

Going the extra mile

Ultimate Services and Allen Landscaping service high-end clients on opposite coasts. They provide a study in contrasts with a common goal – superior customer service.

BY CHERYL HIGLEY

His phone rings at 9 p.m. on a Saturday. On the line is a distraught client who can't sleep because a bee is on her sun porch. His only choice is to go and capture the bee. Sounds like a tiny problem, but it's all in a day's work for John Chiarella, owner of Greenwich, CT-based Ultimate Services.

Chiarella's clients are demanding East Coast movers and shakers with big money, and his approach to customer service is tailored to meet their requests – no matter how unusual. That's why it isn't uncommon for a client unhappy that workers left footprints in her snowy backyard to expect Ultimate Services to refill the prints with snow.



John Chiarella

"My background is in horticulture, but you almost have to have a degree in psychology and psychiatry," Chiarella explains. "I don't know of anywhere else in the country where clients are this demanding. You have to be able to deal on their level, which is why no matter how bizarre of a request or how expensive it might be, you just do it."

Head to the West Coast, and you'll hear a completely different story.

Jeff Allen, owner of Allen Landscaping in Santa Rosa, CA, understands that East Coast mentality; but it won't fly in the Valley, where laid-back flexibility rules the day.

"I've run into those types of situations, but I don't play. I'm a local, and we operate much more in the California lifestyle," he says.

His clients are accustomed to that

Continued on facing page



Ultimate Services crew members work together to create a landscaping masterpiece for a client. Owner John Chiarella says he and his employees share a strong work ethic that always puts the clients first.



Jeff Allen, owner of Allen Landscaping, in Santa Rosa, CA, takes a hands-on approach to ensure his clients' landscaping visions are realized.

Building family ties with ALCA

BY CHERYL HIGLEY

Rick Doesberg has spent more than 30 years as a member of the Associated Landscape Contractors of America, including the last 20 in various leadership positions.

Doesberg, an ALCA past president, raves about the benefits he has gained from taking an active role in the organization.

"From a business standpoint, what we are and what we do we've learned from ALCA," he says. "By participating in leadership, I've developed management skills that have allowed me to be a better leader within my own company. I can't count the value I've gotten

from my relationship with ALCA."

A firm believer in the phrase "You only get out of something what you put into it," Doesberg says participating in ALCA events provides outstanding networking possibilities and is a good first step in moving toward a leadership role.



Rick Doesberg

Those interested in taking a more active role need only to identify a committee that interests them and call ALCA to volunteer.

ALCA leaders will meet at the Summer Leadership Meeting, being held in

ALCA

Tremblant, Quebec, in June to set goals for the organization. According to Doesberg, that meeting is a perfect example of ALCA's lasting impact.

"Today's ALCA leaders have been coming to this meeting since they were children because their dads were in ALCA leadership," he says. "They're now in the family business and taking on leadership roles. These kids have known each other a long time, and now they're sharing that leadership together."

For information on becoming active in ALCA, visit the web site at www.alca.org. ■



Jeff Allen

Continued from opposite page
attitude and even embrace it.

For example, one of Allen's clients was going into semi-retirement and wanted to work with the crews one day a week.

"For fun we sent her an Allen Landscaping shirt and hat and said if she wanted to work with the crew she had to wear it. And she did," Allen recalls.

For high-end clients, time is money, and both say making an efficient use of their clients' time is essential to creating long-term relationships.

"There is a tremendous amount of nurturing and trust that goes into this. And it takes a long time to develop that type of relationship," Chiarella says.

Allen agrees: "People's time is valuable, and getting time from them to educate them and show them what we're doing is critical. Communication is a big part of the relationship. We let them know our thoughts, but we understand the ultimate choice is theirs. We're in this for the long haul, and we make that clear."

Handling high-end clients takes a special knack, but both agree one constant that transcends locations and checkbooks is strict attention to outstanding customer service.

"Our motto is 'We Service the Client.



Ultimate Services offers a unique aviary department, with beekeepers who raise bees that are used to pollinate clients' flowers and harvest the honey.

Period.' Regardless if your customer is paying you \$500 or \$50,000, you have to carry the same mentality when it comes to customer service," Chiarella says. "The numbers are different, but the quality and service we deliver is the same. Now matter how difficult the clients are, service them with a smile and don't take anything personally. In the end, it's all worth the effort." ■