

**TAKE AWAY**

Gauge the effectiveness of your marketing message by the level of response you receive to different marketing initiatives.

Discounts alone won't give the results you're looking for.

To close the sale, explain benefits and value — and address the customer's specific concerns.

# Nail the sale

Successfully selling lawn service requires the process be well thought out. Then, an appropriate strategy must be crafted and executed rigorously every day. **BY BILL HOOPES**

**W**HEW! WHAT a year it's been — challenging for all with many mixed outcomes. In fact, generalizing about results could be misleading.

Instead, I felt compelled to confirm my observations by talking to a group of successful, veteran landscape contractors, folks with records of accomplishment throughout the years. I was interested to learn how they performed during the '09 selling season.

After an admittedly random series of conversations, it was apparent results varied significantly, from modestly successful to awful. What made the difference? I learned there wasn't one lone identifiable success factor. Still, I can confirm that, in most cases, the sales process was extremely important.

During my 25 years as a Green Industry trainer and consultant, I've encountered only a few truly *great* marketing/sales companies. It's not that Green Industry operators are incapable of great selling; it's just that, as is often the case with technical- or production-oriented folks, selling isn't typically a core skill. It must be learned. In fact, I view selling as a process, a combination of lead-generation activities and personal follow-ups.

## Begin with marketing

Did you go to market efficiently? There's no doubt gathering pros-

pect addresses, lawn sizes and phone numbers electronically is highly efficient. Did you take advantage of the latest techniques and tools?

According to my data, direct-mail response declined. For some, it declined significantly. Successful operators I contacted didn't depend on mail. They used multiple tactics to generate leads. Examples include energetic reselling of previous customers, neighborhood canvassing, block leading and driveway marketing.

Was your message effective? Did you change your focus significantly in response to the economy? If so, did it result in enough high quality leads? Some services reduced their emphasis on quality, promoting discounts alone. But while everyone wants a deal, discounting as a singular strategy didn't deliver the results most expected.

There's no best strategy for every lawn service. The way a company sells should reflect the company philosophy and deliver what the public has been led to expect. For some larger services focused on fast, lower-profit growth, discounting may be the only choice for maximizing sales. But no one should conclude that, bad economy or not, you must discount heavily to sell lawn service. This past spring, I observed a significantly different picture.

It's been my experience that, when price is the determining factor in making a sale, the first-year cancel rate for those discounted sales is higher. A competitor will come along, offer a lower price and take the customer. If a company has the ability to outsell the cancel rate, perhaps price off selling provides a sustainable

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model. But for the majority of small to mid-sized services, lifetime value is key. Businesses with limited marketing budgets — and without the ability or inclination to conduct large sales campaigns — need to keep their customers.

Sales based on providing what the customer wants at a fair price versus simply cutting the price and pressuring the customer all season long for added revenue delivers lower cancellations and consistently higher lifetime values.

**Making the sale**

The main goal for landscape contractors in '09 was the same as any year: to maximize profitable sales. For companies with large, full-time sales teams, the spring sales goal is only the first phase of a year-long campaign. For smaller companies with only part-time salespeople, spring sales must provide the bulk of annual revenue. Regardless of who sells, leads must be tightly managed for a maximum close rate.

**ARE YOU GENERATING ENOUGH GOOD LEADS?**

- ▶ Did your 2009 marketing message match the company philosophy and image? Was the marketing focus on quality and outstanding service, or did you attempt to switch to deal maker in response to anticipated sales resistance? Or did you make a significant change in emphasis this last season, possibly confusing prospects about what you stand for?
- ▶ Did you use modern, cutting-edge tactics to generate maximum leads from high-responding prospect groups? Marketing techniques are changing. What was effective 10 years ago is no longer making it happen. Are you current?
- ▶ Did your marketing strategy target new sales, upsell current customers, resell past customers and go after leads that never closed? Selling across the customer spectrum turned out to be meaningful last spring. — BH



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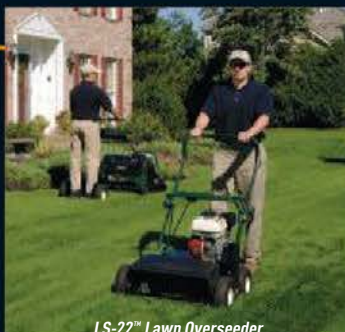
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In the spring of '09, landscape contractors used various sales strategies. Some pushed for an absolute maximum of new sales and used every trick in the book to close. Quoting one sales manager: "Once I have them on the phone, they don't get off until they're my customer." His meaning was clear: He'd do whatever it took to make the sale. But would the sale result in a profit, or would the pressured customer, succumbing to a great deal, cancel mid-season?

