

Property managers speak out

Brent Flory's Freedom Lawns provides on-call services to Great Lakes Chemical Corporation.



Forget being the lowest bidder — here's the real lowdown

BY GEORGE WITTERSCHEIN

Whoa partner, wrong idea

Three property managers — one in New Jersey, one in Indiana and one in California — told us what they want from a maintenance contractor, and it may surprise you since not one selected price as the overriding consideration. Sure, price is a big deal, but you'd better understand their property and their needs. And — this is crucial — you must be able to fulfill those needs.

The Jersey story

Susan Morgan has managed Mendham Commons, a residential town house community of 300 homes in New Jersey's up-

scale Morris County, for the past nine years. What does she want from a landscape contractor?

"Know the community, what the residents expect, what the budget is and any unique qualities that the community may have," says Morgan with emphasis. For example, the size of Mendham Commons is unique to that region of New Jersey. Few other home associations in that area have 100 acres of property.

"I don't think that a smaller landscaper could take on this contract. The contractor has to know his company's limitations and avoid getting his company,

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Editors' note: This is the second article in a two-part series. Last month, we let landscape contractors discuss how they successfully deal with property managers. This month, we let property managers do the talking.

You'd love to land the contract at that upscale apartment complex on the edge of town. "I'll drop a low-priced bid on the property manager's desk and win the contract hands down. That'll do it."

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and us, into hot water down the road," Morgan says. "The contractor has to be honest and he has to be realistic." That starts with the contractor thoroughly understanding the specifications of the project, "and not just quoting a dollar figure to me," Morgan adds.

Low bid blues

Morgan says that she and the owners in the tight-knit Commons community got stung by a low-cost service provider once and learned their lesson.

"Almost a decade ago, our Board accepted the lowest bid on the landscape maintenance contract. It was a disaster," she says. "The contractor and his people didn't know what they were doing. Their crew didn't seem knowledgeable. They cut

corners. Their manager wasn't here when we needed him. I spent a lot of hours out on the property coaching the landscaper's crew. I don't have the time to be doing that."

The Commons canceled that contract and went back to its former maintenance contractor. The town house community gladly agreed to that contractor's original bid price. "Price is just one factor in the whole picture," says Morgan.

She adds that she most appreciates contractors who are willing to be frank. "Learn and understand what we're looking for. Then be honest about whether you can provide the services at the level required and at the price point you've bid," she says. "For example, do you have the staff resources needed to perform the services?"

"I also want the contractor to be proactive and not act on a problem only after I've found it," she continues. "For example, prior to bidding, examine the property and, if you see something like Bradford (pear tree) roots pushing up sidewalks, mention that to me going into the bid, saying, 'Don't you think that situation with the Bradfords should be in here, Susan, and that the price in the contract should reflect that?' I'd rather hear this sooner than later."

Also, the bid should break things down in detail so the property manager sees how many man-hours per week or month the landscapers antici-



Property managers want crews with equipment that gets the job done efficiently.

pate for each service, such as turf management, tree care and weeding.

"This tells us that you understand what you're getting into as well as what we're asking for. That will let me compare bids on something other than price. I'll compare not only dollars, but services and hours," Morgan says.

Another heads up from Morgan — submitting a rock-bottom price, at least to an experienced property manager, signals potential trouble ahead.

"Don't cut your bid price to the bone and then come back to me six months later and say, 'I didn't realize how much property you have here, and we can't do the job for the money you're paying us,'" Morgan says. "It's up to the bidder to know how big the property is and how many man- and equipment hours it will take to get the work done at the needed quality level and within the specified times."

Stylin' in California

Rich Perona manages the landscape at Rossmoor Walnut Creek, a nearly 40-year-old "active adult" community east of San Francisco that has more than 6,000 homes and 9,000 residents. Perona and residents

are proud of their award-winning landscape, which is maintained by two contractors. (He actually worked for one of them, ValleyCrest, the former Environmental Industries, Inc.)

Perona says he wants quality service at a reasonable price. He also wants somebody who's knowledgeable in the latest horticultural practices — "someone who can use the most modern techniques, such as pre-emergent and post-emergent herbicides and growth regulators," he says.

