

Refusing a job because it's not in your area of expertise is professional. It says that you're an expert in what you normally do, but not in that particular task.



Know your boundaries

Recent magazine articles on the sale and consumption of smaller landscape maintenance firms by larger ones show that the trend is toward more efficient, larger and theoretically more profitable companies. But smaller companies must also develop strategies to focus on services suitable for them and how to keep customers from leaving for the big boys.

Your strategy must be clear and focused -- a defined set of services that determine the type of equipment, staffing, customer base and expertise you need for those tasks. One step we all should take is to ask: How far will we go to satisfy our customers with services we don't normally provide and what are we qualified to do? These questions need to be asked before we get in over your head.

Above and beyond

There are two areas of consideration when considering offering "special" services, strategic and tactical. Here are several strategic questions we try to answer before we go any further on a job:

- ▶ Can we make it safe and profitable?
- ▶ Is it something we are qualified to do?
- ▶ Is this a one-time job or a new service we will regularly provide?
- ▶ How successful can the task be?
- ▶ What are the consequences of a problematic completion?
- ▶ What are the long-term affects to the customer?

Then, we look at the tactical, or practical, side of the job:

- ▶ Am I qualified to teach it to my employees?

- ▶ Do we have the necessary equipment?
- ▶ Are we willing to invest in new equipment if we don't already have it?
- ▶ Will we rent equipment?
- ▶ Do we have the necessary licensing?
- ▶ Do we have the necessary insurance?

With these questions in mind, here are our options:

1. Do the job.
2. Hire a subcontractor.
3. Refuse the job.

Take on the job

Just recently, I ran into a manager of an established lawn maintenance firm with an excellent reputation for service. The company, located in southeastern Michigan, also prunes, weeds and mulches the properties of homeowners and commercial sites.

The owner told me that a long-time residential customer asked them to plant a row of Colorado spruces. You may already have guessed that this project was a disaster with long-lasting effects. Although a valuable customer asked for the installation, the manager refused at first, saying that it wasn't the kind of work that he did any longer. He eventually made an exception because he didn't want his customer looking for another contractor who could do the work (and perhaps take over what he had been doing for years). Needless to say, the project was over budget, took too long and the trees died.

You may have acquired some experience performing a certain type of service, but do you know enough about it to be able to teach it to your staff? Those are two different standards. And your staff should understand more than the basics — your employees

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should also know the safest, most efficient and most practical way to perform a task.

Insurance is invaluable. If anything can happen, it just might. Insurance companies may give you performance ratings. These numbers designate the type of services you provide. Some insurance policies are more

Well into an ongoing landscape job, the owners decided they wanted this large, damaged tree removed (above). How successful do you think this guy (inset) will be?



general than others. For instance, insurance for a lawn maintenance firm may not include snow plowing services, even though we often associate the two together.

The lack of equipment can have nasty consequences, particularly when it comes to safety and profitability. For instance, a customer sees how well a company is installing a landscape and asks if a large oak can be removed at the same time. You're there, the customer wants it and they

might pay more for the work because it makes it easier on them.

Often it's best to sub out the job

Now you have a problem because you have to figure out how that tree will come down, where it will land, how you will dispose of it, how you will clean up, if your

staff can do the work and if your insurance will cover the tree removal.

It may be better to hire a subcontractor. If you already have a subcontractor for that particular service, you already know the routine. If you don't, you must do your due diligence, both as a service provider and as a consumer.

If the job must be done quickly, don't

use a subcontractor you don't know. Ask other customers whom they have used and take your time finding one who does the level of work you want.

I work a lot with deck, brick and tree contractors. I use two contractors for each category depending on the type of work and time schedule. This kind of subcontractor may be the way to go. You can provide the service without making sacrifices with potentially dangerous outcomes. Be aware, though, that subcontractors can just as easily ruin as well as strengthen a customer relationship with your firm.

Turn it down

Refusing a job is one of the more difficult aspects to contracting. One of the advantages of a smaller company is the ability to provide services at many different levels and be a one-stop shop for your customers. But after balancing a job's requirements with your capabilities, refusing a job may be the best alternative.

In fact, refusing a job because it is not in your area of expertise is professional. It says that you are an expert in what you normally do, but not in that particular task. Customers, believe it or not, will respond better than you might have expected.

There are all sizes of companies out there. Many full-service contractors have been successful by providing convenient multiple services to their customers. But it must work both ways, for you and your customers.

Consider your boundaries and stay within those limits. It will ultimately make you, your staff and your customers much happier in the end.

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