



THE BENCHMARK

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Re-evaluating account managers

If you are in the grounds maintenance business — and who isn't these days — the one position that will undergo dramatic transformation over the next few years is that of account manager. The reasons why are simple:

1. To flatten out overhead expense growth, account managers must handle a larger book of business.
2. To maximize contract retention and enhancement sales, they must address the customer's real service need.

The customer's value proposition is driven by the **Price-Product-Service** experience. This proposition is shifting dramatically (see Table 1). In its simplest terms, the **Product** has become a commodity, while **Service** has remained focused on horticultural expertise and responsiveness. As a result, the only point of differentiation is now **Price**.

TABLE 1: PRICE-PRODUCT-SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Year	Price	Product	Service
2007	30%	50%	20%
2010	60%	10%	30%
	Contract cost	Mowing Spring clean Fall Clean Irrigation Fertilization Pruning	Responsiveness Communication Proactivity Budget management Speed

Here's the problem: Unless you are the lowest price provider in the market, you *will* lose work if you can't differentiate convincingly and consistently. The customer's real service needs are cost management and proactive communications. I apologize for the "proactive" cliché, but few deliver this very well — as almost any property manager will tell you. The solution requires investments in a combination of web-based technologies and account manager retraining and recruiting.

Web-based customer technology

The account manager of the future simply cannot take any more phone calls, manage crews and hope to deliver a better level of service without off-loading some of the interaction to the customer. The banking industry did it through ATMs and online banking. The leaders in the Green Industry will do it through online scheduling, service order, work order and invoice management in a direct customer interface.

In addition, these customer needs will need to be seamlessly integrated into production management and scheduling to ensure satisfaction. Web-based software already exists to do this — and it is being used right now.

The new and improved account manager

Today's typical Green Industry account managers are horticulture experts who know how to talk to people. This is fine as it goes, but that in no way qualifies them to be budget managers and salespeople.

The future account manager will more closely resemble one who, today, works in the retail world. These professionals must demonstrate the return on investment the buyer achieves selling the vendor's products, as well as working with the buyer to provide ideas that further drive their margins.

Similarly, leaders in the Green Industry will accomplish these goals by providing account budgeting tools, sales training, and commission structures that attract a more highly paid professional. Many of these tools are available already.

I see these changes as an enormous opportunity for the industry, rather than something to be feared — or worse, ignored. We are experiencing a very normal economic process associated with the commoditization of any product. If we want to avoid price discounting as the only point of differentiation, we are going to have to learn some new tricks from those in industries who have already traveled the path on which we now find ourselves.

The good news is the leaders in these industries are making better margins now than they did before.