

# Customer *sensitive* service

**I**n a quest to increase revenues, you put on your sales hat and seek out new maintenance clients with vengeance. You call on a long list of potential clients and set up appointments. You arrive 20 minutes ahead of schedule and walk their sites with them. You prepare and present professional proposals. You do everything you can to convince them that you're different, that you're genuinely concerned about customer service.

Once your bid is accepted, you put a check mark in the "W" column and you're off to the next client. But too soon, many of the promises you made are beginning to fall by the wayside. The foreman you dedi-

cated to this job is rarely seen on site. Monthly site reports haven't been submitted. You're too busy to conduct monthly site inspections yourself, and sometimes it takes you two days to return telephone calls.

Stop! Grab the controls and start turning your organization around.

Whether you work on commercial or residential properties, your clients are looking for a contractor who will respond to all of their needs. Start being more proactive with your clients. Begin anticipating their needs before they do.

This isn't as hard as you think if you follow what I describe as QSRC&V, which stands for Quality, Service, Responsiveness, Communication and Value.

Implement QSRC&V at all levels of your organization — sales, estimating, of-

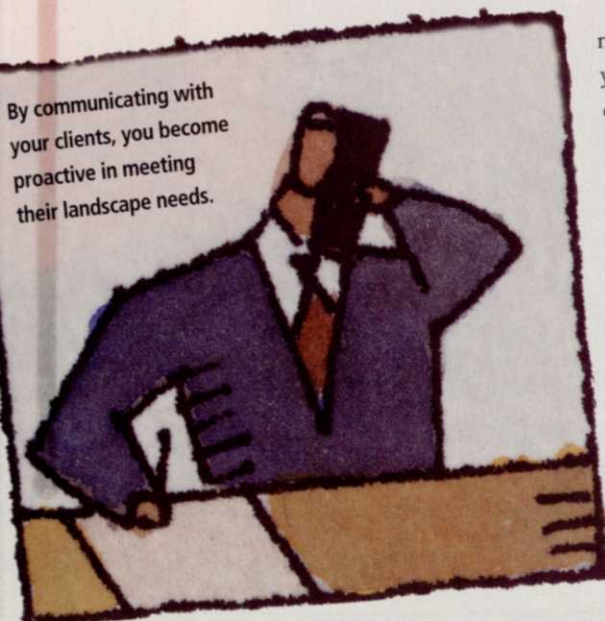
fice staff, production and shop personnel. It will elevate your organization and make your team a champion provider of customer sensitive service.

## **Q is for quality**

Most people equate quality with the completion of a job according to the specifications. True enough, but other elements figure into the concept of quality as well. To understand them, remember another acronym, CARA — Consistency, Authority, Responsibility and Accountability. (See sidebar on page 49.)

## **S is for service**

Crew performance in the field is the most obvious part of customer service, but there are other parts, including the manner in which a receptionist answers the phone, the style the accounting department uses when making a collection call, checking with clients to see how things are going, and keeping appointments that you've made.





Every company needs a client assurance policy that states the company's objective to customer service. This policy must be something that employees can and will implement — clear, concise and understandable by everyone on your team. Here are some items to include in your policy:

- ▶ Dedicated on-site management personnel
- ▶ Annual client survey
- ▶ Client seminars
- ▶ Return telephone calls the same day received
- ▶ Assign a specific contact person in the office to handle clients

Remember, it's easier and more cost-effective to service an existing client than it is to replace them or look for new prospects. Also, never forget that commercial property managers as well as residential clients talk among themselves about the contractors they use. If they don't like your service, others will hear about it. Track your renewal ratios — they'll tell you a lot.

### **R is for responsive**

Is it enough just to provide acceptable services to clients? In today's competitive marketplace, probably not.

Today, customers expect contractors to be more proactive, to have policies and procedures in place, to not only perform contracted services reliably and on schedule but also educate them about other service opportunities.

