

Ask 'em what they think

How would a weekend at the Chicago Ritz Carlton sound to you? Would you treat yourself to a great meal? Check out a blues club? Take in an afternoon Cubs game at Wrigley? I can think of about two dozen things to do in Chicago on a weekend, particularly if somebody else is picking up the tab.

Robert Kinnucan is president of Kinnucan Total Landscape Management. I sat with him and several other landscape pros at an ALCA round table this past November.

Robert's company, based in Lake Bluff, IL, competes in the take-no-prisoners Chicagoland market. Some of the biggest and toughest regional operations in the nation duke it out there. Thousands of smaller operators growl over pieces of the market the big guys don't snap up.

If you want to be in the landscape business (and stay in business) in this market, you can't afford to be timid. And Kinnucan's firm is not timid.

Give to receive

Several seasons ago, it put up the money for the Ritz Carlton weekend and offered the promotion in a survey to homeowners in several upscale neighborhoods it wanted to penetrate. The Ritz Carlton agreed to a special rate, realizing it would reap some positive publicity in those neighborhoods. The response from potential clients was great, says Robert.

Even though that was a one-shot deal, Kinnucan preaches the value of ongoing customer contact. He regularly mails clients a one-page survey folded in

thirds that they can complete and return within 30 seconds. Respondents are eligible to win \$100 in free services from his company. Drawings are held quarterly.

The mailer's purpose is to measure client satisfaction. If there's a problem with his firm's services, it will show up on the survey and his managers can take action.

Kinnucan says the surveys keep his company's name and services in front of customers' eyes, serving as another form of advertising, subtle but effective.

But even the lure of winning a valuable prize sometimes can't generate the kind of response, at least not quickly enough, that Kinnucan sometimes feels he needs to keep his operation on track. "Often you get a delayed bounce on these surveys," he says.

Then it's time to call or meet with customers personally and find out what they think about your services and, perhaps, find out what else you can do for them.

Nobody in this business can afford to offer an expenses-paid weekend or \$100 in free work to a client every time you contact them. But almost all customers will appreciate that you've asked them what they think anyway.

Take this opportunity to thank clients for allowing you to serve them, too. Your brief and simple customer satisfaction surveys probably pack a lot more goodwill than you think.

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