

# inside the owner's head

BY JASON STAHL / MANAGING EDITOR

## Lowballers? Forget about 'em

Everyone in the Green Industry knows lowballing is an unfortunate aspect of business that'll never go away. If that's the case, you'd think every business should develop a strategy for combatting lowballing, right? Wrong.

It seems a majority of landscape/lawn pros believe the best way to fight lowballers is to not fight them at all.

"I don't want to defeat the lowballer," says Dennis Barriball of Hemlock Landscapes, Chagrin Falls, OH. "There should be no strategy to beat these guys. Let them defeat themselves."

How will they defeat themselves? "By continuing to lowball," says Steve Corrigan, president of Mountainview Landscaping, Chicopee, MA. "Lowballers tend to do shoddy workmanship trying to make up for the mistakes they made in submitting a bid. Poor workmanship will catch up to a contractor quickly."

### Choose customers carefully

But if there's a non-strategy out there, it's choosing your customers carefully and offering outstanding customer service.

"I tell all of my clients, potential and current, that we're not the least expensive guys in town, nor do we want to be," says Budd Perlman of Tex-Scape, Plano, TX. "We believe the value of our services is worth what people pay."

Andee Bechtold of Longhorn Landscape Creations, McKinney, TX, agrees that up-front communication with a client can do wonders in the client selection department. "Even when we were contacted to do work for a municipality, we met and explained that we were not a competitive

bid company," Bechtold says. But learning what the city's specific needs were resulted in winning the contract. "I feel if you are clear about who your client is, this is the best line of defense against the frustrating experience of lowballing," she says.

"My idea is, if I can't make money on you, then why would I want you?" says Bruce Sheppard of Tara Holdings, Tillsonburg, Ontario. "These bottom feeders will always be looking for the best price. I want customers that I can build a relationship with."

Once landscape/lawn care pros choose good customers, their next line of strategy is to "customer service them to death."

"We have customer service representatives who are solely responsible for seeing our clientele the day before the service," says Preston Ewing of Kimball Property Maintenance, Draper, UT. "Our customer reps help us overcome the problem of slow turn-

arounds on problems and lack of relationships with vendors."



**Preston Ewing sends customer service reps out to visit clients.**

### Focus on what counts

So, if you shouldn't waste time on trying to beat lowballers, what should you do?

"Stay the course of your existing business plan (one year) and strategic plan (three to five years)," says Barriball. "Know your market niche and who your competitors truly are."

Many landscape/lawn pros emphasize a focus on quality, but it takes time to establish a reputation for quality work. Some would then advise to a new company to make sure to do quality work from the start.

"Over time, you can develop a reputation

### Tips for fighting lowballers

- Don't fight them; let them defeat themselves
- Choose customers carefully
- Focus on performing high quality work
- Know your market niche
- "Customer service" your clients to death



**Ed Koenig says a good reputation will go a long way.**

for quality, have referrals as the major source of new leads, and show outstanding products and projects in portfolios, flower shows, etc.," says Ed Koenig of Lifestyle Landscaping, North Ridgeville, OH.

### Blessing in disguise?

Some view lowballers as a blessing to the industry. Since so many of them come and go, they frequently offer choice business opportunities for savvy business owners.

"Lowballers coming and going might fit your strategic planning in terms of acquisition opportunities," says Barriball. "Some of these guys are great technicians, and as they begin to flounder, there might exist a purchase opportunity, at least the chance to call them up and offer them a career."

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