Perona admits that price is important but not the determining factor in hiring a contractor. "Rossmoor Walnut Creek is divided into several 'mutuals,' or areas, each with its own board of directors and its own budget, so we need companies that provide quality work within those budgets," he explains. "We've worked with our present contractors to develop a relationship with them and an understanding of our budgets and the level of service we want."

In it for the long-term

Long-term business relationships based on trust mean a lot, Perona points out. For example, ValleyCrest founder Burton

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Susan Morgan
 ► Property Manager, Mendham Commons Morris County, NJ
Unique features: Upscale, 100 acres
Likes: Thorough knowledge of the property, "realistic" appraisal of service capabilities, proactive/communicative style
Turnoffs: Requests to renegotiate because the contractor misjudged the size of the property or the services it requires

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Sperber began working with pioneer retirement community developer Ross Cortese almost 40 years ago, before Cortese even developed Rossmoor Walnut Creek. Even so, sometimes decisions are made based on low price, which can be a gamble.

"We had a low-bid contractor here last year who was doing rehab landscape for us," recalls Perona. "I wound up having to go out and supervise the work myself. I don't have the time or inclination to do this."

He advises contractors to learn as much as possible about the property and the person who manages it prior to putting



Rich Perona

► **Manager,**
Rossmoor Walnut Creek
San Francisco Bay Area,
California

Unique features: Active adult community, 6,000 homes, safety and noise issues

Likes: Long-term win-win relationship, technically skilled crews, detailed bid sheet that breaks down services

Turnoffs: "Don't think I'm going to supervise your crews for you."

together bids. For instance, the contractor should understand the kind of community Rossmoor Walnut Creek is, including the retirees living there and the quality of life they expect.

"They must understand that our older population puts some special requirements on a landscape contractor," Perona explains, such as safety issues, noise and hours of operation.

Perona estimates about half of the proposals he gets from contractors are "really good." The ones that get disqualified either show a lack of understanding of the property or an unrealistic budget, often both.

"I think sometimes they just type in numbers without really knowing the situation here. The two main contractors we use here always put together really good, thorough bids that take into consideration our idiosyncrasies as a site," Perona says.

Classy Midwest site

Jess Washburn has been the Maintenance Supervisor for Great Lakes Chemical Corp.'s site in West Lafayette, IN, since 1989. About one-fifth of its 80 acres are finished grass, landscape and buildings. About 350 people work at the facility, which is nicely landscaped with turf and primly edged beds.

"We're very proud of the property's appearance," says Washburn, who likes the convenience of dealing with a single contractor who provides just about all of the outside ser-



Jess Washburn

► **Maintenance Supervisor,**
Great Lakes Chemical Corp.
West Lafayette, IN

Unique features: 80-acre site, 15 acres extensively landscaped

Likes: Reliable local contractors, prompt service response, contractors with modern and efficient equipment

Turnoffs: Contractors who bad-mouth other contractors, "hotshot" experts

vices he needs. He also appreciates being able to deal with a locally owned firm.

"I want a local business that employs local people and is part of our economy. I want someone I know will be here when I need him," says Washburn. "We feel that we get better service from a situation like this." (This is the relationship Washburn says he's enjoyed for five years with Brent Flory's Freedom Lawns, Inc. of Delphi, IN.)

Price, says Washburn, is always considered, "but I want to be able to talk to a real person on the phone. If I have an issue that needs attention, I don't want to get an answering machine. My overriding considerations are service and response."

High on the list of Washburn's contractor "must-haves" are knowledge and the right

kind of equipment to do the job efficiently. "Our terrain poses challenges, including sharp slopes, so walk-behinds are the best thing to use on these," he explains.

Washburn values the win-win relationships he builds with his contractors, and he wants to continue them as long as he's getting the service he expects.

Hotshots stay away

"Because we're a very visible property that looks beautiful, a lot of landscapers drool when they drive by and see us," Washburn remarks. "Some of them will sweep in here, and some of them will take pictures. They push these pictures at me, but does this contractor convince me they'll be better than my present contractor at dealing with the situation? So far it hasn't happened."

As for lowballing, Washburn says he has little respect for "hotshots" that bad-mouth the competition or try to win his favor by dropping an unrealistically low-price bid on his desk.

Price is important, almost all property managers agree. But it's just one part of winning the contract. Take the time to learn their needs, be honest, reliable and proactive. Then you stand a good chance of landing their business. **LM**

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