



It's time to revisit customer service

Market conditions are tough by any standard. Customers are taking a hard look at budgets; competitors are looking for new work to grow — and they are looking at taking your accounts. The last thing you need this year is a customer service glitch. We both know that could open a door you do not want opened.

I think the economic conditions call for a close examination of your own company behaviors relative to managing the customer relationship. There are some tendencies that could become destructive if not managed.

Manage cost, but don't overmanage

Customers are looking at cost, so you may not be getting as many enhancements as usual. Most companies are looking at *managing* costs. There is a fine line here. Yes, you need to eliminate waste and perhaps even cut back on hours, eliminate overtime or freeze pay.

All these things, done with balance, are good. In doing so, you are looking internally, not externally, at your customer. If customers are inadvertently victimized by any of your actions, however, you pay double. Beware of any mixed messages you send to employees in this regard, as they may think that the internal cost reduction is the only important thing.

Manage your weak links

All companies have some weak links — be it among the crews, account managers, supervisors or managers. Now is the time to catch them before they fail. If you recognize the weak links, they must be watched and propped up like never before.

You may gain some satisfaction out of blaming them for failure, but it is failure just the same. Don't let them harm a client relationship, not now and preferably not ever. Proactively manage the weak so as not to let them let you down.

Emphasize the basics

Customers for the most part are not horticulturists; however, they know a weed when they see one. They also can see stress or brown spots in an irrigated lawn. They pay for flower displays and know when they do or do not look good.

Do not let a slip-up in the basics tarnish your relationship or let a competitor in the door. An obvious service glitch now may be all it takes to set in motion a contract review or bid process. Or worse yet, a competitor may use one as a way to get a foot in the door. Stress the basics with your team. Do not let them fail.

Be proactive

This becomes a cliché, but clients refer to it all the time. Every property needs an extra set of eyes. Account managers sometimes miss the obvious because they see the property too often. More than ever, you as owners and senior managers need to be touching jobs and customers, looking for the early warning signs. Be hyper-observant and hyper-vigilant.

There is nothing new here, just a heightened level of importance in a takeaway market.

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