For a rep on the phone compensated only to close sales, it won't matter. If, however, a business depends on keeping customers for three, four or more seasons, the sales conversation is important.

### The sales chain

I believe in and teach the sales chain, which is a metaphor for the process of acquiring and keeping customers. It consists of three important links, and continuity among these links is

imperative for success.

The first link represents **marketing**. The company message is communicated accurately and effectively. The second link represents the **selling process**. Leads are converted to sales in a tightly managed system using daily goals and recognition. The final link is **service delivery**. If the service meets customer expectations, referrals abound, marketing is successful and the cycle begins again.

Focusing on the second link, sales methodology can be condensed into two basic camps. I describe the first as making contact, creating or building interest, baiting the prospect and hooking the sale. Typically, it's done with a tightly canned, well-rehearsed pitch.

The second is a more consultative approach I teach in five basic steps.

**1. Use a strong, clear opener**, which lets the prospect know who's calling and why. It also establishes the prospect's interest level.

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**2. Identify what each prospect wants.** Notice I didn't say *needs*. We buy what we want. But to provide those wants, a sales professional needs to understand what they are by asking a couple probing questions.

**3. Communicate value.** We accomplish this

by explaining how our service benefits each customer. A benefit isn't something we do, but *why* we do what we do. This is important to the prospect.

**4. Look for a buying signal.** A tie-down confirms the prospect understands how we'll provide exactly what they want. If we're successful, we'll get that buying signal.

**5. Close or confirm the sale.** If you have followed the process, closing will be a snap.

When sales resistance rears its head, our people are taught to handle objections as questions that haven't been answered. In reality, they're not objections.

My process for removing resistance and making the sale involves three steps:

**1. Ask "why do you feel that way?"** It's important to understand the prospect's motives for resisting. And even if I'm sure I already know, having the prospect repeat his or her concern sets me up to remove it.

**2. Create empathy.** Let the prospect know you understand and you've felt the same way. Now, there's no barrier between prospective buyer and seller.

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## CONVERT LEADS TO PROFITABLE SALES

- ▶ Who has the responsibility to sell in your organization? How are they trained?
- ▶ What's your sales message? Is there continuity between the marketing message and sales follow-up?
- ▶ Are your salespeople setting accurate and reasonable expectations?
- ▶ Are you converting leads to customers at the highest possible close rate?
- ▶ Are you selling what prospects want, or is the sales objective simply to get to "yes"? — BH

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**3. Remove the concern with a targeted benefit that responds to it specifically.** “Mr. Homeowner, think about this ...” — and provide the appropriate benefit.

Remember, many prospects will never buy, but it doesn't matter because there are plenty of potential buyers who will understand and appreciate a presentation that clearly communicates value.

Consultative selling is an effective strategy. I believe that for higher revenue sales, leading to a strong customer commitment, followed by fewer short-term cancels, it makes sound business sense for most operators.

I'm more confident than ever before that we, as a home-services industry, will continue to succeed by offering measurable, visible value to America's property owners. While we may not be able to sell everyone, there will be enough homeowners who understand that investing a small portion of their discre-

## SELLING THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

Several operators reported successful sales campaigns based on selling benefits, not discounting. In those cases, customer growth increased from 20% to 30%. How was it done? The “old-fashioned way” — quality and reliability were promoted in fliers, personal visits to evaluate lawns were made in quick response to inquiries, and phone follow-up selling focused on the benefits of service versus discounts alone. — BH

tionary income in their properties will repay them — and that's a message I look forward to sending. LM

The author is the owner of Grass Roots Training/ Consulting ([www.trainandkeepeople.com](http://www.trainandkeepeople.com)) and can be reached at 614/531-4000 or [hoopes@columbus.rr.com](mailto:hoopes@columbus.rr.com). Read his blog at [www.trainingchamp.wordpress.com](http://www.trainingchamp.wordpress.com).

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