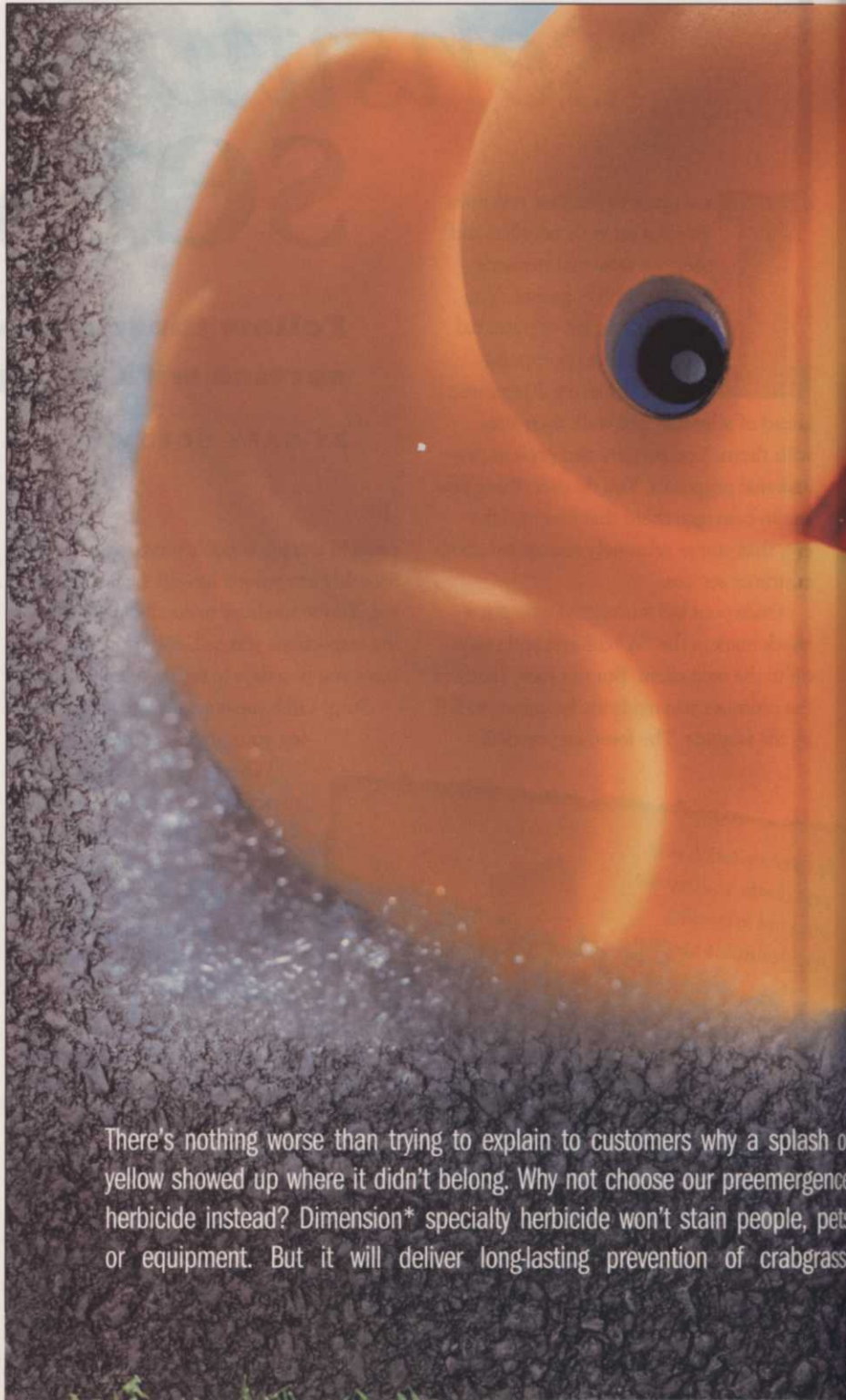
When you're hired to work on a property, your objective is to keep your team focused on the task at hand. However, you need to be able to point out to your clients other areas where you can help them.

If your company has a policy of reviewing properties on a monthly basis, that's great. These regular property reviews almost always generate more "good" in the form of extra work because they strengthen your image as a professional.

### **C is for communication**

With e-mail and cell phones, there's no reason why contractors can't communicate regularly with clients. Surprisingly, one of the biggest complaints by homeowners and

property managers remains their inability to get in touch with their contractor — often the same person who, during negotiations, assured the client that they'd be accessible anytime day or night.



There's nothing worse than trying to explain to customers why a splash of yellow showed up where it didn't belong. Why not choose our preemergence herbicide instead? Dimension\* specialty herbicide won't stain people, pets or equipment. But it will deliver long-lasting prevention of crabgrass



## CARA about your clients

When you're ready to put the idea of "quality" into practice at your company, remember the acronym CARA, which stands for Consistency, Authority, Responsibility, and Accountability. Let's break it down:

▶ Follow consistent best practices. You can do this only after you develop and implement standard operating proce-

dures at all levels of your company.

▶ Give appropriate authority to team members to perform their tasks once they understand your consistent policies and procedures.

▶ Hold your staff responsible to carry out the policies and procedures of your company.

▶ Hold employees accountable for the success of your company and for providing the quality of service that clients demand.

— GG

Whether you're a one-man operation or you have several employees, how you communicate with your clients profoundly affects your company's success. Every company must have a policy about returning



**Some things  
are supposed  
to be yellow.**

**Your equipment isn't  
one of them.**

*Poa annua* and several broadleaf weeds, including spurge and oxalis. All with an application window so wide, it even offers early postemergent crabgrass control.

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calls or other correspondence, preferably the same every day, if possible. You may not be able to answer a specific question or make a commitment when returning the call, but your prompt response gives clients confidence that you recognize their needs.

If you don't have a receptionist in your office, use voice mail on your office and cell phones and check it regularly. Don't let messages pile up because you'll be less likely to return them.

### V is for value

Clients view value as getting what was paid for and, in many cases, a little bit more. That doesn't necessarily mean planting an extra tree or cutting the lawn three additional times. Often, "the little bit more" is an intangible benefit, perhaps an issue related to quality, service, responsiveness or prompt communication. These items don't receive a specific dollar value on the bid sheet, but they carry weight with clients.

Being customer service sensitive is a culture that permeates every level of an organization. Companies that adopt this concept have more dedicated and committed team members and achieve greater profits through client retention. **LM**

— *The author has over 20 years of experience in management in numerous industries, including landscaping and maintenance. He is a past Regional Operations Manager of TruGreen Landcare Corp. He can be reached at [gmanaf@msn.com](mailto:gmanaf@msn.com).*