

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

Always listen to your mom

I can hear my mother's voice in my head. No, it's not the usual situation where there's no physical presence, just her words ricocheting around inside my cranium. I'm actually talking to her on the phone — at work, no less. She's telling me about a situation that's developed with her irrigation contractor. Apparently, she'd given the guy a down payment of \$1,500 to install a \$5,000 irrigation system and told him she wanted it installed before they went on vacation. Here it was, one week before their vacation, and she hadn't heard a peep from him.

"You're in the landscape business, can't you do something?" she pleaded.

"Whoa, whoa," I said. What was I supposed to do, put a mugshot of this guy on the cover of the magazine with a caption that read, "Wanted: Dead or Alive"? My mother has never quite understood exactly what *Landscape Management* is all about, but maybe now was the time to explain it to her in detail.

"Mom, the purpose of this magazine is to —"

"You know, I called that guy's secretary and told her I want my money back right now," she said, her voice reaching a feverish pitch. "Not only that, I told her I was going to call the local television news and report them."

Now I felt sympathetic toward this guy. No longer would I question why certain landscape and irrigation contractors choose to make commercial work their primary focus.

"You know, mom, those guys are backlogged beyond belief right now, and —"

"But he didn't even call me back!" she cried.

And it hit me. He may have looked at her as a nag-

ging customer, but she was definitely in her right to demand action. I was willing to bet this guy wasn't a *Landscape Management* subscriber. If he were, he undoubtedly would have read countless articles about how customer service is so important, and how you should always stay in touch with customers. With all the modes of communication in existence these days, there's absolutely no excuse not to return a client's call. If he had, even if it was to tell her that he wouldn't be able to install the system before the vacation, she at least wouldn't have suspected that he'd run off with her money.

There's a few lessons in all of this:

► Always respond to your customers' e-mails, phone calls or pages. It really doesn't take that much time, especially if you make it brief. It lets them know you're still alive, at least.

► Follow through on your promises but if you can't at least call and explain why. Then tell them when you will be able to start the project so your customer won't go ballistic.

► Don't mess with hotheaded Irish women.

Well, that last statement is probably unfair, not to mention stereotypical. Maybe it should read: Don't create your own headaches. That's exactly what this guy did, and what you should avoid doing.

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If he had just once returned her phone call, she at least wouldn't have suspected that he'd run off with her money.

