

Marketing 101

Use "new" marketing to drive your business

BY MARC BOWERS

Marketing used to be a partnership between a business and its customers or potential customers that was relationship and sales driven. Today, with marketing more competitive than ever, each relationship needs to translate into better profitability. Here are suggestions about how to more effectively market your organization.

First, identify your sources of profitability. Make determining where tomorrow's dollars will come from your number one objective.

Second, do the following things to make more money:

- ▶ Cultivate an image
- ▶ "Own" a specialty
- ▶ Always ask for the order
- ▶ Set clear expectations

Cultivate an image

What image do you want to cultivate? You can start with the image you and your employees give on the job, and that often starts with professional looking clothes. How much do collared golf shirts cost relative to t-shirts? Require your employees to conform to a professional dress code.

Own a specialty

You need to be known for a specialty that sets you above your peers. Start by collecting reference letters from your highest profile and happiest customers. Show them not just to new clients but also to your peers. If you have differentiated your services enough for a particular area, even peer referrals and collaborative projects are a possibility.

Ask for the order

Your best source of new business is from client referrals. Many landscape managers fail to realize the cardinal rule of marketing: You won't get the job until you ask the customer for the order.

Another key idea in the "ask for the order" department is that it's more profitable to sell incremental products and services to existing customers than spend time and money to solicit new customers. Have you recently considered up-selling your existing clients? A flyer listing your services or current projects can generate new business from existing clients.

If you aren't comfortable with asking for referrals, let your customers know you're available to a select group of their friends.

Set clear expectations

Clear expectations have two benefits. By making sure customer expectations are well-articulated and agreed upon by you and the client, and that they're finalized in person and in writing, you take control of a customer relationship early and can under-promise if necessary. Then, you're set up to over-deliver.

The other benefit of setting expectations is to help you manage unforeseen developments. When a project hits a hurdle that threatens your ability to deliver on time, the hardest thing to do is to tell the customer.

Some of the most positive customer feedback comes from jobs that went awry but were dealt with swiftly and professionally. "Awry" doesn't mean you'll reap rewards should you



Collared shirts as part of a mandatory dress code can help you cultivate a professional image.

run a backhoe into a septic system. It does mean people will often forgive those who accept responsibility when something goes wrong.

The most effective way to deal with a problem is by "problem/solution" presenting. Nobody wants to hear what you did wrong — they just want to hear how you will make it better.

Professionalism is key

Every landscape operation projects an image through which it's identified. If you're a landscape contractor, lawn care operator or in-house grounds manager, you are the business to the public. Projecting an image is a never-ending responsibility. Take it seriously and be consistent in your actions.

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