smaller areas.

Valve: A valve is a mechanical or electrical device used to control the flow of water in a system. In most irrigation systems, the valve is actuated by a controller.